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Gunpoint



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GUNPOINT

BY

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CHAPTER ONE

Pale streaks of pink splashed across the Montana sky as dawn broke. The below freezing temperature of the November morning slashed through Josh's warm clothing straight to his bones.

Every muscle in his body caterwauled with pain as he struggled to his feet. He slowly leaned back against the trunk of the fir tree he had huddled under for the night. Inspecting his hands, he saw that his knuckles were scraped raw. "Shit." He glanced around wondering where the hell he was.

Statuesque fir trees surrounded him. Their sprawling vivid-green branches dusted with snow. He leaped out of a vintage clunker Bronco, and rolled down an embankment, which was the reason his whole body screamed with pain. Luckily, for him, he had managed to elude his captors until nightfall.

Dragging in a deep breath, he circled around surveying the area. A dull pain pounded at his temples. There wasn't a part of his body that did not hurt. Besides jumping from a speeding vehicle, like a Hollywood stunt man, he stumbled and tripped a half dozen times, while fleeing from the two bastards that had kidnapped him.

He trudged a short distance, but ended up leaning against another tree for support as a wave of dizziness passed through him. He would kill for some water. The inside of his mouth was parched and gritty, feeling like the sands of the Sahara. Scanning the area again, he

looked for a creek or some other water source. Hell, he'd settle for a mud puddle at this point. His stomach grumbled in need of food.

Patting the side pocket of his jacket, he breathed a sigh of relief.

Gritting his teeth together, he started walking again. He didn't get far, when he heard a woman's voice up ahead.

"Maddy, come on. Leave the squirrel alone. Besides you're supposed to chase rabbits."

Swallowing a litany of curse words, he crouched down. Pain shot through his body. Peering through a tumble of scrub brush, he noticed a narrow gravel road in front of him. A woman appeared wearing faded blue jeans, a burgundy colored jacket, and navy blue gloves. Under her black knit hat, thick auburn hair touched her shoulders.

Suddenly a small animal shot at him, howling as if the pads of his feet were on fire.

"Shit. Go on, get away from me." The animal turned out to be a tri-colored, black, brown, and white Beagle with a mouth that rivaled a pack of Beagles on a royal fox hunt. "Shoo," he hissed at the dog.

The Beagle stood there, head raised and carried on like a wolf howling at the moon.

"Maddy. Come back here. Maddy, you mind me. You're a bad girl. You hear?"

Maddy, the Beagle, obviously had a mind of her own because the stubborn little female didn't budge. He noticed the dog's tail wagging in a change of heart. "Go on, be a nice girl. Mind your mama."

"Maddy, where are you?"

The woman's auburn brows knitted together in a frown, as she wove her way through the brush.

"Maddy, leave what ever you're bothering alone."

The Beagle stopped howling, started to pounce over to him, her tail in high gear.

Nearly stumbling over the dog, he scrambled toward the woman

and lunged at her. Emerald green eyes widened in shock as a look of fear spread across her face.

The combination of sore muscles, lack of food and water made him slow. Josh grabbed her leg just below the knee. She staggered back to land hard on her butt.

“Let go of me you goddamn bastard! What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The woman kicked at him landing a nice punch to his chin with her sturdy hiking boot. “Jesus, lady. That hurt.” The Beagle chimed in with another ear-splitting howl.

“I said, let go of me, you son of a bitch!”

In an effort to subdue her, he struggled to climb up her body. Instead of fighting him with her hands, she fumbled to get at something under her jacket. He inched his way up her body, cursing himself for being so weak. His plan to force her onto her back shot straight to hell when she swung a handgun in his face. With crossed eyes, Josh stared down the barrel of the gun. The click of metal signaled the woman had pulled back the hammer.

He just happened to have endured the worst night of his forty -one years last night. It looked like he sure as hell could get his brains blown out under a spectacular sunrise.

The woman’s eyes, which were such a startling deep shade of green, now flooded with fear and anger. Delicate lines fanned out from the corners of her beautiful eyes. Her lips were full and her chin strong. She might be attractive, but she acted as if she wouldn’t have a problem pulling the trigger.

Suddenly a wet tongue splashed across his cheek, followed by a second splash.

“Maddy, stop that right now. Get back. Get away from him!”

Maddy, the independent little canine, kept on licking.

“Dogs are good judges of characters.” It was the best he had.

CHAPTER TWO

Struggling to hide her fear, Emma glared at the man. Through sheer will power, she held the gun steady. Once the big bedraggled looking guy had seen the gun, he appeared to have frozen. She needed a mean Rottweiler at her side, not a lovable Beagle that threatened to lick the bastard to death. "Maddy. Stop that."

"Okay. Take it easy. I'm going to let go of you. No need to shoot. I'm not going to hurt you."

"You got that right, buddy, since I'm the one holding the gun."

Sliding back down her body, he scooted away from her with his eyes glued on the gun. The man leaned back on his haunches and dropped his hands onto his thighs. Hunting season had opened a week ago, but this man didn't look like a hunter because he did not have on the regulation orange that all the hunters wore. This man was dressed more for hiking. He wore blue jeans and a black weatherproof jacket, which was muddy and torn. A lost hunter would have walked out onto the road. On the other hand, an injured hunter would have called for help when he heard her scolding Maddy.

The man had good shoulder width. His lean face looked to be scraped raw here and there. A chunk of a withered yellow leaf stuck to the side of his head. His sable brown hair, slightly on the long side, needed a good brushing to get rid of the tangles. A touch of desperation glowed in his rich brown eyes.

Holding the gun with one hand, she used her other hand to hoist herself up. Maddy snuggled up against the stranger's thigh. "Who are you?" She pointed her .38 revolver at his chest, and backed away from him.

He didn't answer her.

"Who the hell are you?"

Catching her eye, he said. "Josh Stone."

"Is that your real name or an alias?"

He shook his head. "I'm not a damn criminal. It's my real name."

For some insane reason, she believed him. "Why did you attack me?"

"You were going to step on me."

"Oh, please, give me a break."

"Okay, okay." Josh Stone held up his hands. "Two bozos tried to kill me last night. I escaped and spent the night in the woods." He paused and glanced around. "I thought in the middle of nowhere. I never realized there was a road so close."

Stone sounded sincere, but people didn't get murdered in Timber, the small town she lived a few miles outside of. "I don't believe you."

"That's your call... Would you mind putting your gun away?"

Maddy laid her front paw on his thigh, and she watched Stone pat her dog on the head. Good God, Maddy acted as if she had just been bitten by the love bug.

"Your dog likes me."

"My dog has no sense. Now, why don't you tell me who tried to kill you? Then I can go home and call the police."

Stone attempted to stand, but ended up dropping back down on his knees. "You can't do that."

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't."

"Because one of the guys that tried to kill me, just happened to be a cop."

Stunned, she stared at him... She couldn't believe Stone was accusing a cop of trying to kill him. "You know something, buddy, you're full of it."

Stone shook his head. "No. I'm not." He stuck his hand into his jacket pocket.

“Don't go sticking your hand in your pocket.” Emma toiled to get the cop jargon down, knowing she had blown it.

“I don't have a weapon in here. Just let me get what I need out of my pocket.”

She noticed his expensive winter coat had deep pockets, but she didn't see an outline of a gun. There might be a knife in his pocket, though. “If it's anything that can hurt me, you're a dead man.” She really needed to get her lines right.

Shooting her a look, his hand stilled inside his pocket. “Trust me, lady, I believe you.”

Good, he believed she was capable of shooting him, which gave her the upper hand. She watched him pull out a thirty-five millimeter film canister, to hold it up in front of him for her inspection. “A roll of film?”

He nodded before he slipped the film canister back inside his pocket. She noticed how his hand shook as he zipped up the pocket.

Maddy lay down next to him to prop her head on his thigh, staring up at him with canine adoration. She frowned at her dog. “I'm not buying your story... Since when is a roll of film a death threat?”

“I have the cop and another guy on film dumping a man's body in the river.”

Chills skated up her spine... “What part of the river? Why were you in the woods anyway? How did the so-called cop and other guy catch you?”

Stone held up a hand. “One question at a time.” He managed to get to his feet, but not without some effort.

Tightening her hold on the gun, she raised it a notch. “Stay back. Don't move.”

“I was east of town. About two miles off the River Bend hiking trail.” Rubbing the back of his neck, he grimaced. “I'm a professional photographer. I was out shooting out of the way places in the off

season for a book.”

“So how did these so called murderers catch you?”

“You can leave out the sarcasm. I stumbled across them by accident and got too close. When I turned to leave, I stepped on a branch. The cop had mega hearing. He pointed a long-range rifle right at me.” He shrugged. “I didn’t want to take one in the back.”

Josh Stone told a convincing story... So convincing that it irritated the hell out of her because she really did not want to believe him. “What did the cop look like?”

“Early forties, husky with short military cut blonde hair. Blue eyes.”

Glancing at her gun, she saw that her hands were shaking. Gritting her teeth, she willed herself to keep her cool. “What about the other guy?”

“About the same age, slight bui—.” He stopped, and narrowed his eyes narrowed in suspicion. “I don’t think I should be telling you this.”

“Why not?”

“It might put you in danger. Timber is a small town. You probably know the local cops... Either that or you won’t believe me because it is a small town. Everybody sticks together, that kind of thing.”

Swaying back slightly, he managed to keep his balance. She ruled out alcohol because she hadn’t smelled any on him. Watching him, she realized the man was in a world of hurt. “You need to go to the hospital.”

“No hospital. The small town thing again.” He blinked a couple of times, and looked like he could pass out any second. If I could just get back to my truck.”

“Sit down, before you fall down.”

He staggered back a few feet until he bumped into a fir tree.

“Stay here. I’ll go get my truck.”

When Josh Stone stared at her in surprise, she stared back at him with equal surprise. Why had she volunteered to help him? She

halfway believed him, but the blonde, husky cop... She had a hard time believing that one. Shaking her gun at him, she said... "Just sit down. I will be back in about fifteen minutes."

"How do I know you're not going to bring the cops back with you?"

"You don't. You want me to trust you, so it looks like it is a two way street. Come on, Maddy, let's go."

Instead of listening, Maddy followed him to the tree, and sat down at his feet. What was with her dog and this stranger? "Dammit. You keep good care of my dog."

Stone saluted her.

CHAPTER THREE

As soon as the woman disappeared in the direction of the road, Josh slid down the tree trunk and rested his back against it. Maddy, the faithful Beagle snuggled up next to him. As he scratched behind her ear, she rewarded him with an adoring look of gratitude. "What's your mistress' name?"

Maddy tipped her head to the side. "Can she be trusted? Think she'll bring the cops back with her?" She tipped her head in the opposite direction.

"Hell, I must be delusional. Talking to a dog and waiting for a woman with a gun to come back and rescue me."

Closing his eyes, he felt Maddy snuggle closer. He must have drifted off because suddenly somebody nudged him in the thigh. "Huh? What the hell is going on?" Opening his eyes, he saw the woman standing a few feet back from him, this time with her gun holstered at her side and in plain view

Paranoia charged through him as Josh looked around, expecting to see a couple of men in uniform. Relief raced through him when he didn't see any cops. "So you did come back."

"I said I would. Besides, I can't seem to pry my dog away from you. Can you get up?"

"Yeah, no problem." Struggling to get to his feet because his legs felt like rubber, Josh finally got himself into an upright position but only with some major exertion on his part. He swayed in the direction of the woman, but caught himself before he fell against her. "What's your name?"

Her eyes locked on his for a steamy moment before she answered. "Emma Dawson. Come on, let's go. I'm parked on the road.

I want to get you inside my truck before anyone comes along.”

Following her, he felt like a damn wounded, lost puppy. So much for his macho manhood.

Maddy trotted in front of them.

Reaching down, Emma scooped up Maddy when they reached the road. “You’re not running off on me.” Glancing around, she walked out onto the road. “Hurry, I hear a truck coming.”

She angled behind her Jeep sport utility and opened the back hatch. “Get in.”

“Your car awaits, sir.” He flinched in pain as he crawled into the back of her truck and glanced back at her. Annoyance flashed in her tantalizing green eyes. He folded his body into a pretzel, which increased the pain shooting through his battered body. She tossed a blanket over him before she slammed the back hatch.

Josh heard the sound of an engine rumble to a stop next to her truck. He couldn’t make out what Emma and the driver were saying because of the loud grumble of the sorry sounding engine.

Soon, the driver gassed it and continued down the road. He heard Emma get inside, close the door and start her truck. Maddy leaped over the back seat and landed on his shoulder. “Damn dog.” She didn’t seem to care that she would hurt him because she stuck her nose in his face and licked.

The heat inside the truck started to warm him, and Maddy’s little body helped. Closing his eyes and soaking up the warmth, he hadn’t realized how cold he had been all night. Drifting off, he wondered if Ms. Emma planned to drive him straight to the local cop shop.

“You can get out now,” Emma said.

The chilly air hit him hard as Josh fought to get his bearings. He had dozed off again. Maddy jumped out of the truck while he unfolded his body, grimacing in pain as he climbed out of the truck.

Relief cruised through him when he saw that they were parked

close to a small one story wood house with a pitched metal roof. A mix of fir and pine trees circled the house. He didn't see any other houses nearby. Ms. Emma must be a country girl.

This definitely wasn't the local cop shop. After she closed the back hatch, she walked toward the house. The small house beckoned him with coziness and warmth. Hell, the Taj Mahal would have looked just as cozy and warm to him right now.

Pain, fatigue, hunger, and thirst depleted his strength as he plodded up the front porch steps. Inside the living room, Josh spotted a comfortable looking burgundy couch, and headed straight for it. Turned out, Ms. Emma had something else in mind for him, because she took his arm and to his disappointment led him away from the comfy looking couch.

He caught a whiff of her scent. She smelled like vanilla, all warm and tasty. She gently shoved him down on a chair at a table, and returned in several seconds with a tall glass of water which Josh just stared at with appreciation.

"Drink it. You're dehydrated."

His hand brushed against hers as he reached for the glass. So soft. Ms. Emma might have a brusque attitude but she was definitely womanly. He gazed up at her with immense gratitude for the water and watched her pluck off her hat. Her thick wavy auburn hair gleamed with highlights, the sight of which caused him to down the water in one long swallow.

"More?" She asked.

He nodded and waited for her to return with another glass. The second glass was emptied just as fast as the first.

The water brought him out of his stupor enough to notice that she mixed something in a bowl at the counter. She popped it into the microwave before she slipped off her jacket.

His gaze focused on her butt in her snug jeans. He might have

believed he had been knocking at death's door last night, but he wasn't that far gone that he couldn't appreciate an attractive woman.

Circling around, she caught him watching her. Her nipples were hard under her sweater. Clearing his throat, he saw how her eyes sparked with fire or maybe lust. That's what he wanted to believe anyway. A man shouldn't go as long without a woman as he had. It bordered on cruelty.

Ms. Emma delivered a bowl of oatmeal and a glass of orange juice to the table and followed that up with a thick slick of toast covered with peanut butter and strawberry jam. When she slid a mug of hot steaming coffee in front of him, Josh believed he had died and gone to hog heaven.

Leaning against the counter, she said. "Aren't you going to eat?"

"Yeah, damn right I'm going to eat."

After he wolfed down the simple but filling breakfast, he felt some strength return to his body. Picking up the mug, he took a sip of the hot brew and closed his eyes for a moment in appreciation before glancing over at her. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

While she gathered up the dishes, his eyes clung to her like a magnet. The things he could do with a woman like Emma.

Looking over her shoulder at him, she narrowed her eyes. "Stop staring at my butt."

"Sorry. I can't help it."

"Then I guess you're not as bad off as you look."

She brought another glass of water and a bottle of aspirin over to the table. "You look like you could use some."

He made sure he touched her hand again when he took the bottle from her. Eyeing him from him under long lashes, she didn't snatch her hand away. Holding her gaze, he said. "I look that bad?"

"You need a shower. And your clothes need to be washed."

Much to his dismay, she then walked out of the kitchen. Holding up his arms, he studied his jacket. It looked like he had rolled around in a mud-wrestling pit.

"The bathroom is ready for a shower," she said from behind him.

He momentarily forgot his pain as he stood and followed Emma's shapely butt through the living room and down a short hallway.

She paused at the door to the bathroom. "Take off your clothes."

"Ah, Emma, we just met."

"You know something Stone, you're pushing it. I'm offering to wash your clothes, not seduce you."

Stopping close to her, he inhaled the scent of vanilla again. Oh, yeah, if he wasn't careful, he could lose himself in that scent of hers. "Yes, ma'am." He walked into the bathroom, grinning when he heard the door slam behind him.

Since the aspirin hadn't had a chance to kick in yet, it seemed like it took forever to wrestle himself out of his clothes. Inside the shower, the hot spray of water pounded his body offering his sore muscles a touch of relief. Reaching for the bar of soap, he noticed Emma watching him from the other side of the shower curtain.

Feeling his blood pump faster, he stared back at her, but couldn't see her eyes clearly because of the wispy, opaque shower curtain. His cock twitched to life.

She bent down and gathered up his dirty clothes. When she straightened up, she locked eyes with him again. His fingers latched onto the shower curtain, ready to push it back, but she spun around and high tailed it out of the room.

He might be in a world of hurt, but one part of his anatomy functioned just fine. The bar of soap slipped out of his hand. "Shit." Irritation needled him as he bent to retrieve it.

Thanks to the woman who had rescued him, every part of his abused body now ached. Running his hand over his cock, he cursed

again. "Damn." He didn't have the strength or desire to give himself relief. Instead, he wished like hell it was Emma's hand covering him.

Stepping out of the shower, he spotted a big fluffy blue towel on the counter. A new toothbrush, still in the container, sat on top of the folded towel. So far, Emma had tended to all of his needs. She had given him food, shelter, a hot shower and brought life to another need.

Maybe he was attracted to her, but that did not mean he trusted her. Now would be the perfect time for the cops to bust through the door, when he was buck-naked.

After brushing his teeth, he wrapped the towel around his waist and left the bathroom. He didn't see Emma, so he padded in the opposite direction she had led him, ending up in her bedroom. A hot pink comforter covered the bed. A painting of two kittens peeking out from behind a flowerpot hung above the bed.

Heading straight for the bed, he dropped the towel to the floor, yanked the blankets back, and crawled under them. He fell asleep immediately with the hint of vanilla floating about and the image of Emma naked in bed with him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Emma found him sound asleep in her bed with the blankets pushed down around his flat stomach. Dark brown hair covered his chest. Heat pooled low in her tummy when she fantasized about running her fingers through that mat of sable colored hair. For a man in his forties, he was in good shape, with nice muscle tone to his chest and biceps. It was obvious he was a man who took care of himself.

Like a voyeur, she had watched him shower, and damn, he had caught her staring at him. Cheeks burning, hormones all a buzz, she hustled herself out of the bathroom. The heat rose again as she regarded his naked body. She noticed a large purplish bruise on his left shoulder and several more on his ribs.

He could be a liar, con artist, or a killer. In spite of any one of those possibilities, the heat continued to escalate inside her body. Tugging at the collar of her turtleneck sweater, her feminine intuition told her a man like Stone could pleasure her even though she didn't know squat about him.

Eyes locked on him, she toyed with the film canister she held in her hand. Since he had spent the night in the woods without food or water, and slept on the cold hard ground, he would probably be out for a while. That gave her time to run into town and drop off the film at the local drugstore to make sure it went out today for development.

For some strange reason, she had a hard time taking her eyes off him. She had slept alone for the past year since her divorce. Sleeping with Maddy didn't count. For the most part, she lived an ordinary life. Emma imagined spending the weekend with a man like Josh Stone. The film wouldn't be back in until Monday afternoon. Spinning around, she hotfooted it out of her bedroom, elbowing aside fantasies of her

body twined around Stone's

Maddy whined at the front door when she walked into the living room. Her dog pranced into the house, pressed her nose to the floor, and headed straight for her bedroom. She had no doubt Maddy would leap onto the bed to be near her new friend.

Dogs are good judges of character.

Since Maddy loved everybody, she didn't trust her dog's judgment.

Grabbing her jacket out of the closet, she shrugged into it.

A few minutes later, she cruised down the gravel road that led to town. She rolled to a stop in front of Hanson's Drug Store and noticed only a few trucks out and about so early on a Saturday morning. Chimes jingled overhead as she pushed open the door. Charlie Bates, the one and only pharmacist in Timber, stood behind the counter, filling the cash register with the day's money.

"Morning, Charlie."

Running a hand through his thick gray hair, he smiled at her. "Emma. What brings you out so early? The rest of the town is still in bed."

"Oh, I needed to run some errands and I have a roll of film to turn in."

"Been taking pictures of your son, have you?"

"Um...yeah."

She dug the roll of film out of her pocket, while Charlie pulled a film development envelope from under the counter.

After Emma handed him the roll of film, he studied it for a moment. "This is professional film, like photographers use."

Oh, shit. A burst of panic shot through her. She hadn't even noticed the canister was different from the inexpensive film she usually used in her camera.

Charlie lifted a bushy, gray brown. "You practicing to become a

professional photographer?”

“Who me?” She laid on hand her chest. “Yeah, right. I picked it up down in Kalispell a while back. I thought it might improve my pictures. God knows, I need help.”

He chuckled. “It will definitely improve the color.”

“But not my lack of talent?”

Winking at her, he said. “You never know.”

Shifting on the balls of her feet, she waited as Charlie filled out the information on the envelope.

“What’s your phone number, Emma?”

“Four, three, three, one.”

Pausing, he glanced at her. “I thought it was four, three, three, two. Must be getting old.”

“Come on, Charlie, you’re not old.”

“See you on Monday.”

After he tore off the end of the envelope with the identification number on it, he scrunched it up; ready to toss it in the trash can behind him. Another bullet of panic sailed through her. Nobody, including her, ever took the strip of envelope with the I.D. number on it. Charlie and his employees were as trustworthy as white bread. “Um, can I have the envelope strip?” Damn, she didn't even know the correct name for it.

One bushy, grey brow lifted.

“I might forget. I’ve been so busy lately. Hey, maybe I’m the one getting old.”

She didn't miss the strange look in his faded blue eyes when he handed her the envelope strip. “Thanks. I’m going to tape it to my refrigerator, that way I won’t forget.” How lame did that sound?

“Even if you forgot, one of us here at the store would call you. You know the rule. We wait a week before we give somebody a jingle.”

The hole she had dug for herself just kept getting deeper and

deeper. “Of course, I know the rule. Who doesn’t in town? These are for Jason. I want to make sure I get them to him as soon as I can. So you’ll for sure be seeing me on Monday. Gotta run. Have a nice day.”

Warmth crept into her cheeks as she spun around. Lying was not her strong point. She had broken a golden rule. Never deviate from a small town’s habits. Hurrying to her truck, she wondered if she had just blown it.

Maddy greeted her at the door with a languid stretch and a loud yawn when she arrived home. She slipped off her jacket and tossed it on the couch before walking down to her bedroom. Panic rushed through her again. What if Stone had flown the coop while she was in town? Hesitating at the door, she finally peeked inside, breathing a sigh of relief when she saw him. Having shifted onto his side, he gave her the opportunity to enjoy the view of his broad, naked back.

Each time she gazed at his bare body, heat boiled inside of her sex-starved body. She had gone without for so long. Was it her nonexistent sex life that caused the heat to swell inside her or was she really attracted to him? Tall, with yummy broad shoulders, a fit body, and an interesting, masculine face, she decided the physical attraction was real.

She pushed a hand through her hair as uneasiness crawled through her. He claimed he had seen a cop and another man dump a body in the river. The description of the cop fit Dan Jensen, her boss and the man she was dating. There had to be an explanation for that. Stone could be feeding her a line of bull. Maybe because he had escaped when Dan tried to arrest him, which would explain how he knew what Dan looked like? On the other hand, while driving through town, Stone could have spotted Dan walking to the café for lunch like he did everyday. Another possibility was Dan could have pulled him over for a traffic violation. Should she turn him in and let her boss sort

it out? A sense of uncertainty raked her nerves.

Dan, the chief of police, went by the book. She knew that because she had worked as his secretary for the past two months. When he had asked her to dinner a few weeks ago, she accepted mostly out of boredom, but loneliness played a small part, too.

“Oh my God.” With all the excitement of the morning, she had completely forgotten about their date tonight.

She hurried to the kitchen and grabbed the phone off the counter. Chewing on her thumbnail, impatience clawed at her as she waited for him to answer. “Dan, this is Emma.” Her voice sounded tense even to her ears.

“Hey, good looking.”

His pet name irritated her. “I’m sorry, but I need to cancel tonight.” She prayed he couldn’t hear the strain in her voice or the loud hammering of her heart.

“It’s not allowed to stand up the chief of police.”

Tamping down her growing irritation, she said. “Something came up with Jason.”

“Can’t his father handle it?”

“No. His father can’t. I’m still his mother, even if he doesn’t live with me at the moment.” Emma had the impression Dan was relieved that her sixteen-year-old son, Jason, lived with his father down in Kalispell. He didn’t have any kids and had been divorced for years.

“No need to get your feathers all ruffled.”

She started pacing, then bumped into a solid chest, and swallowed a gasp. Stone stood there with the towel wrapped around his waist. He looked slightly more rested, but not too happy. His bare chest made it damn near impossible to think. “I have to go.”

“Hey, hold on a minute, Em—”

“I’ll get back to you.” She punched the off button.

“Calling the cops on me?”

Shaking her head, her eyes wandered to his chest again. "Don't worry, Stone, you're safe. For now anyway."

He skewered her with a look. "What the hell does that mean?"

He needed to put on his clothes so she could think clearly.

"You haven't answered my question, Emma."

Struggling to ignore his bare chest, she said. "What question?"

"Don't play dumb, because I know you're not. Why am I safe for now?"

"Oh, that." Stepping back, she fought to ignore her growing awareness of him. Good old sexual chemistry kicked into high gear. Was she that desperate for a man? "I mean...."

Taking a step toward her, he forced her against the counter.

"You mean what?"

Averting her eyes, she slid the phone onto the counter to give herself a moment to pull herself together. "You're not going to like this."

"Try me."

He definitely was not going to like what she did for a living. "I work as a secretary at the police station."

"Dammit! Of all the women who had to come to my rescue." His hands fisted at his sides. "You were talking to a cop."

"Not in the way you think I was."

"How many damn ways are there to talk to a cop?"

Fear rippled through her, making her heart pound hard inside her chest, because she didn't know this man lurking over her. The sexual chemistry between the two of them appeared to have clouded her judgment. She knew Stone felt it, too. "I was talking to my boss, Dan Jensen, chief of police."

"And just what did you tell Dan Jensen, your boss?"

"I told him I had to cancel our date tonight."

A flash of surprise gleamed in his eyes. "Come again?"

“Oh yeah. I told him I had to cancel because I was hiding a fugitive.”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. “I don’t hear any sirens. I’m sure in a town this size; it wouldn’t take long to get a car out here.”

“Look, I told him something came up with my son.” Emma said, trying to alleviate some of his worry.

“You have a son?” Josh frowned, studying her for a moment. “Are you married? And if you are, where’s your husband?”

“I’m divorced. My son lives with his father down in Kalispell.”

A look of surprise spread across his face. “You lied to the chief of police for me?”

“No big deal.” She tried to scoot away from him, but he blocked her escape by dropping his hand on the counter.

“You could be in big trouble. Why are you doing this?”

The seriousness in his gaze made her flounder. “I don’t know.” Confusion muddled her brain for a moment. Why was she protecting a stranger? She had no allegiance to Dan, at least not in the relationship department, but she did need her job.

“Ah...dammit anyway.” He lifted his hand and skimmed his fingers across her hair. “Where are my clothes? I need to get dressed, get the hell out of here, and back to my truck.”

“We’re at least six miles from the river. You just can’t go hiking back there. For one thing, you’re hurt and worn out. And for another, you’d be noticed.”

He pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t want to put you in danger. I told you, a cop tried to kill me. From the description I gave you, do you know which one?”

Chewing on her bottom lip, she hesitated. “Maybe.”

“Who?”

“Dan, the Chief of Police.”

“What the hell? One of the bastards that kidnapped me is the chief

of police. And your boyfriend and boss?”

Maddy wandered into the room then, sitting at Stone’s feet, and staring up at him.

“He’s not my boyfriend. However, he is my boss. I still can’t believe that Dan would do something like that. I mean, I really don’t know him that well. But he follows the book, even though he is kind of full of himself.”

“Then why are you seeing him? He doesn’t sound like your type.”

Annoyance shot through her. “You don’t know my type.”

She inched away from him, heading toward the laundry room, but she could feel him following her. “I’ll get your clothes.”

When she handed him his pile of his clothes, he took them from her without a word before he wheeled around and left. He strode down the hallway, his legs long and muscular, with her faithful dog at his heels. She wondered if he was going to take off in search of his truck.

Dan. Could Dan be a murderer or even an accessory to murder? She had told Josh the truth; that she really didn’t know Dan that well.

Taking off after Josh, she caught up with him in her bedroom, where he was tugging his clean white tee shirt on over his head. Maddy sat at the foot of the bed watching him, as usual.

“Are you leaving?” She asked.

He plowed his hands through his hair before grabbing his blue and black checked flannel shirt off the bed. “I think I need to get out of your life.”

Funny, she didn’t think that and she had just met him a few hours ago. “Like I said before, if you take off on foot, someone will spot you. If the neighbors see you, they’ll get suspicious. It’s not a good idea.”

“You got a better plan?” He sat down on the edge of the bed and pulled on his boots. “I need to get that roll of film developed.” Snagging his clean jacket off the bed, he dug through his pockets. When he couldn’t find the film, he turned and looked at her. “Where in

the hell is the film, Emma?”

“I took care of it?”

He leaped up from the bed and stomped over to her. “You mind telling me what that means?”

“I turned in at the drugstore. It will go out today and be back Monday afternoon.”

Suspicion flashed in his eyes. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

Pulling the folded receipt from her front pocket, she handed it to him.

A deep scowl spread across his face as he studied it. “I was planning on taking it down to Kalispell to a one hour photo lab.”

A much better idea than hers, but she had made the decision to take it to the drugstore. “You don’t have any transportation.”

“I need to get back to my truck. If it’s even there.” He refolded the receipt, and shoved it in his back jeans pocket. “Wait one damn second. That was professional film. It must have raised eyebrows.”

The hole she had dug for herself kept getting deeper. “Maybe a little.”

“Shit.”

“I handled it.” She wanted to kick herself for turning in the film. “Okay?”

“How did you handle it?”

“I made an excuse to Charlie, the pharmacist, that I wanted to improve my photography skills.”

“And he bought it?”

“I think so.”

“I need to get it back.”

“If I go marching into the drugstore again, that will definitely raise eyebrows. Besides, it goes out about noon.”

Stuffing her hands into the back pockets of her jeans, she

watched as he paced next to the bed. The film should have been taken to Kalispell. Once developed, it would answer all her questions. "So I blew it."

He paused. "You think so?" His voice laced with sarcasm. Not waiting for her to answer, he started pacing again. "That's the only piece of evidence to prove I saw those two bastards dump a man's body in the river."

Fear shivered through her. The more time that passed, the more she believed Josh's story. Although, she still grappled with Dan being a murderer, there were no other cops on the force that resembled Dan in physical appearance.

Stopping in front of the window, he stared outside. "Do you really believe me, Emma?"

He asked that without looking at her. Did she? Maybe not one hundred percent, but close enough. "Pretty much."

"You either believe me or you don't."

"I don't know you. You could be feeding me a line of bull for all I know. Why should I trust you?"

Turning to face her, he blew out a frustrated breath. "It looks like we're both to going to have to make a leap of faith."

Could she trust him? Up to this point, he came across as honest. Montana had always been a hot spot for wildlife and nature photographers because the state offered so much in the way of wildlife and scenic beauty.

Their eyes caught and held. If Josh truly was telling the truth, then he was ensnared in a life-threatening situation. "I could have turned you in while you were sleeping, but I didn't."

He was quiet for several seconds before he said. "Why didn't you?"

She glanced away for a moment before looking back at him. "I'm not sure." Was her sexual attraction to him influencing her decisions?

If only she knew...

"What about your boyfriend?"

"I told you, he's not my boyfriend. What did the other guy look like?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. Besides I don't know how much I should tell you."

"Or," she paused. "You don't know how much you should trust me."

"You work for the police. The guy you're seeing sounds like one of the guys that hijacked me yesterday. What do you expect?"

This time Emma was the one who turned and stared out the window. Only a few clouds drifted across the blue sky. A half-dozen stubborn leaves held onto the branches of a lone cottonwood tree behind her house. "I know I work for the police," she paused. "Dan's attitude rubbed me the wrong way when I broke our date. He doesn't like kids, that's why he doesn't have any."

His voice lowered. "Are you sleeping with him?"

Spinning back around to face him, she fisted her hands on her hip. "Excuse me. You have no right to ask me that. It's none of your damn business."

"You're right, it's not. I apologize. But when people are close that way, they have an inclination to be loyal to each other."

A strange sense of disappointment rushed through her. For a few moments, hope floated inside of her, that he had asked that intimate question for his own personal reasons. "For your information, I'm not. I'm going to make some coffee."

Caught in a web of indecision, she tramped down to the kitchen. Ambivalent feelings clawed at her. A big part of her wanted to believe Josh. Maybe it was the hormonal part of her that was desperate to believe him, not the rational part of her.

She needed a simple task to get her thoughts in order. It didn't get

any simpler than making coffee.

CHAPTER FIVE

Frowning, Josh tucked his shirt inside his jeans and buckled his belt. Why was he so attracted to Emma? A crazy sense of relief filled him when she denied sleeping with her boss. He didn't need to be attracted to her considering the predicament he had stumbled into. He still had a hard time believing she dated and worked for the s.o.b. that had kidnapped him yesterday.

Irritation threaded through him that she had turned the film in to the local drugstore without consulting him first. There was nothing he could do about it at this point, so he would have to live with the consequences, good or bad.

As he left the bedroom, he felt Maddy padding behind him. When he walked into the kitchen, Emma didn't look at him as she measured coffee into the basket. Leaning a shoulder against the fridge, he studied her. He liked the way she moved, liked the way she looked in faded jeans and turtleneck sweater. The rich color of her auburn hair stirred the juices inside of him. Get a grip, boy.

"The other guy was a civilian," he said.

She turned on the coffee maker before glancing at him. "Describe him."

"About the same age as Jensen. Slight build, with dark hair. He had on a Budweiser ball cap and a red flannel shirt jacket." Her expression transformed before his eyes. "You know him. Who the hell is he?"

She shook her head before taking two mugs from the cupboard. "I just can't believe this. That sounds like Bob Wilder, Dan's best friend who works at the mill."

"What would the two of them be hiding?" he asked.

"I have no idea. Bob is kind of a jerk. I don't really like him. He's a foreman at the mill and thinks he's hot stuff."

"Drugs?"

Turning to face him, she crossed her arms over her chest. "Dan is supposed to uphold the law. As far as Bob goes, who knows?"

"Dirty cops aren't that uncommon." Josh watched the play of emotions cross her face.

She sighed. "I know. I grew up here, left after high school and moved to Kalispell. After my divorce settlement, I decided I wanted to live out in the middle of nowhere again because of the way Kalispell is growing. So I bought this place and got a job at the police station."

"You still have family here?"

"No, my parents retired to Arizona. They were tired of the long, hard winters. My brother, his wife, and kids live in Butte and my son lives with his father in Kalispell, but only because he's fifteen and needs a male role model. I really wish he lived with me."

The realization that Emma was a good mother caused a strange stirring inside his heart. Why had she confided so much in him? Undeniable chemistry arced between the two of them. He remembered her staring at him while he showered. "I'm sorry your son isn't living with you."

"He didn't just need his father. He needed his friends too. And I'm not that far away from him. I see him a lot."

He heard the longing in her voice for her son. Josh held her gaze but she looked away first.

"Um...I think the coffee is ready," she said.

They sat down at the table and drank their coffee in silence for a while.

"Where are you from?" Emma set her mug down on the table.

The two of them were still skirting around the issue of trust. "Seattle. I've been shooting photos for travel magazines most of my

life. I also sell nature photographs.” Leaning back in his chair, he cradled the mug in his hands. “I got this idea to photograph nature in the off season. You know, between fall and winter, spring and summer. That’s why I’m up here. I was hoping there wouldn’t be much snow.”

“Are you married?”

It appeared Emma was interested in his personal life, too. “Divorced. I have two daughters. They’re both in college now.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’ve been divorced five years.” Instead of answering him, she looked over his shoulder at something behind him. “Emma?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you mind me asking why you got divorced?”

She brought her gaze back to him, but he couldn’t read her expression

“In a nutshell? We drifted apart and realized after awhile that we really didn’t have all that much in common, besides our son. John is a good father and Jason is doing well living with him,” she paused and tilted her head. “What went wrong in your marriage?”

He shrugged. “Pretty much the same story. Kate’s a good mother, too. Our girls are doing fine on their own. Looks like we did something right.”

Her eyes settled on his and lingered.

Heat raced through his veins just looking at her. “You don’t have to help me. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciate what you’ve already done for me. Food, shower, rest, but I’ve got two desperate men looking for me. You might get hurt.”

“More coffee?” Avoiding his eyes, she stood up.

Josh reached across the table and caught her hand. “Why are you helping me?” Touching her brought an old familiar urge to the surface.

Skimming her forefinger across his knuckles, she frowned. “It

seems like the right thing to do until all this is straightened out.”

The tease of seduction in her touch sent more heat rushing through his veins. He needed to be careful because of the vulnerable situation he was caught up in. There was no point in pressing the issue of trust. Why should she trust him? Trust had to be earned.

He let go of her hand. “Fair enough. Do I make you nervous?”

“No, why do you ask?”

Josh took a drink of coffee. “I know you don’t know me from Adam, but I’m not going to hurt you. I’m innocent. I’m just your average Joe. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

He could almost feel the wheels turning inside her head as she studied him with those striking green eyes of hers. “Do you think you could drive me to my truck?” He hoped like hell she said yes because he needed to get to his truck.

“Yeah, I could do that... But we need to be careful. Dan thinks I went to Kalispell to see Jason. I can take the back way through town.”

“Maybe it’s not a good idea after all. If Dan the man spots you...”

“I guess I’ll have to be fast on my feet and come up with an excuse.”

He didn’t doubt for a second that Emma could handle herself. She had proved it this morning when he tackled her to the ground.

CHAPTER SIX

Emma's gaze moved back and forth between the road and her rear view mirror. A single road skirted the outskirts of Timber. Dan lived in the opposite direction, but that knowledge did not help the sorry state of her nerves. Josh rode in the back, covered by a blanket again. Maddy always sat in the front seat with her, but not this time because she had to be near her new crush.

Two miles past town, she steered her truck over onto the shoulder of the road. "You can get out now, but hurry."

Maddy leaped onto the passenger seat just as Josh opened the door. He scooped her up and dropped her into his lap. Emma punched the gas.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him turn in his seat and glance behind him.

"It looks like we're not being followed," he said.

"I kept an eye out for Dan, even though he's not on duty today. Besides, there's no reason for anyone to follow me."

Approaching the turn off to the river, she eased up on the gas and spotted a tow truck with a black Jeep Cherokee attached to the rear of it, waiting to turn onto the highway.

He leaned forward. "Shit! That's my trucking they're towing."

"Get down."

As they cruised by the tow truck, she glanced over at it. "That's Ferguson's Towing Company." After she passed the tow truck, she accelerated. When the Forest Service road came into view, she made a sharp right and felt her rear wheels start to spin on the loose gravel.

Josh sat up. "What the hell are you doing?"

Besides loose gravel, there were potholes scattered here and

there along the road. Struggling with the wheel, she attempted to keep her truck under control and out of the deep ditches that lined each side of the road. Instinct warned her that if she was not careful, she wouldn't stop until she jumped a ditch and smashed into a tree. She pulled on the emergency brake, which sent the truck skidding sideways, causing Josh's shoulder to ram into hers. Fighting to straighten out the truck, she finally managed to stop it with her front tires inches from the ditch on the right hand side of the road.

A mixture of surprise and irritation laced his voice. "Was that the damn tryouts for the Dukes of Hazard?"

A giddy laugh bubbled from her. "Pretty cool driving, don't you think?" She glanced over at Josh, who scowled back at her, clearly not happy with her attempt at stunt driving. "Well, what do you think?"

The next thing she knew, Josh's hand was wrapped around her neck as he dragged her face to his. "Oh..." He parted her lips with his tongue. The taste of him fueled the adrenaline already rushing through her body.

Straining to get closer to him, she was held back by her seat belt.

She felt a swift nudge between her breasts followed by a whimper. For one crazy second, she wondered if she was doing the whimpering as his velvet tongue raked a circle inside her mouth and explored her.

Sensing that he had lost interest in their kiss, she opened her eyes and saw Josh staring down at something. Their lips were still pressed together as she lowered her gaze. Brown canine eyes stared up at them. Maddy was wedged between the two of them, her black nose only inches from their lips.

Disappointment swept through her as she straightened away from Josh. "We're suffocating Maddy."

"Shit." He leaned back, scowling down at her dog.

Maddy coughed and sputtered before shaking her head. Fighting to pull herself together, Emma patted Maddy on the head while

avoiding looking at him.

“Do you have any idea where the hell they’re towing my truck?”

His voice sounded strained and rough. “Um...yeah.” She absently stroked Maddy’s ear. “Probably the impound lot behind the sheriff’s station.”

Scrubbing a hand down his face, he dropped his head back against the seat. “We’re not that far from the parking area. We could sneak through the woods and see if anyone is still there.”

She maneuvered her car so it faced straight on the road and pulled over to the side near the ditch. “Okay... Come on, let’s go. Maddy needs to stay here or she’ll blow our cover.”

By the time she walked around her truck, Josh already had his door closed. “There’s a deer trail.” She pointed off to the right. “It will definitely lead to the river.”

After a few minutes of jogging down the narrow game trail, she looked over her shoulder at him. Fatigue lined his face. “Are you okay?”

“I’ve never been better.”

She ignored his sarcasm and kept moving. One of them had to get to river to see who else was there. When she stopped abruptly, Josh plowed into her, almost knocking her over. His strong hands caught her hips and steadied her balance.

“Sorry,” he whispered as he dragged her up against him.

Embers of heat sparked inside of her at the feel of his body pressed against hers. “We better stay low. I can hear voices.” He set her to the side.

Fisting her hand around the fabric of his jacket, she protested. “Hey, wait a minute. I’m the one who can identify who’s ever there. You can’t.”

“Dammit, Emma, stay behind me.”

“Stop trying to protect me.”

The words that came out of his mouth next were not pretty. "If I was your mother, I'd wash your mouth out with soap," she said.

"You can skip the sarcasm."

They moved quickly through the trees and brush, like soldiers stalking the enemy. Her heart leaped into her throat when she spotted Dan dressed in plain clothes. If she could only get a little closer, she might be able to hear what Dan was saying to Bob Hoskins, the deputy on duty today.

She brushed past Josh and took a couple of steps toward the men before he tackled her to the ground.

"Stay down, for God's sakes," he ordered. "They'll spot us."

"So, when did you become the expert in covert operations?"

"That's the bastard who kidnapped me."

"The one with the red baseball hat?"

"Yeah. Yesterday he had on his uniform."

A big part of her wanted to shout no, that he was mistaken about Dan. "You're positive?"

"One hundred percent."

A rush of disappointment intertwined with the fear, grew inside of her. Her boss and a man she had shared a few dinners with might be a killer. She trembled in spite of Josh's body draped over hers. Doubts still lingered. Josh could be stringing her along, and he could very well be the murderer. A strong, sexual attraction did not necessarily make for sound reasonable judgment on her part, especially after just having his tongue inside her mouth doing delicious things.

Charlie hadn't mentioned anything about a murder when she turned in the film. Gossip raced down the fast track in a small town. Also, if a manhunt was in progress for a killer, why had Dan not called her, or told her when she spoke with him on the phone?

Deputy Hoskins climbed inside his cruiser, and Dan turned and walked to his own white four-wheel drive Dodge truck. Several

minutes later, they both drove out of the parking area and disappeared.

"I have the keys to my truck," he said.

"It doesn't matter if you do or not. There's a seven foot cyclone fence around the impound lot with a locked gate."

"Dammit."

"Are you going to get off of me?" Not that she really wanted him to.

"Oh, yeah."

She immediately noticed the drop in timbre in his voice. Delicate shivers pulsed through her body. After he shifted his weight off her, she started to get up, but he grabbed her arms and hauled her on top of him as he rolled onto his back.

"Is this better?" His deep voice oozed sex appeal.

Fighting back waves of heat when she felt his erection poking into her hip, she moved slightly to the right of his hard-on.

"You didn't answer my question."

Simple raw passion blazed in his eyes.

"I don't think so." If Maddy hadn't been suffocating between the two of them earlier, their kiss would have gotten out of hand. She pushed away from him and felt his arms slide away from her body.

She got to her feet, straightening her jacket and brushing off the debris of dirt and leaves clinging to it.

He stared up at her, but she looked away first.

Fatigue weighing him down, Josh stayed a considerable distance behind Emma as they hiked back to her truck. She had kissed him the first time. The second time, she had all out refused him which frustrated the hell out of him. His cock sprang to life the second he had dragged her on top of him.

His truck had been impounded which didn't surprise him, but still

pissed him off. The roll of film was out of his possession at least temporarily. Anger mixed with his fatigue souring his mood.

Suddenly Emma dropped to the ground, turned on one knee, and motioned for him to get down, too. Now what? What else could go wrong today? Josh hit the ground and crawled on his hands and knees toward her. His body hadn't recovered enough to play commando out in the woods.

"What's going on?"

"Oh my God. Dan is parked next to my truck."

He peered over her shoulder. Dammit. The bastard strolled around her truck. What the hell was Jensen even doing on this road? Jensen and his partner in crime had driven him down a different road yesterday.

"You're going to have to go talk to him. There's no getting around it," he said, hating that idea. Unfortunately, it was their only option.

"He thinks I went to Kalispell." She reminded him. "Damn, here he comes. Quick, hide."

Jumping up, she strode toward Jensen as he scrambled behind a patch of thick brush. If the s.o.b. threatened her in any way, he would take the bastard down. His sudden feelings of protectiveness stunned him. The dense scrub brush limited his view, which added to his agitated frame of mind.

"Hey, Dan. Fancy meeting you here."

"What the hell are you doing out here, Emma? You're supposed to be in Kalispell."

Jensen's tone rubbed Josh the wrong way. His jaw tightened as he peeked through the tangle of brush.

"Jason cancelled. He caught me right before I went out the door. Turns out it wasn't as big a deal as I first believed."

When Jensen narrowed his eyes at her, Josh balled his hands into fists, wrestling back the strong urge to show himself. He wanted to

stomp over to Jensen and punch his lights out.

"That still doesn't explain what you're doing out here." he said.

Talk about a demanding ass. Common sense warned him to stay put, while concern for Emma burned inside of him.

"I was bored, so I went for a drive."

"Why is Maddy locked in your truck?"

"Oh, because nature called. I'm sure I mentioned how she is. If I don't watch her, she runs off on me."

She sounded convincing. Hopefully Jensen bought her story. At this point, there was not a thing to tie the two of them together.

"When I drove by the turn off to the picnic area, I noticed an SUV being towed. What's going on?"

Good for Emma. She lobbed the ball back into the bastard's court. He ducked his head when Jensen glanced in his direction.

"Abandoned vehicle. You know we always tow them in."

"If I had that new of a SUV, I sure wouldn't abandon it. I noticed it had Washington plates."

"We'll check it out and see what pans out."

"It might be backpackers and when they return from camping, their truck will be gone."

Dammit, woman, don't push so hard.

"I doubt that," Jensen said.

Her next comment stirred up a good dose of jealousy inside his gut.

"We could still do dinner. Since Jason is taken care of."

What the hell was she thinking?

"I'll have to pass, Emma. I have some business to take care of."

"Something must have come up?"

"Ah...yeah...it did."

"Looks like fate stepped between dinner and us."

Was she still acting or was she sorry she had cancelled the date

with the bastard? Scowling, he watched the two of them walk toward the road disappearing from his view. "Dammit."

The next few minutes crawled by like a lazy snake slithering through tall summer grass. He heard a diesel engine gurgles to life and idle down the road. Spotting Emma jogging toward him, he stood up, his muscles hollering in pain.

"We need to get out of here and fast. Dan is supposedly looking for missing hikers. There's a trailhead about a mile up the road. He's probably going to drive up there, turn around and come back. I told him I was heading back home."

Taking her hand, he said. "What the hell did he say? And what took you so long to get rid of him?"

Slanting him a look, she pulled her hand from his, retracing her steps down the game trail. "Don't I get any credit for getting rid of him and prying information out of him?"

He fought back the urge to take her in his arms and kiss her. Long, slow, and deep.

"I'm sorry to do this to you, but I think you had better ride in the back again. At least until we get a few miles from here."

When he opened the back hatch of the truck, Maddy leaped outside. He snagged her collar before she could take off and picked her up. Climbing into the back of the truck, he folded himself into a pretzel for the third time in one day. Emma tossed the blanket over him before she slammed the door so hard that the truck shook on its four wheels.

After she turned her truck around, he sat up. "What did Jensen say? I missed out on some of the conversation."

Glancing in the rearview, she caught his eye. "Just more b.s. about your truck being abandoned. I kept stressing it could be missing hikers. That's why he drove up to the trail head."

Blowing out a frustrated breath, he raked a hand through his hair.

"Why was he on this road in the first damn place? Did he act suspicious?"

She turned onto the main road before answering, keeping her eyes on the road. "I asked him about that. He said he was just checking the area out. But he was real edgy, which isn't like him. And he turned down our dinner date."

"Now that you mention it, why did you suggest dinner again?"

"I wanted to see if I could get him to slip up or something. Get down. Dan just turned out onto the road."

Anger surging through his veins, he dropped back down because he had been reduced to hiding in the back of a truck. "What's the bastard doing?"

"Following me."

"How close?"

"He's keeping a reasonable distance. He has no idea you're hiding in the back of my truck."

Maddy stuck her wet nose in his face, forcing him to pet her. "So you think he bought your story?"

"I don't know if he bought my story, but there's no reason for him to connect the dots. How could he? There's nothing to tie us together."

"The roll of film." When she didn't answer, he wondered if she had heard him. "Emma?"

"Okay. I screwed up on that. "But...the chances of Dan talking to Charlie before Monday are pretty slim."

"I'm not blaming you for that."

"I should have thought it through. It would have been smarter to drive to Kalispell and have it developed there."

If they had driven to Kalispell, this whole damn mess would be over by now. At least he got to stay with Emma until Monday. Instinct told him she wouldn't kick his ass out until then. "I want to go back to the river."

“You can’t be serious. That’s too chancy.”

He felt the truck slowing down, probably because they were approaching town. “How about we go tonight when it’s dark?”

“I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to look around. But you need to rest first. Your butt is dragging.”

Grinning at Maddy... who wagged her tail in response, he answered. “Yes, ma’am.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Josh glanced around. "We need to hide your truck."

"Good point." Emma opened the back hatch and strapped on her gun before picking up the small daypack crammed full with water bottles, snacks and extra ammo for her gun. "Here." She tossed the keys to him. "Move it to where ever you think best."

While Josh backed her truck under the cover of several old growth fir trees, she hooked Maddy to her leash. After returning to her house, Josh had slept for several hours. In addition, she fixed a filling meal, so he had plenty of energy for hiking to the river.

She gave him a flashlight when he walked over to her. Taking the pack from her, he shrugged it onto his back.

Heading toward the trail that followed the river, Emma did not get far. A big hand grabbed her arm and spun her around. Josh's mouth crushed against hers in a bruising, breath-stealing kiss.

When his tongue drove inside of her mouth, she dropped the flashlight, followed next by Maddy's leash, which slipped from her fingers. Twining her arms around his neck, she heard his husky groan. He pressed her flush against him as she sucked on his tongue. The heat from his big body radiated through their warm clothing. Feeling his hard-on pushing against her belly, she rubbed her breasts against his chest, hoping to get some relief for her aching nipples.

Two large hands cupped her butt, snugging her tighter against him. Her senses reeled as extreme heat rolled through her.

He tore his lips away from hers. "Dammit."

Struggling to get her breath back, she didn't answer. Elemental sexual heat flushed her entire body.

He cleared his throat not once, but twice. "I just wanted to say

thanks for helping me.”

You're welcome sounded too ridiculous, so she stepped back, took his hand, and laid it on her cheek.

“Ah... Emma...” He leaned close and kissed her forehead. “You do something to me.”

If only he knew what he did to her? “Josh,” she whispered. “We’re not here to make out.” Although making out was exactly what she wanted to do. “Now it’s dark.”

“So it is,” he whispered back, kissing her cheek this time. “You’re right. We need to get moving.” Pulling his flashlight out of his pocket, he turned it on and scanned the ground around them. He bent down and grabbed hers.

She dragged in a deep calming breath, managing to get her hormones and emotions under control, for the moment anyway. Bouncing the beam of her flashlight around in search of Maddy, she found her loyal dog sitting at Josh’s boot heels. After she picked up the leash, Maddy took off, tugging on it, in hopes of finding a rabbit. She hurried to keep up with her dog.

As they walked toward the river, Josh took her arm again. Another over the top passionate kiss?

“Let me be in the lead,” he suggested. “You never know who we might stumble into out here.”

“The parking lot is empty. And I know the way better.”

“Maybe so, but I want you behind me. Keep your gun. Don’t hesitate to use it, if you have to.”

Cold hard fear tangoed up her spine. She had learned to handle a gun at twelve years old and carried it with her when she walked, in case she stumbled across a mountain lion or rabid coyote. The idea of using it on a real live human rattled her more than she wanted to admit. What if it came down to shooting Dan? She couldn’t bring herself to even imagine a situation that frightening.

“Emma?”

“Yeah, okay. But if you get us lost...”

“Keep me in line.”

The beams from their flashlights guided the two of them as they hiked along the trail. A quarter slice moon glowed in the sky. The whitetail deer were out in full force. The deer leaped and scampered out of their way. One doe vaulted into the river and swam across to the opposite bank.

They had hiked close to a mile when Josh stopped.

“I’m damn near positive this is where they dumped the body.”

Suppressing a shudder, she looked at him. Since she couldn’t see his expression, she shined her light out onto the glistening, lazy flowing river. She was sure this was one of the deeper spots along the trail. “A diver would have to go down there.”

“You know any?”

She felt rather than heard his attempt at humor. “No. Where were you?”

“About a hundred yards back. I was moving quietly, trying to get a picture of a six-point buck taking a drink.”

“What were they driving when they kidnapped you?”

“An older, white Ford Bronco that had seen better days. Does that sound familiar to you?”

There were a lot of old clunkers still cruising the roads in and around Timber. “No, not really.”

“If the body’s at the bottom of the river, there’s not much more we can do here.”

Staring at the river, she heard the resignation in his voice. It had been a long shot to come out here. She hoped the kiss of the decade didn’t influence her perspective of Josh and the entire frightening situation.

Dan hadn’t been his usual cocky self today when she had bumped

into him. He had avoided eye contact with her for the most part and had definitely been on edge.

Josh's truck had only been parked for a day. So why tow it? Backpackers sometimes left their vehicles for up to a week while hiking and camping.

Knowing there was a dead body resting on the river bottom sent icy chills through her body. She turned to face Josh, sensing he was lost in thought. Since he had actually witnessed a body being dumped into the river, she could only imagine what he was thinking.

He tilted his head in her direction. She couldn't see his eyes, but she felt his gaze locked onto her. His fingers brushing hers, he took the flashlight out of her hand and laid it on the ground along with his. Moving closer to him, she felt his hands settle on her shoulders. Their lips found each other's in the murky darkness. The kiss started out slow and easy, but quickly turned rough and needy. His hand cupped her breast, shooting tingles of excitement through her. She pressed herself into his hand. As their tongues and lips fed off each other, she longed to be naked with him, instead of fully clothed.

Her breathing grew more erratic as he gently squeezed her breast through her clothes.

Heady anticipation sluiced through her when his hands pushed up and under her jacket and sweater. Cool night air came in with the rough warmth of his hands. Somehow, he managed to get his fingers inside her bra. The touch of his fingers pinching and fondling her hard nipples had her desperate to rip off her clothes. His breathing labored, he ran the tip of his tongue down her cheek arousing every nerve ending in her body. She wanted to strip herself bare for Josh, so that his hands could explore her body and discover her secret places.

His tongue outlined her lips in a slow languid motion, and she rubbed her cheek against his jaw like a cat in search of affection.

"Jesus, Emma." His hands stilled inside her clothes.

He slowly dragged his hands away from her nipples. A moment later, his hands cupped her face. "We've got a problem. A damn big problem."

She shook her head, fighting to get her brain to function.

He brushed his knuckles over her cheek. "Let's see if we can find any kind of evidence before we head back."

Disappointment swamped her when he dropped his hands and moved away. She hadn't even let Dan kiss her yet and he had given it a supreme effort, but she would let Josh fondle and paw her like a teenage girl asking for trouble. Spending time with Dan filled up a few lonely hours on the weekends. No passion, no lust, no crazy emotions swirling inside of her like a cyclone.

They took their time shining their flashlights around the immediate area. She struggled to concentrate on the task at hand, but found it nearly impossible. Josh squatted down and plucked something off the ground.

He held up a cigarette butt. "Do either one of those two smoke?"

"Dan doesn't and I'm pretty sure Bob doesn't either."

"Damn." He dropped the butt. "It looks like they covered their tracks well."

"What about your camera?"

"I left it in the old Bronco when I leaped out of it. I managed to get the roll of film out and stick it in my pocket before they caught up with me out here."

"Do they know you got a picture of them?"

"Neither one asked. You'd think they would have put two and two together, though."

CHAPTER EIGHT

First, Emma rolled onto her side, then a few seconds later, flopped onto her back. Josh's masculine scent lingered on the sheets. Since she only stocked vanilla scented bath products, he had been forced into using her toiletries. The smell of vanilla, her favorite, had never been so strong in her room before. After she fluffed the pillow, she stared out the window. The gauzy white curtains allowed her a view of the clear night sky, which was dotted with stars and filled with the quarter-sliced moon.

Maddy, the little renegade, had followed Josh to the spare bedroom.

Dogs were good judges of characters. Her dog had simply fallen head over heels for the man. If she didn't tread softly, she could very well fall head over heels, too. Squeezing her eyes shut, she struggled with her blossoming feelings for Josh. She hoped like hell she possessed more common sense than her dog.

What if he was lying? His entire story rode on the roll of undeveloped film. For all she knew, it could be photographs of trees and squirrels. The two of them hadn't discovered anything at the river earlier.

What about Dan? Was he capable of cold-blooded murder? Trembling, she snuggled the blankets closer around her. She didn't have a clue because she truly did not know him that well. Now she doubted her sanity for agreeing to go out with him in the first place.

Her heart wanted to believe Josh.

Staring out the window again, because sleep eluded her like a lone deer stalked by a mountain lion, she pictured Josh naked, which

shot electric sparks through her body. The image of him with nothing but a towel hooked around his waist taunted her. She touched her breast. Under her cotton nightshirt, her nipple felt hard as a pebble. It didn't surprise her because fantasizing about Josh did that to her. She quickly moved her hand away from her breast.

Her bed seemed extra lonely tonight, especially since Maddy had deserted her for her guest. Tossing the blankets aside, she sat up and combed her fingers through her hair. A woman needed a man. She had been married for seventeen years. Making love with her ex-husband, John had been adequate for both of them. Certainly not earth-moving or mind-blowing, but adequate.

She climbed out of bed and straightened her sleepwear. Flannel pajama bottoms and a short-cropped cotton top hardly fit the requirement of seduction clothes, but she didn't own a sexy negligee. Her bright yellow fuzzy socks nearly glowed in the dark.

After opening her door, Emma looked down the hallway. The bathroom separated the two bedrooms in her house.

She sucked in a deep breath in an attempt to steady her nerves, and crept down the hallway. His door was cracked open a foot, probably for Maddy in case she needed or wanted out.

Her dog appeared at her feet and wagged her tail. Bending down, she hooked her fingers through her collar. "Shhh, Maddy."

"Emma, is that you? What's going on?"

Busted.

A light came on in the bedroom. Straightening up, she elbowed open the door. "Um...I'm sorry. I was just checking on you." No doubt, he saw straight through her blatant lie.

The blankets slipped down, exposing his bare chest when he sat up. Her body warmed as quickly as a flash of lightning.

"I'm okay. How about you?"

His bedroom eyes caused a tingling low in her belly. "Sure, I'm

okay.”

Patting the bed, he said. “Come sit down. I get the feeling you can’t sleep. Maybe you need to talk a little.”

Talking was the last thing on her mind. Hot, wild, and abandoned sex was on her mind.

“Come on,” He patted the bed again. “I won’t bite.”

Refusing to think of any possible consequences, she walked over to the bed, hesitating a moment before perching herself on the edge.

He leaned over the side of the bed. “Nice socks.”

Nervousness made her giggle. “They’re warm.”

“I bet they are.” He paused, his eyes focused on her. “Just like you, Emma.”

Raw, blatant desire glowed in his dark eyes. Taking her hand, he feathered kisses across her fingertips. The gentle touch of his lips aroused hidden feelings buried in her heart.

Lips hovering over her fingertips, he paused, and caught her gaze. “Maybe you have the same thing on your mind that I do.”

“Maybe,” she whispered.

“I want to be with you.”

Scooting over to give her room, he tossed the blankets back, showing her his long and lean naked body. Her eyes lowered to his hard-on, feeling her breath hitch inside of her chest.

“Stop staring, Emma. You’ll make me come just with your eyes.”

Reaching for her, he tumbled her on top of him. His tongue prodded her lips open as firecrackers of lust exploded inside of her body. His manly scent wrapped around her, right along with his arms. A hand slipped under her top, and when his fingers gently caressed her nipple, slick heat trickled between her legs.

Breaking away from the kiss, she stared at him wide-eyed. Excitement and need swept through her. “I need to get rid my pajamas.”

One corner of his lip twitched up. "I'll take care of it."

As Josh's hands skimmed over her body stripping off her clothes, heat swamped her body.

This is what she had craved and desired since meeting him. To feel his bare skin pressed against hers.

"Emma." His hands slithered up her thighs. "So sexy, so womanly."

She reached for him, but his hands stopped at the auburn curls between her legs. Her breathing shallowed as he trailed his fingers across her pussy. When his fingers lowered to her clit, her eyes drifted close as she leaned back, loving the dark heat spreading through her as he explored and caressed her.

Moments later, his finger slid inside her pussy. "Oh, oh..." Emma clutched at the blankets as his lips closed around her clit. Sighing and moaning in pleasure, she moved her hips beneath him. His tongue roamed everywhere over her sex, coaxing her with his exquisite strokes to abandon herself. She gyrated against his face, struggling for sweet release.

Her orgasm rolled through her swift, hard, and unexpected.

Before she had a chance to catch her breath, Josh plunged his cock deep inside of her.

"Jesus, Emma." His voice sounded scratchy and raw.

Wrapping her legs around his thighs and her arms around his neck, she dragged his head down for a kiss. The sound of his lusty groan as she pushed her tongue inside his mouth shot red-hot bullets of heat through her. When his hand fondled her breast, pinching her nipple, she bit her bottom lip. Big hands roaming over her flushed body, he caressed and tantalized her with his scorching, demanding touch.

Stroking her slow and easy with his cock, he whispered. "Tell me what you need, Emma. Tell me."

She gazed into his dark hooded eyes. "I need you deep inside of me, as deep as you can be."

Immediately quickening his strokes, he pounded her hard and fast. Against her cheek she felt, rather than heard, his muffled groans. Struggling to match her rhythm to his hard swift plunges, the intense heat built inside of her. Her breath caught in her throat, and her fingernails dug into his back muscles, as his cock thrust deeper and deeper into her.

Moments later, she climaxed beneath him gasping in pleasure and release. Josh tightened his hold on her as his sweat-slicked body thrashed against hers. One final rough plunge of his cock and his body convulsed with relief.

The night light cast a soft shadow across their bodies tangled together. Her head resting on Josh's chest, Emma loved the feel of his rough fingers as they skimmed up and down her back, sometimes lingering near her bottom.

Sighing with pure pleasure, she snuggled closer to him if that was possible. She ran her fingers through the tangle of dark hair on his chest.

"There's something about you," he said. "Something I can't quite put my finger on. Hell, maybe I'm not supposed to be able to figure it out."

Lifting her head to look at him, she was startled by his sincere expression. She didn't know what to say so she brushed a soft kiss across his lips. Some emotion banked deep in his eyes made her heart flutter with anticipation. "You need to sleep."

"No kidding. I'll sleep good and sound tonight." He flashed a grin. "Your hot, sexy body beats the hell out of the cold, hard ground."

Smiling, she kissed him, letting her lips linger for a moment. "Then sweet dreams."

The danger surrounding Josh and possibly her had been pushed aside while they made love. Laying her head on his solid chest, she held tight to his strong body. If she only had tonight with him, it would have to be enough. It would just have to be.

CHAPTER NINE

Clawing her way out of a deep sleep, Emma heard Maddy howling and carrying on like there was a snowshoe hare loose in the house. Sitting bolt upright in bed, she fought to orient herself.

“What the hell?” Josh mumbled. “What’s with Maddy?”

“I don’t know. She never howls at night.”

“Never?”

They had fallen asleep after making love and forgotten to shut off the light next to the bed. Tilting her head in his direction, she watched him blink a couple of times before scrubbing a hand down his face. “Rarely. I don’t like this.”

Maddy’s howl, echoing from the living room, sent chills skittering through her body. The bed shifted as Josh scrambled off it and started tugging on his jeans. She scrambled too, but when she didn’t see her pajamas, she hurried toward the door.

“Dammit. What the hell are you doing?”

“Getting clothes.” And her gun.

In her room, she stumbled around in the dark until she found her jeans and a sweatshirt. Shrugging the sweatshirt over her head, she raced over to the nightstand, and fumbled for her gun inside the drawer.

Icy fear crawled up her back as Maddy kept up her insistent wailing. She bumped hard into Josh when she raced out of her room.

He leaned in close to her. “Stay in your room. Someone’s in the house. I saw a shadow.”

Grappling with her fear, she shook her head. “No. I have my gun,” she whispered back.

“Dammit. Then get ready to use it if you have to.”

He crept down the hallway with her at his heels. "Emma."

"I'm coming with you," She whispered back

"Shit."

Their whispers seemed to echo through the house, even over Maddy's persistent howling.

He had only taken a couple of steps into the living room when a bright beam from a powerful flashlight blinded her. She moved up behind him, peering over his shoulder. His hand came around, holding her in place.

"Identify yourself," Josh said.

"This is the police. Put your hands in the air."

Dan? "What the hell are you doing in my house, Dan?"

"I know he's holding you hostage, Emma. I hope to God he didn't rape you."

Anger, swift and powerful, surged through her. Before she could say anything, Josh spoke.

"Don't twist this around, Jensen. You're the one who broke into Emma's house in the middle of the fucking night."

"Put your hands above your head."

She angled around Josh. "Put the damn flashlight down. You're blinding us."

"This man is a fugitive. I don't know what kind of bullshit he's fed you, but this man is a murderer."

"He is not a murderer!"

"He's been sweet talking her, Dan. I told you he was a slick talking city boy."

She recognized the other man's voice. "Bob?" Where was he? He sounded like he was to the left and behind Dan.

"Bob's not a cop. So what the hell is he doing here?" Josh said.

"Can it, Stone. Emma is vulnerable after her divorce. We're onto you." Dan said.

Her anger hiked up into the red zone. "You kidnapped Josh because he saw you dump a body in the river." Her voice trembled from the combination of anger and fear surging through her. "Who did you kill and why?"

"Yeah, Jensen. Who's the poor sucker you dumped into the river? I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Don't believe a word he says, Emma."

"Keep your mouth shut, Bob." Dan ordered.

Her hand started to sweat around the handle of her gun that she kept close to her side, so Dan and Bob couldn't see it.

"I have pictures of you two throwing a man's body in the river. You didn't know that when you tossed me in your truck yesterday." Josh's voice vibrated with anger.

"I found out about the pictures when I stopped by the drugstore this afternoon after I ran into out by the river," Dan said. "Charlie mentioned you turned in professional photographer's film. Got me to thinking. You weren't your usual self today."

If she lived to be a hundred, she would never forgive herself for turning in that roll of film in town.

Deep down, she had always known Josh was telling the truth. Dan was the guilty one. A wave of nausea washed through her. "Who did you kill, Dan? And why? You tell me why."

"Shut up, Emma."

"Maybe we need to get rid of both of them, Dan."

"You shut up, too."

"I can't help it," Bob said. Emma watched the shadow of him pacing back and forth behind Dan. "It was an accident. I didn't mean to kill George Wiley."

"Will you just the hell up!" Dan turned slightly to face his friend.

When Dan turned, Josh lunged at him, tackling him to the floor. Emma heard them scuffling and cursing each other.

Pointing her gun at Bob's shadow, she stepped to the side and fumbled for the light switch on the wall. Several seconds later, her small living room flooded with light. Bob sighted a shotgun at Josh and Dan.

Fear charged through her when she saw that Dan had Josh on the floor. Dan fisted his hand and took aim at Josh's nose. His face contorted with rage, Josh blocked the near punch with his foreman.

Raising her gun, she leveled it at Bob's chest. "Drop the gun, Bob!" Her hands shook so badly, she didn't know if she could shoot straight if she had to. She heard Maddy whimper across the room. The bastards better not have hurt her dog.

As her adrenaline threatened to top the chart, she glared at Bob. "Drop the goddamn gun now!"

He must have sensed something in her tone because the shotgun clattered to the floor.

She watched Josh slam his fist into Dan's jaw. Cursing in pain, he fell back on the carpet. Josh, his breathing ragged, hoisted himself to his feet. He stomped over to Bob and took a swing at him, too, landing a good one on his mouth.

Bob stumbled back. "You no good bastard."

Josh snagged the shotgun off the floor and backed up until he stood next to her. Blood trickled from the corner of his lips.

"You damn fool!" Dan yelled. "You idiot bastard." Sitting up, he rubbed his jaw.

She felt a great deal of satisfaction when she saw that Dan's face was more bloodied up than Josh's.

Bob hung his head. "I can't keep it inside. I can't. I didn't mean to kill George."

George worked at the mill and was married with two kids; Emma's heart clenched in anger and sadness for George's family.

"He caught me snorting coke in the men's room. He was gonna

report me.” Bob’s shoulders sagged. “I can’t afford to lose my job. I just meant to scare him. I didn’t mean to kill him.”

“Don’t tell me you shot him.” She gripped the handle of her gun tighter.

“I hit him in the head. I just meant to rough him up. That’s all. I must have hit him too hard or something. He went down like a deer in hunting season and he wouldn’t get up.” He shook his head and stared at the floor. “Just stopped breathing.”

Dan started to get to his feet. “I’ve been cleaning up your messes all your worthless, damn life.”

“Stay right where you are, Jensen.” Josh raised the shotgun. “Emma, call the sheriff.”

Brushing past him, she headed straight for Dan. Kicking him hard in the shin, she watched him flinch in pain. “I want to know how you knew Josh was here.”

“I told Bob about the professional film because it kept nagging at me. I knew something wasn’t right with that. Bob spotted you driving through town tonight, so he followed you out to the river. You misled me, Emma.”

“Tell it to a judge.”

CHAPTER TEN

Emma sat on the couch with Maddy cuddled on her lap. The last of the four county deputies had just left her house. Dan and Bob had been read their rights, handcuffed, and carted off to the county jail. Leaning her head back against the couch, she caught Josh's eye as he walked over to her.

He dropped the ice pack on her coffee table and stared down at her. Powerful feelings for him rushed through her as she tried to read his eyes and expression.

Circling around the coffee table, he sat down beside her and wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. Snuggling her head under his chin, she savored the warmth of his body holding her tight.

"The deputy said George's wife and kids went to Missoula for the weekend." Her heart filled with sadness again. "They didn't even know George was missing."

"Tough break for his family. George Wiley didn't need to die." He pressed her tighter against him.

She couldn't bring herself to think about the possibility that Dan was willing to kill both her and Josh, to cover their tracks.

Josh kissed the side of her head. "You okay?"

It would be a long time before she felt okay about this. "Yeah."

"We need to talk."

Turning to face him, her heart beat fast and hard. Maddy groaned her displeasure at being dumped off her lap.

He rubbed his thumb gently over her lower lip. "We need to talk about us."

It might be better if he simply left. They shared just one night together.

Josh kissed her letting his lips linger on hers. "All I know is I want more from you. I want more for us. And I'm hoping like hell you do, too."

Anticipation mixed with excitement burst to life inside her. "We live in different states. I won't leave Jason. You probably don't want to leave your daughters."

"As far as different states go, that's a logistics problem. That can all be worked out. Besides, I spend half my time here working anyway. My daughters are scattered over the country. Shelly goes to college in Denver and Anne is in Spokane at the university there. How about it? Would you consider a relationship?"

She smiled. "I think I could handle that. I kind of like you."

"Is that so? I know Maddy likes me."

"Oh, she's head over heels for you."

"How about Maddy's mistress? Is she head over heels?"

"Let's see now. I take things a little bit slower than my dog. But it's a definite possibility I could be just as smitten as Maddy."

He lowered his head, and Emma sighed when his lips touched hers.

