



Elisa  
Adams

Miss Independent

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# Miss Independent

*Elisa Adams*

# Chapter One

Being a professional wife definitely had its bonuses. Bonuses Amanda Storm missed on days like today. She swiped a hand through her sweat-drenched hair and muttered a curse. Why had she wanted to do the work on the property herself instead of hiring a handyman like her mother had suggested?

Oh, yeah. Because she'd wanted to be *independent*, though at the moment, the reason why she'd been so insistent on gaining that status eluded her. Home ownership had its advantages, the real-estate agent she'd contacted a month ago about renting properties had told her, but the man had failed to mention the downfalls.

"Stupid railing," she mumbled, narrowing her eyes at the warped wood like her glare would make a difference. It wouldn't. She'd learned *that* early on in the game of household repairs. If she'd been born mechanically inclined like her brothers or even her younger sister, Rachel, the thing would have been fixed on the first try, but, like independence, mechanical aptitude came with a pretty big learning curve. Though, she had to admit, she was doing pretty well for a twenty-eight-year-old woman who was living well and truly alone for the first time in her life.

"Just remember, you asked for it," she whispered to herself, the beginnings of a smile curling her lips. Yeah, she'd asked for it, and despite the problems, she wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Stupid railing and all.

She didn't regret the snap decision to buy the little cottage—how could she when she'd gotten the fixer-upper at such a steal?—but it might have been easier if she'd hired someone to do the work on the place before moving her stuff in. Less than twelve hours into unpacking her car and bringing her possessions inside, she'd managed to find a

hundred different things just waiting to be done. A week later, she'd only scratched a handful of things off her list.

Sweat dripped down her face and stung her eyes. Mosquitoes buzzed around her head, ignoring the ineffective repellent she'd purchased at the local pharmacy. At this rate, she'd look like she'd come down with chicken pox by morning, but she had no right to complain. She was a home owner now. Just the thought made her smile, despite the heat and the mile-long list of chores she had yet to make a dent in. The place was hers, and if *that* didn't scream of independence nothing else did.

*Oh, yeah.* Definitely a reason to smile. One of the few she'd had in the past year or two.

In all her time moving from husband to husband, what being alone really meant had never occurred to her. She knew the feeling now, better than she ever had, as she stood on the front porch of the tiny cottage baking in the nearly one hundred degree New England afternoon. She'd expected to feel lost, out of her element, and in a way, she was, but exhilaration raced through her bloodstream like a flash fire. For the first time in her life, she didn't have to share a damned thing, and she intended to keep it that way for a long time to come.

Yes, being a wife had its bonuses, but being a home owner had more.

Satisfied she'd done all she could to secure the rail on a temporary basis, she promised herself to call a professional first thing Monday morning and set the hammer down on the porch next to the glass she'd long ago drained of ice water. Slumping onto the step and drawing in a big breath of pine-scented air, she glanced around the tree-strewn land for what had to be the thousandth time in the week since she'd moved in. Her land. Her trees. Her shrubs, overgrown as they were. Her beach on the lake a few dozen yards away from the cottage.

Well, not entirely hers. She had to share the beach with the neighbor she had yet to meet. The real-estate agent assured her someone lived in the big house on the hill, but she had yet to see any signs of life. Not that she minded. She'd prefer to have the small beach to herself for as long as

she could get it. She might be new to the whole living-alone thing, but she was already loving nearly every second of it.

Grabbing the empty glass, she stood and headed for the front door. Her parched throat practically screamed for a refill on the water, and a cool shower and a little afternoon TV time would be just what she needed after a long day of playing handyman. The boards creaked under her feet and she grimaced. The home inspector had said the porch—and the rest of the property—was structurally sound, but by next summer she wanted to replace the old, worn-out boards with new ones. A bigger, covered porch where she could hang a swing from the roof and enjoy the moon and stars on warm summer nights.

With one last glance over her shoulder at the lake, Amanda reached for the doorknob and gave it a turn. The door swung open on groaning hinges and she walked inside.

Her situation could have been a lot worse. The cabin was small—just three rooms and a bath—but the furniture she'd chosen was comfortable and sturdy, if not a bit plain. The price on the place had been right, too, thanks to the little building's fixer-upper status. What she would pay here monthly for mortgage wasn't much more than what she'd been paying for the hotel room she'd rented in town her first few weeks in Ludlow, while she'd been looking around for a place of her own and then waiting impatiently to sign the papers on her new place and move in. It wasn't much more than she would have paid for any of the apartments in town, either, and none of them had the privacy the cabin had—or the stacked washer and dryer in a closet in a corner of the kitchen.

So it needed a coat of paint and a decent amount of TLC. It wasn't anything she couldn't handle, either by doing the work herself or hiring someone to come out and do it for her. The payoff would be worth it in the end. She now had a place to call her own.

A place she didn't have to share with family or the latest man in her life, and that alone made it worth so much more than the asking price.

Her cell phone chimed and she snatched it off the counter, flipping it open and sparing a quick glance at the caller ID screen. A sigh caught in

her throat. She'd been avoiding this call long enough, and it was time to face her demons. With a silent prayer that the call would go smoothly—and quickly—she brought it to her ear. “Hi, Mom.”

“How did you know it was me?” The disappointment in Miriam Storm's voice had Amanda biting back a laugh.

“Caller ID.” And the funny feeling she got in her stomach whenever her mother called. Amanda loved the woman with all her heart, but sometimes her mother went a little overboard. *I'm not sick anymore, Mom. Haven't been for years and years. No need to worry about me like you did when I was five.*

“Rachel told me you moved into your new place at the beginning of the week,” her mother said, referring to Amanda's younger sister. She spoke in an accusatory tone usually reserved for special occasions, like when she bombarded them all with questions as to why none of her five offspring had managed to produce grandchildren yet. “I figured you would be trying to get unpacked.”

Amanda nearly sighed at the prospect. What little she'd brought with her had been unpacked on the first day. Clothes, mostly, and some personal items and mementos. The furniture had been bought new from a nearby discount store and delivered on moving day, and she'd stocked the kitchen at the same time.

“I'm finished with all that, believe it or not, but I have a feeling you called about something else. What's up, Mom?” Amanda walked into the kitchen and opened the cabinets. Everything she needed was here. Plates, glasses, flatware and pans. She would have to make a trip into town later for some groceries since she had yet to buy more than a gallon of milk, some bottles of water and various cans of ready-to-heat meals, but even that would be pretty simple. Cooking for one didn't involve a lot of effort or ingredients. For Amanda, at least, it rarely involved more than a can opener and a microwave. “Is something wrong?”

“I just wanted to make sure you were settled okay.”

Amanda rolled her eyes. That, and her mother wanted to lay on the guilt since Amanda hadn't called home the day she'd moved out of the

hotel and into her new place. She hadn't even mentioned buying the house to her mother until after she'd signed the papers. Miriam would have tried to talk her out of it, convinced her to rent for a while instead of taking such a big step, and before she'd seen the place Amanda would have agreed. But one look and as crazy as it sounded, she'd known it was home. Or it would be, once the work was finished.

"I'm as settled as I can be for having just moved in. I'm fine. I promise. If I wasn't, you'd be the first one to know. You can stop worrying so much about me now."

"I'm worried about you for good reason, Mandy. You packed up and moved away without giving it much thought. Now you've bought a house, for God's sake, and gotten a job. Are you sure you're all right?"

Amanda shook her head. Her mother said the word "job" like that was a *bad* thing. As for being *all right*, she wasn't sure. The only thing she knew was that she felt better than she had in a long time. *If I can't take care of myself now, we have a serious problem.* "I think I'm okay. Really. I feel great, and I'm going to go with that feeling."

"You really shouldn't leave the door open here," a masculine voice spoke from behind her. "You'll get bugs. Or maybe something small and furry."

Amanda jumped and spun around, the phone clutched to her ear, and found herself face-to-face with a set of the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Blue eyes set into a handsome, sculpted face framed by thick blond hair. Her breath caught in her throat and her heart hammered against her rib cage. He had to be the sexiest man she'd laid eyes on in a long time.

He was also a stranger, and she was out in the middle of nowhere with him. Her hand tightened around the handle of a frying pan in the dry rack next to the sink. "You scared me."

"Sorry. I thought you heard me come in." His lips tilted in a sheepish smile and he raised his hands in front of him, palms up. He glanced toward the counter. "You want to let go of the pan? I'm not here to hurt you. I just wanted to stop by and introduce myself on the way into town."



She loosened her grip on the handle, but only marginally. “Who are you?”

“Joe Baker. I live next door.”

The breath left her lungs in a whoosh. So he wasn’t some murdering psychopath. He was just the absentee neighbor. If she’d made him a little nervous by grabbing the pan, it was his fault for walking into her house without even knocking. Okay, he hadn’t walked in, exactly, since he was standing in the doorway, but he should have stayed out on the front porch and knocked on the doorframe rather than just making himself at home in someone else’s house.

She gave the stranger—Joe—a quick once-over and blinked. Yeah, his manners might need some work, but he had a nice face. A body to die for, too, clad in a pair of denim shorts and a T-shirt stretching across broad shoulders. She’d always been a sucker for a killer body and a cute face, and he had both in spades.

She swallowed hard. Why now, that she’d officially sworn off men, did this guy have to show up at her front door?

It was a sign. It had to be.

“I have to go, Mom. I’ll call you later.” Before her mother could protest, Amanda snapped the phone closed and set it on the counter. She could only deal with one problem at a time, and the one standing a few feet away took precedence. “Can I do something for you?”

“Like I said, I just wanted to stop by and introduce myself.” He stepped into the cottage, his hand extended. “If you need anything, let me know.”

She took his hand and shook it, and the unsettled feeling swirling in her stomach grew by leaps and bounds. The warmth of his fingers encircling hers sent a shock through her. She’d be lucky if drool wasn’t dripping down her chin. He was the kind of guy Rachel would call a hottie, all tanned skin and muscled pecs and a spark of something in his eyes that told her there was a lot more to the man than what he seemed willing to let on with his friendly smile and goading tone.

And she was still holding his hand.

She released her death grip on the poor guy and took a step back. Suddenly, a little distance seemed like a very good idea.

“Anyway,” Joe said, his gaze wary but bordering on amusement. “If you need anything, feel free to call. I’ll give you my numbers, home and cell.”

He reached into the front pocket of his shorts and took out a small, white card, thrusting it in her direction. Amanda forced a smile and grasped the corner of the card between her forefinger and thumb. She gave it a tug, pulled it from his fingers and dropped it onto the counter.

“Thanks. I appreciate it.” If she touched him again, she might not want to stop. Her new neighbor would probably take issue with that, given she’d known the guy for a total of two minutes.

Then again, if the interested look in his eyes meant something, he may not. Yep, definitely a sign. Now she just had to figure out if it was a good one or a bad one.

She glanced away, busying herself with putting the clean dishes into the cabinet. He couldn’t be as good-looking as she’d first thought. It had to be a trick of her imagination.

“You know where to find me if you have any problems,” he continued, a hint of laughter in his voice. “And if you need help fixing the place up, give me a call.”

Amanda narrowed her eyes. If she didn’t know any better, she’d think her mother sent this guy out here to be her personal savior. *Guess what? The last thing I need right now is saving.*

She pasted her best cordial expression on her face and swung her gaze back to his. “Thanks anyway, but I don’t mind doing a lot of the work myself.”

He blinked, shock registering in his expression a second before doubt replaced it. “Okay, if you say so. Just keep what I said in mind. I’m a contractor, so I can handle pretty much any job, though I have to say the place looks like it needs a complete overhaul.”

She followed his gaze around the room, but didn’t see what he saw. Where he probably saw yellowed linoleum and peeling paint, old windows

and torn screens, Amanda noticed something different. Potential. Lots of it. She could live with the lack of updates for a while, since a picture of the finished product had already formed in her head.

“What do you charge?” she asked, grasping for a way to keep things professional between them.

He shrugged. “Depends on the job. We could work something out.”

Did he think she was destitute or something? So she drove a run-down car and lived in what he probably thought of as a shanty. She wasn't poor, though the down payment on the cottage had eaten a good chunk of her savings. She was a lot like the cottage. A work in progress. The repairs would come, in time. So would a newer-model car. But between the money she made working at a busy local bar and the remainder of her savings, she was by no means needy.

“Thanks. I'll keep that in mind when I'm ready to start repairs.”

“Or even before that, if you need help with the porch railing.”

He winked, and Amanda's face flamed. So he'd seen her half-assed attempt at wielding a hammer and pretending she knew what she was doing. If the floor would just swallow her up, she might be able to salvage what little dignity she had left.

She squared her shoulders and drew a fortifying breath before responding to his veiled rib. “I handled the railing fine.”

His raised eyebrows told her he didn't believe her. One corner of his mouth lifted in a slow, sexy half-smile that had her heart thumping. She licked her dry lips and leaned back against the counter for support. The amusement dancing in his blue eyes only added to his appeal, despite the fact that he was laughing at her. She couldn't bring herself to be too upset with him. If she'd been him, she would have chuckled a little, too. He'd seen her at her worst, fighting with an inanimate object.

“I'm sure you did. I'm just putting the offer on the table in case you change your mind down the road. And if you ever want to have coffee or anything...” He stopped and shook his head. “Never mind. Forget I asked.”

Amanda frowned. Had he really just asked her out? She'd just met the guy and already he wanted to have coffee with her.

She was an idiot for even considering the offer.

For a long time they stood there, neither of them saying anything, and Amanda had to shake off the sudden urge to get closer to him. If she was looking for a man right now, he would be at the top of her list.

*Stupid, Amanda. Really stupid.*

She swallowed hard. The old Amanda would have jumped at the chance to get to know him better, but the old Amanda had ended up married and divorced three times before she'd hit twenty-seven. Not exactly a poster girl for healthy relationships. She crossed her arms over her chest, hoping to steady her breath. What was it about this one particular man that made her react so strongly? So what if he looked good. She'd met plenty of handsome men in her life. What made him different?

She didn't know, but if she didn't get rid of him soon, her curiosity would get the better of her and she might take him up on his offer for coffee. Not a good prospect, given that she tended to fall in love at the drop of a hat, and out of it just as quickly.

"Well, thanks, Joe. I appreciate it, but I'm going to be fine." If she spent time with him, even during the course of repairs, there would be problems. She needed to stay as far away from him as possible if she wanted to keep her sanity intact. "I can handle the little stuff around here all by myself."

"I never thought you couldn't. I just figured I'd make the offer." He started backing out the door, the half-smile morphing into a full one filled with way too much amusement. "Keep the door closed, though, or you're just inviting problems I'm sure you don't need on top of all the other things you're planning to deal with."

Yeah, problems like a hunky neighbor with what seemed to be a white-knight complex. She definitely didn't need that kind of trouble.

"Thanks. I'll remember that." She closed and locked the door behind him, rested against the scarred wood and slid down until her butt hit the

floor. Her face felt flushed and her heart was still beating a little too fast. Looking at him had a decidedly bad effect on her. Standing a few feet away, in the middle of nowhere with no one else around, the effect turned devastating.

Why him, of all people? He was the last man she wanted as a neighbor, simply because he was the first man she wanted in her bed since fiancé number four had left her at the altar—and she'd just met the guy.



*Well.* That was...interesting.

Somehow Joe's brain had managed to shut down at the sight of her and turn him into a complete moron. What had he been thinking, asking her out not even five minutes into meeting her? The woman probably thought he was some kind of psycho. Or she thought he was desperate. He was neither, he'd just taken one look at her and lost control of his mouth.

He glanced over his shoulder at the cottage and shook his head. She was nothing like he'd expected. After the fight she had with the railing, he thought she would have jumped at his offer to help. Instead she'd all but sent him packing, and damned if her behavior didn't intrigue him. No matter what she'd said, the look in her eyes had spoken volumes. There'd been attraction there, but he'd also caught a glimpse of a different emotion. Anxiety. Fear, maybe. He recognized a woman on the run when he saw one. He didn't know yet whether she was running away from her ex-husband or something else, but it didn't really matter. He'd always been a sucker for a woman in need. His new neighbor might talk a good game, but the incident he'd witnessed on the porch just after getting back from his trip told a different story.

He'd gone to meet her solely to offer help. Since he'd finished renovations on his own house, weekends often found him bored and restless. A side project or two would go a long way toward fixing that. But

then he'd touched her. She'd held his grip a little too long, and he would have laughed had the feel of her hand in his not warmed him all over. And he hadn't even asked her name.

Another quick look back at the cottage showed him he wasn't the only interested party. His new neighbor stood on her front porch, hammer in hand, head cocked to the side. When his gaze caught hers, she hurried inside. The slam of her front door echoed through the silence. She was interested, but she didn't want to be.

He could say the same thing about himself.

He turned back toward his house and started walking again. He'd been away for a little more than a week dealing with some problems at an out-of-state job, and it showed. The grass needed to be cut, and newspapers had piled up on the wraparound front porch. The gardens were all but begging to be tended. Probably had since before he left. He had his own problems to deal with, but for some reason, he couldn't stop thinking about his neighbor and the many things needed to be done around her small piece of land.

He stepped into his house and closed the door behind him. When Barry had told Joe he'd sold the cottage to a divorcee who'd moved to town, his friend had forgotten to mention the woman was beautiful. And young. Even wearing a ratty T-shirt and cut-offs, her brown hair hanging damp around her shoulders, she looked good. The confidence in her big brown eyes was a huge turn-on, and those full lips... He wouldn't even go there. He'd just met the woman.

He ambled into the kitchen, grabbed a beer from the fridge and opened it. Knocked back half the bottle before he set it on the counter with a thump.

"Not gonna happen, Joe," he muttered to himself. For whatever reason, his neighbor had decided to pretend she wasn't interested. He had to respect that. After his last disaster of a relationship—the one that, even now, refused to end—he wasn't looking for anyone, either. And that was why it killed him that he found himself not wanting to look away.

Curiosity getting the better of him, he picked up the phone and dialed Barry's number.

"Tyler Real Estate," Barry answered in the professional tone that, even now, made Joe grin. He remembered Barry from high school, when the two of them had gotten into so much trouble Barry's mother had threatened military school. Times had certainly changed.

"How's it going?"

"Hey, Joe. When did you get back into town?"

He glanced at the suitcases piled near the front door and shook his head. He'd get around to unpacking them. Eventually. When he ran out of things to wear and realized it was either unpack or do laundry. "A little while ago."

"Have you met your new neighbor yet?"

"Briefly. She's...interesting."

"Interesting," Barry repeated, his tone laced with humor. "Not how I'd put it. She's cute. Smart, too, to buy the cottage at the price Mrs. Krause was asking. Once she gets the place fixed up, it's going to be worth triple what she paid for it, easy."

"Yeah," Joe agreed half-heartedly, glancing through a window toward the cottage to see if he could get another glimpse of her. He couldn't. "She's...young. What's her name, anyway?"

"Amanda. She works at Maggie's with my nephew, Alex. She's twenty-eight, by the way, in case you were wondering."

Okay, so not young enough to be his daughter, but pretty damned close. "I didn't ask her age."

"You didn't have to. I know you." Barry laughed even harder this time. "Relax, Joe. She's well over eighteen. Hell, she's almost thirty, and you're not exactly an old man. There's nothing wrong with being interested."

"Even if I was interested, and I'm not admitting to anything here, she's made it clear she's not." And didn't that just kill him? The first

woman to really intrigue him since the divorce, and she acted like she wanted nothing to do with him.

He took his beer onto the deck off the kitchen and settled into one of the Adirondack chairs overlooking the lake. The peacefulness of the scene usually calmed his nerves, but today it just made him more edgy. The trip had been stressful and he had yet to completely get rid of the headache that had been dogging him for the last few days. The messages Claudia had left on his machine while he'd been gone—all twenty of them—didn't help matters. Of course he'd gravitate toward the new neighbor. Amanda. Helping her would be a distraction from the chaos his life had become since his assistant had walked out on him three weeks ago with practically no notice.

"This one's right up your alley," Barry continued, as if reading Joe's mind. "She thinks she can do everything on her own, but look at her. She's a little piece of fluff who's going to fall apart the second she realizes there's no one around to help her. She needs you. She just doesn't know it yet."

Joe nodded in agreement. The woman needed someone. She'd never be able to do it all herself. He'd meant what he said. He was willing to help, as soon as she was willing to ask for it. She knew how to reach him. He wouldn't make the offer again, though. At least not for a while. No sense pushing her and having her resent him.

"I really need to take a break from women in need," he said instead of agreeing with Barry. After Claudia and the disaster that relationship had become, he'd promised himself to do just that, but one touch of Amanda's hand against his—a touch that had lasted, at most, ten seconds—and he was already willing to trash that promise in favor of spending more time with the woman.

"Despite what it might look like, I talked with her a lot during the week I took her out looking for houses. She's got a good head on her shoulders, even if she does have some sort of independence complex. I bet the two of you will become really great friends."



“You want me to make friends with her.” Joe crossed his ankles on the deck railing and dropped his head back against the chair. He could just about hear the wheels turning in Barry’s head. No matter what his friend might think, Joe didn’t need to be set up, especially not with a woman he’d have to see on a daily basis, even once things went south—as all the relationships in his lifetime had eventually done.

Barry was silent for a long time before he spoke, and when he did, his voice took on a serious tone. “Listen, Joe. I know you. You say you’re happy casually dating, but you’re the kind of guy who needs to be settled down to be happy. You need to get on with your life. What Laura did was terrible. I won’t deny that. But it doesn’t mean your life is over. It’s okay to get serious again. It’s been five years.”

Joe bristled at the mention of Laura’s name. He was over his ex-wife, but he wasn’t over what she’d done to him. Fifteen years of marriage, and she hadn’t even had the guts to tell him the truth. Hadn’t had the guts to leave him, either, until he’d found out about her affair.

“I’ve been dating.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“I was dating Claudia for nearly six months, and you know that.”

It wasn’t a complete lie. His liaison with Claudia had begun as something casual, a mutual need to scratch an itch, as she’d first put it, but a few months into it she’d started talking about things getting more serious and he’d never corrected her opinion. She’d wanted to lean on him and he’d been more than willing to let her, but he hadn’t loved her.

“What’s her middle name?”

Joe swallowed. “I don’t know.”

“See? You know nothing about her. That’s not dating. She’s not even your type, and I think you know it. I understand being gun-shy after the divorce, but enough is enough. You deserve to be happy.”

“I’m happy by myself.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, and maybe someday you’ll start to believe it. I’ve got an appointment. I have to get going before I’m late. Why don’t we meet up later for drinks at Maggie’s? Seven o’clock?”

Joe almost declined, but then changed his mind. What harm would it do to unwind after a long business trip? “Yeah. Okay. I’ll see you later.”

Odd that he found himself wondering if Amanda was working tonight. And wondering why he suddenly couldn’t wait to see her again.

## Chapter Two

Amanda stepped from the employee area into the dimly lit barroom, tying her apron around her waist. Pencil clenched between her teeth, she twisted her hair into a loose bun at the back of her head and secured it with an elastic. A quick scan of the room told her the place was jam-packed tonight. Good. The busier, the better. The shifts passed so much faster when she was constantly moving, and though she'd stumble out dog-tired after her shift and practically fall into bed the second she got home, the tips were a welcome addition to the moderate weekly paycheck.

The manager, Alex, stepped up behind her and tapped her on the shoulder. "The table in the back corner is all yours. Big tippers. They won't give you a hard time, either. At least not with me here."

She took the pencil out of her mouth and slipped it into the apron pocket next to the small pad of paper she used to record the orders. Most of the longtime wait staff could commit what the customers wanted to memory rather than writing it down, but it would be a good long while before Amanda could manage to keep all those orders straight. "Friends of yours?"

"My uncle and a buddy of his."

"Barry? The real-estate agent?"

Alex nodded, his dark hair falling across his forehead as he did. Amanda had to clench her hands into fists to keep from pushing the lock away from his eyes in a maternal gesture. Though the man was her boss, he was seven years her junior and looked even younger.

“Yep. And I’m sure he’ll want to know how everything is with the new digs.” He smiled, showing off the dimple in his right cheek. “How is it going, by the way? Is everything okay with the house?”

“It’s great. Couldn’t be better.” She narrowed her eyes, squinting through the semi-darkness to see the two men sitting at the table Alex had indicated, and her breath caught in her throat. “The man your uncle is with is my neighbor.”

“Joe’s a great guy. He’s dating Claudia Marshall, the niece of the woman who sold you the cottage.”

Was everyone around here connected to everyone else? Despite the fact that Ludlow, New Hampshire was a college town, the locals seemed to outnumber the outsiders by a huge margin. When school started in the fall, the numbers would change, but for now, Amanda sometimes felt like she was standing outside a window, looking in. She supposed anyone who’d moved to her hometown of Lilton, Vermont, would feel the same way, but having lived there for her whole life, she’d sort of become part of the scenery.

Here she stood out. People noticed her. Asked her why she’d moved to town, and when she told them, asked what she planned to study at the college and if she planned to stick around town after she graduated. Having always been a private person, the questions seemed a little too close to an invasion of privacy, but if she didn’t answer them, the gossip would start. Being fodder for all the wagging tongues in town didn’t hold a hell of a lot of appeal.

“He’s dating someone?” Funny, he hadn’t mentioned a girlfriend when he was looking at Amanda like he wanted to eat her alive. When he’d asked her out for coffee. She shook her head. Men. They were all the same. Husbands two and three had had wandering eyes. Number three cheated on her with the same woman for nearly a year before he’d come clean and she’d filed the divorce papers. Her low-life radar must be defective, since she was always attracted to the wrong men. It seemed like her new neighbor was no exception.

Men were dogs. Even the ones who acted like they weren't. Joe's little omission clarified that for her better than anything else had in a good long while.

"You okay?" Alex asked, his brows knitting into a frown.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Now that she had her priorities straight. She wouldn't let them get skewed again, at least not for a man she didn't even know anything about.

Resolve firmly intact, she headed for the table, a smile plastered across her face when she really wanted to sneer at the jerk.

"Hey, guys," she said when she stopped at the table, focusing her attention on Barry and ignoring Joe. "What can I get for you tonight?"

"A couple of beers would be great." Barry mentioned a popular domestic variety.

"No problem. Be right back." Without even a glance at Joe, she spun on her heel and walked away from the table.



"What was that all about?" Barry asked once Amanda was out of earshot. Joe just shrugged.

"I guess she's ignoring me." Because she seemed insistent on pretending she wanted nothing to do with him.

Barry laughed. "What did you do to her?"

"What makes you think I did anything?"

"I've been married for long enough to understand when a woman's pissed. She's *pissed*, Joe. She ignored you on purpose."

"Impossible. I just met her this morning."

"And apparently you managed to strike out already." Barry laughed again, this time longer and louder. He clapped his hand down on the tabletop and shook his head. "It figures. You, Mr. Nice Guy, struck out with a woman you have to see every day."

“I didn’t strike out.” Not yet. He just had to figure out what it was she thought he did and try to fix it. If she was like all the other women who’d ever been in his life, figuring out the problem would take nothing short of a small miracle. “I went over to the cottage this morning and introduced myself. I was there for two minutes. I didn’t do anything to offend her.”

Except walking into the place without knocking first, but she’d left the door wide open. That was inviting trouble. If it scared her, good. Maybe next time she’d think twice about doing it.

Asking her out couldn’t have offended her. At least he hoped not. She hadn’t turned him down because she wasn’t interested. And she hadn’t given him any reason to give up.

“The woman’s perfect for you,” Barry continued, ignoring what Joe told him. “A lost cause. I couldn’t think of a better neighbor for you.”

“You think she’s a lost cause?” Joe asked, frowning. He hadn’t picked up that vibe from Amanda at all. She wasn’t lost. She was running away from something. Or someone. The fact only intrigued him more. Getting to know her, to learn what made her tick, had suddenly become top priority on his list. “She’s not.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Yeah.”

She needed help, though, and sooner or later he was going to find out what her problem was so he could try to find a way to fix it.



Amanda checked her watch and shifted on the edge of the curb just outside the bar parking lot. It had only been fifteen minutes since she’d called the auto club, and yet it felt like three hours.

Humidity still clung to the air despite the late hour—a little after midnight—and she swiped the back of her hand across her forehead. Of all the nights, and all the times, for her car to break down, it had to be now, when she was exhausted after a long night at work. Her feet hurt, her legs ached and she could barely keep her eyes open. The operator at

the auto club told her a tow truck would be right out to help her, but even Amanda understood it would take a lot longer than a few minutes for someone to show up.

“Is everything okay?”

She glanced up to see Joe standing over her, hands in the pockets of his denim shorts. She sighed. A neighbor who wanted to “help”. Yet another thing she had no use for—but relief flooded her anyway. “It’s fine, thanks.”

“Is there a specific reason why you’re sitting on the sidewalk?”

“Other than the fact my car won’t start? Nope.”

“Want me to take a look at it?”

“Thanks, but I’m all set. The guy from the auto club will be here any minute now.”

She expected Joe to walk away, but instead he propped his hip against the side of her car. “What’s wrong with it?”

Other than it being well past its prime and ready to fall apart at the seams? She had no clue. “If I knew that, I wouldn’t be sitting here right now.”

“Does the engine turn over?”

“No. But it’s really not your concern. They’re going to tow it to the garage and the mechanic will take a look at it in the morning.” And how she’d get to work until she had her vehicle back, she had no idea. She had enough to deal with tonight. She could worry about transportation to work later, when she’d had some sleep.

Joe crossed his arms over his chest. “How are you going to get home after that?”

She hadn’t thought that far yet. *Thank you, Joe, for giving me yet another thing to worry about.* “I’ll call a cab.”

“Good luck getting one at this time of night.”

She frowned. “What do you mean?”

“The only cab company in town has two cars, and the same number of employees. The cabs don’t usually run past eleven.”

She groaned. Just lovely.

“I’ll stick around until the tow truck gets here. Then I’ll give you a ride home.”

She started to protest, but Joe held up his hand. “Don’t. Unless you’re planning on walking home or staying in town, you don’t have many options. I don’t mind giving you a ride. Your place is on the way to mine.”

She had to admit he was telling the truth. Staying in town for the night held little appeal, and walking wasn’t even an option. It would take her all night to get home. What would be the harm in taking a ride from her new neighbor? If he was friends with Barry and had Alex to vouch for him, he couldn’t be that bad.

“You’re not a serial killer or anything, are you?”

“Not hardly. You?”

What was it about him that put her at ease, yet made her all edgy at the same time? She might have seen herself becoming friends with him—if she wasn’t so attracted to the man. She couldn’t be friends with a man she wanted. Especially a man who was currently unavailable. Those were the ones she always ended up marrying. And divorcing.

“Where are you from?” Joe asked, his tone casual. He glanced up and down the street before returning his gaze to her.

“Vermont.”

“What made you decide to move out here?” This question was less casual and a lot more probing than she was ready to deal with.

She shrugged, ready to give him the answer she gave anyone else in town who asked. The easy answer, and half of the truth. “I’m starting school at the college in the fall.”

“Not many college students buy houses within a month after moving to town.”

She was willing to wager not many college students were three-time divorcees, either, but she didn’t point that out to him. “I like it here.



Always have. My family used to vacation on the lake when I was growing up. I figured it would be a good place to settle down.”

“Do you have family or friends here?”

“Isn’t that kind of a personal question?”

He smiled. “I don’t know. Is it?”

“Yes, it is.” She swiped her hand across her forehead again and tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear. “And no, I don’t.”

The lack of family in the area was the reason she’d chosen it. The place was familiar enough that she could make her way around town without getting lost, yet there was no one there to smother her with good intentions.

At least there hadn’t been, until her sexy neighbor had pushed his way into her life.

“So you’re all alone out here, no support system?”

“For someone who says he isn’t a serial killer, you sure are starting to sound like one.”

The smile widened. He raised his hands in the air, palms up, in a gesture of surrender. “Trust me. I’m safe. I’m just curious about you, that’s all. Call it a fault, but I’m curious about people in general, especially women who seem to be running away from something.”

“I’m not running away from anything.” Except maybe herself. Leaving Lilton had been a necessity. A matter of survival. If she’d stayed, she would have continued on the same path of falling in love with and marrying the wrong men just to keep from being alone. Letting everyone around her take care of her instead of accepting responsibility for her own life. Back before she’d moved, she hadn’t known it, but coming to Ludlow had shown her being alone wasn’t the worst thing in the world. In fact, she’d quickly learned she liked it. *Loved* it, even.

“No?” He cocked his head to the side, brows knit together, and studied her for what felt like an eternity. Her face flamed under his scrutiny and she swallowed hard, dropping her gaze to the ground.

“What are you studying in school?” he finally asked.

Grateful for the change in subject, Amanda let out the breath she hadn't even realized she'd been holding. "Nursing."

"That's a tough program. Some long hours, from what I've heard."

"I don't mind. I've always been interested in the medical field. Since I was little, and I..." Her voice trailed off. She didn't even know the guy. What was she doing giving him her life story when he hadn't even asked?

"What happened when you were little?"

"I was in and out of the hospital a few times." *Just a slight exaggeration there.* "I got to know some of the nurses. I always thought it would be a fun job."

She held her breath, expecting him to question her further, but he seemed to realize it was time to back off. "What did you do before you moved here?"

"I was a secretary at a real-estate office." And things had started to get weird when Ronny, her ex-fiancé, had gotten serious with another woman. Amanda harbored no ill feelings for him despite the way he'd left her at the altar, but it had been a strain on the friendship they'd developed for her to see him with someone else. So they'd agreed it was time for her to move on. Registering for college had been a huge step—one she'd almost reconsidered at least twice a week since she'd signed up for the nursing program—but when she graduated with her RN in two years it would be one step closer to total independence.

"And you didn't like working as a secretary?"

"It was okay." Toward the end, there had been days she'd woken up dreading going to work, but she'd never told anyone that. It hadn't been anger, or frustration, that had caused the feelings. It had been...apathy. She just hadn't cared, and the lack of emotion had spurred her into making some pretty drastic changes in her life.

They sat in silence for a little while longer, only the sounds of crickets and the occasional bark of a dog echoing through the darkness, before Joe spoke again. "What made you decide to buy a house?"

"I talked to Barry about renting an apartment, and I did look at a few, but then he showed me the cottage and I decided to go for it."

Impulse control had always been an issue for her. Once she decided to do something she jumped in with both feet. Luckily, purchasing the cottage had been a smart decision.

“What about you?” she asked when he said nothing. “How long have you lived here?”

“All my life.” His gaze swung toward her, a smile in his eyes. “I know just about every square foot of this town. Since you haven’t been around long, maybe I could give you a tour sometime.”

Her eyebrows shot up. It sounded like he was asking her out on a date...and she didn’t date attached men. “You didn’t mention earlier that you’re dating someone.”

“I’m not.” He frowned, but soon understanding passed across his features and he shook his head. “You’ve been talking to Claudia, haven’t you?”

“No. Someone else mentioned you were seeing her, though.”

“I *was* dating her,” he continued. “Past tense. We split up a little while before I went on my business trip.”

Hope flared inside her and she quickly stomped it out. It really wasn’t any of her business if he was dating the woman or not. Amanda was so not interested.

Okay, maybe a little bit interested, but she had no plans to act on that interest. She’d made a promise to herself—no more men in her life, no more dead-end relationships—and she intended to keep that promise.

“You change your mind about that coffee?” he asked, his tone as hopeful as the feelings inside her.

She didn’t get a chance to answer. The tow truck pulled up and she jumped off the curb to meet the operator, glad for the distraction from what could have become a very uncomfortable situation.



Amanda hadn't said more than two words since she'd ignored his question about coffee, and Joe was starting to get worried. Was Barry right? Had he done something to scare the woman off?

"Are you okay?" he asked her, sliding a sidelong glance to where she sat in the passenger seat of his truck, gaze focused on some point out the windshield. "You're really quiet."

"Yeah, I'm fine." She offered him a wavering smile, but didn't glance his way. "Just tired. It was a busy shift tonight."

Tired, and uncomfortable too, judging by the way she had a death grip on the door handle. Okay, so the woman didn't want to go out with him. Why couldn't he just take no for an answer?

Because she was lying. He'd seen it in her eyes tonight when he'd asked. She'd wanted to say yes, had been on the verge of doing so, but something was stopping her. And then the tow truck had shown up and she'd run toward the driver like she'd been stranded in the desert for months and he was carrying a gallon jug of water.

"When did you get divorced?" he asked, determined to get to the bottom of her reasons for turning him down despite the mutual attraction.

"Two years ago."

Okay, so maybe it wasn't a broken heart holding her back. Though he knew from experience broken hearts didn't have a time limit. It could be years before they healed completely.

"But that's not the reason I said no to the coffee," she continued, glancing at him with a wary expression on her face. "I'm not dating right now. I've had some bad relationships, and I need a break. Sorry, Joe."

"I can respect that." But he didn't have to like it. He turned his attention back to the road. So Barry was right. He'd struck out with Amanda. What was the big deal, anyway? It wasn't like she was the last available woman in town.

Ten minutes later, he pulled up in front of her house and got out of the car. Before he could get to the passenger-side door, Amanda had already opened it and was sliding off the seat onto the gravel.

He frowned. "I would have opened the door for you."

"I'm really not into the whole chivalry thing," she told him, heading up the pathway toward her front porch before he even had a chance to round the side of the truck. "But thanks. Thanks for the ride, too. I really appreciate it."

She lifted her hand to wave, stumbled and almost fell to the ground. She teetered a second before catching herself, but not before her purse flew out of her hand and landed a few feet away on the path, strewn its contents everywhere.

Laughing at the soft curse she muttered, Joe rushed over and started helping her pick the stuff up. Studiously avoiding the more feminine items, he scooped up her wallet and handed it to her. She took it and then he realized they were very close together. So close their lips just about touched.

For an endless second, neither of them moved. Neither said anything, and Joe's breath caught in his throat. Amanda blinked those big eyes, licked her lips, and he nearly came apart right there. The woman was too sexy for her own good, and she didn't even know what she was doing to him.

A dog barking somewhere in the distance broke the spell and Amanda stood, running her free hand down her thigh. She dug through the repacked purse and pulled out a set of keys. "Like I said, thanks for the ride. I do appreciate it."

He stood, trying to ignore the disappointment welling in his gut. "No problem. Anytime. If you need a ride to or from work until your car gets fixed, let me know."

"I have the next two days off, so I'm hoping I won't. But thanks. I'll keep that in mind." She left him standing there like an idiot, watching after her as she ran into the house and slammed the door behind her.

## Chapter Three

Okay, so the situation could have been worse—but admittedly, not much. Amanda slumped down, her fingers burrowing in the dirt in the garden, and let out a shaky sigh. She'd heard from the mechanic at the garage earlier in the morning. Her car needed a new alternator. Not a huge problem as far as expenses went, but enough that her bank account would take a hit. Given that she'd used a good chunk of her savings to put a down payment on the house, she didn't relish the idea of using more to fix a car that was more than likely on its last legs. Not having a choice in the matter since she had to be able to get to and from work and, once fall came, to school, she'd told him to go ahead and fix it. She'd just have to tighten her budget a little more. In another month or so, she'd need to start buying school books.

And then there was Joe. Another worry she just didn't need. He'd almost kissed her last night.

She'd almost let him.

She'd spent the first twenty minutes after slamming her front door trying to convince herself she hadn't wanted him to, but in the end she'd had to admit the truth. She'd wanted it all right, and the fact settled in the pit of her stomach like a ball of lead.

She so didn't need the complications of having Joe as her neighbor. Even now, as she knelt outside trying to weed the overgrown mess that had at one time been called a garden, she couldn't stop throwing glances toward his yard.

He was splitting logs, of all things, in the middle of the summer. The log splitter he was using probably helped with the work, but given the

sheen of sweat glistening on that rock-hard chest, the work wasn't easy. Manual labor suited him.

He looked up, saw her watching and waved a gloved hand. Yelled something she couldn't quite understand over the dull roar of the machine's motor. Her face flushing, she glanced back down at the garden and started ripping weeds out of the soil moist from an early morning rain shower. She swiped the back of her hand across her cheek to wipe off some of the sweat that seemed to be pouring off her face. It was hot today—and not entirely due to the weather. His barely clad presence created a good deal of heat. Man, he was something to look at. No woman in her right mind would be able to keep her eyes off a body like that.

He wasn't alone, either. There was a young guy with him who looked similar. A brother, maybe. It had to be—though from this distance he looked to be a good fifteen years or so younger than Joe. Tall, blond and handsome, the both of them. But Joe...he was filled out, and she'd been right about his body. She would have licked her lips, had they not been covered in nearly as much dirt as her hands.

With a frustrated sigh, she turned back to the garden—yet again—and started yanking weeds out of the ground with a vengeance. Stubborn weeds. Gave her such a hard time coming out. Why did she even bother, anyway?

Because she wanted to prove to everyone, and even to herself, that she could do it all on her own. When Barry had sold her the place, he'd given her the name of a landscaper in the area, but she got a lot of pleasure out of doing it herself. Yeah, the work was difficult and time-consuming, but at the end of the day she had something to be proud of. Her own place, slowly taking shape and starting to look like a home. Once the outside was painted, she had plans to put in some window boxes and fill them with flowers. Another month, maybe two at the outside, and it would be ready for her parents to come and visit. She could show them, once and for all, that the last thing she needed was a babysitter.

“If you won't take my help, at least use these.”

Startled by the sound of his voice so close, Amanda jumped and swung her gaze over her shoulder. Joe stood behind her, his eyebrows raised as he studied the progress she'd made in the garden. In his outstretched hand he held a pair of worn leather work gloves. "They're a little big, I'm sure, but they'll do. They'll keep your hands from getting dirty."

Amanda rocked back on her heels, held her hands up in front of her face and shook her head, trying not to laugh. "I think it's a little too late for that."

"There are bugs in that dirt, you know. Lots of them."

As if a few worms and beetles would bother her. Did he think she was some prissy girl who was afraid of a little dirt? "Thanks, but I'm fine. Really."

"Well, take them anyway. You might need them for something else later."

"What about you? You need them now, with the work you're doing up the hill."

"I've got plenty. I work with my hands, remember? These are extra. Just take them, okay?" He dropped them onto the ground beside her, and she left them where they fell. If she needed gloves, she was perfectly capable of buying them herself.

But she didn't need to be rude, either. The man was just trying to be nice. It wasn't his fault she had an unwanted hormone surge every time he got within ten feet of her. "Thanks."

"It's nothing. Really." He lifted one bronzed shoulder in a shrug. "Did you hear from the garage?"

"Yeah." She told him what the mechanic had relayed to her. "He's got the part available and thinks it'll be ready tomorrow afternoon."

"I can take you to town to pick it up tomorrow when I get home from work."

"That would be great," she said through gritted teeth. She appreciated the fact that he wanted to help, but at the same time, a tiny



twinge of resentment tightened her stomach. Once she had her car back, she'd feel better.

"Is there anything else you need?" Joe asked.

She squinted through the sun to get a better look at his face. As far as she could tell, the guy had no ulterior motives for offering her his help. He was just a nice guy wanting to do what he thought was the right thing. He'd accepted her rejection last night like a gentleman, and seemed to have no interest in holding it against her. Funny, but up until this point her life had seriously been lacking nice guys. Why couldn't she have met him years ago, before the first disaster of a marriage?

"No, thanks. I think I'm okay."

He shrugged and turned to walk away, but she called him back, struck with the sudden urge to return the favor and make a peace offering, albeit a small one. "Hey, Joe?"

He stopped, glancing at her over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"I have a couple bottles of water in the fridge. You and your friend look like you could use a drink. Want me to get them for you?"

He started to shake his head, but then nodded and smiled. "That would be great if you don't mind."

"Don't mind at all." It was the least she could do, after he'd stayed with her last night while she waited for the tow truck, and then given her a ride home—and it would also show him that she had as much to offer him as he did for her. He wasn't the only one willing to lend a hand. She raced into the house and grabbed three bottles. Once back outside, she handed two to Joe. He thanked her and headed back up to his log-splitting machine, and only then did she sink onto the front steps, open her bottle and take a deep swig of the cool liquid.

Unfortunately, it did nothing to ease the burning in her gut. There was only one thing that would quench that, and it had nothing to do with water.



A little while after Joe and Scott finished for the day, Joe walked down to the lake and dove into the water. Scott joined him for a quick dip to cool off before he headed back to town to meet up with his girlfriend.

“How’s Monica?” Joe asked in as close as he could come to a conversational tone. There was still a hint of worry in his voice, no matter how much he fought to keep it out. Scott and Monica had been seeing each other for a few years now, and Joe was worried that it was starting to get really serious. Too serious for a twenty-year-old to be.

Scott rolled his eyes. “She’s great. And Dad, don’t start.”

“I just don’t want to see you tie yourself down to someone while you’re so young.”

“Like you did with Mom?”

Joe sighed. It always came down to that. Whenever he wanted to have a serious talk with his son about the woman in his life, Scott threw what had happened between him and Laura in his face. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Sure it is.”

“Not like you think. Your mother and I were barely eighteen when you were born. Just out of high school. Definitely not ready for marriage, let alone children. It was a hard lesson to learn, and I hate to think you and your sister suffered because of it.”

“We didn’t, so don’t worry. And I’m not thinking marriage with Monica yet. Geez. I haven’t even hit twenty-one yet. Let me at least get through college first.” He splashed water on his face and shook his head, spraying droplets into the air around him. “It looks like your new neighbor is watching again. Do you have something going on with her?”

“Are you trying to change the subject?”

“Is it working?” Scott asked, his tone hopeful.

Joe would allow him the distraction, since most of their talks lately surrounded his relationship and his age, and Joe didn’t want to risk pushing him away. At twenty, Scott should be old enough to make his

own decisions. It wasn't that Joe didn't trust him to do the right thing, he just knew what he'd been thinking at that age and hated to see Scott tie himself down when he still had so much life to live and so many things to accomplish.

"That depends. Is she really looking?"

Scott laughed again before stepping out of the water and grabbing a towel. He dried his shaggy hair and glanced up the yard to where Amanda knelt in front of the overgrown garden. "Yeah, she's really looking."

Joe swung his gaze toward where the cottage sat a few hundred feet away from the beach and saw she was, indeed, looking in their direction. It wasn't long before she turned her attention back to the garden she was pretending to weed. He smiled to himself.

That was the tenth time he'd caught her staring today alone, or at least it seemed like it. For a woman who sent out signals that she wasn't attracted, she was doing a terrible job of standing by that. Her silent perusal when she thought he wasn't aware made him want to get to know her even more. To find out what made her tick, and why he couldn't seem to get her out of his head.

"She's cute," Scott continued. "What's her name?"

"Her name is Amanda, and she's not interested in anything I have to offer."

"Did she tell you that?"

"Sure did." He shrugged. "She said she's not dating right now."

And then she'd almost let him kiss her. Not the actions of a woman who wasn't interested.

"Then why does she keep staring?"

That was what he was trying to figure out. "She needs help, but she won't admit it."

"Then she's the perfect woman for you. I know how you like to help people. Especially women."

Why did everyone act like it was a character flaw to be nice? He got out of the water, shook the excess drops from his hair and grabbed the second towel he'd brought down from the house. "Yeah, that's me. A regular Boy Scout."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. I just think, if she's interested enough to spend her whole day staring at you when she thinks you're not looking, maybe it wouldn't be a bad idea to take her out. Or if you're not interested in dating, she does live right down the yard from you. You wouldn't even have to *take* her anywhere." Scott waggled his brows and broke down into a fit of laughter, collapsing into one of the lawn chairs on the beach.

"I'm not discussing this with you."

"Why not? Like I have no clue that you have sex? And believe me, if I wasn't seeing someone, I might consider asking your tenant out for a drink or two."

"You're not old enough to drink yet."

"Yeah, but she is."

"She's not much older than you. Twenty-eight."

"Good. Perfect for you. At least she looks a lot nicer than that witch Claudia Marshall."

"Scott..." Joe warned through gritted teeth.

"What? She is. Even Mom says so."

As if he really cared what Laura thought. He wouldn't say it in front of his children, but she'd screwed him over worse than any other woman ever had. Though he hadn't been *in* love with her like she'd needed, he'd loved her. Cared about her, and she'd cheated on him. Even after he'd found out the truth, it had been a few months before she stopped denying what she'd been doing. He'd washed his hands of the woman a long time ago, but the emotional wound had yet to heal. Mostly it pissed him off that he hadn't known what was going on until she was on her way out the door.

“Don’t get like that,” Scott continued. “I didn’t bring Mom up to get you upset. I’m just saying that Kelly and I want to see you happy too. You deserve the happiness even more than Mom does.”

Yet another discussion he didn’t want to get into with his son. He loved his children, and even though he wasn’t with their mother anymore, he wouldn’t badmouth her. She hadn’t badmouthed him to the kids, and he figured she at least deserved the same courtesy. He’d spent the past five years showing her a lot more courtesy than the woman deserved. Someone had to be the adult in the situation. Lord knew, it hadn’t been her.

“We’re not going there,” Joe said.

Scott started to speak again, but Joe held up his hand. “I mean it. I do date. I *am* happy. You don’t have to worry about me.”

“Claudia doesn’t count. She was nice, before, but lately she’s been a bitch. You deserve someone better.”

Joe nodded in silent agreement. Too bad the woman he wanted to spend more time with was so intent on avoiding him. She could say she wasn’t interested, but another few days of this and he’d have to break down and ask her out again anyway. He couldn’t stand her looking at him and not having at least said he’d taken the chance. Plus he was intrigued. Why was she so adamant about not taking his help? She had to be running away from something, even though she’d told him she wasn’t. Everything about her told him she was lying.

He’d noticed it earlier, when she’d reluctantly thanked him for the gloves. For some reason, she was resistant to his help, but she was curious. And attracted. Hell, he’d seen that the morning before, when he’d stopped by to introduce himself. He had no plans for the following weekend. If he could convince her to join him for dinner—not a date, since she didn’t want that—he could find out a little more about the woman behind the façade.

“I’ve got to head out,” Scott said, breaking into Joe’s thoughts. “Monica is waiting. You...just talk to Amanda, okay? You’re acting like a couple of teenagers. I’ll see you at the job site on Monday.”

With a clap on his father's shoulder, Scott walked to his car, gave Amanda a quick wave before climbing inside, and took off down the street, leaving Joe to think about what he said.

And to curse himself for his indecision.

## Chapter Four

Two weeks. It had been two weeks since Amanda had moved into the cottage, and though she loved it, living in isolation had taken some getting used to. Being so far away from town had been a problem at first, but now she'd gotten used to the twenty-minute drive and it wasn't so bad. Her proximity to Joe wasn't something that could be solved so easily. There were other properties nestled along the lake, but the area was fairly undeveloped so she had no other neighbors nearly as close as Joe. And his closeness bothered her in more ways than it should.

He'd asked her out again the day he'd taken her into town to pick up her car. Sure, he'd sworn it was just a friendly gesture, but she'd seen it for what it was. A veiled attempt at getting her to go out to dinner with him after she'd rejected his earlier offer for a cup of coffee. Given the way her heart sped up whenever she was within ten feet of him, turning him down hadn't been an easy thing to do.

She often found herself staring up at his house, seeing lights on at all hours of the night and wondering what he was doing. Wondering if he was alone, or if the woman he said he wasn't dating—the one Alex had told her about—was keeping him company. A sliver of unwarranted jealousy raced through her at the thought, though she had no claim to the man.

“Amanda?”

Amanda sighed. She'd forgotten she was even on the phone until her mother's voice had prompted a response.

“I swear, Mom, I really am okay,” she said into the handset, holding the phone to her ear with one hand while trying to paint the trim around

the windows with the other. "I told you before, I have a nice place. I have a job. I'd come out for the weekend, but I'm just too busy."

A good excuse if she'd ever heard one. She hadn't been home since she'd left, and in all honesty, had no plans to go back there until Thanksgiving. Maybe even Christmas. She loved her family, but they tended to go a little overboard sometimes. Her siblings would argue that she was the craziest of the bunch with her multiple marriages, but she did have a reason. It might not have been a good one, but it was there and she'd cling to it for as long as she could.

"We always have a family cookout in July," her mother continued. "You've never missed it before."

She'd never had a job to worry about before. Now things were different. She had real responsibilities.

"I'm sorry. I wish I could, but I can't get the time off from work." Satisfied that she'd done as well as she could with the trim given the shape it was in, she stepped back and leaned against the railing.

The railing she had just painted.

With a groan, she pulled away and glanced over her shoulder to survey the damage she'd done. Her white shorts now had a nice stripe of yellow across the middle of her rear, and the freshly painted railing didn't look so fresh anymore.

Of course this would happen now, when she was starting to make headway.

"Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just learned that I really shouldn't try to multitask when I've had about three hours of sleep."

"Making a new fashion statement?" Joe's voice came from the bottom of the stairs, making her jump. How did he always manage to sneak up on her? And why did he seem to get such a kick out of it?

"Who is that, Mandy?" her mother asked, and she could already hear the wheels turning in the older woman's head. "A new friend?"

Yeah, a friend. That was what he was. *Not.*



“My neighbor. Again.” No one important. No one she should even be talking to since she couldn’t seem to control her reactions whenever he was around. For the past week, she’d been doing all she could to stay away from him. If he kept asking, she might accept a date one of these days. “Very funny, Joe. Is there something you need?”

“Just to talk to you for a second.”

“I’ve got to go, Mom. Sorry about the cookout. I’ll make it up to you around the holidays.” *Though I haven’t decided yet which ones.* She hung up the phone, set it down on the top step and turned to Joe. “Yes, it’s a fashion statement. It’s all the rage in New York. Want me to do the same thing to your shorts?”

“Sure.” He shrugged, trying for casual when she could see he was barely holding back a chuckle. “Why not. I could use a little excitement. It’s been so quiet around here lately.”

She blushed at the thought of having to touch his butt to paint the stripe across it, so instead she turned her back on him and started cleaning up her painting supplies. Now that he’d made the suggestion, her fingers itched to do just that.

“Seriously, Joe. What is it you need?”

“It looks like you’re the one who needs help, not me.”

“I don’t need help. I can handle doing a little painting myself just fine.”

“From the looks of things, you’ve done a lot more than just painting. The flowers you planted in front of the place look great.”

“No big deal. It needed to be done, so I did it. That’s one good thing about working the evening shift. I have plenty of time during the day to work around the house. Now if you don’t mind, I really need to get inside to take a shower.”

The second the words were out of her mouth she realized her mistake. Thinking about taking a shower, thinking about Joe in the shower with her...she leaned her head against the side of the house and groaned. For a woman who didn’t want to get involved, she was really failing. Miserably.

“You look tired. Maybe you should take a break. Had dinner yet?” he asked, his tone laced with amusement.

Dinner? Had she eaten? No. She’d been so busy with the trim she’d forgotten everything else. She started to shake her head, but her stomach chose that moment to growl.

“I guess not. Can you take a little time off from home improvements? I brought in a pizza from town a few minutes ago, and it’s too much food for me to eat all by myself.”

The thought of a fresh, hot pizza brought a smile to her face. For the past few weeks, she’d lived mostly on canned soup, sandwiches and salads. The pizza place in town didn’t deliver, and she’d never been able to justify a forty-minute drive round-trip just to get a meal. Her stomach growled again, not giving her the chance to turn him down. Instead she gave in. “Okay. Give me five minutes to change into some clean shorts.”

And run a brush through her hair. And put on some makeup. And...she glanced his way and had to swallow hard. If he was looking at her like that without any primping, maybe she should skip the hair and makeup. Wouldn’t want to give the guy any added encouragement.

Then again, maybe she would.

No. She couldn’t think that way. If she did, she’d end up in another doomed relationship and that was the last place she wanted to be. Still, what could a couple slices of pizza hurt? Since she’d been keeping to herself, she had yet to make any real friends in town. She could be friends with the guy without the friendship turning into something else, right?

One look in his eyes and she realized it would be easier said than done.



A half hour later, seated on the deck overlooking Joe’s backyard, Amanda was at peace with the man for the first time since he’d walked into her cottage warning her about the unwanted visitors she’d get if she

left the door hanging open. Joe was...fun. He had a relaxed manner that had put her at ease almost immediately. They'd eaten and talked, and she'd learned there was a lot more to him than she'd first thought. The man was anything but simple, and it only made her want to get to know him better.

That couldn't be good for anyone.

Her loser radar had broken long ago, and she no longer trusted herself to be able to tell the difference between a good guy and a scum in sheep's clothing.

Joe wasn't like the other ones. He was real. He wasn't a bum, and would have no problem supporting a woman emotionally instead of leaving her on her own to take care of herself. If she was looking, he would be the perfect choice, which was why she really should stay away from him.

The more she learned, the more she wanted to learn, and it was a vicious cycle she had no hope of breaking out of anytime soon. He was what she needed, and everything she needed to stay away from. But how could she when he made her feel so comfortable? When he made a simple pizza and iced tea meal feel like something from a four-star restaurant?

Not to mention his house. The place was freakin' gorgeous. Open-concept with exposed beams, granite countertops in the roomy kitchen, and dark hardwood floors. It was like looking at her cottage, but all grown up.

When she'd stepped through the front door, she'd realized she was standing in the middle of her dream house, the one she'd wanted since she was a little girl. It looked so much like a place her family used to rent across the lake—and exactly like a place she'd always wanted to live. The sight had stunned her nearly speechless and still held her captivated even now.

"You're so quiet. Is everything okay?" he asked.

She looked up just in time to catch the concerned expression on his face. The evening breeze whipped a lock of his hair across his eyes, and

she had the sudden urge to reach across the table and push it away with her fingers. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"Working too many hours on your feet down at Maggie's."

"It's not so bad. Besides, I really do need the job."

"Can you type?"

She narrowed her eyes. "Yeah. Why?"

"I have a job opening, if you're interested."

"Doing what?"

"My assistant left almost a month ago. I haven't found anyone to replace her on a full-time basis yet."

Okay, so not a good idea. Couldn't he see that? If she worked for him, she'd have to see him more, and she wanted to see him less. Seeing him more often would be dangerous to her mental health. The man wanted to *help* her, and help was the last thing she needed.

"Why did she leave?"

The look in his eyes darkened and he let out a harsh sigh. He glanced toward the lake, and it seemed like forever before he turned his attention back to her. "Another company offered her more money."

His tone made her regret asking. She leaned forward and placed her hand over his. "I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't." His expression softened marginally. "She made her choice, and I have to live with it. I just wish she'd given me time to find a replacement before she jumped ship."

Something told her there was more to the story, but she didn't push it. She didn't know him well enough to pry, and even though she was curious, she couldn't say she wanted to dig any deeper into his life. Everything she learned about the man made her want to get to know him better. Asking more about his assistant would edge them too far into personal territory.

The thought made her pull her hand back, and she folded it together with the other one in her lap. For a woman who didn't want to get

involved with any man, ever, she was having a hard time remembering why she'd sworn them off in the first place.

Instead of sitting around dissecting her feelings and talking herself out of her original plan, Amanda jumped to her feet and started gathering plates and napkins off the table. "I should help you clean up. It looks like it might rain."

She rushed into the house, leaving Joe out on the deck staring up at setting sun.



Joe shook his head, grabbed the pizza box and headed inside.

"Rain, my ass," he mumbled. For a little while there, she'd relaxed and allowed herself to just enjoy the company. It hadn't lasted long.

Something had spooked her, but he had yet to figure out what he'd said this time to scare her off. Could have been the job offer. Miss Independent wouldn't want her sense of freedom threatened by someone who actually cared what happened to her. She'd rather struggle, working for tips as a waitress in a dark little bar, than admit there might be something else for her out there. It would be two years before she finished nursing school, and he couldn't imagine her staying at Maggie's all that time. The shifts were late, and the crowds terrible and raucous sometimes. He could give her a better job, but he should have realized she wouldn't take what he offered.

She was working herself to the bone, and Joe hated to see anyone in that sort of situation. Especially someone like Amanda. Someone who made his gut clench and all his blood rush south with nothing more than a smile.

He stuffed the half-full pizza box into the fridge, walked over to the sink where she was washing dishes and switched the water off.

Her gaze flew to his. "What are you doing?"

“I was just going to ask you the same thing.” He lifted a checkered dish towel off the stove handle and tossed it to her. “Dry your hands and have a seat. My house, my dishes. You need to relax.”

“And you need to stop.” She dried her hands on the towel and tossed it back.

“Stop what?”

“Stop trying to help so damned much. I’m a grown woman, Joe. I can take care of myself.” Her eyes narrowed, flashing fire.

“Why do you have such an extreme need to prove that to me?”

“I’m not trying to prove it to *you*,” she said through clenched teeth, a flush rising up her neck to stain her cheeks. “I’m trying to prove it to everyone else.”

The last words were spoken so quietly he had to strain to hear them. She slumped against the counter, arms crossing over her chest. Her head dipped and her hair brushed the exposed skin just above the low neckline of her tank top. Suddenly, she didn’t look so obstinate anymore. She looked...defeated, and he couldn’t help the guilt that clogged his throat when he thought he was the one who’d caused her misery.

He walked over to her and reached a hesitant hand out, placing it on her shoulder after a few seconds of mental debate. Yeah, she’d probably shove him away and tell him where he could stuff his pity, but if a woman ever needed a friend, Amanda did right now.

Surprisingly, she didn’t push him away. If anything, she leaned into the touch. He waited for the telltale snuffle of tears, and considered himself a lucky man when he didn’t hear anything. He hated to see a woman cry, but he had a feeling Amanda wouldn’t appreciate any more comfort than she was allowing at the moment.

“It’s not your fault,” she told him, her gaze still glued to the floor. “I’m sorry I got upset. You didn’t deserve that.”

“Why do you reject me every time I try to help you?”

Now she looked at him, and the pain he saw in her eyes nearly undid him. He fought the strong urge to pull her into his arms, to stroke her hair and tell her everything would be all right.

“It’s okay to lean on someone else sometimes,” he continued when she stayed silent.

“Not for me it’s not.” She said the words on a sigh, straightened her shoulders and put some distance between them. Her expression hardened into the familiar stubborn one he’d seen so many times when he’d offered her help, and he knew it was a lost cause. Forget getting her to open up to him tonight.

He raised his eyebrows. “Want to explain that comment?”

“When I was little…” Her voice trailed off and she turned toward the slider, gazing outside. She pressed her hand to the doorframe and leaned closer to the glass. “Everyone took care of me then. They didn’t stop babying me as I got older, even after… and I let them. It took me until last year to realize what a mistake that was.”

“It’s not a mistake to have friends.”

“It wasn’t about having friends. It was about everyone thinking I was fragile and couldn’t do anything for myself.”

With that, she spun around and paced back to where he stood, stopping right in front of him. She lifted her chin and glared at him. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself, Joe.”

“Believe me, I know you are.”

“I’m an adult,” she continued, her tone even more harsh than before.

“Another thing I’ve noticed.” And man, had he noticed. Thoughts of her body, and what it would feel like under his, had kept him awake for many a night since she’d moved into the little cottage down the hill. The only reason he hadn’t done anything about his attraction was because she’d been sending out so many signals telling him not to. If he caught one inkling of interest that wasn’t countered with a stay-away sign, he might not be able to stop himself from kissing her.

In the end, she took the choice away from him when she stood on tiptoes, wrapped her hand around the back of his neck and drew him down for a kiss.

Joe held himself still for as long as he could, allowing her the chance to be in control and explore. If he pulled her closer, she’d probably run

away, and at the moment that was the last thing he wanted. His whole body tightened, his muscles bunching and his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

He wouldn't take advantage of her vulnerability. Rushing things, in this case, would only lead to trouble. Talking with her over dinner, spending time with her in a relaxed state, had made him realize he wanted to get to know her, to take her out on the town, to give her everything she wanted and show her she didn't need to run away from anything anymore.

And damn, he was in some pretty deep shit.

He broke the kiss, extricated himself from her hold and pressed his lips to her forehead.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sounding as shaky as he felt.

"Nothing. I just don't want to rush you."

"You weren't. We could have stopped at any time."

He let out a laugh tinged with bitterness. *Easier said than done, Amanda.* "Stopping would have been really difficult for me a few minutes down the road. I think we should call it a night now, before we get carried away. I wouldn't want you to have any regrets in the morning."

He backed up, and she brushed her hands down her sides. She gave him an uncertain smile. "If you're really not attracted to me, it's okay to tell me that."

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. How could she think that? She had to have felt his cock pressed against her. Had to know how being that close to her affected him. "You know that's not the problem, so don't pretend like it is."

"Then what is it?"

"You seem so intent on pushing me away. I'm not going to give you another reason. I'm still trying to figure out why you kissed me in the first place."



She opened her mouth to speak, but he silenced her with a hand in the air. “If we rush, you’ll use it as an excuse to ignore me tomorrow. I’m not going to let that happen.”

“I don’t feel rushed.”

The woman was something else. One minute telling him she didn’t want to be involved, the next telling him she hadn’t wanted him to stop kissing her. And as for the kiss...there had been a hint of desperation in her touch that bothered him. She’d kissed him for the wrong reasons. It wouldn’t happen again until her reasons were the right ones.

He leaned in close and pressed a fast kiss to her lips. “Trust me, Amanda. I’m a sure thing. You just have to say the word. But I’m not going to take any less than everything. I don’t want you going into this on impulse and regretting it the next morning.”

She opened her mouth, closed it again and shook her head. A few seconds later, she started for the door.

“Thanks for dinner,” she said over her shoulder as she stepped outside. “And...just thanks. I mean it. I really appreciate it.”

It took a few seconds after the door closed behind her for Joe to be able to breathe again.

## Chapter Five

Amanda's shopping bag hit the floor with a thump as soon as she walked through the front door. A swift kick sent the door slamming shut and she made her way to the fridge for something cold to drink. First thing she did when she got her next paycheck would be to buy the air conditioner she'd promised herself when she'd first moved in. Other expenses had taken precedence so far, but now she had no more excuses. Summer had hit full blast, bringing in a heat wave that didn't want to quit. New England summers tended to come quickly and be brutally humid, and this one was no exception.

Her hair hung in damp waves around her face and her T-shirt had been plastered to her back since she'd left town. The air conditioning in her car had gone on the fritz a few days before the vehicle had broken down all together, and for the first time in her life, she had to deal with those kinds of problems on her own. The thought didn't thrill her, though she kept trying to convince herself that it should. She was on her own. Just how she'd told herself she wanted to be.

So why didn't it hold so much appeal as it had earlier, when she'd first moved away from home?

Because she was tired. Tired and...frustrated. In the three days since Joe had all but kicked her out of his house after that scorching kiss, she'd done nothing but think about kissing him again. She'd lost too much sleep over it, and every other aspect of her life was beginning to suffer. According to Joe, all she had to do was say the word.

Well, what the hell was she waiting for?

She grabbed a glass and filled it with cool water from the tap before lifting the glass to her lips and draining most of it in a few sips. She was waiting for some kind of sign that starting something with Joe was the right thing to do. She'd been going over and over the situation in her head, and so far she'd been able to come up with a con to match every pro. He'd been right. She wasn't sure what she wanted. The one thing she was sure of was that she didn't want to get involved, at least not in another failure of a long-term relationship, so he'd saved her a lot of trouble by sending her away before things had gone further—and gotten even more confusing.

She looked out the window toward the lake and smiled. Between work and fixing up the cottage, she hadn't spent nearly enough time in the water. She could always go for a swim a little later. That was guaranteed to cool her off, and she needed cooling today. In more ways than one.

Her gaze snagged on something moving out in the lake and she blinked. Joe. He was walking toward the shore, running a hand through his hair. His swim trunks rode low enough on his hips that she got a good glimpse of the muscles there. She swallowed hard. The man was pure perfection, and in his own words, a sure thing. She pressed a hand to her belly. Too bad she'd sworn off all men less than three months ago. His offer was proving too difficult to resist. He'd probably known, when he'd made the offer, what it would do to her. It had made her think—almost nonstop since she'd walked out of his house. Maybe, just maybe, she wasn't as sure of what she wanted as she'd first thought.

Joe suddenly stopped walking and smiled, and she realized she'd been caught. He lifted one hand and beckoned to her, but she sank down along the counter until her butt hit the floor.

“Oh, my God.” Of course, now he'd catch her watching. Why not? Was there anything else she could do to embarrass herself in front of the man? She still had yet to figure out why he'd want someone as neurotic and unstable as she must seem.

Yeah, the man probably thought she was a total headcase, and she wouldn't blame him if he did. She refused his help even though she

needed it, she all but ignored him whenever he came in to the restaurant, and then she had to do something as stupid as kissing him. Definitely not the behavior of a sane woman. The fact that he was interested at all should have told her something about his own mental state, because up to this point she'd been sending him so many mixed signals his head should have been spinning.

A knock sounded on the door, but she ignored it. He'd want to gloat, and seeing him laugh at her didn't hold a lot of appeal right about now. After a few minutes of sitting silent on the floor, the knock didn't come again and she let out a relieved breath.

She should have realized it couldn't be that easy. The knob turned, the door swung open, and he stepped inside, a cocky grin on his face.

She slumped down even lower and propped her elbows on her bent knees. "By all means, Joe, come on in."

He shook his head, spraying droplets of water across the walls and floor. "You're the one who left the door unlocked."

"This is the middle of nowhere. Besides, I don't have anything of value. If someone wants my stuff that badly, have at it."

"Is the couch not comfortable enough for you?"

"It's fine. Why?"

"Well, you're sitting on the floor. Or is that because you didn't want me to see you watching me?"

Her face flamed and she swallowed down the lump of embarrassment forming in her throat. The guy was bold. A little too bold, sometimes, for his own good. And if she wanted to save herself any further embarrassment, all she could do was lie to his face. "I wasn't watching you."

"Oh, really?"

"Really. I was watching the lake. It's hot and I was thinking of going for a swim."

"So what's stopping you?"

“Oh, I don’t know. There’s something big and bulky blocking my front door, dripping water all over my house.”

“Sorry.” He took a step back, going out onto the porch. His deep laughter reached her from across the room and she narrowed her eyes at him. Exactly what, in this impossible situation, did he find funny? From where she was sitting, it seemed like one big, honking embarrassment after another.

“Come for a swim with me, Amanda,” he continued, his stance casual and his expression anything but. “It’ll be fun. We haven’t had a chance to talk in a few days.”

Not since he’d told her he was a sure thing. She shivered at the memory of those words. She was a sure thing, too, which was why she’d decided to stay away from him. If she got any closer, she might forget about swearing off men and take him up on the hard-to-resist offer she wished he’d never made.

Swimming with him was so not a good idea for way too many reasons, half of which eluded her now, with him standing so close and wearing so little. She shook her head. “I can’t right now. I just walked in from shopping a few minutes ago. I have clothes and a few groceries to put away, not to mention a shower to take, before I have to be to work tonight.”

His eyebrows rose and the expression on his face told her he didn’t buy into her excuses for a second. “What time do you have to work?”

“Seven.”

“It’s only a little past two. You have plenty of time. You really look like you could use a swim to cool off.” Mischief glinted in his eyes and his smile widened, full of challenge.

She should say no, but for some reason, she couldn’t make herself turn him down. She really did need to find a way to cool off. Besides, she could swim with the guy without wanting to kiss him again, couldn’t she? Maybe not, but she could pretend with the best of them. “Okay. For a little while. Give me a few minutes to put my swimsuit on.”

She pushed herself up off the floor and walked toward the bedroom, needing to put a bit of distance between them while she still could. If she was going to spend the afternoon with the guy, she'd need to psych herself up for it first. If there was ever a time for a mental pep talk, it was now. "Go ahead and go back down to the water. I'll meet you there after I change."



Joe headed back down to the lake, all but whistling as he walked. A stupid smile tickled his lips and refused to go away. After that kiss the other night, she might want to shut him out, but no way in hell would he let that happen. Yeah, she could say she wasn't interested until she was blue in the face, but her body language told a different story. So did the fact that he'd caught her watching—and it wasn't the first time, either. Since she'd moved in, there had been many times he'd glanced her way to see her standing in the window.

The smile spread over his face and he looked back over his shoulder. No one in the window this time, and he wondered if she'd really join him in the water like she'd said. At this point, he figured it was a toss-up. Once she was done wrestling with herself over what she really wanted, she would either come and find him or lock her door and not answer it if he knocked. His stomach sank a little when he realized the woman was probably leaning toward the latter, but maybe then she'd actually surprise him. She'd surprised the hell out of him the other night when she'd kissed him. If he wasn't mistaken, he had a feeling she'd surprised herself nearly as much.

Before he swung his gaze back toward the lake, he caught a glimpse of the shutters that still needed to be hung straight. He'd been so busy trying to catch up since his assistant, Catherine, had left him in complete chaos at the office he'd neglected to go over and help Amanda with the larger repair jobs like he'd originally planned to do. There were a few borderline safety issues that needed immediate repair, like the loose railing Amanda had made an effort to fix and the lock on the back door

that kept sticking, but the place needed a paint job besides. She'd been planning to do it—the paint cans stacked neatly just inside the front door told him that—but it was too big of a job for one person to tackle alone.

She might tell him she didn't want the help, but would it be so terrible to surprise her by getting a few things done for her so she had less to worry about? It would be a few weeks before he could get one of his crews on it, but the place was small and he had all weekend to get as much done as he could. Scott and his buddies would help out, too, if Joe tossed a couple of bills their way and bought lunch. The least he could do for his stubborn neighbor was to help her make the place look as presentable on the outside as it was on the inside.

To tell the truth, thinking about helping her was a welcome distraction from the mess his life had been thrown into with Catherine's defection to the dark side. He'd tried a few replacements, but none of them had worked out. Catherine had known her stuff, when everyone else seemed lacking. And seeing Amanda around, pretending she wasn't interested, lightened his perpetually dark mood and gave him the interruption he needed to forget about his work for a little while. A swim together would be good for both of them. Plus he'd get to see that cute body of hers in a swimsuit.

Now that was a bonus he'd been looking forward to for a long time.



“What's the worst that can happen?” Amanda asked herself as she made her way down to the lake, towel clutched to her waist as if it could help her ward off the nerves fluttering in her stomach.

If it wasn't for the humidity in the air, it would be a beautiful day. The sun beat down from a nearly cloudless sky. The bright green grass was soft under her bare feet. The beauty of this place struck her every time she stepped outside the cottage, but today even the serenity of the nature around her couldn't calm her frazzled nerves.

She took a deep breath of pine- and sunshine-scented air and tried to force her stomach to stop doing flip-flops. It was just a swim in the lake

with a man she might be able to consider a friend. Could it really be so terrible?

What a painfully easy question to answer. There was a lot that could happen, and none of it was good. She was way too attracted to Joe, and prancing around in front of him in her swimsuit could possibly be one of the worst ideas she'd ever had.

She shivered at the thought of him being attracted to her only because he'd come to the conclusion she was helpless. He might not see it, but she didn't need his help any more than she needed her family's help. She wasn't a damned charity case. She *could* handle things on her own. She *would* prove to everyone that she didn't need a man in her life to be okay. Her family, and her new neighbor, might not believe it, but she did and that was all that mattered.

She hoped.

"Hey. You look lost in thought."

She blinked and noticed Joe standing waist-deep in the water. She forced a smile and dropped her towel on the small beach nestled in the grass, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear with her free hand. She'd been an idiot to accept his invitation.

"Amanda? You okay?"

She had to give herself a mental kick to recover her voice. Of course she was okay. Watching the water bead on his chest made her warm all over, but that didn't make her unstable.

*Bad, bad line of thought, Amanda. Keep it friendly, but nothing more. Keep your distance, for God's sake. The man is pure trouble wrapped in a tanned, blond, blue-eyed package.*

Keep her distance? Ha! As if that could ever happen. Every cell in her body was screaming for her to get closer to the guy, even as her mind warned that getting close to him would be a very bad idea.

"I'm fine. Just a little tired is all." Tired, stressed, in complete and total lust with the wrong man yet again, for the fifth time in her adult life...at this point, was there really any difference between the first and the last? From where she was standing, it didn't look like it. She was



destined to make the same stupid mistakes, over and over again, and was hard-pressed to think of a way to break the horrible cycle.

Joe put his hands on his hips. Confusion lit his eyes, but when he spoke his tone was soft, almost coaxing. “Are you coming in the water or are you going to stand on the beach all day?”

Her best option would be to grab her towel, march back up to the cottage and slam and lock the door. Instead she just stood there, staring at him like some lovesick teenager, trying to get her frozen feet to move across the sand. When she couldn’t get them to budge, she let out a sigh.

“Is it cold?”

One of his big shoulders lifted in a casual shrug. His smile widened. “Nah. It’s been a hot summer. The water is great. Like bath water. Come on in. I have no idea what you’re waiting for.”

With that said, he turned and dove under the water.

Amanda edged toward the shoreline, dipping her toes into the water lapping gently against the sand. He hadn’t lied to her. It wasn’t cold. Actually, it was pretty refreshing. She waded further in until she was about waist-deep, and then looked around for Joe.

“Can you swim?” he asked from behind her. Right behind her. She jumped and spun around, arms crossed over her chest. Joe standing so close sent a ripple through her nerves and she swallowed hard. His lips were less than a foot from hers, and all she could think about was how he’d tasted when she’d kissed him. Pizza and iced tea and warm, sexy man. Her lips went tingly at the thought of kissing him again.

“Yes, I can swim. I need a little time to get used to the water first, though. I can’t just jump right in.”

A deep laugh rumbled in his chest. “There’s nothing to get used to. The water is nearly as warm as the air. Plus...” He grabbed a sweat-dampened strand of her hair and twisted it between his thumb and forefinger before tucking it behind her ear. “You’re all sweaty. The water will feel nice.”

She bristled at the words, though she knew he hadn’t meant them as an insult. “It’s hot today. Has been all week. It’s hot in the cottage.”

“Do you need an air conditioner?”

Of course she did, but she wasn't going to get it from him. The more she leaned on him, the easier it would get, and pretty soon she'd be leaning on him for everything. Not an appealing prospect. “I'll be getting one when I get my next paycheck.”

“Let me know when you're ready. I'll go to the hardware store with you to help you with the heavy lifting. The box will fit better in the back of my truck than it would in your car. I can install it in the window for you, too.”

She barely restrained the urge to roll her eyes. A small unit would be light enough for her to be able to handle putting it in the window herself. No need to bother her neighbor with something so trivial.

“You don't have to do that. I can take care of it myself.”

She ducked down into the water and started to swim away, but Joe grabbed her ankle and pulled her back toward him. Her face flaming, she fought against his hold, but he wouldn't let her go. His hands on her waist, he lifted her up. Once he had her settled on her feet again, he shook his head. “Why are you so resistant to my help?”

“It's my place. I can deal with it myself.”

“Neighbors help each other around here. It comes with the territory, so you'd better damned well get used to it.”

The concern in his gaze made a lump of anger rise in her throat. When was he going to get it? She couldn't prove to everyone—and to herself—that she could do it alone if he kept hounding her at every turn. Men were not in her revised grand plan, and Joe would just have to *get used to that*.

She raked her hair out of her eyes and shook her head. She didn't need this right now, on top of everything else in her life. Why did fate choose this moment, when she was finally on her way to getting what she really wanted in life, to throw such a huge wrench in her plans? A week ago it had been easy to pass off her interest in Joe as a simple case of lust, but now that she'd gotten to know him better, she understood it was more than that. She could see herself caring for him not far down

the road, if things kept going the way they were. Kissing him had been a huge mistake.

“Listen, Joe. I think you’re a great guy, but I’m just not interested in being taken care of right now. I moved away from my family for this reason. I really need to be on my own to do it all myself. Okay?”

He cocked his head to the side, hands on his hips, and studied her with an intensity that made her want to melt into the water and float away. There was something about that deep gaze that made her weak-kneed every time he turned it her way. And he knew it, too. She could see it in the slight curve of his lips.

Though he hadn’t moved an inch, suddenly he was too close and she needed to get away. She took a step back, her hands in front of her in a gesture of surrender. “I don’t think I’m really in the mood for a swim, after all. I’m going to head back up to the house and take a cool bath instead.”

“What’s the matter? Scared?”

The challenge in his voice made her smile, despite the severity of her situation. She dropped her hands, swirling them in the lukewarm water. It felt so good and she really didn’t want to leave, but if she stayed she might make yet another stupid, impulsive mistake in a long line of them. “No. I’m not scared. I’m just not...interested, either. Not in anything serious, at least. I thought you should know that so we could avoid any confusion in the future. One badly timed kiss doesn’t mean I want to pursue things further with you.”

“You’re lying.” He hadn’t even hesitated. As soon as she’d finished speaking, the words had been out of his mouth, accompanied by his raised-eyebrow, amused gaze.

Her discomfort level skyrocketed. Could he really read her that well? Maybe she was more transparent than she thought.

“What makes you say that?”

“I just know you are. What I don’t get is why you don’t admit to it.”

*Because it’s none of your business, anyway.* How could she explain her mess of a life to him? It would take a lot more time than she had

available, and even then, she doubted she'd be able to make him understand. "There's nothing to admit to."

"How about why you've been watching me, for starters. You could explain that to me."

As if he deserved an explanation. He'd been watching her, too, so he was just as guilty. "It was just this one time, and—"

"No, it was more than that."

She licked her lips. She was so busted. "You noticed?"

"Sweetheart, a woman like you stares at a man, he's bound to notice." He took a step closer to her, crowding her even though they were out in the open with nothing around them but water. He didn't touch her, but something in his gaze held her as effectively as if he had. "So we've established that you're interested. What I don't get is why you won't admit to it."

"I'm not looking for a man." The explanation ran from her mouth before she could stop it. Another side effect of the impulse-control issues she hadn't quite been able to get rid of.

Joe said nothing for a long time. When she thought he'd finally given up, he did something that caught her by surprise. He grabbed her hand, pulling her toward him until her toes bumped his under the water. "You know, I'm not really looking for anyone, either. And the last thing I want to do is push you into something you aren't ready for. But there's something about you that grabbed a hold of me on day one and hasn't been willing to let go since. I just think it deserves some exploration."

He said the words, possibly the sweetest and most contradictory she'd heard in a long time, just before he leaned down and kissed her.

The kiss was short—barely more than a brush of his firm lips against hers—but it was electric. Even as he backed away, she pressed her palms to his damp, cool chest and sucked in a breath. Wow. The man could kiss, she'd give him that. Part of her wanted to drag him closer for more.

"What'd you do that for?"

“It seemed like the right thing to do at the time.” He let out a small laugh and shook his head, his hand coming to rest over hers and giving it a gentle squeeze. “Was I wrong?”

As much as she wanted to tell him he wasn't, that she wanted the contact as much as he did, she nodded. The man didn't need another unnecessary boost to his ego, and she apparently needed another reminder that she'd promised herself to keep her distance. “Yeah, I think you were.”

She said the words, yet again, but the more she said them, the less she believed them. Now she was finally starting to see the truth. Whether she wanted it or not, getting involved with Joe was inevitable.

Joe seemed to sense her change of heart. Instead of backing off, he dropped his hand, cupped her face between his palms and leaned in again. This kiss was anything but brief, but just as electric as the first. His tongue probed at her lips and he slipped it in between to brush with hers. At the same time, he pressed his hand against her lower back and drew her up against him, catching her hand between their bodies. Her nipples pebbled at the feel of his hard chest so close to her breasts, and something inside her cried out for more.

Even knowing she could be sinking into trouble, she had no interest in moving away. She melted into it, melted against him, and dove into the kiss with everything she had. By the time he broke the kiss and stepped back, they were both breathless.

She brought her fingers to her lips and a little sigh escaped before she could stop it.

“Wow.” Joe's whispered word echoed somewhere deep inside her. *Wow* was a very apt description of a kiss that was even more of a mistake than she'd first anticipated. So much for not getting involved. With that one contact she'd jumped in with both feet.

Still shaking off the remnants of the earth-moving kiss, Amanda turned away and started swirling her hands in circles just below the water's surface. “You're right, the water is really warm today.”

Without another word, she swam out deeper, ignoring him when he tried to call her back.

She'd reached the float a few hundred feet from shore and settled onto the sun-warmed deck boards before he came after her. He joined her on the wooden float and flopped down next to her, arms tucked behind his head. "What are you running away from?"

*You. Me. My life. Everything. Is that enough of an explanation?* "Why does it matter?"

He turned his head to the side and regarded her through slitted lids for a few seconds before he answered. "Because you look like someone who needs to talk."

"How can you possibly make that assumption?"

One corner of his mouth rose in a sexy half-smile. "It's in your eyes. I see it every time you look at me. It's like you want to trust me, want to spend time with me, but you're holding yourself back. There's more to it than that, I think, but so far you aren't talking. What gives?"

Yeah, she was definitely transparent. "Am I that obvious?"

"I'd love to say no if it would put you at ease, but you are."

Just wonderful. Why was he interested in a woman who, at twenty-eight, had yet to manage to get her act together? Everything she'd learned about Joe so far showed her he was a great guy. He didn't deserve to get involved with a woman who changed husbands nearly as often as she changed the oil in her car. She started to turn away, but his next words stopped her.

"No, don't get upset. I'm just making an observation. It doesn't mean anything." He winked. "So...want to tell me what it is you're running away from?"

About as much as she wanted to have toothpicks shoved under her fingernails. She didn't make a habit of opening up to people, at least not on the level he wanted. The thought of confiding something so personal to a man she'd known for a matter of weeks made her stomach clench. "Not so much."

"Is it a man?"

She narrowed her eyes. It was like he could reach into her mind and pull out her most personal, private thoughts. “Maybe.”

“You can trust me, you know. I’m a pretty good listener. For a guy, at least.”

Once again, he’d known just the right thing to say to put her at ease. At a minimum, she owed the guy an explanation for her erratic behavior. If she told him about her marriages, his interest would most likely dissipate pretty fast, anyway. Most men didn’t seem to want a woman who’d managed to go through three husbands before she even hit thirty.

“Okay, you’re right. I’m running away from a man. No, not so much *a* man, but men in general. All of them. All of *you*.”

He laughed as if he didn’t believe her. “What do you have against men as a gender?”

“Nothing. That’s the problem—and the reason I’ve been married three times. Almost four.”

To her surprise, he didn’t even blink. “Barry mentioned the three divorces.”

“Don’t forget the near miss shortly after my third divorce,” she answered in a small voice, trying to calm the butterflies in her stomach. Generally, this was the time most nice guys would turn tail and run. She could practically tick off the seconds on her fingers. *One...two...three...*

“Three,” Joe mumbled, shifting his back on the float. He closed his eyes, draped an arm over them and let out a long whistle. “When Barry first told me you’d been divorced three times, I thought he was joking.”

“Unfortunately not.” She didn’t know whether to be put out by his comment or to find it amusing, so she just sat there and waited to see what he’d say next.

“What happened? If you’ve had so many marriages and a near-miss to boot, why are you still single?”

To explain that to him would be to give him the story of her life, which was something she wasn’t ready to talk about. Instead she swiped a hand through her wet hair, forced a grin and lied through her teeth. “I

like men. I like dating, too, I think. I mistook lust for love a few too many times, and then I got bored and got rid of them. No big deal.”

His arm dropped from his eyes and his lids snapped open. Their gazes locked and Amanda had to take a breath. His expression warned that he didn't believe her, but he didn't dispute what she'd told him. A good thing, too, because she knew how it would go if she had to tell him the truth. It had happened too many times already. *See, Joe, I was diagnosed with leukemia when I was five...and it would all go downhill from there.* She'd *had* leukemia. Didn't have it now. Had been totally free and clear since she was fourteen, so long and drawn-out explanations would only dredge up years of pain she'd rather not relive. It would only make him uncomfortable. She brightened her smile and turned, resting on her stomach on the hot wood.

It seemed like forever that they lay there in silence before she couldn't stand it anymore. It was his turn to be uncomfortable now. *Let's see how you like being in the hot seat for a little while, Joe dear.* “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“How come you're single?”

“Haven't found the right woman yet.” His tone told her there was more to the story, and since he'd prodded her, she figured it was her turn to pry a little into his life. An eye for an eye, so to speak.

“How old are you, Joe?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“And you've never been married?”

“I didn't say that.” He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, a wary expression on his face. “I just said I'm single now because I haven't found the right woman. Never said I've been single all my life.”

No, he hadn't, but the explanation was too simple, too basic. Too much like the glossy one she'd given him. “So...have you been married before?”

“Yep.”



Now he decided to clam up? *Not happening, buddy.* A small part of her reveled in his discomfort. The man probably didn't have the tables turned on him very often. "Come on, Joe. Talk to me. You look like a man who needs to do a little talking."

"Throw my words back in my face, why don't you?"

She would have thought he was upset, if he hadn't started to laugh.

"You know," he continued, "I like you. You don't beat around the bush and play games like a lot of the women around here. You might not be willing to open up about your own life, but at least you don't jerk a man around and manipulate him to get what you want. You can ask anything you want to, if it makes you feel better about spending time with me. I'm an open book."

Her breath caught in her throat. He really had no idea what he was offering her. She didn't want him to be an open book. It would be so much easier to keep her distance if he stayed closed off. It had been easier to think of him as laid-back, without a care in the world, but his expression held a hint of bitterness and pain that gave her pause. He'd been through something that still bothered him. Maybe he'd understand her better than she'd first hoped.

She thought about it for a minute, considering leaving him alone on the float, but in the end decided she was too curious to walk away. The man was a study in contradictions, and it fascinated her. "When did you get divorced?"

"Five years ago."

"What happened?"

"My former business partner did."

She didn't know what to say to that, so for a while she said nothing. They lapsed into silence for a few minutes before Joe volunteered more information. "It's not as big of a deal as it sounds," he told her, though he gave her no reason to believe he was telling her the truth. "Laura and I...we didn't get married for the right reasons."

"No?"

"No, and we didn't stay together for them, either."

She understood that, though she'd never been through it herself. Her marriages had all ended well before the three-year mark. "Did you have kids together?"

"Yeah, two. Kelly and Scott. Great kids. Surprisingly well-adjusted, considering the mess our marriage was in."

That had to be tough on all of them. One thing she was glad for, with all her marriages, was that the subject of children had never come up. She couldn't imagine being a single mother right now, and none of her exes had really been the paternal type, anyway. "Do they live with their mother?"

"Yeah, pretty much." He didn't elaborate. "What about you? Have any kids?"

"No."

"Three marriages and no children?"

"I wouldn't make a very good mother."

"The jury's still out on that, but I bet you would. You're stubborn. That's a huge part of being a parent."

The last thing she needed was Joe, single father, thinking she would be a good parent. She wanted to tell him she wasn't looking to mother someone else's kids, even part-time, but she kept the bitter response to herself. It wouldn't be fair to him to make such a leap. He hadn't even mentioned the kids until she'd asked about them.

It wasn't that she didn't like kids. She did. In truth, she was afraid to have children. Though it was an irrational fear, she never wanted them to have to go through what she'd gone through as a child. It was too scary to even contemplate, and though she'd been reassured by many doctors that the odds of it happening were slim to none, it didn't change her decision or lighten the burden on her heart.

"Stubbornness aside, I just don't think motherhood is for me. It's too complicated to explain, but trust me, I have my reasons." Once her brothers and sister started having children, she'd be a wonderful aunt to them all, and as far as she was concerned, it would have to be enough.

“Now tell me more about you. Barry said you’re in real-estate development?”

“Not exactly. I’m a contractor by trade, and I do home restorations. I started out buying properties to fix up and rent, and I still do some of that, but my main business comes from people hiring me to restore old, run-down homes. That’s what I love to do. To take a building that’s falling apart and turn it into something spectacular.”

“That sounds like a great job,” she said, and meant it. That kind of job was fascinating for her, a woman with no discernable skills. “Do you like what you do?”

He let out a laugh that sounded almost...bitter. “I used to, but lately I’ve been questioning my decision.”

“Why is that?”

“I told you before that my assistant walked out on me. It turns out I’m not as organized as I thought.”

Poor guy. Here he thought she was the one in need, but it turned out things might actually be the other way around. “Are you still looking for help?”

“Actually, I think I’m all set in that department. I think I’ve finally managed to convince my daughter to come in and lend a hand when she’s not in school.”

He had to be kidding. He was going to use his child to do office work? “They have child labor laws for a reason, you know.”

He stared at her for a long time before he spoke. “Kelly’s nineteen.”

“Oh. *Wow.*” Nineteen. Joe’s daughter was nineteen, and Amanda was suddenly feeling very young. How had she not realized the man had an adult child?

He stood, shrugged and dove into the water. A few seconds later, he surfaced, very close to where she still lay. He crossed his arms over one another, resting them on the float. The expression on his face was uncertain, and his voice hesitant when he spoke. “I told you we got married for the wrong reasons. Scott is actually the reason. He’ll be twenty-one in a few months. Does it bother you?”

She had to fight back a smile of admiration. His reason might not have been the right one, but it was a noble reason. When so many men would run away and deny responsibility, Joe had stuck it out. Knowing that only made her like him more.

“No, it doesn’t bother me. Why should it? I told you I’m not looking for any kind of commitment.”

“Me either. But like I said, I like you. I’m kind of hoping you like me, too.”

She smiled. Yeah, she liked him. Way more than she should. Instead of answering, she reached down and splashed lake water in his face.

He splashed her back, and as the tension started to seep out of the afternoon, she knew everything was going to work out fine. He could be a good friend to her, and lord knew she needed them around here.

Now she just had to keep reminding herself that she didn’t want him as anything more than a friend, despite her body’s insistence that she did.

## Chapter Six

Amanda dragged herself into the cottage at a little after midnight. The late shift at work was always a difficult one, but the Friday night tips more than made up for the fatigue and the sore feet. Now she'd be able to afford the air conditioner she'd seen down at the hardware store.

The one that looked remarkably like the one humming away in the window next to the couch.

She froze midway between the door and the kitchen table, her breath stuck in her throat. What did that man do now?

Hadn't she told him she'd take care of it herself? Heat crept up her face and her blood pressure kicked up a notch or two. How many times did she have to tell him she didn't need his help before he actually believed her? And what in the world made him think it was okay to *break into* her house and install the damned thing?

A glance up toward his house told her he was still awake. She could see him sitting on the couch in his brightly lit living room, watching something on TV. Too ticked to think it was probably way too late to pay him a visit, she grabbed her keys and headed out the door, intent on berating him for his presumptuous attitude. Who did he think he was, anyway? He'd gone too far this time. Stepped over a line she'd clearly asked him not to cross. She might have tried to ignore his attempts at *helping* her in the past, but this was too big to ignore.

She stomped up the steps, pounded on the door and shifted from foot to foot while she waited for him to answer. After what seemed like an

eternity, the door swung open to reveal an amused-looking Joe. “What can I do for you, kiddo?”

“First of all, don’t call me that. I’m only ten years younger than you are. And second, there is something very important I need to talk to you about, and before you ask, no, it couldn’t have waited until a decent hour.” She pushed past him into the house.

Joe crossed his arms over a chest she’d just noticed was completely bare. “Didn’t you want to yell at me for something?”

It took her mind a few seconds to process what he’d said. “Oh, yeah. The air conditioner.”

“It makes it nice and cool in that little cottage, doesn’t it? Amazing what a little window unit can do for a couple of small rooms.”

Did he not even realize he’d overstepped his bounds in a major way? Of course he didn’t. Men could be so dense sometimes. “Yes, I guess it does make it cool and all, but that’s not why I’m here.”

“Oh, no?”

She narrowed her eyes. He wasn’t going to make this easy on her. Why must she spell it all out for him? “No. You can’t just go buying me things and breaking into my house to put them in. That’s rude and disrespectful, not to mention breaking the law.”

He let out a harsh breath and shook his head. It seemed like an eternity before he responded, and when he did, his tone was contrite. “I’m sorry if I’ve upset you. I didn’t break in, though. I used to take care of the place for the old owner whenever she had renters in and it needed work. I have a key—and before you ask, I’d completely forgotten I had it, or I would have given it back to you on day one.”

A little of her anger dissipated, though she refused to let it show. “Thank you for being honest. I’d like the key, if you don’t mind.”

Joe nodded. “No problem. But I have to say, it might not be a bad idea to let me hang on to it, in case you get locked out sometime.”

“Now that you’ve said that, it’s probably going to happen tomorrow.” She rolled her eyes, not ready to finish being angry with him. Who did he

think he was, anyway? “I at least need to know how much I owe you for the unit.”

“You’re not buying it from me.”

“Yes, I am. My place, my responsibility.”

“It’s not new. I used to use that one in my bedroom window before I had the central air installed. Consider it a loaner if you want, but you’re not giving me a cent for the thing.”

*End of subject.* He didn’t say the words, but the way he walked into the kitchen and opened the fridge, his back to her, spoke volumes. He wasn’t going to let her give him the money. Not without a fight.

She followed him into the kitchen space, on the opposite side of the curved stairway from the living room, stuffing her keys into the pocket of her black jeans. He was just trying to be nice. She understood that. But he shouldn’t have been in her house without permission. “Well, thanks. But you still shouldn’t have done it without at least asking me first.”

“I’m sorry for going into your place without checking with you. I really am. I don’t know why I did it. I really was just trying to help. I won’t ever do it again.” Joe turned to her, a bottle of beer in each hand. “Why do I think that thanking me was probably one of the hardest things you’ve ever had to say?”

He set the bottles on the counter, popped the tops and offered one to her. Beer wouldn’t normally be her beverage of choice, but at the moment, with her emotions in turmoil and her legs ready to give out on her, she’d take what she could get. She accepted the bottle and drank down a sip of the liquid, letting it cool her parched throat. “Thanks. For the drink, I mean. And...thanks for the air conditioner. I really do appreciate it.”

The last was said through gritted teeth. Joe raised a brow, one corner of his lip lifting in a half-smile.

“I do. I appreciate it,” she repeated before swallowing against the sudden lump in her throat. “I’m...I’m glad you don’t mind if I use it.”

“Then why do you have such a hard time admitting you do?” He took a swig of his own beer before setting the bottle on the counter with a

thump. “And better yet, why do you have such a hard time accepting help in the first place?”

She thought for a minute about blowing off his question, yet again, but in the end common sense prevailed. It made no sense not to tell him the truth. It wasn't like she had deep, dark secrets she was trying to hide. He'd bared his soul to her earlier in the day when he'd told her about his divorce and his children. The least she could do was return the favor.

“When I was younger, I was...sick. Everyone took care of me for so long, treated me like I was fragile. My mom and dad never outgrew it. I resented it, but at the same time, I got used to it. It carried over into my adult life, until recently when I decided I needed to move away. From everything.”

“Sick? What do you mean? Like the flu or something?”

If only it had been so simple, she might not have turned out the way she did. Unable to be alone for more than a few months. Unable to feel complete without someone in her life to take care of her. “No. I had leukemia.”

“Oh, wow. I'm sorry.” He nodded, not saying anything for a long time. It took her about that long to realize tears were welling in her eyes. The look on his face turned to pity and he walked over to her, pulling her into a hug. “I am, you know. I'm really sorry you went through all that.”

She tugged out of his grasp and put as much distance between them as she could, not stopping until she stood on the other side of the large kitchen table. It wasn't much of a shield, but the distance helped her get her thoughts in order. Pity had no place in her life anymore. She'd left that all behind for good when she'd moved away from her hometown and too many prying eyes who knew way too much about her. “I don't need your pity.”

“Good, because I'm not offering it.”

Her gaze snapped to his and the sincerity she found there struck her like a blow to the stomach. “You're not?”

“You said you were sick. Are you okay now?”



“Yeah. I have been for a long time. I was diagnosed when I was five, but by the time I was fourteen and I’d been in remission for five years they told me it was gone. I’ve been fine since then. At least physically.” Mentally was another story. For way too long she’d let everyone treat her like fine china. Not anymore.

“That’s really awful. It must have been so hard to live like that for so many years.”

“Yeah, but it’s in the past. I’m alive, and thankful, but at least now you understand why I don’t want to be babied. I lived like that for so long, and I’ve had enough.” And it was well past time to change the subject to take the focus off her. Enough talking about uncomfortable subjects for one night. Since the dinner they’d shared, she’d been curious about his house, but hadn’t yet had the chance to ask. “This place is amazing. Did you do all the work yourself?”

“Yeah. It’s been my pet project. I have a couple of crews to work on the other jobs, and I hire out whatever work they can’t do because of either time or distance, but this one...I’ve done this one all myself, with my son’s help.” Pride shone in his eyes when he spoke. “The whole property was pretty run-down when I got it, so I got it dirt cheap, same way you got the cottage. At first I hadn’t intended to live here. It was supposed to be another rental property to add a little extra income, but by the time I was finished, I knew it was where I belonged.”

She understood that better than she could ever tell him. It was how she’d felt the first time she’d stepped into the run-down little cottage down the hill. There were no words to explain it. When she was there, she was...home.



Joe almost laughed at the way Amanda clung to the beer bottle for dear life. Like she expected him to attack her or something. He gave her hand a gentle squeeze, relishing in the feel of her skin against his for a second before he let go. “Relax, Amanda. It’s just a house. It doesn’t bite.”

But he would. All she had to do was give him the signal.

And if she knew what he was thinking right then, she'd be out the door before he had a chance to take another breath. He hadn't been lying when he'd told her he liked her. He did. A lot. But he wouldn't push her into something she wasn't ready for, and he hadn't lied about that, either. The next move was hers to make.

No, he wouldn't push her, but he would have no problem reminding her every chance he got that he was interested...and that she was, too. Hell, she'd let him kiss her at the lake. Twice. Had even responded. That had to count for something.

It figured now he'd find a woman he could really get into, when the rest of his life was in such chaos. With Kelly filling in for Catherine things would soon be getting much more organized at the office, but there were still so many details that had to be hammered out for so many jobs. Business was booming, and though it was a good thing, it didn't leave him much time for a social life. He didn't have time to pursue anything real with the woman, but just the sight of her had him wanting to clear his schedule whenever she asked.

Chaos or not, he'd come to a decision down at the lake earlier that day, right about the time she'd tried to swim away from him. He wanted her in his life, to see where things went. To see if she could be the woman he was looking for to spend the rest of his life with. She was interested too, even though he had a feeling it would be a long time before she stopped denying it. At the moment, the heated look in her eyes when she glanced his way was enough for him.

"I know *the house* doesn't bite," she scoffed, dragging him out of his thoughts. "It's not the house I'm worried about."

"Me?" He blinked a few times, giving her his best wide-eyed innocent look. "You're worried that *I'll* bite?"

Though she fought it, the beginnings of a smile played at the corners of her mouth. Finally she broke down and giggled, and the sound washed over him like a caress. "Among other things."

“Well, then, let’s get one thing straight before this goes any further,” he said, walking toward the living room. “I wouldn’t bite you. Not unless you wanted me to.”

With that, he started down the hallway toward his home office, hoping she’d follow rather than turn tail and run.

Luckily, she did follow, and he hid a smile. She didn’t want to want him, but she did. She chose to ignore his baiting comment, which really didn’t surprise him. Instead of continuing along that line of conversation, he put his efforts into showing her his house. His pride and joy. Months had been put into fixing the place up, and by the look in her eyes, he could tell it showed.

“This is incredible.” Amanda walked ahead of him up the stairs a few minutes later, caressing the railing with her palm. “You’ve got a talent for this.”

“I wish I could say I did it all myself, but Catherine—my assistant—helped with some of the colors and a lot of the décor. She used to joke that I was colorblind, since I couldn’t match to save my life. So she used to pick out color schemes on the places my company renovated, while I did the design work.”

“She’s talented.”

A fact his biggest competitor hadn’t failed to notice. Joe tightened his fist on the railing. “Which would be why the competition did everything he could to get a hold of her.”

She spun so fast she almost knocked them both down the stairs. He had to put his hands on her waist to keep her from slamming into him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to dredge up sore feelings.”

With her this close, just about pressed right up against him, he couldn’t remember what sore feelings she thought she’d brought up. Man, he had it bad for this woman. *Real bad*. Without thinking, he wrapped his hand around the back of her neck and pulled her lips down to his.

He’d expected her to back away, to reject him and recite a laundry list of the reasons why he needed to learn to keep his hands to himself,

but she surprised him yet again. Her arms came around his shoulders and she moaned softly against his mouth. Taking that as a cue to continue, Joe tilted his head to deepen the angle of the kiss. The woman tasted incredible. His fingers itched to yank her flush up against him so she could feel how strongly she affected him, even with a simple kiss.

He put a hand on the railing and tightened again, trying to remind himself that she wouldn't appreciate a bold move like that. If and when she was ready for more than a kiss here and there, it would be up to her to let him know.

After a few minutes, Amanda stiffened against him and stepped back. She blinked, her face flushed, and seemed to force a smile. "You mentioned something about custom fixtures in the upstairs bathroom?"

He returned the smile, though he imagined it was probably a little strained at the edges. Nope, she wasn't ready to let him know yet. There was something between them, no matter how much the woman tried to deny it.

Bathroom fixtures. She wanted to see the bathroom. The thought should have been enough to cool his raging hormones, but all he could think about was Amanda naked in the jetted tub or soaping up under the rainfall showerhead. "Yeah, I did mention that, didn't I?"

She nodded and, without another word, turned to walk up the stairs ahead of him.

So much for things finally starting to go his way.

## Chapter Seven

Amanda stood at the foot of Joe's bed, acutely aware of how uncomfortable being in his bedroom was making her. She shifted from foot to foot and avoided eye contact with the man standing in the doorway at all costs. The second she'd stepped into the room, dominated by a huge, four-poster bed, her voice had failed her and she'd been struck with the sudden urge to run away. Far away. Like into the next county.

Joe affected her in a way she wasn't entirely at ease with—and he knew it, too. And she'd followed him into his bedroom for his little “tour” without even thinking about what a bad idea that would be.

*You wouldn't be here if you didn't want to be*, a little voice in her head chided. She shrugged off the voice, even knowing it was right. Never in her life had she felt so conflicted over a man. Usually she jumped in with both feet and thought about the consequences later.

“You wanted to see the master bath, remember?” He gestured with his chin toward an open door across the room. “Custom fixtures and all?”

Had she wanted to see the bathroom? Right now, the bedroom was proving to be pretty interesting. The kiss on the stairs had been a taste of something forbidden. Something she'd promised herself she wouldn't indulge in but now, standing in the center of the room where the man slept, indulging in a little time between the sheets with him was at the forefront of her mind—right along with the warning that she needed to steer clear of any more contact with the man or risk getting involved in something she wasn't ready for.

“Amanda?” Joe asked when she remained silent.

“Huh?”

His laugh broke through her haze of fantasies and sent a frisson of heat down her spine. Even his laugh was low and rumbly and more sexy than it had a right to be. Of course she’d meet the man of her dreams now that she’d sworn off men completely.

Oh, no. Joe Baker was certainly not the man of her dreams. He couldn’t be. The man of her fantasies, maybe, but in real life fantasies didn’t amount to much. She’d learned that with her first three failed marriages and the ill-fated engagement. All of those men had been buff, handsome and charming. And the first three had been losers underneath. Ronny, fiancé number four, hadn’t been a loser—but he’d told her he didn’t love her when he left her at the altar.

Was it any wonder she was so screwed up when it came to relationships?

Joe walked into the room, stopping only a few feet from her. “The bathroom is that way.”

He propped his hip against the footboard of the bed, hands in the pockets of his shorts, and just stared until she caught up. Bathroom. Across the room. *Come on, feet. Move.*

Finally she was able to break out of her daze and she walked across the floor, stepping into the marble-tiled bathroom. It was gorgeous, like the rest of the house, but the only thing holding her attention at the moment was the jetted corner tub. Every muscle in her work-tired body started screaming for a bath in the luxurious tub. “Wow. You really went all out with this place, huh?”

He stepped in behind her and she caught his expression in the huge mirror on the far wall right in front of the marble double sinks. “You like it?”

“Like it?” She ran a hand through her hair in a nervous gesture. Having him so close made her heart skip a whole bunch of beats. Being tired only added to the problem since it seemed to put a stopper on her willpower. “It’s incredible.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, his voice even lower and deeper than usual. The tone made her glance up, and she realized he wasn’t looking around the bathroom. His gaze was locked on her.

“I look terrible.” She spun and backed away, further into the bathroom since he blocked her only exit. “I just got out of work a little while ago. I’m...wilted. I look like crap. And it’s nearly one in the morning.”

She snagged her lower lip with her teeth and bit down to remind herself that she really did need to walk away from him. Getting involved with him would be a bad idea, and at this point in her life, anything that happened between them would have to be casual. To expect more would be to set herself up for hurt she didn’t have room in her heart for.

“When you bite your lip like that, it makes me think things I have no business thinking. Since you’re not interested in me and all.”

“Sorry.” No point in denying what he said, because it would only lead to more trouble. He had to know she was lying, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. To admit interest would be to let herself go down a road she’d long since learned not to travel.

They stood suspended for a few beats before Joe walked out of the room back into the bedroom. “So...ah...that’s the bathroom I was telling you about.”

“You were right. I love it. I have to say, this whole house is incredible.” Amanda stepped into the bedroom after Joe, her heart beating out of control. Disappointment clouded his gaze and it struck a chord somewhere within her. Why was she fighting this so hard? He wanted her. She wanted him. It was as simple as that, and suddenly it didn’t seem like such a horrible idea after all. They could be just a friends with benefits sort of situation...she hoped.

“Joe?”

He didn’t say anything, but he raised his eyebrows in question.

“I never said I wasn’t interested.”

“Actually, you said it quite a few times.”

So maybe she had, but she hadn't really meant it. She'd been hooked the second she'd seen him, and it had taken her until this minute to admit defeat. She walked over to him and placed her hand in the center of his chest. "I meant I didn't want a commitment. Not that I didn't want you. I think what you said a while back is right. We should at least explore this...thing between us."

His hand came over hers and he pulled it away from his body. "You're sending me very mixed signals, Amanda. First you tell me you have no interest, and then this? What am I supposed to think?"

*That it's been over a year since I've even been this close to a man? That sex, for the past year at least, hasn't even been a part of my vocabulary?* No, this wasn't about sex. At least not entirely. She wanted him, true, but she actually *liked* the man. "Here's what you should think. That I'm interested in you, but I won't do anything about that interest unless things can be kept casual. I can't jump into anything serious right now. I need time to adjust, to think things through."

That was a novel idea, coming from a woman who'd made weddings a hobby. She was a first-class serial monogamist who'd never had a *casual* fling in her life, but hell, there was a first time for everything.

"Casual." He seemed to think about it for a minute before he nodded. The intensity in his gaze heated to the boiling point. "I can do casual."

He stepped closer, stopping when he was only inches from her. Her heart rate kicked into overdrive and she swallowed against her suddenly dry throat. Casual. Yeah, she could do that too. At least she hoped she could, because she'd set in motion something she didn't want to stop.

"Can you really?" she asked, trying to keep her emotions out of her voice. "Because if you can't promise me not to make this more than just...you know, I should go home now."

"Don't go," he said, walking closer. He cupped her cheek in his hand and stroked his thumb along her cheekbone, inciting a riot along her nerve endings. She leaned into the touch and closed her eyes.

"Unless you're not sure..." he continued.



Her eyes snapped open. She held up her hand to stop the question he'd already asked once. "I told you I'm sure. What more do you need, a written invitation?"

His eyes darkened to a stormy, midnight blue just before he reached for her and pulled her into his arms, sealing his lips over hers in a scorching kiss. A kiss that was different from the others they'd shared. There was nothing gentle about this one. It was a branding kiss, meant to shake her to her toes and all points in between.

*Mission accomplished.* Her legs were already protesting her weight and her fingers shook where she had them pressed into his shoulders. The heat of his body against her warmed her like the ninety-degree weather had been unable to do. She dug her fingers into his shoulders, trying to get even closer to the man who'd been starring in all her dreams since she'd first seen him.

He broke the kiss and trailed his lips down her neck until he reached her collarbone. He unbuttoned the first button of her three-button T-shirt and suckled the line of skin there. She arched into him, but he pulled back and stared down at her through lust-clouded eyes. He moved away, hands once again in the pockets of his shorts.

"You planning on finishing that beer?"

She swallowed hard. If it wasn't for his heated expression, she might be a little confused by his behavior. Was it just her, or had Joe suddenly gotten a case of cold feet?

"Um, actually, the beer was the last thing I was thinking about."

He smiled, but it looked strained at the edges.

"You okay, Joe?"

"Yeah. Fine." The look in his eyes warned he was anything but. "Don't you want to slow this down a little?"

"No. Not tonight."

*There you go again, Mandy. Jumping in with both feet.*

The fact should have bothered her, but it didn't. It was well past time she started going after what she wanted. She'd wanted Joe from the first

time he'd walked into her house. There was nothing wrong with a casual fling. Men and women did it all the time, so why couldn't she do it, too? Chivalry had a time and a place, and this wasn't it. Gallantry wasn't what she was looking for tonight. Just the thought of going to bed with Joe made her feel powerful. Liberated.

She toed off her shoes and walked over to him, trying to fight a smile. He was going down tonight, whether he knew it or not. Tonight, she would finally be the one to take control.

She ran her hands up his chest. The impressive, full-on erection pressing against his zipper told her his feet were the only part of his body that were cold.

Joe let out a harsh breath. "What are you doing?"

*Wanting to feel something, to do something crazy that, for once in my life, isn't going to lead to a wasted trip down the aisle.* She put her hands on his hips and pulled him closer. She might not need his help, but there were other things she needed from him and she was sick of feigning indifference when what she felt was anything but. The guy turned her on. He wanted her, and was willing to keep it casual. What more could a girl want?

She could want the guy without expecting forever with him—though she hadn't realized it until just now.

"If you want me to stop, say it now, Joe."

"I'd be crazy to tell you to stop, but I don't want you doing something you aren't sure about."

She let out a frustrated sigh. He really was a gentleman.

The very *last* thing she wanted right now was a gentleman. "Do you have protection?"

He nodded.

"Then what is there to question?" She stripped off her top and let it fall to the floor, and by the time she'd unzipped her pants Joe pulled her toward him and helped her out of the rest of her clothes. Very quickly. It wasn't more than a minute before she stood naked in front of him.

She might have felt self-conscious if it hadn't been for the heat in his gaze as he looked her over slowly, taking in every inch of her bared flesh.

"Damn," was all he said, and it made her giggle. "What's so funny?" he asked without looking up.

"Nothing. It's just...it's been a while. And I know I'm not perfect." No matter what she did, those five extra pounds refused to leave her hips, and her breasts weren't much more than a handful. Joe didn't seem to mind. He skimmed his hands up her sides until he cupped them in his palms.

"Yeah, you are." He leaned in and sucked one of her nipples into the moist warmth of his mouth, and in that second she knew she was a goner. She'd never last more than a few minutes if he kept this up. Even now, her knees buckled at the feel of his tongue swirling over the hardened peak. Tiny jolts of pleasure shot from her nipples down to her sex, making her wriggle against him.

A moan caught in her throat when he moved across her skin to the other nipple, leaving a trail of damp heat in his wake. She tangled her hands in his hair in case he thought about stepping away. She wasn't ready for him to stop yet. Maybe she never would be. Why had she waited so long to let this happen?

Because she'd been an idiot. Had thought seeing someone would challenge her independence, but now she realized it wouldn't. It would reinforce it. She could see Joe on occasion, and not have to worry about falling for the guy since neither of them was looking for anything serious. It was a perfect situation for both of them.

Seeming to sense her need, he teased and tormented her body for what felt like an eternity before he laid her back on the bed and made quick work of his shorts. No underwear beneath them. How friggin' sexy was that? Generally, she liked a man in nice clothing, but Joe looked so much better in next to nothing. He even made a pair of faded denim shorts look good.

But naked...now that was a sight to behold. His erection was long and thick, and more than ready. Her sex grew even damper and she swallowed hard.

When she thought he'd fit himself between her legs, he surprised her by kneeling, lifting her hips and stroking his tongue along her folds. She almost came out of her skin. Her hands fisted in the navy blue comforter, her knees bending as she arched her hips off the bed, closer to his amazing mouth. He chuckled against her skin and a wave of intense sensation rocked her to her core. Her eyes rolled back in her head and she moaned.

"You like that?" Joe's laughter mixed with lust in his husky voice.

"Um, *yeah.*"

"Good." He stroked his tongue over her most sensitive part and her body exploded in an orgasm that nearly took her breath away. It had been so long, and he was so good. She slammed her eyes shut and let the sensations wash over her, enjoying the feel of his lips and tongue against her.

When she finally came back to herself, Joe knelt over her, the heat in his expression mirroring what she felt inside.

"You okay?" he asked, a little breathless. His shoulders were tense, like he was fighting to stay in control. Damn it, why couldn't the man give in to what he really wanted?

"I'm...wow. You're something else."

She leaned up on one elbow and reached out, circling his erection in her palm. She stroked and he shuddered, his eyes closing.

"Why don't you lie down and let me return the favor?" She gave his hard length a gentle squeeze.

"No."

The vehemence in his denial made her chuckle. He really was fighting so hard for his control. Too bad she was going to take it away from him in another few seconds.

"You said you have condoms. Where are they?"

He opened his eyes and looked down at her, letting out a long, loud breath. "Bathroom. Top drawer on the left."

"Good. Lay down. I'll be right back." She scooted off the bed and hurried into the bathroom, her body still shaky from the killer orgasm. It was a delicious sensation, one she planned to savor for a long time to come.

With a smile on her face, she opened the drawer and pulled out a box of condoms. New. Unopened. For some reason, the sight made her smile even wider. Maybe he'd been without someone for as long as she had.

And maybe not. A guy like Joe could get any woman he wanted, and probably did, but she wouldn't even allow herself to think about *that* at a time like this. She tore into the box, pulled out a condom and walked back into the bedroom, ripping open the wrapper as she went.

Joe lay on his back on the mattress, and Amanda's mouth watered at the sight. She'd never get sick of looking at him. There was something about a man whose muscles were honed from an honest day's work rather than hours a day on a weight bench that got to her. He reached his hand out, palm up, but instead of handing him the protection, she chose to roll it on for him. Slowly. In a way that had him gasping for breath by the time she was done.

She'd never been one to take control of sex, and now she realized what she'd been missing. It was a rush like nothing she'd ever experienced. To know he wanted her, but waited for her to make the next move, filled her with an incredible sense of power. She straddled his legs and lowered herself down the length of his erection.

His gaze more intense than she'd ever seen it, he grasped her hips, guiding her into a frenzied rhythm as he slammed his hips up to meet her. Finally, *finally* she'd managed to make him let go of his control, and the idea of it thrilled her. Her hands dropped to the mattress next to his shoulders, the breath sawing in and out of her lungs. He stretched her, filled her to bursting. Even now, the tingling of another orgasm started low in her belly and she moaned. Sex had been good before, but never

like this. Never had she felt the sense of freedom and abandon she did with Joe.

The orgasm hit fast, pulling her along on a tide of sensation, threatening to drag her under with its intensity. She clutched the comforter, clinging to it as Joe continued to move inside her. Not long after, he tightened his grip on her hips, holding her in place as he took his own release. Their jagged breaths and panting filling the air around them, Amanda collapsed onto Joe's damp chest. He stroked her hair, whispering incoherent but soothing words that lulled her.

It felt like forever before she recovered enough to even move. She rolled onto her back, staring at the ceiling and trying to keep the giddy expression off her face.

"That was intense," Joe whispered.

"That's a huge understatement."

"Any regrets?" He asked the words as if he wasn't sure he wanted to hear the answer.

She thought about it for a few seconds, searching her mind for an answer that wouldn't hurt him, and in the end came to a startling revelation. She'd just had casual sex, for the first time in her life, and she'd *liked* it. A lot. No regrets for this girl.

"Definitely not. You?"

"No way."

Something in his tone made her glance his way. He was looking at her with that intense, searching gaze again and it made her swallow hard against a sudden lump forming in her throat. "This is casual, right? No strings, no commitments?"

"Yeah. You said that was what you wanted, and I agreed."

"Joe..." Her voice trailed off when she couldn't think of anything to say.

"Stay with me, Amanda." His gaze pleaded as much as his tone. "Not all night if you don't want to, but at least for a little while."

“I have an appointment in the morning. Later today,” she amended when she looked at the clock. Staying the night would imply a commitment when that was what she was trying to avoid. She started to sit up, but Joe pressed a palm to the flat of her stomach and shook his head.

“Just because you want to keep it casual doesn’t mean you have to be in a rush to leave afterward. Come on. Stay for a while. What are you afraid of?”

He thought she was afraid, did he? Ha! She’d show him. “Okay. I’ll stay. But I can’t promise you I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Finally he smiled. “I’m okay with that.”

She’d just begun to doze off when he whispered in her ear. “Amanda?”

“Huh?”

“Will you let me paint your house?”

“Whatever you want.”

Sometime later, her still mind in a haze, Amanda fell asleep in Joe’s arms.

## Chapter Eight

Joe woke up alone, but he really hadn't expected things to play out differently. He stood, stretched his arms overhead, and after a pit stop to the bathroom for a quick shower, he dressed and headed downstairs for breakfast.

His body still thrummed with contentment after his night with Amanda. She'd fallen asleep in his arms, and that had to count for something. She'd left before he'd woken up, but only just recently if the warmth on her side of the mattress meant anything.

A quick glance out the window told him he was right. She rushed down the walkway from her cottage toward her car, pulling her hair back into a messy ponytail as she went. So she'd left his bed not long ago, and was now running late for that appointment. For some reason, the thought gave him more than a little satisfaction.

He remembered her mentioning her meeting earlier in the week when they'd spoken. She had to meet with the college financial-aid counselor, and then run to the bookstore to buy her books while she was in town. He had plenty of time to take care of a few things that needed to be done. Once she started school, her days would be taken up with classes and her nights with work at Maggie's, and if he ever wanted her to have time for him again, he needed to make sure she kept her stress levels down. Helping her with household repairs seemed to be the simplest way to accomplish that.

Maybe it hadn't been right that he'd asked her if he could paint the cottage last night. She'd been half asleep and probably hadn't heard a word he'd said. But it brought a smile to his face anyway. She'd said yes,



and he planned to take her up on it before she came home and realized what she'd agreed to.

A fast cup of coffee later, he was almost ready to get moving. If she didn't appreciate the air conditioner, she'd really hate what he had planned today. At least this morning he'd recruited a few accomplices in the form of his son and friends. That way, when she got mad, she'd have a few other choices to take her anger out on.

A knock sounded on the door just before Scott walked in with a couple of his old football buddies from high school. Joe recognized them—Ryan Sanders and Jake Reading. He used them on occasion when he needed backup crew for painting or laying tile. Between the four of them, they should be able to knock out the project in no time. Maybe even before Amanda got back from town.

“Hey, Dad.”

“You guys are early. I haven't even had breakfast yet.”

“It's after ten.”

Surprised, Joe glanced at the clock. That couldn't be right. But it was. Well, shit. Time to get to work, so they could get as much done as possible before she returned home.

After another cup of coffee and a slice of dry toast, he and Scott and the other boys made it down the short walkway to Amanda's place to start the long-overdue paint job the place so desperately needed.

A half hour into the job, Scott sidled up to him. “You're whistling.”

“Am I?” Joe chuckled. Though he wasn't surprised, he was a little shocked that he hadn't even noticed. Even the heat slowly making a return couldn't dampen his spirits today. “Hmm. Didn't notice.”

“What's got you so happy?” Scott asked, wagging his eyebrows. “It wouldn't have anything to do with the fact that we're working on Amanda the sexy neighbor's house, would it?”

Joe shrugged and continued slathering the clapboard siding with sage green paint from the cans he'd found still stacked inside her front door. There was no way in hell she would appreciate his help, at least not at first, but the woman was stressed. He knew all the signs of a woman

in trouble—first from watching Laura in the last few months of their marriage and later from Catherine before she left. He hadn't been able to recognize them then, and it had been too late to do any damage control, but he could see it in Amanda. Adding college classes into her hectic schedule just might put her over the edge, and she had yet to hire anyone to work on the railing that was still loose. She needed the help, even if she refused to admit it.

“Nah. It's just a good day. Your sister told me she'll fill in for Catherine until I find someone else, so on the work front, things are looking up.”

“And what about on the social front? You look like a guy who's had very little sleep, if you know what I mean.”

Joe could only shake his head. The last thing he wanted to discuss with his son was his love life. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

Scott raised his eyebrows in a way that reminded Joe of himself. “Give it a rest, Dad. Did you, or did you not, get lucky last night?”

Lucky? He was the luckiest man on the friggin' planet after his night with Amanda. The fact that she wanted casual niggled a little but he'd find a way to change her mind. “Yeah, okay. Maybe I did.”

He glanced at Scott out of the corner of his eye, waiting for his reaction. Scott only smiled. “It's about damned time.”

“Yes, it is, and that's all I'm going to say about it.”

They painted in silence for a little longer before Scott chimed in again. “Are you happy with her?”

He should have known his son wouldn't keep his mouth shut long. He'd always been a talker. “It's not serious. She's a friend.”

“A friend?” Scott smiled. “Friends don't usually sleep together.”

Laughter reached them from the other side of the house. Joe glanced around to make sure his son's friends weren't listening before he continued. “She's been hurt before, and though she's not ready to admit it, she's afraid of being hurt again. So she wants to keep it casual.”

“Okay, I can understand that,” Scott said, nodding. He loaded the roller with more paint and moved further down the porch toward the far end of the front of the cottage. “But are *you* happy with that arrangement?”

Joe got to sleep with a beautiful, sexy, interesting woman who liked to take charge in the bedroom but didn’t ask anything further from him than great sex. What wasn’t there to be happy about? It was the perfect arrangement, most men’s biggest fantasy, but something about it left him a little cold. He wasn’t ready for forever with any woman, but Amanda intrigued him. She made him want more. Quiet dinners in fancy restaurants, walks around the lake, long conversations over morning coffee...yeah, he missed that part of being involved with a woman he cared about, and he wanted it back. Wanted to try it with Amanda to see if the connection between them extended to more than sex. But if he told her how he was feeling, she’d never speak to him again. He’d have to find a way to show her that a commitment with him wouldn’t be as bad as she thought it would be. In fact, he had a feeling it would be pretty damned great.

“It’s all I’m getting for now, so I’m going to have to be happy with it.”

“You could try to talk to her, to explain you want more than a fling.”

And run the risk of her moving out of the cottage and out of his life? No way in hell would he chase her away before he had a fair shot at getting what he wanted from her. “No. I’m not going to rush her. If she wants casual, fine. I’m all for it.”

Between the painting and the conversation, Joe hadn’t realized a few hours had passed until he glanced at his watch. Amanda’s car pulled into the driveway and she jumped out, her expression stern. Her hands clenched into fists, she walked up the walkway and joined them on the porch.

“Hi,” he said, bracing himself for her anger. It wouldn’t be totally undeserved.

She blinked. “Hey. What’s going on?”

So far so good, but that didn't mean it would stay that way. The woman was prone to mood swings he couldn't even begin to comprehend.

"I was just going to ask you the same thing. How did your appointment go?"

"Fine."

Just one word, spoken in a clipped tone that warned him she was about to let him have it. Fearing the worst, he decided to head her off before she had a chance to start. "I was going to surprise you with this, since I know how much you love my surprises. You did say I could do this last night, remember?"

She actually laughed, catching him off guard. "Thanks. I appreciate it. Sorry I got home early and ruined the surprise."

He swallowed hard. This had to be for Scott's benefit. She wouldn't get angry with him in front of a stranger. She'd wait until later, when she had a chance to get him alone, and then she'd let him know what she really thought. That was okay. He could handle her aggravation—and he could turn it around into something much more productive and enjoyable for both of them.

"If you hate it, go ahead and say it," he told her. "Scott won't mind. He's pretty much used to listening to me get yelled at, anyway."

Scott stepped around Joe and stuck out his paint-streaked hand. "Since my dad doesn't seem interested in introducing us, I'll do it for him. I'm Scott."

Amanda took his hand and shook it, shock written on her face. "Hi, Scott. I'm Amanda Storm. Your dad's neighbor."

Scott cleared his throat and Joe gave him a soft elbow to the ribs. Amanda glanced from Joe to Scott and back to Joe again before rolling her eyes. "When I saw you over here before," she said to Scott, "I thought you were Joe's brother."

"Nah." He clapped Joe on the back. "Good genes keep us Baker men looking young is all. We hear that a lot."

Luckily Scott didn't harp on the fact that Joe had been a very young father. Instead, he went back to his painting, mumbling something about leaving the lovebirds alone. Joe was going to have to kill him later.

He glanced at Amanda and found her face red and her lips tight. "Sorry about that. Kids."

"Yeah. Kids. You know, he's about the same age as my boss down at Maggie's."

She didn't comment on what Scott had said, and Joe would be eternally grateful for it. Still, he had to find out her state of mind. She had to be pissed that he'd taken what she referred to as "liberties" yet again with the cottage.

"Are you okay with this?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"You always have a choice."

She shook her head. "What are you going to do, strip the paint?"

His expression must have been horrified, because her eyes widened and she put her hand on his arm before standing on her tiptoes to plant a quick, surprising kiss on his lips. "I'm fine with it. Really. Well, mostly, at least. I think last night I realized something important."

"And what would that be?" He tried to grab her and pull her up against him, but she ducked away. He saw Scott watching the exchange out of the corner of his eye, but chose to ignore it. Let him think what he wanted. They were all adults here.

"That when you're trying to help, you're not doing it because you think I can't take care of myself."

Hadn't he been trying to tell her that all along?

He shook his head. If he had, he hadn't tried very hard, or she would have known. "I realize that. I'm glad you finally do, too."

"You're only helping me because you're a nice guy," she continued. "A gentleman. I would have recognized it sooner, had I ever met a true gentleman before."

Oh, man. Now she was going too far. His intentions had been kind, but he'd also been trying to get her right where he'd had her last night. In his bed. "Don't put me on a pedestal. I don't deserve to be there."

To that comment, she rolled her eyes. "No shit. I'm just trying to tell you I'm okay with you helping. Well, at least as far as the house goes. Just don't go thinking I need your help in other areas of my life, because I so don't."

*Yeah, right.* The woman needed help—help learning she didn't have to be alone to be happy, and she didn't have to settle for a man who wasn't right for her. "I never thought you did."

"Do you guys need an extra set of hands here?" she asked, glancing around at the house. "I have the rest of the day free and I don't mind pitching in."

"We've got it pretty well covered." He tucked a strand of her hair that had fallen loose from her ponytail behind her ear, letting his finger trail across her cheek on the way back. She leaned into the lingering touch. "My house is unlocked. Why don't you go up to my house and take a bath?"

Her eyes lit up at his suggestion. A huge smile broke out across her face and she shifted from foot to foot. "Really?"

"Sure. No one else is using the tub. You might as well give it a try."

"Thanks, Joe. I'll just get my stuff and head up." She kissed him again and turned, heading for the door. He grabbed her hand and pulled her back, crushing his lips down on hers for a harder, longer kiss. One that had his cock stirring to life. He broke away and slumped against the railing, hoping to hide his reaction to her. As much as he wanted to suggest joining her in the bathtub, if he did, the work around the cottage would never get finished.

"No problem." He watched her go, trying to calm his libido so he could get back to the task at hand, promising himself that tonight, if she'd let him, he would make up for all the time they'd lose today.



Amanda leaned back in the bathtub, letting the water cover every inch of her except her head. The jets in the tub hummed and whirred away, easing the tension in her work-weary muscles. Joe—and his bathtub—were life savers and he didn't realize it. His suggestion that she take a bath had kept her from doing some serious damage to the man. At least now she didn't feel like taking off the top of his head for starting the paint job on the outside of the cottage without warning her first.

Okay, he'd warned her. Gotten her permission, but he'd done it while she'd been half asleep. She would have agreed to anything at that point if he'd just stopped talking and let her fall asleep. She hadn't realized what she'd agreed to until she'd gotten home and seen what he was doing. Yes, she was upset—at first, but what she'd said to him had been the truth. He was trying to help because he was a nice guy. It wasn't his fault she had such an aversion to gentlemen.

She expelled a soft breath and sank even further into the water, letting it lap against her lower lip. The cottage only had a shower stall and the hotel bathtub had been a cramped, dingy four-foot job she'd barely wanted to step into to take a shower, so the luxury of the huge tub was something she hadn't dreamed of passing up when Joe had offered. Now this kind of help, she could get used to.

And she wasn't really *mad* about the paint job as much as she was surprised. There were some things she really needed to learn to let go of, and Joe doing work around the cottage was one of them. To ask him to stop helping would be stupid, now that she had a chance to think about it. Why do all the work herself when her neighbor, a contractor, wanted to do it for her? She'd pay him, of course, as soon as he told her how much she owed him for time and labor.

As for the air conditioner, she'd let it slide. Sleeping at night would be so much easier. Now that she wouldn't have to worry about having her clothes constantly plastered to her body, she could forgive him just about anything.

And then there was last night... A dreamy smile spread across her lips and she didn't have to look in the mirror to know she looked like a lust-sick fool. It had been incredible. Amazing. And so freeing. She'd been worried that, come morning, she'd wake up to thoughts of commitment and forever and the worst one yet—marriage. All the way to her appointment she'd been waiting for the thoughts to start, but they hadn't. The smile on her face grew. She'd finally broken the cycle. She could be happy seeing someone casually, having fun, and not worrying about rings and walks down the aisle and her mother's crazy wedding planning that only seemed to get more outlandish with every ceremony. If she ever did marry again, no way was she letting Miriam Storm plan her wedding.

The last wedding cake had been in the shape of a sun. Lemon-yellow frosting rays and all. And Rachel's southern-belle-style maid of honor dress had matched. Unfortunately for both Amanda and Rachel.

Instead of thoughts of commitment, a revelation had hit that morning on her way to town. Her incredibly insightful sister Rachel had it right all along. Who needed a man to be happy? Sure, being with someone could add to happiness, but if you couldn't be happy without a man in your life, there was a serious problem.

Her life had been one big problem until she'd moved to the little town of Ludlow, New Hampshire and found herself. She wasn't the woman she'd always thought she was, and that was the main cause of her unhappiness. Now she had a chance to change everything, and no way would she pass it up.

She washed her hair, worked in some conditioner and clipped the wet mass up on the top of her head. Feet resting on the edge of the tub, ankles crossed, she closed her eyes and let the water do its magic on the remnants of the tension she hadn't quite been able to get rid of since moving here and buying a house.

She owed Joe a favor for giving her this moment of pure, uninterrupted peace, and she knew just how she planned to repay him. The kiss he'd planted on her told her he wanted a repeat of the night before, and she was all too happy to oblige.



She'd found a man she enjoyed spending time with, enjoyed sleeping with even more, and she got to go back home to her own place every night she wanted to. Her life was finally exactly what she'd needed for so long, but hadn't known how to get.

Now she just had to figure out a way to keep things from changing. She'd had enough upset in her life and couldn't handle any more.

## Chapter Nine

Amanda switched off the TV and pulled the woolen blanket up to her chin. Severe storm warnings tonight, the all-too-perky weather forecaster had said in a sing-song voice belying the news she was giving. Heavy rain, high winds and thunder. Amanda shivered. Anxiety settled into a cold ball in the pit of her stomach. This would be the first time she'd be truly alone during an electrical storm, and the thought really didn't thrill her all that much. She wasn't phobic, but storms didn't make her top ten list of things she enjoyed about the summer, either.

As if on cue, a flash of lightning brightened the room, followed by the harsh clap of thunder. She pushed up from the couch, fingers clutching the blanket around her, and walked to the window. She parted the curtains and looked across the wooded yard. A light burned in Joe's living-room window. He was still awake, but working according to what he'd told her earlier. He hadn't had time to see her tonight. They'd spent the past week together during every free moment they could manage to coordinate, but now he had a few things to catch up on.

For a few seconds, she thought about running across the lawn and knocking on his door, despite knowing he had more important things to do than calm an irrational twenty-eight-year-old with a mild fear of thunder, but nixed the idea almost as soon as it hit. She didn't need him, no matter what her scared brain might be telling her. She was almost thirty. It was well past time for her to learn to weather a thunderstorm all on her own.

After a brief hesitation, she let the curtain drop and was halfway to the kitchen for a glass of wine to help calm her frazzled nerves when

another clap of thunder boomed through the room, sounding like it hit something right outside the cottage. She didn't even have time to think before an ear-splitting crash filled the room and the roof over the pull-out couch caved in.

Amanda screamed and jumped back, her heart pounding. Tree branches stuck into the room at odd angles, the dark green leaves glistening with water that dripped all over the beautiful hardwood floors. The thickest twisted limbs lay across the couch where she'd just been sitting, and through the open bedroom door she could see one had crushed the cabinet where she kept her clothes. The bedroom roof had caved in as well, and glass from broken windows lay strewn across the patchwork quilt on her bed.

A gasp caught in her throat, her mind having trouble wrapping around the concept of what she was seeing. The roof of her cottage was half gone, and a big gaping hole had taken its place. Her clothes and belongings scattered across the floor like trash in an alleyway and rain poured in, soaking everything in its path.

Another flash of lightning brightened the sky, and the resulting thunder made her heart all but stop. Tears of frustration, of anger, clouded her eyes. She pushed a hand through her hair. What was she supposed to do now? Her little cottage was ruined. Her car keys were in her purse, somewhere in the mess—along with not only her cell phone, but the single cordless landline phone.

She was still trying to figure out what to do when she heard pounding on her front door. She rushed to the door and yanked it open to find Joe standing on the porch, panting, shoulders hunched and hands balled into fists. Without a word, he pushed past her into the cottage, took one look at the tree on her mattress, and pulled her into his arms, crushing her against his chest.

For what seemed like an eternity he held her, stroking her hair and whispering calming things. She sank into his embrace, tears flowing freely for the first time in as long as she could remember. What had she done to deserve someone as caring and compassionate as him?

“I saw where the tree hit, and I thought something happened to you,” he told her, still refusing to let go. “Damn it, Amanda. It scared the hell out of me. I don’t think I’ve ever run so fast in my life.”

She let his words wash over and comfort her. She held tight to him, drawing him closer, knowing that even if she could crawl inside his skin it wouldn’t help get rid of the sudden desolation spiking through her. The life she’d built for herself was gone. Clothes, the school books she had just bought, and almost everything else she owned. She had nothing.

“Are you okay?” he asked, his tone tense. “Please talk to me and tell me you’re okay.”

“I think so. I’m not hurt, anyway. I was on my way to the kitchen when it happened. Not anywhere near the bed or the couch.”

“Yeah, I can see you’re fine. But how are you, really? That must have been awful to see. It would have scared the hell out of me, I’m sure.”

She tried to tell him she was fine, that she could take care of herself and didn’t need his sympathy, but the words clogged her throat. Her chest ached. So instead of moving out of his embrace, she sank further into it. She clung to him even more, her fingers digging into his shoulders, until he leaned down and sealed his lips over hers.

The kiss was brief, nothing more than a soft brush of lips, but it was enough. Her body hummed. She suddenly craved more. A lot more. Anything to help her forget. She reached for him, but he backed away and walked toward the tree. The only thing that let her know he was fighting something was the way his shoulders heaved with each of his breaths.

“You can’t stay here tonight.”

*No shit.* “I’ll get a room at one of the hotels in town. I did it when I first moved here. What’s a few more nights, really? I don’t mind. But...can you give me a ride? I have no idea where my keys are.”

She sucked in a shuddering breath at the thought of suddenly being so helpless, so dependent on another person, when all she’d wanted since her last failed relationship was to be on her own. Now she had no choice but to rely on Joe and whatever help he could and would give her.

“No,” he said with a finality that echoed through the room. “You’re not going into town.”

“Why not? Do you think I can’t—”

“It has nothing to do with what you can’t do, Amanda. The road will be washed out. Always happens in storms like this. We’re stuck up here for at least three days...after the rain stops.”

“So you’re saying I’m stuck? In this place, without a roof?” She sniffled and then started to cry in earnest, her tears mixing with the rain still pouring in through the ruined roof. Another crack of thunder tore through the air. “I might as well just sleep outside. There really isn’t a difference, is there?”

“I won’t let you do that. You’ll have to salvage what you can and come stay with me.”

She let out a sigh. What choice did she have? Her new life was in shambles and Joe was her only lifeline.

“I can see what you’re thinking,” Joe said, running a hand through his wet hair. “I wish there was something else I could do, but there isn’t. We don’t have much choice. Now we really need to get out of this rain. You’re already soaked to the bone and I couldn’t stand it if you got sick because of your stubbornness.

“Do you have anything to pack?” Joe asked when she said nothing, sounding impatient and a little unsure. He touched her cheek, glanced around the room and shook his head. “We’re going to catch cold if we stand here much longer.”

She started to protest out of habit, but in the end realized turning down his offer would be one of the stupidest things she’d ever done. He was offering to take care of her, and at the moment, her choices were limited. She went about taking a few minutes to pack what she could salvage, which, admittedly, wasn’t a lot. The clothes were wet and dirty, and would have to be washed and dried before she could wear them, but her bathroom items were all fine so she stuffed them into a bag and met him back out in the main room. Her purse and keys would have to wait

until morning, when the rain stopped and it was light enough to see as she searched the shambles.

“Don’t worry about the clothes,” Joe said, leading her toward the door. “I’ve got some shorts and T-shirts you can use. We’ll deal with your stuff tomorrow. Come down and get it and wash it up at my place. For now, let’s...let’s just worry about all this tomorrow and for tonight be glad you weren’t in bed when this happened.”

Another look at the couch, and the tears started fresh again. Where was the fairness in all of this? She’d tried to better her life, tried to better herself, and where had it gotten her? Homeless, that was where. Once again relying on someone else for basic needs she should be able to provide for herself.

“Thanks.” Defeated and downtrodden, she let him lead her out the door.

“I don’t have an umbrella,” he said as if it were a problem.

Amanda just shrugged. “Like that’s even an issue right now. I don’t think I could be more soaked if I jumped in the lake.”

That earned a laugh out of him, albeit a small and hesitant one. “Okay, let’s go, then. We can run and be to the front door in a couple of seconds.”

He grabbed her hand and she had no choice but to run across the slippery stone path heading toward his house, lightning occasionally lighting the world around them. It really wasn’t more than thirty seconds before they stomped up his front steps and burst through the door in a flurry of limbs and cold rainwater. Once inside, he closed the door behind them, took her bag from her hand and set it by the door. Then he put his arm around her shoulder and walked her upstairs toward the bathroom. Once there, he pulled a towel from the linen closet and handed it to her.

“Why don’t you take a shower? I’ll go get you some clean clothes and leave them here for you, and make some coffee so you can have something warm when you get out.”

She nodded, taking the towel and closing the door after he walked out of the room. She turned the shower on, stripped off the wet clothing and stepped into the hot steam.

She washed her hair, soaped up and rinsed off under the spray, all the while feeling numb. It would be a long time before she came to terms with what had happened tonight. Already, she could feel her mind working hard to block the terrifying images from her memory. Another hour, and she would have been in bed. Would have been crushed by the tree trunk and ended up in the hospital. Or maybe worse.

Somewhere between rinsing her hair and turning off the water, her tears dried. No sense crying over something she couldn't change. There would be plenty of time to worry about it later, once she'd been able to absorb all that had happened. Joe had helped her, and she needed to remember that. He was right. They could deal with the mess in the morning if the storm cleared. Right now, she was lucky to be alive and concentrating on that would be better for her well-being than thinking of all she'd lost.

Her resolve strengthened once again, she climbed out of the shower, dried off and dressed in the clothes Joe had left hanging on the towel bar for her while she'd been washing up. When she finished, she brushed her hair in the mirror. It took a little while for her to figure out she was primping. For Joe. Now, of all times, in the middle of the second biggest crisis in her life.

Well, didn't that just bite the big one?



Joe got the coffee started and leaned back against the counter, lost in thought. What was he supposed to do now? He had to let her stay, but she had no desire to be here. Sleeping with him was one thing, but he knew how her mind worked.

He should be thankful she wasn't looking to push him into marriage. He'd done the whole wife-and-family thing before, and it hadn't ended

well. No way in hell was he going back to that place for a cute brunette with a killer smile and great eyes and an amazing body...

*Stop, Joe. Not going there, remember?*

*Shit.*

He was already in way too deep as it was. He needed to figure out some way to pull himself out, not a way to dig himself deeper into a place he didn't even want to be. If he didn't get out, *now*, he'd end up in big trouble.

Hell, it was way too late for that and he knew it. Had known it from the first time he'd sunk his cock into her welcoming heat. She was it. The woman he'd been looking for. At least he thought she was, but she wouldn't even give him the chance to find out. Physically, they'd gotten close since the first time they'd slept together a week ago. Emotionally, things were a little stickier. As far as friendship went, they were on solid ground, but mention anything beyond that and she acted like she'd developed a bad case of hives.

*Great going, Joe. You've become the woman's fuck buddy, and you didn't even notice.*

The coffee finished brewing and he poured himself a mug. He took a sip, black, and winced at the heat. It felt good, though. He needed the reminder to smarten up before he did something stupid, like get involved in a relationship that hadn't yet started but was already doomed to failure.

A few minutes later, Amanda walked into the room, looking better than she had a right to scrubbed clean of makeup and hair products and wearing his baggy shorts and T-shirt. She gave him a hesitant smile, and something in his chest stuttered.

"The coffee smells great."

"It's decaf. I hope you don't mind. I thought regular might keep you awake."

The smile grew and she padded across the floor, her bare feet whispering softly on the tile as she went. "Thanks. You're right."



She walked over to the cabinet, grabbed a mug and filled it with the dark brew. Unlike him, she added two heaping teaspoons of sugar from the canister on the counter and a large dollop of milk. After taking a few sips, she leaned against the counter, the stoneware mug cradled between her cupped palms.

“Thanks for everything, Joe. You’ve really been a good friend.”

He shook his head. Too bad friendship was the last thing he wanted from her.

“Are you okay?” he asked after too long a silence. The air had changed, turning tense, and he just knew she was about to blow. *Bring it on, honey. Let it out so you can start to feel better.*

Amanda turned to face him, her hands on her hips and her expression murderous. “Am I okay? Let me ask you this, Mr. Perfect. Do I *look* okay?”

“You look...shaken.”

“That’s a huge understatement. I was finally able to move out on my own, and look at what happens to me.” With her hand, she gestured toward the window facing her house, swinging her arm in a wild arc. “You wouldn’t understand. You’ve got it all together. Not a thing out of place. You don’t get what I’ve been going through, and why I want to change everything.”

Now she’d gone too far. “I don’t get it? Are you crazy? Sweetheart, I understand failure, and heartache.”

“Yeah, right.”

“I’ve been through divorce, too, remember? And my former business partner I was telling you about...when he left the business he took more than half the clients with him. His company is now twice the size of mine and growing, and sometimes he still feels the need to take things from me. It’s been this way since we were in high school. Maybe even before that. Now I’ve lost my wife and my assistant to him, so don’t tell me I have no idea what it’s like to have my life torn apart.”

She stilled, her lips parted, and cocked her head to the side. For a long while she just stared at him and it felt like almost an eternity before

she spoke. “Why didn’t you say something sooner? All these times I’ve complained to you about life and how it sucks, and you’ve just kept your mouth shut.”

Wasn’t that the question of the century? Joe raked a hand through his hair and turned away. She hadn’t wanted to hear about his problems. She’d been too busy with her own. “It’s no big deal.”

“Apparently it is.”

“It’s really not.” He’d only spent fifteen years of his life with the woman, had two children, to watch her get bored and walk away when the kids were nearly grown. But it was no big deal. Hadn’t affected him at all.

Not one fucking bit.

He turned around, pressed his palms into the counter and let his head drop. Okay, so maybe it had affected him more than he’d been willing to admit.

He felt her hand on his back, right between his shoulder blades, and he sucked in a breath.

“Come on, Joe. Talk to me. You’re a master at getting me to open up to you even when I don’t want to. Now it’s your turn to share.”

No way in hell was he rehashing his past failure right now. She’d heard the story before, and there was no need to make her sit through another retelling. It wouldn’t accomplish anything except to make him want some serious alone time, and it looked like it would be a long while before he got that. “I don’t want to talk right now.”

“Then what do you want to do?”

“I just want to...” Not knowing what to tell her, he spun around and kissed her.

The kiss was short, but scorching. No hesitancy from her, and that bolstered his spirits and drove the sudden, shocking need for her even higher. Tonight he didn’t want to stop. He wanted to keep going until he lost himself in her.

He wanted to show her that letting someone else in wasn't a bad thing. They could be good for each other. She just needed to realize that, besides their differences, they really could be something to each other. She might not be looking for forever, but it didn't need to be that. It would be enough for him if she would cut the stubborn crap and promise to try.

He wound his fingers in her hair and held her close. Finally, he let her go and she stepped back. He braced himself for all her usual arguments, all her anger and aggravation, but got none of it. She launched herself into his arms instead.

He couldn't say how long the kiss went on, but it was enough to drive him near-mad. Soon they were tearing at each other's clothes. The urge to hold her, to make sure she was really okay was so strong it almost pulled him under. He leaned in, trailing his lips down the side of her neck, past her collarbone until he reached her breasts. He suckled one nipple and then the other. Tonight wouldn't be gentle. She had to know that. He just didn't have it in him. Amanda seemed to feel the same way, if the way she wriggled against him was any indication. Her fingers reached for his pants and she had them unzipped in record time. The air around him had a frantic edge that only pushed him to move faster.

He almost laughed, but then he caught the look in her eyes. She wanted him. *Cared* about him. That was there, plain as day. But she was scared of something, too. It made sense. She'd been hurt a few too many times. Sometimes when he touched her, even after all they'd shared, she shrank away. When she touched him first, she was fine. She needed to be in control, and he could give her that. Hell, he'd give her that forever if it made her happy. Didn't she know by now he'd do anything for her? She had him wrapped around her finger and the woman didn't even know it.

He stepped back and leaned against the counter, taking in the sight of her almost naked body. She only wore panties, ones she must have salvaged from the pile of clothes on the floor of the cottage, and it was the most incredible sight he'd ever seen.

He beckoned her with his finger and she walked over to him, an enticing mix of lust and insecurity on her face. It was endearing and he found it made him like her even more. But he wasn't supposed to like her. She didn't want him in that way.

He *had* to find a way to make her change her mind.

She brushed her lips across his chest and he shuddered. He was dangerously close to coming, but that made no sense. He wasn't a young man by any stretch of the imagination, but the adrenaline pumping through his system made waiting impossible and he didn't think he'd be able to hold back much longer. She scraped her nails over one of his nipples and he hissed out a breath.

"Are you okay?" she asked, her tone quiet. He would have thought she was nervous if he hadn't caught the coy look on her face.

"I'm fine," he ground out through clenched teeth.

"Yes, you are." She gave a small sigh and continued on her journey downward until she ended up on her knees in front of him. When she reached for his waistband again, he hauled her to her feet. "No."

"You wouldn't like it?"

Was she nuts? What man wouldn't want a beautiful woman on her knees in front of him? "I'd like it. Too much. I wouldn't last."

Amanda barely resisted the urge to put her hands on her hips and sigh. What was it with this guy? Here she was, willing to give him pleasure with no strings attached, and yet again he was turning her down? Not likely. In the past, she'd always let the man take the initiative when it came to sex. Joe didn't mind when she explored, and she planned to do just that. He was all hers for tonight, and he'd have to learn to deal with it. She broke free of his hold and spread the unzipped sides of the jeans he'd changed into when she was in the shower, pulling them down enough that she could free his erection from his boxers.

His fingers tangled in her hair and he moved her head away. "You really need to stop now."

"Why? Not having fun?"

“I need to get inside you. Like five minutes ago.” He took her hand and started to lead her out of the kitchen, but she shook her head.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“We need to move this into the bedroom.”

“What’s wrong with right here?”

A stunned look passed across his face before he frowned. “In the middle of the kitchen?”

“Sure. Why not. The table looks pretty sturdy.” She smiled, and he met the smile with a look that let her know she’d turned him on with her suggestion. A lot. It turned *her* on to think she could get him going with just a few words, even though he probably thought she was a total headcase.

Joe’s throat worked as he swallowed. His chest sawed in and out with his heavy breaths. “Are you serious?”

She nodded.

“Awesome.” He took a few seconds to sheathe himself with a condom he’d pulled out of the dresser drawer before he lifted her onto the table, wrapped her legs around his waist and slid inside.

He surprised her yet again by not moving. Instead, he leaned down and kissed her. It was a long, slow, thorough kiss that had her panting and clinging to him, desperate to get more. She’d never get enough of him. The man was sheer perfection. What she’d been searching for all her life. Too bad she’d been looking in the wrong places.

No. She had to stop that line of thinking. Sex was one thing. A girl had to have it every once in a while, so why not when a sexy guy was ready and more than willing? Getting involved on an emotional level was out of the question. Totally, completely, utterly out of the question. She shouldn’t even be thinking of it. Now, for the first time in her life, she needed to be thinking of herself. If she let herself get close to Joe, she’d end up wanting to get married again, and look where that particular line of thinking had gotten her.

She blocked out all thoughts of emotion and just concentrated on what was important. The feel of him inside her. The crisp, masculine

scent of him and his rain-dampened hair. The rough hairs of his chest against her nipples, making her want to scream out from the incredible pleasure of it all. The man was a walking sex god, and she finally had him right where she wanted him. Might as well enjoy the ride.

And what a ride it was. Joe stroked and thrust and wore her out. She'd come twice by the time he joined her, and by then she felt so limp and sated that she could just lay back and fall asleep. He picked her up and carried her to his bed, lay her down and climbed in next to her. By the time he covered them both with the sheet, she was half-asleep.



Joe woke up disoriented the next day. He sat up, shook his head and coughed before realizing what was wrong. He hadn't gone to bed alone the night before. He wasn't alone now, either.

She'd stayed in bed with him all night? Now that was a switch. In the time they'd spent together, both at his house and at hers, she'd always managed to leave the bed sometime before he woke up. To have her there, finally, was the most incredible feeling in the world.

He glanced over his shoulder to see her tangled in his sheets, her long brown hair spread all around her. Her eyes were closed and the look on her face was nothing short of angelic.

She hadn't looked angelic the night before.

He smiled at the memory of her dropping to her knees in front of him, more than willing to give him what he'd wanted so badly. It shook him to think she was so open and free with herself, but it shook him more to think that he was going to get too deeply involved if he wasn't careful. She was dangerous to him. Something in the rational part of his mind reminded him of that even as his cock hardened from looking at her between his sheets. He should have walked away from her the night before. Should have slept on the couch. But he hadn't, and now he was in deep shit. Now he couldn't deny it, couldn't even try to pretend it didn't exist. He was falling in love with the woman and she just wanted

to get laid. She wanted to be *friends*, too, but at the moment friendship didn't count for much.

She opened her eyes and smiled sleepily at him. "Good morning."

"Hey. How did you sleep?"

"You mean for the few hours you actually left me alone? Fine."

She hadn't been the only one who'd been insatiable the night before.

"Are you hungry?" he asked, looking to change the subject.

"A little, but I think we need to talk first."

Oh, boy. Here it came. The kiss of death for whatever was happening between them. Funny that he was the one wanting a commitment and she was the one running scared. He couldn't tell her what he wanted now, though. Not with the two of them trapped out in the middle of nowhere until the roads cleared.

He slid out of bed and pulled on a pair of sweatpants he found on the floor. "I'm not looking for anything permanent. Just in case that's what you're worried about."

She raised her eyebrows. "Good. Neither am I."

Something in his chest tightened. "Really? Are you sure?"

She laughed then, a soft sound that hit him low in the gut and made him even harder, sick bastard that he was. Here she was tearing his heart out, and he wanted her just the same. Better to think about what she did want rather than what she didn't. "Really."

*Damn it.* Even now that they'd started to get close, she was still denying wanting anything serious with him. What would it take to show the woman he was the right man for her? A freakin' miracle?

He turned away, glancing out the window at the dismal, rainy day. When he finally glanced back at her, he hoped he'd managed to school his expression before she realized what he really wanted. "Does that mean we get to go back to bed?"

"How typical is that?" She shook her head, sending waves of rich brown hair around her shoulders. She looked deliciously ruffled and he

couldn't wait to get her under him again. If that was all he'd get for now, it wouldn't be difficult to live with.

"What a man you are, always thinking about sex," Amanda continued. "We'll get back in bed—but not quite yet. First I need something to eat. And some coffee. Not decaf this time, Joe. The real stuff."

"Yeah, okay. Let's head downstairs and see what we can manage." With a laugh on his lips, he made his way toward the kitchen in search of something to feed her. He had a feeling they'd end up back in bed sooner rather than later, and he wanted to make sure they both had plenty of energy. At least, while he was in bed with her, he didn't have to think about how the messy situation between them seemed to grow worse with every conversation they had.



## Chapter Ten

“What are you doing?”

Joe glanced up to see Amanda standing in the doorway. He hadn't realized she'd woken up. Two nights had passed since she'd moved in with him, and in that time they'd worn each other out. If he hadn't had work to do, he would have stayed in bed a little longer himself.

He smiled and beckoned her into the office. “Getting caught up on a little work.”

She stopped and ran a hand through her damp hair, her expression uncertain. “Sorry. I didn't mean to disturb you.”

“You didn't. I wouldn't normally be behind on a weekend, but my daughter has to cut down on her hours due to schoolwork with the summer classes she's taking. Now I'm winging it while I try to find someone else. No takers so far. Again.”

She surprised the hell out of him when she came over and sat in his lap, staring at the computer screen. “Need some help?”

“Do you know anything about interiors?”

“Not really, but most women have an eye for color. It comes with the territory, I guess.”

She spent the next twenty minutes helping him go through paint and carpet colors, and he was surprised that she really did have an eye for it. He'd offer her Catherine's old job, but she wouldn't take it anyway. She'd already turned him down once, and he wouldn't offer again. She'd take it as a personal affront if he did.

By the time they finished, he had everything set the way he wanted it to be, thanks to Amanda's help.

"Thanks."

"No problem. Do you want me to make some lunch or anything? You must be getting hungry."

"Nah. We'll figure something out a little later." He set her off his lap, pushed out the chair and went into the kitchen. She'd cleaned up the house. He was surprised, to say the least. Not very domestic to begin with, he hadn't had time to clean anything as well as he would have liked to since Catherine had left him high and dry, and for the past few days things had sort of...piled up while he and Amanda had been busy doing other things. "What have you been up to? I thought you were sleeping."

"I've been awake for a few hours. You seemed so lost in thought I didn't want to disturb you. But then it started to get close to lunchtime and I figured you probably needed something to eat."

A small part of him shivered. Here she was, living with him for only a few days so far, and already they were playing house. He didn't think she liked it, but he had no problem with it. The roads would be out another few days, at least, and he still felt a little protective of her. There was nothing he could do but sit back and take it.

"Joe? Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"I've upset you. I'm really sorry. I just...well...I'm going to be stuck here for a while, so I thought I'd make myself useful."

He sighed. She was reading him all wrong, and since he didn't want to spook her yet, he had to let her keep believing he was as nervous about the situation as she was. "It's okay."

"No, it isn't. I shouldn't have touched anything around here without asking. Want me to mess it up again?"

Her teasing tone had him laughing despite his misgivings. "No, it's fine. Really, Amanda. Sorry if I seemed upset. I'm not. I'm just used to doing things like that on my own."

“Now you’re starting to sound like me.”

He blinked, not sure what to say in response.

“Relax, Joe. It’s no big deal. I was a housewife a few times before I learned I’m one of those people who isn’t cut out for long-term commitment.”

And he was just the opposite. He wanted a commitment out of life, but had settled for the wrong woman the first time out the gate. Though her case was a little more extreme than his, Amanda was in a similar situation. And he couldn’t help but think of her as his. One way or another, no matter what it took, he’d show her they belonged together. His resolve was even more strengthened than ever. She could deny it all she wanted, but he saw it in her eyes.

Amanda Storm *would* be his. It was only a matter of time.



Sitting on the couch with Amanda curled in his arms, Joe couldn’t think of a place he’d rather be. In the few weeks since she’d had to move in with him, the roads had cleared, her cottage was days away from being ready for her to move back in, and that was the last thing he wanted to happen. Having her with him, he’d been so...happy. Life couldn’t get any more perfect. Though she wouldn’t want to hear it, she had him thinking about marriage again. He couldn’t tell her that. She’d run for sure.

Amanda snuggled closer to his side. “You’re so quiet. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” *Everything.*

“Then what’s on your mind?”

“You. Us.”

He realized his mistake when she stiffened against him. If he hadn’t had his arm around her, odds were she would have shot to the other side of the couch faster than he could blink. He let out a sigh and changed the direction of the conversation, hoping it wouldn’t be too late. “You’ve got me so worn out.”

She pinched his side. "It's probably just that you're getting old."

Or maybe that he wanted something he would never be able to have. A few weeks and he wasn't any closer to getting her to admit to her feelings than he'd been on the first night he dragged her in out of the storm.

They sat in silence for a little while before Amanda spoke. "Tell me about her. Your ex-wife."

He sighed. Of course she'd want to talk about Laura now. *Way to put a little distance between us, Amanda.* "There's not much to tell that you haven't heard before. We dated in high school. She got pregnant in our senior year and we got married. Stayed together way too long, and then one day she decided someone else could take care of her needs better than me. That was five years ago, after fifteen years of marriage."

"I'm sorry things didn't work out," Amanda said softly, settling back against his side.

"I'm not. I knew, almost from the start, that we weren't meant to be together. We both did. I just wish she'd come to me when she'd decided she wanted out rather than cheating."

"I can understand that."

"So tell me. What happened in your marriages?"

"Not much. As a good friend of mine back home was fond of putting it, I married bums. Men who couldn't take care of themselves let alone support a household or keep a marriage together. And the last guy...Ronny...he was a good guy. Wanted what was best for me, but he wasn't in love with me. He was just someone my mother had set me up with because she thought he'd finally be the one I stuck with and gave her grandkids."

"But you don't want kids."

"It's not that I don't want them. I just don't want them to have to go through what I did, being sick and helpless and all. It was a nightmare for everyone, especially with me being so young."

“I can imagine. I’m sorry you had to go through that, but there’s probably a really slim chance any children you have would contract the same disease.”

“Oh, believe me, I know that. At least the rational part of my mind does. But there’s an emotional part, too. One that’s afraid to ever have to go through something so horrific again.”

“Is that what ended your marriages? The fact that you were afraid to have children?”

“It was probably a sticking point, but there were a lot of things.” She sucked in a shuddering breath. “I was scared, Joe. Scared to be alone, but scared to get close to anyone at the same time. I was young, and I really didn’t know what I wanted.”

“What about now? Do you know what you want now?”

“Right now, right here, I’m happy. Probably happier than I’ve been in a long time.”

He waited for her to finish, but wasn’t really surprised when she didn’t. Instead they sat there in comfortable silence, Joe stroking Amanda’s back and wishing like hell she was willing to take the next step. At this rate, he didn’t think she’d ever be and he wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to let her go.



“What’s a sweet girl like you doing in a place like this?”

Amanda set a glass in front of Charlie Reed, one of Maggie’s regular customers. He was sweet, funny and the biggest flirt she’d ever met. “I don’t know, Charlie. I keep asking myself that same question, but I have yet to come up with an answer.”

Charlie winked at her and raised his glass in salute. “I know the answer.”

“Oh, really?” She propped her free hand on her hip. “And what would that be?”

“Simple.” He snatched her hand. “You work here so you can see me every night.”

She laughed. His tone was teasing and light. He didn’t mean what he said, and they both knew it. Charlie was sexy, in his own way, but he couldn’t be more than twenty-two. Way too young for her, and the women he dated tended to look like runway models rather than almost-thirty-year-old future college students.

“Yeah, that’s it.” She looked him over, taking in his dark-haired good looks and charming smile. He’d make some woman very happy one day. Just not her. “I work here just to see you. It has nothing to do with paying the bills.”

“Is everything okay?”

Amanda glanced up to see Joe standing a dozen feet away, fingers in the pockets of his jeans. She might have thought him calm and relaxed if she hadn’t caught the irritated expression etching his features. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes. Barely. A few weeks of sex and now he felt like he owned her? What the hell? Wasn’t it the woman who was supposed to feel clingy?

Though she had to admit she was starting to feel a little clingy herself. Not that she wanted to, but there it was. The days she’d spent with him had been the best sex she’d had in her life. Joe actually made her crave the sex rather than merely tolerate it. Her last two husbands hadn’t been able to manage that. Only the first guy had come close. Joe was...special to her, though she’d only admit it under threat of torture.

“No problems, Joe. Why don’t you go sit down and I’ll be with you in a few minutes?”

He just raised his eyebrows.

“Joe, knock it off.”

When he still said nothing, she shook her head, grabbed his arm and dragged him across the floor to the backroom. Once they were alone she fixed him with a glare. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“You’re swearing now? I think I like it. It sounds good on you.”

“Don’t even go there.” She started to protest more, but he didn’t give her the chance. He pulled her flush against him, crushing her breasts to his chest, and kissed her.

The kiss was long, lingering, and made her tingle everywhere. She clung to him, holding him close as he continued the sensual assault. It was amazing, so good, and she still wanted more than she could rationalize. She’d known that getting involved with him would be a mistake, but she hadn’t realized just how much of one it would be until this moment.

She tried to push him away, but instead ended up pulling him closer. Her fingers tangled in the hair at his nape. She parted her lips and his tongue thrust into her mouth, brushing hers. He backed her up until she was against the wall. His whole body pressed against hers, his hands cupping her rear. He squeezed gently, dragging her against him. The hardness of his erection against her belly made her let out a soft moan.

Joe chuckled against her lips. He murmured something she didn’t understand and continued with the kiss.

It seemed like an eternity before he broke away, resting his forehead against hers. He chuckled again, his chest heaving with his breaths. “Why can’t I keep my hands off you?”

“I was about to ask you the same question.”

“Maybe it’s something in the water.”

She couldn’t help but chuckle at the absurd explanation. “Yeah, that must be it.”

Then she remembered how he’d acted around Charlie and she pushed at his chest. He stumbled back, shock written on his face. “What are you doing?”

“What were *you* doing? Back there at the table. That wasn’t funny.”

“You were flirting.”

“So what?” she asked, trying to keep from raising her voice. “Charlie and I do that all the time. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“I don’t like it.”

“Why not?” Her hands plunked onto her hips. “You said it yourself. You don’t want to get involved. You’re happy with your stupid life the way it is, and no woman is going to come in and change that.”

Joe’s gaze darkened. He pushed a hand through his hair and paced the room. When he finally stopped and turned to face her, he looked ready to spit nails. “Don’t twist my words around and throw them in my face. Maybe what I want has changed. Maybe you read more into the words than what I meant because you’re so damned afraid of committing to me.”

Something inside her jumped for joy at his words. It took a few seconds to realize it shouldn’t make her happy.

“Nothing has changed, Joe. Neither of us wants this fling to turn into something more serious.”

“Fling?” He spat the word back at her as if it left a bad taste in his mouth. “Is that all this is to you?”

The look in his eyes shocked her and she reeled from it. He was the one who had insisted he wanted nothing more than sex. He’d said he couldn’t make promises he wouldn’t be able to keep. She’d readily agreed, but Joe had been the one to instigate the conversation in the first place.

“Of course it is. We agreed to that after the first night together. Remember?”

His expression turned pained. “I’ve never wanted to get involved. Not since my divorce. But then I met you, and I don’t know. I don’t even know what I want anymore.”

The look on his face told her he was lying, but she refused to call him on it. If she did, she’d have to admit she felt more, too, and that would be a huge problem for both of them.

“Then what is this all about?”

“Damned if I know.”

“Well, we need to settle this.”



He stared at her for a long time, seeming to be searching for something. After what felt like an eternity, he stepped back and leaned against the wall. "There's nothing to settle. Nothing has changed."

*Yeah, right.* Everything had changed in the past ten minutes, and now Amanda was afraid there was no going back. How could they, with so much standing in the way? "Are you sure about that?"

Joe lifted one shoulder. "Never been so sure about anything in my life." With a hard shake of his head he walked toward the door, turning to glance at her over his shoulder. "My crew will be out at the house tomorrow, like I promised you a couple days ago, to finish getting the place back in order. It should be another week, tops, before we get you settled back into your own place."

With those words, he'd managed to push her away. To shut her out. She'd expected it, maybe even asked for it, but at the same time he'd managed to tear her up inside. "Thank you. I appreciate it."

"No problem." He left, but after a second showed back up in the room. "Will I see you at home later?"

Something in his voice told her he'd be upset if she said no. But what could she do? She was already in a lot deeper than she wanted to get.

With a sigh and a small smile, she relented. "Sure. I'll be there when my shift is done."

"Good." With that, he walked away, leaving her standing alone in the backroom. She stalked over to the mirror, straightening her hair into a neater ponytail before she went back into the main room to finish her shift.

Charlie got her attention and she crossed the room to stand beside his table. "What's up?"

"You and Joe Baker have something going?"

She shrugged. "Not really."

Charlie looked at her for a long time before nodding. "Sure. Nothing much, huh?"

"Nope."

“Then I guess *that* doesn’t bother you.” He pointed to a table in the corner, where Joe had taken a seat. The woman Alex had pointed out to her last week—Claudia Marshall, Joe’s old girlfriend—was sitting across from him, looking like she wanted to eat him alive.

Something snapped inside Amanda. Her stomach bottomed out. She swallowed hard and looked away from the scene. So he was having dinner with a friend. So what? Hadn’t she just told him flirting was no big deal? He’d sworn to her over and over that he and Claudia had nothing going on anymore.

She tried to school her expression and returned her gaze to Charlie’s. “He told me he’s not involved with her. They’re just friends.”

Charlie raised his eyebrows. “That’s not how she tells it.”

“So I’ve heard.”

“I just thought you should know she caught up with him after he came out of the backroom. She took his arm and he walked over to the table with her.”

“He did?”

Charlie nodded.

Why now? She would have cried if she hadn’t promised herself she’d never cry over a man again. Why here, of all places, where she worked? Did the morning they’d just spent in his bed mean nothing to him?

She glanced back toward Joe and Claudia, and the woman looked up and gave Amanda a smug smile.

That was it. Amanda was so done with Joe. Tonight, when her shift ended, she was going to pack what little she had left and move back into a hotel until her cottage was livable again. One closer to town, where she wouldn’t have to worry about being stuck in the middle of nowhere with a man she never should have gotten involved with in the first place.



Joe kept his eyes on Amanda for most of the night. She was pissed, and he didn't blame her. She had a right to her anger, but she was directing it at the wrong person. Hell, he was pissed, too. Claudia had damned near ambushed him. He'd been on his way back to his table after the conversation with Amanda when Claudia had grabbed his arm. He hadn't been able to get rid of her since.

He didn't want to be around her at all, let alone when Amanda was so close by. Amanda was still skittish, and since the storm, he'd been on edge, trying not to do or say anything that might chase her away. The roads were clear and the fact that she hadn't moved into a hotel yet bolstered his spirits. Maybe there was hope, after all.

Hope for what? Something she would reject as soon as he mentioned it?

Hell, he just wanted her home.

*Home.* Now that was a word he never expected to use as far as Amanda was concerned. In the past two weeks, he'd begun to think of his home as hers, too. Inevitable, given she'd been living with him, but still a touch on the shocking side. Of course the other shoe would drop. It had been too perfect. Too terrific to last. He should have known she'd eventually want to leave, and tonight he'd managed to do something stupid enough to push her over the edge. Next thing he knew, she'd be accusing him of somehow creating the lightning that took out the tree. He'd never imagined it would be his own words chasing her away.

"Why do you keep looking at her, Joe?" Claudia tapped her manicured nails on the table and let out an irritated huff. "Are you involved with that waitress?"

He threw her a glare. "Her name is Amanda."

Shock registered for about two seconds in her eyes before she masked it. "Fine. *Amanda.* Are you involved with *Amanda?*"

"I already told you she's living in the cottage next to me. The one your aunt used to own."

"The cottage that's ruined."

He nodded.

“And where is she staying while she waits for your crew to fix it?”

When he didn't answer, Claudia sneered. “In your house, Joe? In your bed?”

He still said nothing. There would be no point in arguing with the truth.

“You've got to be kidding me. I thought you'd given up on charity cases.”

“Amanda isn't a charity case.” Far from it.

“Yeah, she is. I know you. Once she gets on her feet, she's going to walk away.”

Amanda had surprised him. With everything she had going on, he'd thought the same thing. But he hadn't counted on the fact that she was already on her feet and always had been. She was one of the strongest women he'd ever met, and she didn't even realize it.

“What I can't figure out,” Claudia continued, “is what can that woman do for you that I can't?”

*Everything.* “She's...” Since he couldn't think of a way to explain it without using words Claudia wouldn't want to hear, he closed his mouth. Amanda was smart. Funny. Beautiful. Kind and caring.

*His.*

At least she had been, until he'd pulled the jealous caveman act and more than likely chased her away.

Joe couldn't get the woman out of his mind. He wanted more time with her. Maybe a lot more time. Now he just had to convince her it was the right thing for both of them. He'd been lying when he'd told her he didn't want something permanent. Giving her what he thought she wanted to hear. He didn't want to want it, but there it was.

“Joe?”

“What?” The word came out harsher than he'd meant and he groaned when he caught the crestfallen look on Claudia's face. He pushed away the feeling with a shake of his head. Claudia was a fake. Every one of her

emotions was perfected for the sole purpose of catching a man. He would never be that man. Not for her.

“Are you in love with her?”

What a loaded question that was. He let out a sigh and shook his head. Hell yes, he was in love with the woman. How could he not be? “No, I’m not in love with her. I haven’t known her that long.”

“Long enough.”

He glanced at Amanda, carrying a tray over to a table for four across the room, and his chest tightened. Yeah, sometimes that was all it took. And sometimes, on rare occasions, one look across a run-down little cottage and a guy was a goner. A few weeks of banter, a few weeks of sex and he could kiss his bachelorhood goodbye. The woman had gotten under his skin in a big way.



Amanda was just getting off her shift when someone tapped her on the shoulder. She turned around to find Claudia Marshall standing behind her.

“He’s not interested in marriage,” she said without preamble, her acidic tone making Amanda’s eyes narrow. “I just thought you should know you’re wasting your time.”

Amanda let out a sardonic sigh. “Like I didn’t already know that before. As far as marriage goes, I’m not much for the hard stuff, either. Been there, done that, and three times is more than enough for a lifetime.”

Claudia’s expression faltered, but she stood her ground. “Why should I believe you?”

“I have no clue. You have no reason to doubt me. What stake would I have in lying to you?”

“I don’t know, but what I do know is that you want him. You can’t have him. He’s mine.”

So she kept saying, to everyone who would listen. Amanda wasn't buying it. But she didn't blame Claudia for wanting Joe. If Amanda had been looking, he would have been at the top of her list for prime boyfriend—or even husband—material.

"You have nothing to worry about, Claudia," Amanda assured her, grabbing her purse and keys out of her locker and heading for the door. "Joe and I aren't involved. At least not in the way you're thinking."

"He says different."

Amanda froze, her feet sticking to the floor and her tongue sticking to the roof of her mouth. The woman was lying. Had to be. Joe wouldn't have said something like that to her after he'd just told Amanda he wasn't looking for marriage or anything close. It was a full minute before she regained the power of speech.

"He's wrong. I don't want anything more than friendship from him." Aside from the mind-blowing sex, of course. The sex was something she was beginning to think she couldn't live without. Hell, who was she kidding? *Joe* was something she might not be able to live without, and that thought scared her most of all. "Seriously. I'm not looking to get involved. I have no need to justify myself and my actions to you. It's late, I'm tired, and I'm heading home now. Good night."

"Home? Don't you mean Joe's house?" Claudia huffed when Amanda said nothing. "Just by being here, you're a threat to what I've been working toward for so long. Understand this, Amanda. If you try to get in between Joe and I, I can make your life very miserable. I've spent *months* trying to get my relationship with Joe to the next level and I will not let some spoiled little child come in and ruin it."

Child? *Please*. "Fine. I get it. You're the one who seems to be having problems with understanding. Let me tell you this. What Joe and I have is just sex. Hot, incredible, sweaty, mind-blowing sex, but in the end, still just sex. Does that make you feel better?"

She stomped out of the building, got into her car and drove away. Her comment had been juvenile, but deserved. Amanda could only stand so much before she snapped.

She made the short drive out to Joe's and used her key to let herself into the house. As far as she knew, he was still at Maggie's. She hadn't noticed him leave. Perfect time for her to pack her things. She didn't need this kind of stress in her life.

The hotel back in town was calling her name. It would be a much better place than hanging around Joe, being in near-constant danger of going to a place she had no intention of ever visiting again.



Amanda was gone.

Joe slammed the bedroom door and stomped down the stairs, through the house and onto the porch. He flopped into one of the wicker rockers and shoved a hand through his hair. He should have expected this. Had, on some basic level, but he'd held onto the hope that Amanda would still be there when he finally managed to ditch Claudia and head home.

His head ached. His chest ached. He should have seen this coming. He couldn't hold on to Amanda forever. Not when she didn't want to be held. Amanda, with the multitude of divorces leaving her gun-shy and unwilling to commit, was the woman he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. He'd fallen for her hard. And now, after he'd made a total ass out of himself with his jealousy, she'd gotten scared and run away.

He had a pretty good idea of where she'd gone. The hotel wasn't far away. He could chase her down, but what good would that do? If he went after her tonight, it would make her run even further. He had to give her time, let her think he accepted her decision before he went after her. And he *would* go after her. When he saw something he wanted, he got it. No exceptions. He'd give her the time she needed, but after that he would make no promises to keep his distance.

A car pulled up and a woman got out, but not the woman he wanted to see. Claudia.

“Hey, Joe.” She walked up the steps and stood in front of him, hip propped on the railing.

“Little late for a visit, isn’t it?”

“You never complained before.”

Because he hadn’t cared enough to complain. He hadn’t realized Claudia had more on her mind than a casual fling until the idea of a commitment had snuck up on him. “I just saw you at Maggie’s. Didn’t we say all that needed to be said there?”

“Not even close. Where’s your roommate? Did she move out already?”

Joe narrowed his eyes as he studied Claudia’s expression. “What did you do?”

She shrugged. “I talked to her. She told me she isn’t interested in a relationship with you.”

He could practically feel her glee, and it made his eyes narrow. “No shit. Tell me something I don’t know.”

“So where is she?”

“I think I know, but I’m not certain. What do you care?”

“Did she really move out?”

He wouldn’t dignify that question with a response. Of course Claudia knew Amanda had moved out. She wouldn’t have come here if she’d thought differently.

“I’m so sorry, Joe.”

“No, you aren’t. You did something to chase her away.” Even as he said the words, he recognized them for the lies they were. Whatever Claudia had done hadn’t chased Amanda away. He’d already done that himself before Claudia had even gotten a hold of her.

He’d been the one to pull the jealousy shit. He should have known better, should have backed off or never started in the first place. Charlie Reed had been talking to her and he couldn’t help himself. His brain had shut down and something far more basic had taken control. A knee-jerk reaction.

His reaction, obviously, had been the wrong choice.



Claudia clicked her tongue. "You're right. I'm not sorry. We have a good thing going here and she got in the way."

"We never made any promises to each other."

"I thought they were implied."

"No. You know they weren't. We've been through this a hundred times before. Dating once in a while doesn't equal long-term commitment. Even the dating is over now. Has been for a long time and you just refuse to let go. You knew from the beginning that it wasn't going anywhere."

"I was hoping I could get you to change your mind."

"Not gonna happen. You know what, Claudia? I think you need to leave."

She blinked, sputtering for a few seconds before she started to protest, as he'd known she would. The woman didn't know when to give up. "But, Joe—"

"No." He put his hand in the air to stop her protests. "This won't work. I'm sorry, but I'm not interested in you. We need to stop seeing each other. We won't work together the way you want us to."

She looked like she might argue, but he shook his head. "No, Claudia. Don't drag this out. It's over, though it was never really what you thought it was in the first place."

Without another word, Claudia stomped off and got into her car, peeling out of the driveway. Joe hadn't wanted to hurt her, but for months he'd been trying to shake her and nothing had worked. He'd had to do something drastic to make her understand. There was another woman in his life, and even though Amanda didn't know it yet, she'd taken him off the market. Someday he would make Amanda understand that. Someday.

With that thought firmly in his mind, he pushed out of the chair and went inside.

## Chapter Eleven

“Amanda?”

Amanda turned around and found Joe’s daughter, Kelly, hurrying toward her. She stopped and sighed, recognizing the younger woman from the pictures she’d seen at Joe’s house when she’d been staying there. Just what she needed right now was a lecture from a woman trying to protect her father’s feelings.

“Yes?” she asked, hoping she was doing a good job of feigning indifference.

“I’m Kelly Baker. I think you know my dad.”

Amanda thought about denying it, but in the end decided against it. She couldn’t lie about something they both knew was the truth. “I do. We’re neighbors.”

For the past month, since she’d moved back into her cottage, she’d done all she could to avoid running into Joe. Given her work schedule, and now college classes, it hadn’t been all that difficult. The man seemed intent on giving her a wide berth, and though that should make her happy, it had only served to make her more miserable.

Kelly raised her eyebrows and at the moment she looked so much like a dark-haired version of her father that Amanda nearly laughed. “Is that all you are?”

“There wasn’t much more than that. But now, yeah, we’re just neighbors.”

“Then why is he so upset over the fact that you left?”

Amanda frowned. Joe was upset? Kelly had to be mistaken, because when she'd moved back into the hotel he hadn't even bothered to chase her. Hadn't bothered to call save for the one time he'd phoned to let her know the cottage was back in move-in condition. The place looked amazing—exactly how she'd envisioned it—and she hadn't even had the guts yet to thank him.

He apparently hadn't had the guts to stop by with a bill for his services.

"I don't think he was upset over me. Maybe he got into a fight with Claudia."

Claudia, a woman who was closer to his age. A woman who had children the same age as Joe's. A woman he belonged with, *had* been with until Amanda had forced her way into the picture.

Kelly cocked her head to the side and stared at Amanda. She studied her for what felt like an eternity before she spoke. "You're denying the whole thing as much as he is."

"He's denying it?" For some reason, the idea of him ignoring what she'd been to him, if anything at all, made her fume. "I thought you said he was upset."

"He is. All he does is stomp around and slam things every time I visit. I've been trying to get out there to see him more since he seems lonely. Whenever I call, he's short-tempered and grumpy. That isn't like him at all. The way I see it, I figure the fact that you moved out on him has to have something to do with it."

"Moved out on him? I never lived with him."

"That's not what he said."

"Well, okay, I lived with him for a few weeks after that big storm wrecked the cottage. But it wasn't like *living* with him. We were roommates."

"Roommates generally don't share a bed."

Amanda narrowed her eyes. "Look, I don't need a lecture. There's nothing going on between your father and me, and it's that simple."

Kelly's expression softened. She tucked a strand of coffee-colored hair behind her ear and glanced around before she spoke, her voice low. "I'm not trying to give you a lecture. Believe me, I'm glad my dad is happy. Or, was happy, at least. My mom moved on years ago, and it's awesome to see him doing the same thing. Finally."

"What about Claudia?"

"She's been trying to get her hooks into him for years."

Kelly looked upset about that, and Amanda questioned her. "You don't want that to happen?"

"No. She's got four kids to support. She's just after the money she thinks my dad will provide and a man to warm her bed. She's such a snake that she's always alone."

"Your dad has money?"

"Yeah, he's not hurting for cash or anything. His business is doing really well. He doesn't advertise it, though. Plus he's got a whole bunch of rental properties that bring in a decent amount of income."

How had she not known that about him? During the time they'd been together, they'd spent many nights and many meals talking, and Joe had mentioned a rental property or two, but he'd glossed over the details of the business in favor of talking about her instead. "I had no idea the business was doing so well."

"You didn't?"

Amanda shook her head.

"That's a good thing. I'm glad you're not after him for what he can buy for you."

"I really mean it. I'm not after him at all."

"Yeah, okay." Kelly grinned. "The point is, he's miserable without you. I don't know what you did to him in that short amount of time, but he wants you back. Can't you at least go talk to him?"

"I don't think that's such a good idea. Besides, isn't he away for a few weeks? I thought he mentioned a business trip to check out a property."

“He’s not leaving yet. You still have a good two days before he even heads to the airport.”

Hope sparked inside Amanda and she smiled. She shouldn’t, but he was miserable without her. And she was miserable without him, too. She needed him. It was as simple as that. And apparently, he needed her, too. “Are you sure he wants to see me?”

“Of course he does. You’re the first woman to get to him since my mother moved out. That was five years ago, so that’s got to say something.” She smiled and started to walk away, turning back when she’d made it only a few steps. “Oh, and Amanda?”

“Yes?”

“I think you’d be good for him. He needs someone who isn’t going to take any of his crap.”

“I think I can handle him. And Kelly? Thanks.”

“No problem. Just don’t hurt him, okay?”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She just hoped Joe didn’t hurt her. She couldn’t handle one more failed relationship.



Twenty minutes later she was sitting in her car in Joe’s driveway, her hands shaking and her forehead peppered with sweat. So much for having the nerve to make the first move. Now, faced with the crushing reality of what she planned to do, follow-through was looking less and less appealing with every second that ticked by. So here she sat like a sixteen-year-old stalking her crush, complete with clammy palms and a stomach full of killer butterflies.

Why now, of all times, did she have to lose her nerve?

Her cell phone rang and she brought it to her ear. “Hello?”

“Amanda?” Joe’s voice reached her across the line. Her anxiety kicked into overdrive.

“Um, yeah. How are you?”

“I’m fine.”

Humor laced his tone and she narrowed her eyes. “Are you laughing?”

“Yep,” he said after a pause.

“Why?” What did he think was so funny? He was the one who had called her. “Care to let me in on the joke?”

“You’ve been sitting out in my driveway for ten minutes. Are you planning on coming inside?”

*Busted.* She let out a shaky sigh, raking a hand through her hair. If he hadn’t thought she was nuts before, he was sure to think it now. “You knew I was here?”

“Yep. Heard you pull up.”

“Why didn’t you call sooner? Or better yet, come outside?”

“I was waiting to see what you’d do. But you did nothing and I got sick of waiting.”

With a groan, she hung up the phone, got out of the car and marched up to his front door. He thought this was funny? She’d show him funny.

She’d just raised her hand to the knob when Joe opened the door, looking better than any man had a right to in boxers and nothing else. She didn’t have time to comment on his lack of attire. He stepped forward, pulled her to him and kissed her soundly on the lips.

By the time he broke the kiss, she was breathless and could barely form a coherent sentence.

“Sorry if that was out of line.” He moved back and leaned against the doorframe. “I’ve been waiting for way too long for you to make the first move, and I figure you showing up was close enough.”

She couldn’t help the nervous laugh that bubbled up in her throat. “You weren’t out of line.”

“Are you sure?”

She had a feeling he was talking about more than just the kiss. “Yes.” The word came out as little more than a whisper, but the look in Joe’s eyes told her he heard.

“You need to be sure, Amanda. I’m sure. Very sure, and I want to know we’re on the same page here. I’ve been hurt before.”

“Me, too.”

“Are you willing to take the chance again?”

It was what she’d spent the past month figuring out. Did she have the courage to try again after so many missteps?

Yeah, she did. It was worth it. *He* was worth it.

“I am.”

He was silent so long she was afraid he’d tell her he changed his mind. Finally, though, a smile spread across his face. “Would you be willing to make me a promise?”

“I’m not going to marry you,” she blurted before she could stop herself.

“Not yet.”

She wanted to tell him not ever, but she couldn’t get the words to leave her mouth. She knew that with him, anything was possible. “Not yet. Maybe someday, but I won’t make any promises regarding that.”

“What I want you to promise me is that if you ever get freaked out like this again, you’ll talk to me about it rather than push me away.”

“I can do that.”

“Good.” He pulled her into his arms and tangled his fingers in her hair. “I have something to say to you, but you have to promise not to get upset about it.”

“I promise.” She had a feeling she already knew what he was going to say. It did scare her, just a little bit, but it excited her at the same time. “I’ll be fine.”

He waited for a few seconds, apparently judging her expression before he spoke. “I love you, Amanda. I didn’t want to at first, tried to fight it, but there it is.”

A giddy smile curled the corners of her mouth. She hadn’t moved to Ludlow to find love, but now that she’d found it, she wouldn’t trade it for anything. “I love you, too.”

“You don’t have to say it if you don’t mean it.”

“I do mean it. And I intend to spend a good, long time proving it to you.” She’d do whatever it took. Joe had stuck by her, caring for her, showing her without words what she meant to him, and all the time she’d pushed him away and denied the truth she’d always known. Rachel had been right. It was just a matter of finding the right man rather than the nearest available one. “Now I think we have a lot of catching up to do.”

Joe blinked at her for a few seconds before he threw his head back and laughed. “You know what? I think you’re right.”



## About the Author

Born in Gloucester, Massachusetts, Elisa Adams has lived most of her life on the east coast. Formerly a nursing assistant and phlebotomist, writing has been a longtime hobby. Now a full-time writer, she lives on the New Hampshire border with her three children.

To learn more about Elisa, please visit [www.elisaadams.com](http://www.elisaadams.com). Send an email to Elisa at [elisa@elisaadams.com](mailto:elisa@elisaadams.com) or join her Yahoo! Newsletter group to learn about upcoming projects <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/ElisaAdams/>

## Look for these titles by Elisa Adams

*Now Available:*

Reality Check  
Settling the Score  
Miss Independent

*Coming Soon:*

The Whole Shebang  
Damage Control

*An instant family wasn't what David had planned for his life, but once he met single mother Lucy he knew he had to change his plans.*

## The Whole Shebang

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*Available April 17, 2007 from Samhain Publishing*

Fifth grade teacher David Storm has had it up to *here* with one of his students. Lately the boy's attitude has changed. He's is obnoxious and rowdy, unable to sit still for five seconds, and is constantly interrupting to ask questions that have nothing to do with the subjects they're studying. The boy's twin brother is just the opposite—so quiet that it has David worried. He calls their mother and tells her he needs to speak with her, setting in motion a whole set of events he never could have imagined.

Lucy Parker knows what her boys are trying to do—and she doesn't approve. Since her divorce from their father three years ago, the eleven year olds have been trying to set her up with every single man in the tri-county area. They mean well, but she isn't looking for love. She's got enough trouble raising four rambunctious boys, and she doesn't need to add someone else to the list. Especially not their latest choice—their very handsome yet way-too-young-for-her teacher.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *The Whole Shebang*:

“Trevor, you and your mother can come in now. I'd like to talk to both of you first before I talk to your mother alone.”

Without waiting for a response, Trevor's teacher disappeared back into the classroom, leaving the scent of his clean, masculine cologne behind. It was vaguely familiar and a little bit sexy. Lucy swallowed hard against the sudden lump forming in her throat. *That* was the teacher who'd replaced Mrs. Frye when she'd left on medical leave last month? Why had Nikki, the school's third grade teacher and Lucy's closest friend, not mentioned the man was a complete and total hunk?

A glance at Trevor's smiling face brought her suspicion rushing back. The pieces of the puzzle that were her son's odd behavior slid into place all at once, and she couldn't say she liked the finished picture. Young, good-looking man, no wedding ring, and a couple of kids who had yet to learn to mind their own business. How many times had the twins tried to do this very same thing? And how many times had she had to put a stop to it before things went too far?

Way too many times in the past three years.

She swung her gaze to Trevor, her eyes narrowed in disbelief. The last time—when they'd tried to set her up with the teenaged waiter at their favorite pizza place—they'd promised her to let her find her own dates and concentrate on things eleven year olds should be doing. "Is that Mr. Storm?"

Trevor nodded, a hint of a smile on his face.

"I thought you said he was old?"

Her son rolled his eyes and spread his hands in front of him. "He is. He's *twenty-five*."

*Ugh*. What did that make her, at the ripe old age of thirty-two? Dust in the ground? As her younger twin son, Lucas, liked to put it, worm food. "Yeah, that's positively *ancient*."

She stood and ruffled her fingers through Trevor's hair. Might as well get on with the meeting so she could get Trevor home and discuss punishment. The other times, she'd let the boys slide with a warning, but obviously it had had little effect on them. Time to pull out the big guns and unplug their video game system. "Come on. Let's get this over with. I know what you and your brother are planning, by the way, and you can forget about it. I have no interest in your teacher beyond what you learn in his classroom. At least most of the other ones you've tried to set me up with have been closer to my age."

"Aren't you twenty-five, too, Mom?"

She laughed. The kid was destined for a career as a politician. "Nice try, Trev. I was twenty-five once. Seven years ago. Now I'm just about

heading for a nursing home, at least as far as you kids are concerned. Come on, let's get moving here."

She grabbed Trevor's hand, knowing it would embarrass him to no end, and marched into the classroom with her oldest boy in tow.

Mr. Storm sat against the edge of his desk, hands in the pockets of his pants and legs crossed at the ankles. When Lucy and Trevor stepped into the room, he stood and walked over to them, hand outstretched. "It's good to meet you, Mrs. Parker."

Lucy nearly cringed at the name she'd given up three years ago. She hadn't even liked being referred to as Mrs. when she'd been married. Now it grated across her senses like fingernails on a chalkboard. Even the boys' friends had always called her by her first name. "*Miss* Parker. But I prefer Lucy."

She took his offered hand, and the second they touched, her mouth went dry. Her heart knocked against her ribs and she had to remind herself to breathe. The man was more than just handsome, true, but for some reason he affected her on a deeper level. She didn't buy into the notion of love at first sight, but lust was another story—and she'd just fallen head over heels in lust with her sons' teacher.

Her only consolation was that he seemed equally affected. His eyes widened, his lips parted, and he didn't let go of her hand for what had to be almost a full minute. When he finally broke the contact, he stepped back and cleared his throat. "Okay. Lucy it is. Call me David. I don't like to be too formal with the parents. Why don't you have a seat?"

He gestured to a few wooden chairs placed next to his desk. Lucy settled into one while Trevor sat next to her, the look on his face letting her know he understood the exchange between his mother and his teacher and he was all for it. She'd have to remind him later, once they were in the car on the way home, that his mother dating his teacher wasn't appropriate and, as much as he might want it, it was never going to happen. After this meeting, she'd probably never see the guy again, anyway.

“Has Trevor told you why I asked you to come in?” Mr. Storm—David—asked as he settled into the chair behind his desk.

“No. He won’t tell me anything beyond the fact that you wanted to talk to me about something, and all you mentioned on the phone was that he was having an issue in class.”

She’d asked her son, repeatedly, and he’d told her every time he had no idea what the problem could be. Lucy had assumed he hadn’t wanted to get into trouble, but now she realized she’d been wrong. He’d wanted to find the quickest way to get her to a meeting with his teacher, and acting out had probably seemed like the best solution.

David nodded, his expression all business, before he turned his attention to Trevor. “We’re having a little bit of a behavior problem in school, aren’t we, Trevor? He’s loud, he interrupts other children in class and he doesn’t turn in most of his homework assignments.”

Lucy glanced at Trevor and gritted her teeth. Usually, when he was working with his brother to try and set her up with someone, both boys suddenly became model citizens. Patient, helpful and polite. Quiet and as near perfect as two eleven year olds could get. The younger two were usually the ones who misbehaved, though Trevor had been known on occasion to be a little mouthy. This change in tactic was something new, but it made sense. What better way to get their mother to meet their teacher than for one of them to become public school enemy number one?

When Nikki had mentioned a younger male teacher would be replacing the old fifth grade one, Lucy should have known her boys would start trouble. They were like sharks, smelling fresh meat and going in for the kill. The homework shocked her, though. She checked each boy’s assignments every night and Trevor’s were always completed. She also made sure the assignments made it into the folder in his backpack before he left the table. What had he been doing with the finished work?

“Why am I not surprised by most of this?” she asked on a sigh.

David raised his eyebrows. “Are you having problems at home, too?”

*We will be now.* The boys had no idea what they'd gotten themselves into this time. *Can you say grounded for life?*

"No. Actually, he's fine at home, so I was a little shocked to get your phone call. What I'm not surprised about is that Trevor seems to be up to his old tricks."

Yes, shocked by the call, but not as surprised as she'd been to see the teacher Trevor and Lucas had described as "positively ancient" was anything but. She'd expected a man in his mid-thirties, but instead she'd found one barely out of college. Did Trevor and Lucas really think their little plan would work?

For the past three years, since just about the time the ink had dried on the divorce papers, her precocious twins had been trying to set her up with one man after another. It appeared, now that she'd ended a three-month dead-end relationship with a man they didn't particularly like, they'd set their sites on David Storm. She hated to admit it, but this time they'd chosen well. If he wasn't seven years younger than her and the person responsible for them when they weren't at home, she might actually consider it. Not that he'd really be interested in a harried, work-at-home mother of four. She could safely say she wasn't the man's type. "I'm sorry for the way Trevor's been acting. I think there might be something going on that doesn't really have a lot to do with an inability to control himself. I'm sure he knows exactly what he's doing. Sometimes my son has ulterior motives."

*Can a man who knows he shouldn't,  
resist a woman who knows she can't?*

## Midnight Temptation

© 2006 Dee Tenorio

*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

Raven Remington has secrets. Only one of which is how badly he wants his personal assistant, Vanessa Kaye, the beauty who refuses to be anything more than professional. A smart man would remove himself from temptation, but Raven can't quite make himself ignore the longing in her eyes or the taste of her kiss. Soon, neither of them can fight their passion.

What Raven doesn't know is that Vanessa has secrets of her own...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Midnight Temptation*:

"I'm not in love with her."

"I heard you last time," Sky laughed. "You missed a spot on the back fender!"

Raven shook his head. He'd promised their mother he'd be there early to spend time with the family, but the idea of how to get Vanessa to accept her "company car" hit somewhere around four in the morning and he doubted he'd get another such opportunity to do the work himself any time soon. A fast change into jeans he'd cut only that morning and a pair of work boots he hadn't worn in years and he'd been ready. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to get rid of Sky. He'd rather have been alone, but Sky claimed wild horses couldn't keep him away.

Raven didn't have time to stop at the stables to find out.

He brought the hammer down on the trunk. The slide of the handle was nearly as satisfying as the screech and crunch of the head impacting the metal. Paint cracked, flecks flew everywhere. Again and again he raised the sledgehammer, bringing it down from the highest point of his



reach until the trunk was a mangled, dimpled mess. Just the way it should be.

“Whose car is that and why do you hate them?”

Raven finished his swing before looking up. Jordan must have talked their best friend into a visit as well because there stood his childhood buddy on a sand dune, looking crisply rumpled and vaguely irritated. You’d think as a doctor he’d be more accustomed to little sleep.

Perry Chase circled the front of the car, eyeing it from behind his sunglasses before joining Sky near the water’s edge just out of the hammer’s arc.

“Welcome to the fine art of Motor Vehicle Demolition!” Sky pointed with both hands at the mangled machine.

Raven rolled his eyes, took a drink from the water bottle he’d nestled in the sand at Sky’s feet and put it back. “Ignore him, Chase, I think he got into some old RMI samples.”

“Normally, I would, but since you’re the one half-naked pounding a—” Chase tore off his sunglasses. “Oh, God, was that an AMG Coupe?” He sounded pained. He probably was. Chase was a bona fide car buff. Oh well. Raven lifted the hammer again, ready to get back to it.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Sky voice, full of pride and laughter, made Raven’s back twitch.

“You Remingtons are a sick bunch,” Chase grumbled.

“Just wait till he uses the power sander.”

“How long has he been at it?”

“Oh, an hour or two. Can you believe it, he had the forethought to stop at the shop this morning and have them disable the security alarm.”

“Am I supposed to be shocked at the forethought or the destruction?”

“Hell, you can pick. I’ve never seen him like this. I’m amazed he hasn’t broken a window, but he always was good with tools. Could never make a damn thing but handled them well.”

“As you can see,” Raven said over his shoulder to Chase, “Sky’s practicing to become a sports announcer.”

“Or a used car salesman,” Chase agreed dryly. At least someone else thought Sky was out of his mind.

“I’m allowed to be impressed,” Sky argued. Of all the damn things to finally impress him with, why did it have to be this?

“Why are you enjoying this so much? I thought you liked cars.” Chase’s voice bordered on betrayal.

“Raven’s in love.”

Raven wiped the sweat off his brow with a gloved hand, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up. He could forget the car and drag Sky into the ocean, maybe hold him under the water until he got some peace and quiet. Satisfying, maybe, but ultimately unproductive. Better to conserve his energy for what needed to be done. Still, he could request a little silence. “Kiss my ass, Sky.”

“He’s been telling me that all day,” his brother explained to their guest. Did he have to sound so happy about it? Any other day, saying that could ensure a good month of silence.

“I thought there’d have to be icicles all over the place and a little horned, red guys skating around for Raven to fall in love.”

“Thank you!” Raven spun around to tip an imaginary hat to his friend. He leaned on the upside down hammer pole and pointed to Chase for his brother’s benefit. “You see? That’s exactly what I’ve been trying to tell you all damn morning.”

Sky nudged Chase with an elbow. “Would *Raven* expend this kind of energy destroying a seventy-thousand dollar car for anything but love?” Sky asked, nonplussed. “Take a look at the inside. He cut the leather seats to ribbons, but he’s brilliant with a roll of duct tape. That takes attention to detail. If it wasn’t for her, you think he would have bothered making sure the springs were all safely padded and sealed?”

Chase’s face skewed, his brown eyes inspecting Raven as if he were some kind of lab rat. “He’s got a point. You don’t even *wash* your own car, much less repair it. Couldn’t you have hired someone to do this?”

Raven stood there, staring at them for a few seconds. He wanted to refute them, but they’d stumbled on the hole in his logic, damn it. It still

didn't mean they were right. It meant he was getting to be as much of a control freak as Sky. He didn't have time to be arguing with them when he knew what and why he was doing. "Screw both of you."

"I always figured that when Raven finally fell in love with somebody I'd have to leave the country to maintain my peace of mind. I never thought it would be this much fun." Sky waved a dismissive hand at him when Raven turned to yell. "Yeah, yeah, kiss your ass, I got it. You're still missing that spot."

Annoyed instead of stressless, Raven went back to the repetitive swing of the hammer with more fervor. Obviously, marriage had sucked dry Sky's once impressive IQ. Sure, he *looked* deliriously happy. Losing your mind had that effect on you.

Granted, Evie turned out to be a decent, kind hearted woman, galling as that was to admit. Her son did happen to be smart and interesting; he even made Sky laugh. Their daughter might redefine the phrase "cute as a button" and none of them seemed to mind being in each other's presence, but did that mean love existed?

The car boomed a negative reply.

"Didn't think so."

Still, stupid or not, Sky did have an intolerable point. Raven felt...*something* for Vanessa. Whatever it was didn't seem in a hurry to go away, either. It was like having a splinter in his mind, this indefinable feeling. Whenever he looked at her—hell, whenever he thought about her—it welled up with a fierceness that almost crippled his control. It was worse when she was walking away from him.

"You're going to love this," Sky said, just before Raven tuned him out. No doubt he'd tell Chase all about his problem with Vanessa. Great.

Something had to be done, it was getting out of control. He had to ensure he could burn out the need for her before she realized she wanted more than a casual affair and that he was the last man on earth to give it to her.

His lip curled at the thought of what happened between them being called casual. He'd done casual. This wasn't it. A woman who made love

the way she did... His stomach tightened just thinking about her face, her eyes, her body, even her voice. When it ended, she'd never be able to go back to the monastic life she once led. No, eventually, she'd be casual with someone else.

The hammer came down violently, slipping from his grasp and slashing into the sand several feet away, finally quieting his brother into pensive silence while he heaved in breath after breath.

Someone *else*?

Raven didn't like the dark thing slithering through him, something alien and unwanted. It took him another breathless second to identify it and when he did, he was incredulous.

*Possessiveness? Him?* He didn't have a possessive bone in his body; never had, never thought he would. But then again, hadn't he come home after all these years—taken control of Remington Medical Industries—because he longed for something of his own? Something to put his mark on?

He eyed the car. Leaving his mark wouldn't be a problem any longer. But was he trying to mark the car or the woman? Why? He couldn't own her. He didn't want to own her. He just wanted... He didn't know what the hell he wanted, damn it. All he knew was that this wasn't it. He wanted her. All of her. He wanted to know what she was hiding. Why she was so afraid. Why she wouldn't come to him. Most of all he wanted to know why he cared. But the answers weren't coming, not from this car and not from Vanessa.

Something would have to give.

In a takeover, occasionally concessions had to be made. Unpleasant ones. Change never happened without someone changing the status quo. Vanessa said she wasn't part of his life. Maybe she wasn't. But she would be. Soon.

He wasn't about to go to Sky's extremes, of course, but he was damn sick of doing nothing at all. Making room in his life for her didn't mean he was in love with her. It definitely wouldn't involve marrying her. This

was just another acquisitions battle, that's all. Nothing that would require or inspire his heart.

He smiled, secure at last. How could it?

He didn't have one.

*While investigative reporter Catherine Steel looks for Mr. Right, she tries to learn if someone murdered the janitor from her old high school.*

## A Fiery Secret

© 2006 Diane Craver

*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

Catherine Steel is an investigative reporter for a newspaper in Ohio. To supplement her income so that she can buy clothes and gifts for her small godchild, she writes fluff pieces for women's magazines. Two recent articles are: "What To Wear to Get Noticed" and "Catherine's Ten Simple Dating Rules."

When Jake Michaels fills a sports editor's spot on the paper, Catherine wonders if he is man enough to fulfill her fantasy. And does she want him to be the one? After all, he broke her heart ten years ago in high school when he failed to show up for their prom date. And now that he's back in town, he wants to date her. Catherine refuses to go out with him but he keeps asking. Should she give Jake another chance?

When it appears the high school janitor, Max, was murdered, Catherine is determined to learn the truth about his death. Catherine's list of suspects for Max's death include: the school secretary with her intense dislike of Max, the charismatic mayor, the mayor's unbalanced girlfriend, the angry school principal, and a strange math teacher.

Enjoy this excerpt from *A Fiery Secret*:

On Friday morning, I sat at my desk, wearing my favorite pair of jeans with a raspberry-colored, single-button shrug sweater and a white top underneath. The vibrant raspberry was enough to brighten anyone's work day. While leaving my apartment, I'd slipped on a comfortable pair of loafers and was happy to leave the stiletto heels at home. My feet needed a break from walking back and forth in high heels in front of Jake. I wondered if he'd miss me wearing a short skirt today.

I didn't have to wonder for long.

"Are you working on your romance article?" Jake said, standing next to me.

I turned away from the monitor screen to see him grinning at me. He wore jeans and a shirt with the Bengals' Tiger logo on it. I shook my head. "No, I'm finishing up the interview I did with Mr. Jansen last night about his new poetry book." My eyes widened as I gazed at Jake. "I guess the Bengals didn't sign you."

"Even if they could add me to their roster mid-season, I couldn't leave the newspaper and miss seeing you parade up and down the hallway to get your water."

"I better get a water bottle so I don't distract you from your work."

"I like the distraction." He leaned closer. "And you look great in jeans and that..." He stopped to take a better look at my shrug. "That little sweater and tight top."

Glancing down at my chest, I said, "It's not tight, just slightly fitted."

"How's the absent Ricardo? Is he going to make an appearance at the Halloween party?"

It was time to tell Jake that a Spanish girl had taken Ricardo's love away from me. No, I couldn't say that. It wouldn't be wise to mention I was jilted for another woman. And actually I wasn't, since I broke up with Ricardo first, but still I hadn't anticipated him finding someone to take my place in his heart. This stretching the truth a little bit—okay, a lot—was making my life too stressful.

I looked Jake straight in the eye. "We broke up."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "I'm sorry."

"I don't like speaking Spanish anyway."

"Doesn't he speak English?"

I nodded. "It was a joke. Ricardo speaks better English than I do. But his family talks in Spanish most of the time." I wondered if Anita realized what a great family she was marrying into. Probably not.

“You better still come to the party.” That’s all he had to say. What happened to hitting on me and asking me out for tonight? It was Friday, after all, and I was definitely free now. “I’ll be there. Have you talked to Brian? Is everyone going to McFadden’s tonight?”

He shrugged. “I haven’t heard. But I’m leaving this weekend to cover the World Series.”

This was why being a couple would never work for us. One of us would always have a story to cover, but still it was funny that he wasn’t all over me. What happened to him trying to convince me to give him another chance? It couldn’t just be because he was leaving for the World Series.

I mean, he could’ve mentioned going out for a drink before he left. That was it. We could go out for a nice drink after work, and it’d be fun to be the one to suggest it. “Let’s go out for a drink tonight.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think that’s wise.”

I tapped my fingers on the desk. “What’s going on here? You just said the other day how much you wanted to go out with me and I could even stand you up since I missed the prom. Then we’d move on. What gives?”

His expression grew serious. “I think the biggest mistake single women and men make is to bounce from one relationship to the next without evaluating what went wrong. I know you really don’t want to use me to help you get over Ricardo. And I don’t want you to date me on the rebound. That’s unfair to both of us. My policy is to wait a month after a breakup before I date someone new.”

“So you want to give me a month after my breakup with Ricardo before we date?”

“Or longer.”

Now that Jake knew I was available, he wanted to wait before going out with me. Unbelievable. When I decided to take a chance on him, he was indifferent. I thought there were sparks between us, so why was he pulling back?

He was only interested in the chase. That had to be it. That was what I’d feared.



Something wasn't right here and I thought for a moment, giving Jake a weak smile. Then it hit me how his words sounded so familiar. Shit, he was playing me. His whole rebounding theory was taken from my magazine article, "Catherine's Ten Simple Dating Rules".

I glared at him. "You read my dating article."

He grinned. "I thought you'd catch on. And a drink tonight sounds good."

It turned out to be more than a drink.

*When Jared Romero gets shot the only person he can turn to is Macayla Sullivan, but will she risk her heart—and her life—to help him?*

## Take Your Medicine

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*Available now at Samhain Publishing*

After escaping from an abusive relationship, Macayla has no interest in tying herself to another man, even if he is drop dead gorgeous. Unfortunately, Jared doesn't understand the meaning of the word no and breaks down her defenses as fast as she can put them up.

When Macayla saves Jared's life, little does she know that she's putting her life—and her heart—in danger.

Sequel to *Surprise*

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Take Your Medicine*:

Should she go down to clear the air with Jared? Maybe a little space would be best for both of them. She wasn't the type to hold a grudge, but there was a time and place for every discussion. The fact that she was still feeling a little overheated from Jared's kiss, and he was downstairs working out, possibly with his shirt off, didn't bode well for an intelligent conversation. She had never seen a man as good looking as Jared, even Connor wasn't as ruggedly handsome, and he was no slouch.

Thoughts like those weren't going to help clear her mind any.

Macayla went into the kitchen and started a meatloaf for supper. She wasn't sure if her stomach was up to that yet so she put in an extra potato to bake just in case. She cleaned up the kitchen and pattered around the house, straightening little things, cleaning the bathroom, making the beds. When she had run out of things to do and Jared was still downstairs, she figured she had better stop him from hurting himself.

*Idiot man, he's going to overdo it just like I said. Why is it men think they are so much smarter than women?* Macayla muttered to herself as she headed for the stairs leading to the home gym. As she stomped her way down, she was blasted by the music Jared had blaring from the speakers. His face was turned away from her as his arms pumped the free weights. He had his shirt off, just as she had expected, and his torso was beaded in sweat.

The muscles in his arms rippled with the effort he made to lift the weights over and over again. Macayla paused, speechless as she watched him work out. He was definitely eye candy. Forget eye candy, he was eye chocolate. The overhead lights emphasized his every asset—the glints in his midnight black hair were almost blue, his hairy chest was pumping up and down with exertion. His sweatpants sagged on his narrow frame and revealed the upper curve of his pelvis, a sight Macayla found irrationally erotic.

Her mouth hung open as she stood staring at him, wondering how to take her eyes off him long enough to form a coherent thought in her head. She had completely forgotten the reason she had come downstairs in the first place.

Jared dropped the weight and pressed his hand to his side. When he looked up and saw her, he lowered his hand guiltily. He stood and walked over to her, drying himself on the towel as he went. His chest moved up and down with his heavy breath from his workout. She said nothing as he came within inches of her. He stopped, waiting for her to make the next move.

Macayla stared at Jared, watching him as he ran the towel over his body. She wanted to be that towel, wrapped around that gorgeous chest, feeling his heartbeat, touching his body. She licked her lips as though she could already taste the salt from his skin. The rational part of her brain yelled at her to say something, to break the spell, but her body wasn't listening. It was too busy watching him.

Slowly, almost against her will, she moved closer to him. She reached him, just a breath away from all that glorious skin, but he didn't make a move to touch her. She almost whimpered.

She wanted to be pressed against his chest, to feel the fire spread and burn. She waited breathless seconds for him to move, but when he did nothing more than grip the towel and stare at her; she knew it was up to her to decide what was going to happen.

She watched a bead of sweat work its way from the hollow of his throat, down his chest, over his stomach, and stop at the waistband of his sweats. She could feel her control snap as she saw the evidence of his desire directly below the devious drop of sweat.

Struggling to find courage, she stood on tiptoe and placed her mouth against his throat. She delicately licked her way from his throat to the oasis of his chest.

What a dilemma. She had dreamed about these acres of muscles for days now and, like a kid in a candy store, didn't know where to begin. She wanted to touch and taste everything at once, yet wanted to linger over it as well. She kissed a path between his nipples, and brought her hands up to run her fingers through the hair on his chest, grabbing his pectorals gently and rubbing his flat nipples between her fingers.

Jared remained silent, his hands gripping the towel. He held on for dear life, afraid to make a move and break the spell. Macayla devoured his chest—and his control. Her hands explored his torso like a blind person reading Braille. Fire exploded in his gut as her mouth trailed kisses over every inch, and worked lower second by agonizing second. When she reached the waistband of his pants, Jared pulled her up to him.

“Macayla, you have about five seconds to decide if this is what you want, because if it isn't, you had better run for your life.”

“You talk pretty tough, but I don't believe a word of it.” Macayla ran her hands over his chest. It was like now that she had finally given in, she never wanted to stop touching him.

# hot stuff

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