



# THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

By

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## Prologue

“If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life,  
it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat,  
and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence.”

George Eliot 1819-80; *Middlemarch* (1871-2)

Pennsylvania  
October 1765

Roger struggled for a moment against the binding of his hands, and then relaxed. In fear that he would attempt escape, they could not let him walk freely to the scaffold. He understood this.

He drew a deep breath beneath the loose blouse, grown soiled in his long days of confinement. The air was fragrant with crisp smoke and fallen leaves and the lingering autumnal chill, the breeze wafting away baser scents from his nostrils. He did not want his last memory to be one of the prison’s foul odors, nor of the rank press of bodies gathered round below to witness his hanging.

Mounting the steps to the scaffold, Roger lifted his head, his dark unbound hair flying in the wind. The minister walked at his side, muttering prayers from the open book in his hands. Roger could see the bald patch on the man’s pate, the place at his shoulder where the seams of his frock coat were separating, the dirt beneath his nails as he trailed his fingers along the printed words to hold his place on the fluttering pages. The preacher was a short man and, even had he not been, Roger would have been considerably taller. He’d always been distinguishable by his height, taller by a full head and more than most men he had ever known.

Perhaps had he taken into consideration the ease with which he might be identified by his height he would have chosen a different occupation. Ah, well. There was nothing for it now but to accept his fate.

Red-coated soldiers lined the yard and the lane beyond in an attempt to keep order. With a twist of amusement to his lips, Roger watched the pickpockets ply their trade. A particularly enterprising young lad was hawking what were purported to be locks of Roger’s own hair. Well, let him be. No one had come to sever even a strand from his head, but if these citizens were willing to part with their hard-earned coin for a fraudulent and morbid memento, then so be it.

None of them remembered, of course. Why would they? Why would they recall that a winsome lass had given her life for his own, in order to keep him from the hangman’s tree? And for naught, as here he stood anyway, waiting for the noose to be slipped about his neck.

His heart wrenched in his breast as he thought of her, of young Janet Black, the innkeeper’s daughter. Misguided, mistaking a kiss in the dark as a promise of more, placing herself in front of the soldier’s muskets. God, he would make it up to her if he could, but there

was no chance of that now, was there? She was dead, because of him. He had not loved her, but he would now, if he could, just to do right by her. He would care for her for the rest of her days ... but she had none left to her. And neither did he.

They'd driven him in the cart past her grave, there at the edge of the kirkyard, just to torment him, he supposed. He recalled the leaves skittering across the ragged grass up against the headstone. Recalled as well her father's eyes watching him, dark as his daughter's own but without the joyful laughter Roger remembered. Winsome, yes, she had been so, and kind-hearted. He should have loved her while he had the chance.

The minister's voice grew louder, as if trying through the strength of volume to make him pay attention to the words. Roger raised his eyes to the sky, to the skein of geese winging overhead in the bright, bright blue. Their disharmonious voices called to him, spoke to him of limitless freedom, of distant places, of the passing of the bountiful seasons and the start of the long, cold winter. Of Janet's grave beneath the snow. Of his own.

His eyes watered in the sun and he lowered his head, dark hair drifting across his brow. The noose was slipped around his neck and he stepped forward, planting the soles of his boots on the mark in the boards at his feet. His gaze fell on a place just beyond the crowd, caught movement there, tried to seek it out, to follow the flutter of long black hair blowing back from a face as fair and delicate as a dove's. She was there, she was there, young Janet, ghostly with the sun shining right through her skin, her clothes, telling him in silence not to be afraid. He tried to answer her that he wasn't, but the words would not come. Her eyes held his, those dark blue eyes like midnight, and he felt the vibration of the platform beneath his feet, felt the sudden plunge, heard the passage of rushing air in his ears, of exploding blood in his heart, and then ... nothing.

## Chapter One

Pennsylvania  
April 2004

“Well, naturally the chainsaw needs gas, and naturally the gas is all the way over there in the barn and I’m all the way over here trying to wrestle with this stupid freakin’ tree that just happened to want to get blown down last night, and just happens to be of some sort of stupid historical value, so I’m not supposed to cut it up, but I am, because it’s lying right in the middle of my stupid freakin’ yard ...”

Pausing for breath, Sunny glared at the offending victim of the storm, which was not exactly the entire ancient oak tree, just one massive bough of it. Broken in two, it was blocking both the pathway to the pond and the entirety of the driveway. Shoving one hand into her jacket pocket to grab the ringing cell phone, she ran the other through her tousled hair.

“Hi, what’s doing?”

At the sound of her sister’s voice, Sunny smiled despite her annoyance.

“Hey, Jess,” she said. “Just trying to clean up last night’s damage.”

The response to that was swift and alarmed. “What happened?”

“A big branch came down, which I might tend to ignore, except it’s keeping me from getting out of the driveway. It’s that huge oak that sits close by the road. The historical tree.”

“Historical tree?” It was clear from Jessica’s tone that Sunny had not mentioned that fact before, or at least that Jess had no recollection of it.

“The Hanging Tree, they call it. Not that there’s any record of anyone being hung from the actual tree, but the scaffolding stood there, and they used to hold impromptu trials beneath the branches, as well as auctions and village meetings and that sort of thing, back when the main house was first built.”

“Really? That’s kind of creepy.”

Sunny rolled her eyes. “Gee, Jess, don’t sound so enthused,” she chided with a smile.

“Ah, well, you know me and history. How big of a mess are we talking?”

Glancing the length of the shattered bough, then at the multitude of smaller branches and bits of bark scattered across the grass, Sunny spent a moment contemplating. If she ever got the chainsaw going, it would probably take the better part of the morning to cut and remove the debris. She said as much to her sister.

“Where’s Scott?”

Sunny kicked at a small branch with the toe of her boot, watching it skitter across the blacktop. A single brown leaf still clung to the brittle end, breaking into small bits as the limb rolled over it. Oaks were the last to lose their leaves in the fall, the last to regain them in the spring.

“One would presume,” she drawled after a moment, “that he’s off doing something wildly exciting with that new girlfriend of his.”

There was a brief silence at the other end of the connection. “Sorry. I just thought he

was still stopping by on occasion to lend a hand around there.”

Scratching her right eyebrow, Sunny blew a breath out over her lips, dislodging a single, clinging strand of honey-blond hair. “Yeah, well, he is, though God knows I’m not encouraging him.” At that precise instant, she heard the recognizable sound of his pickup truck coming down the road. Sunny glanced to the top of the drive. “Speaking of the devil,” she said.

“He’s there?”

“Indeed, he is. There’s someone with him,” Sunny added, seeing the passenger door of the stopped truck swing open. A glare on the windshield prevented her from seeing inside. “Don’t think it’s the girlfriend, though.”

“Well, I should hope not!”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Sunny murmured.

“You never said anything about that.”

Sunny could tell by Jess’s tone that her sister was faintly disturbed by this particular breakdown in what was usually an open and active line of communication between them. Sunny shared everything in her life with her sister, or had, at any rate. Something about the fact that Scott felt comfortable enough to bring his girlfriend to the house that the two of *them* shared had awakened a pain that Sunny had been inclined to keep to herself.

“I know,” she answered apologetically. “I haven’t been too keen on it happening, let alone talking about it. Look, let me run and see what he wants. If he’s willing to help, I’ll let him. What the hell, right?”

“Alright, but call me later. I can’t believe you never *told* me that he brought her there.”

Sunny’s lips twisted in a smile of affectionate amusement. “I’ll tell all, later. Love you, sis.”

“Love you, too, Sunny. And Sunny?”

“Hmm?”

“You’ll find someone to cherish you one day. I know you will.”

Not in this life, Sunny thought, but held her tongue, promising to call Jessica later in the day. Stowing the closed phone in her pocket, she clambered over the fallen tree and started up the driveway, boots crunching over the smaller debris. Scott and whoever was with him had gone to the back of the truck and were unloading something from the bed. Cutting through the still-damp grass, Sunny called a greeting as she approached the side of the pickup.

“Hey, Sunny-girl,” Scott called back in an irritating use of the pet name he knew she would just as soon he dropped. Utilization while married had been one matter, while “amicably” divorced was another entirely. He grinned down at her from the bed of the truck, looking--happy, damn him. The new girlfriend must be good for him, after all. What was her name? Kathy. The polite and adult thing would be for Sunny to remember it next time they met.

“Heard you had some damage ....”

“How did you hear that?” Sunny interrupted, although she wasn’t altogether surprised. Word traveled fast in a village as small as this one. Hosen Creek was a small community in Lehigh County—a rural Pennsylvania charmer whose size and close-knit mentality had captivated her at the outset of her residence within it. Still did ten years later, although in instances like this she might have preferred the anonymity of the city.

“Ned was driving by earlier this morning and saw the tree down, so he gave me a call.”

*He called you*, Sunny thought. Why? If her neighbor didn’t think her capable of taking

care of the job herself, why didn't he just stop in and offer to help, instead of giving her ex-husband a call? They all knew he had someone else in his life. Dammit, it was humiliating.

"I guess he figured the little lady couldn't tackle the job on her own," Sunny muttered, reaching up to grab a pair of loppers Scott was handing over the side. She had a pair in the barn, perfectly serviceable, but she supposed he had forgotten.

"Now, don't be like that, Sunny. You have to admit even someone as feisty as you would have a bit of trouble moving this wood alone. Or were you planning on cutting it up into bite-sized chunks?"

Grinding the handle end of the loppers into the soil at her feet, Sunny eyed him with tolerant concession. "Maybe I was," she said. "A little gas in that chainsaw might have gone a long way."

Scott snorted back laughter. Behind him there was an echoing noise, recalling Sunny to the fact that Scott had not come alone. Peering around her ex-husband's legs, she raised her hand in a brief wave of greeting, and then quickly straightened her spine. This man was not one of the friends she knew. Scott apparently picked up on her disconcert, because he made a hasty introduction.

"Sunny, this is Roger Macleod. Roger, Sunny."

Leaning the loppers against the truck fender, Sunny stepped around the back with her hand extended. "Nice to meet you," she said.

The hand that grasped hers was warm, nearly dwarfing her own. "Likewise," answered Roger, his voice gravelly and deep, the way sharp stones might sound rolling against each other in an uneven mixture of honey and water. He was a tall man, too, likely six and a half feet. Sunny had to tip her head back to look him in the eye. Shaded by thick lashes, the gaze that met her own was the color of amber, friendly, open, and somehow very intense. For a moment she felt like the man knew what she'd eaten for dinner the night before, what she'd worn to bed, what she'd just said to her sister on the phone, or if he didn't know, then he was planning to find out.

Sunny removed her hand from his and took a single step away. Unsettled, she cut another quick glance at him from beneath her lashes as she bent to pick up the fallen pruners. His gaze hadn't left her. When he saw her watching, he smiled, a closed curve of the generous flesh of his mouth. Friendly, just friendly, but in some manner absurdly intimate.

Blushing, and annoyed at herself for doing so, Sunny hiked the loppers up under her arm, turned on her heel, and headed back down the driveway.

\* \* \* \*

Flinging remnants of iced tea from the plastic tumbler, Sunny stacked the glasses, preparing to carry them into the house. Scott was seated on the lower step to the porch, wiping his brow with the hem of his tee shirt. Sweat beaded the close crop of his light brown hair. The jacket he had cast aside earlier hung over the porch railing, flapping in a mild breeze. Sunny hesitated with her free hand on the screen door latch.

"Scott, thank you. Thanks for your help."

Lowering his t-shirt, he stared out over the yard towards the barn and the pasturage beyond. "No problem," he said.

"I mean it," Sunny urged.

"I know you do," he said. "I look at this way, Sun: I owe you."

Sunny felt her throat tighten. She blinked back unexpected moisture from her lashes, biting down hard on the inside of her cheek. "You don't owe me anything," she said.

He glanced at her over his shoulder. "I do," he said. "You know I do."

Inhaling, Sunny fumbled the door open and went inside, striding down the corridor beside the stairs. Rinsing the glasses, she set them in the top rack of the dishwasher. At the front of the house the screen door opened and shut.

"I'm sorry, Sunny. I never did say that I was sorry, did I?"

"No," agreed Sunny, wiping her hands on a tea towel before spreading it to dry on the handle to the oven door, "you never did."

She could feel him there at her back with an old, familiar ache. Lifting her head, she looked through the garden window above the sink into the backyard. The daffodils beneath the newly budding maple danced madly in a spiraling current of air.

"We weren't much more than kids when we got together, you and I."

Sunny shook her head. Right. More than fifteen years ago. "There's no need to go over this. Really. It's alright. Your buddy out there is going to be wondering where you went."

"Roger? He won't notice for a while. Last I saw him, he was doing a little investigating on the other side of the barn. He likes this place. Says he always has."

Turning about, Sunny found herself inches from Scott's chest. Breathing in sharply she scented his sweat, his deodorant, the lingering fabric softener in his clothing. The same. Still the same. Closing her eyes, Sunny stepped around him.

"Has he been here before? I don't remember him," Sunny commented as she headed back out to the porch. Slowly, Scott followed. Outside he stood beside her, leaning with his hands on the railing.

"Nah. But he's familiar with the place. I believe he knew the prior owners. Look, Sunny ..."

Even as he spoke, his hand came up and rested against the nape of her neck, stroked through her bound hair and down her back, coming to rest on the curve of her hip. Sunny sucked in her breath, ignoring the remembered sensations. She had been a long time without a man. Deliberately. The next guy she had sex with sure as hell wasn't going to be her ex-husband.

"Scott, you have a girlfriend, remember? I think it's time you went on home to her."

With a laugh he dropped his open palm against his thigh. Snatching up his jacket with the other, he leaped the two porch steps to the concrete pathway, turning to look back up at her.

"I miss us, Sunny. You and me, together."

"Yeah, well. Too late for amends, eh? Go home to Kathy."

She smiled as she said it, flicking her fingers at him in playful dismissal. He strode away toward his parked pickup, his stride carefree, jacket slung across his shoulder. Sunny felt her stomach turn.

*You bastard.*

Slowly she sat down on the top step, arms wrapped around her legs. Lowering her chin to her knees she watched the purling of pale smoke from the muffler of the truck as Scott gunned the engine. Roger Macleod appeared from the far corner of the barn, said something to Scott, and then headed in her direction. Sunny sat up, observing the easy grace of his progress. He walked like a man who spent a great deal of time outdoors measuring the distance from one place to another in the length of his stride.

Crossing the graveled driveway, he paused on the pathway before her. Shading her eyes, Sunny looked up at him, neck arched. Apparently taking note of her expression of discomfort he folded his long legs and crouched down, arms levered across his thighs and his large hands hanging loosely between. The wind blew his untidy dark hair about his brow.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

He held her gaze with his in careful speculation. God, she thought, what the hell was showing in her face? Somehow she managed to maintain a level glance against his searching look, even as she recalled all the times during the course of this day when she had found him watching her. There had been nothing alarming about the manner in which he studied her. It seemed more as if he was trying to make up his mind about something, although she couldn't begin to imagine what.

“I'm fine,” she said.

He nodded, looking to the walkway between his feet. Plucking a twig from the concrete, he tossed it under the porch with a flick of his fingers, and then turned his head to observe the path of a swallow over the roof of the house.

“It really was nice to meet you, Sunny. Thanks for the drink.”

“Thanks for all your help. I appreciate it. I feel like I should give you something for it.”

He waved that off. “You kept up your end, right alongside the two of us. You're a hard worker.”

She shrugged, slightly embarrassed yet pleased by his words.

“You are a hard worker,” he repeated, his lips curving. “Don't let anyone ever tell you you're not.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“You're welcome.”

A brief interlude of silence followed the exchange. He showed no inclination to get up and leave, no discomfort at their lack of speech. His lips remained curved, his eyes steady on hers, gauging her, it seemed. Dark hair drifted across his brow, and she raised her gaze to the fine strands, and then shifted her focus over his head to the truck waiting in the drive. Scott was watching them, fingers drumming the steering wheel.

“There's a lot to be done here,” Roger went on, unaffected by her momentarily straying attention. He didn't even turn his head when Scott gave a light tap on the horn. She turned her focus back to him, meeting his dark-lashed, amber gaze. His only acknowledgment of her ex-husband's impatient signal was that he smiled broadly in apology. Steady. Quiet. Settling. She felt all those things looking at him and was amazed to recognize it.

“First off,” he went on, “the trim on the barn needs painting. I could do that for you.”

If he had spoken those words differently she might have taken offense, but there was nothing of judgment in them, nor condescension. His gaze remained fixed on her own. A flush of heat colored her throat and cheeks.

She stood abruptly, stepping backwards onto the porch. Roger Macleod rose in protracted leisure, his broad shoulders blocking her view of Scott in the truck. The level of Roger's head was still slightly higher than her own, despite the fact that he was standing below her.

“I could afford to pay you about two hundred dollars,” she said, “plus the cost of paint. Will that be enough?”

“More than enough,” Roger answered quietly. “I’ll see you soon.”

Walking away with his loose, long-legged stride, he climbed into the passenger side of the pickup. Scott tapped the horn again as they exited the drive. Waiting only until the sound of the engine had faded, Sunny grabbed her jacket from the back of the wooden rocker, pulled out her phone and called her sister.

“Jess, it’s me. If you haven’t put Colin down for his nap yet, why don’t the two of you come over for a while? We need to talk.”

## Chapter Two

Stooping, Sunny picked up a stuffed duck that had been left behind the evening before when Jess took the baby and went home. Setting it on the counter, she retied her terry robe, and then reached for the pot of coffee. The garden window dripped with the condensation of morning fog. In the center of the rear yard the maple stood ghostly and pale, the yellow heads of the daffodils invisible in the tarnished grass.

Lifting the mug of black coffee, she took a mouthful, grimacing at the unaccustomed taste. She didn't normally take her coffee without cream or sugar, but she hadn't slept well. When she did manage to drift off, her dreams had been such that she had awakened immediately. She only wished she could remember what they were.

Exiting the kitchen, Sunny went to the front door and opened it, standing on the edges of her chilled soles as she gazed through the screen, her thoughts on the Sunday paper waiting in the box at the main road. A movement by the barn caught her eye. Slipping her feet into a pair of garden clogs left by the threshold, she stepped outside, the warmth of the coffee mug held close to her chest.

"Hi!" she called. She hadn't heard Roger arrive let alone set the metal extension ladder against the barn wall. That couldn't have been a quiet enterprise. "A little wet for painting, isn't it?"

From the ladder's base Roger turned around, waving an instrument in his hand. "Not painting yet, just scraping. Did I disturb you?"

Recalling the fact that she was in her robe, Sunny pulled the terry shut across her knees. "I didn't realize you were here already. I guess I should have looked at the clock." It had to be later than she thought. Roger had said he'd be over around eight. Normally, Sunny rose with the sun. Not this morning, she thought. Of all mornings to oversleep.

"Coffee?" she offered, lifting her mug in indication that she could get him a cup.

"No, thanks," he said with a shrug. "Had a cup. Two, actually, but you go ahead and enjoy yours."

"I didn't sleep well," she confessed.

"Any particular reason?"

Not nosiness. There was a warm note of concern and nothing more. Reaching up, she ran her fingers through her tangled hair.

"Not really," she said. "Just one of those nights. Sure you don't want a cup?" she asked again, twitching the mug in his general direction.

"Positive. Maybe later, if you're still offering."

"Okay." Pressing her lips together, she hesitated a full ten seconds before turning back toward the screen door. His voice stopped her.

"When you get dressed, there's something I want to show you."

Pivoting back around, she folded her free arm across her waist, holding the still-steaming mug close to her chin with the other hand.

“What’s that?”

“When you’re dressed,” he repeated, and then mounted the ladder, climbing with patent fearlessness toward the highest window nearly twenty feet above the ground. Sunny watched him lean across the stonework to apply the scraper to the peeling window frame. Despite the early chill he was wearing a t-shirt, the effort of his movements apparent in the tightening and subsequent release of his right arm. With the left, he held the ladder, the rigid position making the curved muscles stand out in relief beneath the taut casing of his skin. He looked strong, she mused. Well, that much was evident from the fact that he had raised the length of the ladder alone without her hearing it clatter against the stone wall.

Sipping her coffee, Sunny continued her perusal from beneath her lashes. She couldn’t really tell how old he was. Not too young, perhaps not even in his thirties anymore, although he was still lean and hard in build, his attractively untidy hair thick and dark and shining. Observing the competence of his stance as he worked, the length of his legs in his jeans, remembering the way he had looked at her the day before, suddenly made the blood run warm beneath her skin.

“Crap,” she muttered to herself and went inside to change out of her nightclothes.

\* \* \* \*

“When did you see this?”

On her knees beside a worn window sill in the upper storey of the barn, Sunny peered at the pitted, graying wood. Scarcely visible until pointed out were a pair of initials, side by side and linked by some kind of marking she couldn’t quite decipher. Still, the intent of a connection between them was clear.

Standing in the gloom beneath the pitched roof behind her, Roger cleared his throat. “Yesterday. I’m sorry. I should have asked you before looking around, but ...”

“Scott told you it would be fine,” she finished for him. Of course he did. As far as he was concerned, the farm was still his when, in point of fact, it wasn’t even half his anymore. She had the refinanced mortgage to prove it, and he had the fat check. Or perhaps he had spent it. She didn’t know and she didn’t care. “It’s alright. I don’t mind.”

Sunny poked a finger at the old spider’s web with its long-desiccated carcasses crisscrossing the sill, pulling the decrepit structure away. Dropping her buttocks onto her heels, she folded her hands in her lap.

“I guess lovers have been doing this for a long time,” she said, smiling down at the initials carved into the wood, barely legible now. There was no date, but a great many years had to have passed for slow decay to have so obliterated what were once deeply incised letters. Roger did not comment, though she could feel the weight of his regard centered somewhere near her nape.

“Back then,” she went on thoughtfully, lifting her gaze to the view through the small, square window, “these two probably got married in their teens and stayed together until one of them passed away. Nowadays, if death doesn’t end a marriage, life is likely to do so.”

Still he said nothing. After a moment he came to stand near. From the corner of her eye she observed the tilt of his dark head, studying the initials. He lifted a hand to rest his fingers around the upper frame, leaning slightly forward, his other hand deep in his pocket.

“I’m not bitter,” she stated quietly. “Just making an observation.”

Clutching the edge of the sill, Sunny stood up. The fog had lifted and the sun was bright

across the furrowed fields. She could feel the warmth of him, sense the solidity of his body, even though they were separated by a distance of a foot or more. Still, he was definitely within the boundaries of her personal space and she wasn't uncomfortable with it at all. She lifted her chin a little, drawing a deep breath. He smelled good, masculine, slightly sweaty from his labors, healthy. She felt his eyes on her in mute study, then he turned his head toward the dusty window.

"Who farms those fields?" he asked.

"The neighbor," she answered. "That's a lot of his equipment stored downstairs."

With a shift of his body he came nearer. Just a slight adjustment of his stance, casual in execution, unplanned, but her skin felt electrified beneath her clothes by his proximity. *Please*, she thought, *don't let him notice*.

"Does he come here often, then?"

"Who?" she asked, distracted.

"Your neighbor."

Oh, right. "Soon," she said. "Not yet."

Now why did she phrase her reply in quite that manner? Frowning, she watched the shadow of a turkey vulture undulate across the turned earth. Roger moved, dropping his hand. She felt the passage of his breath warm across her cheek. The fine hairs that had loosened from her braid moved against her ear, over the sensitive skin along the side of her throat. She wanted him to touch her, just touch her lightly where his breath had been. Instead she took a step back, turning to face him. His amber gaze was sober, patient, steady. She looked away first.

"Thank you for sharing that with me. I don't think I would ever have been so observant. I've been up here countless times and never noticed."

"You're welcome," he said quietly.

Her gaze snapped toward his in consternation, then away. She left him, mumbling something about keeping him from his work. At the top of the steep wooden steps she turned to look back. He was bent toward the window sill, fitting his fingers against the vanishing outline of those ancient initials. The sun was in his hair, making it glossy as a raven's wing, on his face, shining on his extended arm. The rest of his long, lean body was in shadow. He lifted his head to look through the aged glass. Sunlight touched his neck above his collar, revealing a strange scar, which had not been visible earlier, running nearly around his throat. Then he moved his head and it was gone.

\* \* \* \*

At a little after noon, Sunny brought lunch out to him, only to find that he'd brought his own and was nearly finished with it. She stood a moment staring at the paper plate in her hand.

"What kind of sandwich is it, anyway?" he asked.

"Turkey, mayo, roasted peppers."

"That was very thoughtful, Sunny. And it would be tempting if I wasn't already full. Why don't you sit down with me and eat it yourself?"

Lowering herself onto the grass beside him, Sunny stretched her legs out, crossing her ankles, and set the plate onto her thighs just above her knees. But she let the sandwich rest, turning instead to eye the trim around the windows. It had been scraped bare, and then sanded in preparation for a coat of primer before the application of an earthy brown. He had explained this process to her during one of her brief visits to observe his progress. Roger Macleod was nothing

if not thorough.

“You do good work,” she commented with an arch of her brows.

“Wouldn’t be worth doing otherwise,” he stated, smiling at her.

She couldn’t help smiling back at him. He was friendly, easy to talk to, easy on the eyes, as well, which was an added bonus. Rugged, relaxed, confident, very much a man who knew his place in the world and was comfortable with it. A man who seemed, in some way, to have an intuitive understanding of the natural rhythms around him. And of her. So far, he had gauged her mood, her emotions, her thought processes with unerring accuracy. He was either extremely practiced, or he was just ... right.

Okay, what *was* she thinking? Lifting her sandwich in both hands, she took a bite, focusing her full concentration on the mechanics of eating. Beside her, Roger drew his leg up, propping his arm across his knee and turning his head to gaze across the yard and up the driveway to the newly fractured tree, giving her time to collect herself, to relax, time for the blush heating her cheeks to recede. After a moment, she followed the direction of his gaze with her own.

“So what do you do,” she asked, glancing aside at the drift of his dark hair in a current of air, “when you’re not here, helping me out?”

He turned back slowly. “Do you mean for work or relaxation?”

“I meant work, but ....” She let the sentence hang. He could answer whichever he chose, or neither, if he felt it was none of her business.

“I’m a carpenter,” he said, with enough of a tone of surprise to make her wonder if his choice of occupation was not one to which he had originally aspired, and the knowledge of it still sometimes caught him off guard. She glanced at his hands, his muscled arms, capable and strong.

“I bet you’re meticulous.”

He grunted. “I like to take my time,” he stated quietly, “with everything I do.”

Her eyes closed as an arrow of heat stabbed low in her abdomen, radiating out to her limbs and then back again, full circle. *Idiot*, she chided herself, but when she raised her lids he was looking right at her, his dark lashes shadowing the amber hue of his gaze. Sunny drew a steadying breath.

“And for relaxation?” she prodded.

“I like to read.”

She blinked. “Really? Most of the men I’ve known would have said a beer and TV are what do it for them.”

He shrugged. “I don’t drink. And I don’t even own a television.”

*No shit*, she thought on an expulsion of breath. A long-held tightness in her unfurled a little at his words. “I don’t drink, either,” she responded, thinking of Scott and one of the multiple reasons they had parted company, “although I must confess to the occasional tube watching. And I love to read. Anything and everything, but especially history.”

He laughed, a short sound of pleasure. “Me, too.”

His gaze held hers and then moved slowly over her face before coming back to her eyes. A closed smile curved his mouth. Sunny felt her heart beat a little faster. She popped the last of her sandwich into her mouth, chewing quickly as she stood.

“Um, I’m making a salad for dinner. Greens, cold baked potatoes, and whatever else I

have on hand. A little bit of baked chicken, if you'd, um ..."

"I'd love to," he answered. "Let me get a good start on all the scraping and sanding, then you can show me where and when to clean up."

"Okay," she said and headed back to the house with her teeth in her lower lip to keep her grin from spreading too broadly.

\* \* \* \*

Candlelight and music seemed a tad presumptuous, so Sunny served a casual dinner on the wrought iron table on the front porch as soon as Roger finished painting for the day.

Centered in the table was a single, fat candle, though, which she lit with an apologetic look.

"The porch light is out, and I haven't gone to buy more bulbs yet."

Roger settled his long frame into the seat opposite, hair slightly damp across his forehead from his brief ablutions in her laundry room. The tools of his labors were stored temporarily in the barn. Splotches of primer on his upper arm and the edge of his sleeve made her want to smile.

"I'll pick some up for you tomorrow," he said. "I have to work in the morning, but I'll come back in the afternoon to get on with the painting. The lighting's nice, anyway," he added, nodding at the flickering flame.

"I didn't want you to think I was trying to seduce you," she joked.

"Why not?"

She glanced at him quickly. In the candle's illumination it was difficult to tell if he was teasing.

"Does that question require an answer?" she asked him.

"Only if you're ready to give one," he said.

"Hmm," she murmured, and chose to ignore the opening, if that was what it was.

Although physical intimacy had played a part in a great many scenarios that had been running through her head since she had offered Roger Macleod dinner, consideration of the actual act of seduction made her hesitate. She had been without a man for too long, married with only one man in her life for years before that, and was nervous of the details. Picking up her fork, she started in on her salad. After a moment he followed suit.

"This is delicious," he said in praise, pausing to pick up a warm roll and slather it with butter.

"Thank you."

He lowered his knife to the edge of his plate. "Sunny?"

"Yes?"

"If I ever do or say anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, you'll tell me, won't you? I was teasing you a few minutes ago. I like you. I think you're sweet and kind and spunky and we seem to get along. I'm enjoying that. Are you?"

Silently, Sunny nodded. His tone was so gentle she visualized getting up and climbing into his lap to feel his arms around her, to hear the cadence of his gravelly voice rumble through his chest beneath her ear. That in such a brief expanse of time he cared enough, respected her enough, to say such things to her, moved her more than she could believe. It also showed her what kind of man he was.

"Good," he said. "There's nothing wrong with enjoying each other's company. That's how people get to know one another."

After dinner, he helped her clear the table, and then went back onto the porch to wait for her while she slipped the dishes into the dishwasher. The fact that he chose not to remain inside the house with her seemed significant. He was sitting on the steps when she came out. The candle had been snuffed, the thin scent of smoke still lingering in the air. She sat down beside him, folding her hands on her knees.

“Thanks again for dinner.”

“Sure,” she said, lifting her head to look up at the stars. Several strands of hair had loosened from her pony tail and he reached up to push them back off her neck, his touch gentle. She shivered. Leaning toward her, his arm across her back, hand flat on the porch floor, he pressed his lips to the side of her head. Then he stood up.

Extending a hand to her, he helped her to her feet. She stood on the upper step, still barely reaching his shoulder in height. For a long time he stared at her and she stared back, unflinching. She felt like there were words and words and words to say, and neither one of them much inclined to start to say them.

“Goodnight, Sunny,” he said finally. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She watched him walk to his truck with a stride that made her hungry every time she witnessed it. “Crap,” she said, as she had earlier that day. This time, her sentiment of the morning had an expansive new meaning.

## Chapter Three

Yanking up the parking brake, Sunny shut off the engine and got out of her car, staring at the open front door to her house. She wasn't alarmed, didn't think she was being burglarized or anything like that. It was Scott. She knew it was Scott, because his truck was idling in the place where she usually parked her vehicle.

As she was gathering her purse from the seat, the screen door opened. Scott stepped out onto the porch, a folder in his hand.

"Hi, Sun. You look nice. Good day at the office?"

Sunny closed the car door, pushing it the final inch with a definitive click.

"What are you doing?"

"I needed some paperwork from that time when I had the contract for snow removal over in Hereford--"

"You should have waited until I got home, then. I'm surprised there's anything of yours still here. How did you get in?" Sunny demanded, stopping on the walkway. "You don't still have a key, do you? I asked for it back, if I recall." She knew she sounded bitchy and regretted it, but she was aggravated with the fact that he still acted as if the house was his to freely invade.

"Now, Sunny, don't be like that. Besides, I didn't need a key. The door wasn't locked."

"I always lock . . .," Sunny began, and then stopped. Today she hadn't. In fact, for the past three days she'd left for work with the door unsecured in case Roger needed to get into the house for the bathroom or a drink before she got home. Spinning on her heel, she looked at the barn. The ladder, the paraphernalia of painting were missing. Fresh brown paint gleamed on the last section of trim to be completed. The job was done and Roger was gone.

Sinking her teeth into her lower lip, she tried to ignore her disappointment. She'd paid him Tuesday, so he had no reason to come back unless he happened by again with her ex-husband. The idea of meeting him again in Scott's company was less than ideal. And she was short-changing herself, too, she knew, because there was no reason to assume he wouldn't want to spend time with her again, that he wouldn't just stop by, see how she was doing, maybe ask her out. Right?

Maybe not. This was a game with which she was no longer familiar. Why should she assume that her personality was simply so magnetic that he would be drawn back?

She had certainly enjoyed his company, enjoyed their brief but informative conversations, enjoyed the way he looked, the way he smelled, the way he sometimes stood quietly and said nothing, just watched what she was watching, his thoughts his own. Or watched her. Remembering his silent, contemplative regard caused a flood of heat not just to her skin, but to those places that were deep and private and longing again for contact with a man. Not just any man, though. That much had become increasingly apparent during the few days Roger had been around.

"Does good work, doesn't he?" Scott commented, coming to stand beside her. Sunny started and glanced at him, then back to the barn. "Ned was here earlier today checking over his

farming machinery. He saw all the stuff lying around, but not hide nor hair of Roger. Of course, Ned wouldn't know him if he tripped over him, since he's never met the guy. Still, he said no one was here. Wonder what ol' Roger was doing?"

"I don't know," Sunny answered absently. "Doesn't much matter, though. He finished the job." Everything was in order, nothing in the yard now to indicate anything but a completed and professional job.

"He did that," Scott agreed, making no move to leave.

"Really, Scott," Sunny said, turning to him, finding herself impatient, "what were you doing in the house? It's not like you live here anymore."

"Sorry," he said, spreading his hands out, the folder flapping open. "I didn't think you'd mind."

"I do," she answered, bounding up the stairs onto the porch and almost turning her ankle in her heels. She tossed her purse down on the rocker, bending to remove her shoes. She'd probably ruin her pantyhose, but what the heck. "I really do. You can't act like it doesn't matter, because it does. You haven't lived here for more than two years. Pick a day and we'll check to see if anything else of yours is here, so you won't have to worry about needing it sometime in the future."

She turned around in time to catch Scott eyeballing her legs beneath the hiked hem of her skirt. He raised his eyes quickly to her own.

"Whoa, Sunny-girl, what's up? I honestly didn't think you'd care."

"I do care," she said, picking up purse and shoes and managing to manipulate the latch on the screen door. "You have another life, totally separate from mine. It's time you acted like it."

"I don't want to act like it, Sunny."

Sunny stared at him. "Jesus, Scott," she said and went inside.

He followed, standing silently in the kitchen as she deposited her purse on the telephone table. A white envelope with her name on it leaned against the scalloped wooden back. She picked it up, narrowing her eyes at the unfamiliar handwriting.

"I saw that. Didn't touch it, I swear."

Sunny shot a glance at Scott over her shoulder, slipping her finger beneath the haphazardly glued flap. She flipped through the bills, counting them. Two hundred dollars and a receipt for the paint. Shit.

"What is it?" asked Scott, coming closer.

"Nothing," she answered, closing the envelope and returning it to the table. Shit.

He made a noise, nothing concrete, and then his hands came up and rested on her shoulders. His thumbs began to move, massaging the muscles to either side of her neck.

"You're tense," he said.

"Yep," she answered tersely, moving away from him. "Care to guess why, Sherlock?"

He laughed uncomfortably and followed her, stopping right up against her when she paused. His arms went around her. Dropping her shoes to the floor with a clatter, Sunny took his hands from her waist and set them at his sides.

"Go home, Scott. Go home now. This isn't going to happen. I don't want it to happen. Despite how I might act sometimes, I actually like Kathy, and I'm not going to let it happen. Go home."

He sighed, his blue eyes taking on an expression she didn't much care for. "This is

home. It feels like home to me, Sunny.”

“I don’t care,” she said, backing away from him, “it’s not. Not anymore.”

For several seconds he said nothing, and then he laughed again. There was no humor to the sound. Lightning quick he bent and kissed her, his mouth forceful on her own. She shoved him away, wiping her linen jacket sleeve across her lips where his tongue had tried to wedge between.

“Sunny, please,” he begged, reaching for her. “I want you. I want you back.”

Sunny backed away, feeling the edge of the table against her hip.

“No! What the hell is wrong with you? Did you and Kathy break up or something?”

He stood before her, breathing heavily. Involuntarily her gaze flicked to his khaki trousers where the beginning of an erection was making itself evident. She lifted her eyes back to his face, brows lowered in anger.

“Well?” she prompted.

Scott straightened, exhaling loudly. He ran the palm of his hand across his close-cropped hair.

“She’s pregnant, Sunny. Kathy’s pregnant.”

Closing her eyes, Sunny sat down in the nearest chair.

\* \* \* \*

Two hours later, she stared out through the night’s gloom to the place where Scott’s truck had been parked. If she’d had a cigarette she would have been smoking it, even though she’d never smoked a day in her life. Instead, she made do with a piece of cherry licorice, holding it between her teeth, sucking air through the narrow, hollow center, occasionally taking an aggressive bite from the end.

Pregnant. What the *fuck*.

Leaning her head against the back of the porch rocker, Sunny pulled her sneaker clad feet up onto the seat, wrapping an arm around her legs. The light blue paint of the ceiling was faded to gray in the darkness. In the advancing warmth of spring a great many of the new leaves on the trees and shrubs had unfurled and she could hear them whispering.

With a jerk of her shoulders, she set the rocker to rocking again, the loose floorboard beneath one runner creaking under the pressure. At least she had stopped crying about it. What was the point? The fact that Scott had never wanted kids and she did had ceased to be a consideration long ago. She had simply given up trying to convince him, and it had never occurred to her to just let it happen. Considering the demise of their relationship, she was almost grateful. It was difficult enough to deal with Scott as an ex, let alone as an ex and the father of a child they shared, with all that entailed. Scott had veered away from the responsibility of parenthood with a vengeance, refusing to even listen to other parents who tried to convince him that the whole thing was a learning process with no rules, that it would always be that way, no matter how long you waited. But for Scott, it wasn’t a matter of waiting for a certain position in his life. It was a matter of not ever wanting to reach that place at all.

No wonder he was scared now. Even so, by the time he had finished blabbering about it and Sunny had calmed him down, he had actually seemed excited.

What the *fuck*.

Taking another bite out of her licorice, she lowered her hand to the chair arm, whipping the twist back and forth against the leg of her jeans in time to the motion of her rocking. Wait

until Jess heard this one, she thought, but she felt no urgency to call her sister with the news. In fact, she didn't want to talk about it at all. Anything she had to say aloud on the subject she had said to Scott already. Anything else didn't bear voicing.

Hearing the sound of an engine, she turned her head to watch a set of headlights move slowly along the road, pause at the top of the driveway, turn in. The driver parked the pickup alongside her car, cut the engine, opened the door and stepped out, tall against the moving shadows of the night.

"Roger," she whispered. Silently she berated herself for the tears that started to her eyes. Lowering one foot to the floor, she stopped the rhythmic motion of the chair.

Through the window at her back, the light from a single lamp at the opposite side of the living room fell on the high planes of his cheekbones and shadowed his eyes where he stood on the walkway.

"Sunny. I would have called you, but I had a tree come down the same day yours did, bringing down the phone line. I ... well, I haven't been in any particular rush to have it fixed."

He shoved both hands into his pockets, seeming in no hurry to come up onto the porch, either, to get to the reason for his visit, to do anything but watch her and wait.

"You gave me the money back," she said.

"I don't need it," he answered.

"But all the work you did ..."

"I enjoyed it. I enjoyed spending that time with you. I have to be honest. I wasn't doing it for the money. It was a chance to get to know you better."

Sunny lowered her lids over her eyes, viewing him through the moist clump of her lashes. She felt a trembling begin low in her abdomen and radiate into her chest and out to her limbs. Setting her licorice across the top of her glass of water on the floor, she stood up and crossed to the edge of the porch. He strode forward, stopping at the base of the stairs. His hair looked damp, dried at the ends but clumped and dark and wet closer to his head. She could smell the shampoo he had used, faint and fresh, and the clean soap scent rising from his skin. He was freshly shaven, the line of his jaw smooth and strong, his full mouth held immobile as he waited for her to speak again.

"How much do you know about Scott and me?" she asked.

His eyes moved, pupils wide and surrounded by the narrow amber ring of iris. It was the only sign he made that her question surprised him.

"Nothing that matters," he said.

Huh. So Scott had talked about her. What Roger was saying, though, was that he ignored the talk.

"And I really know nothing about you," she went on.

"Yes, you do," he said. "You know everything that matters."

What the hell did that mean? she wondered. But she knew. She knew exactly what it meant.

Lifting his arm, he took her hand into his own, rubbing the ball of his thumb across the backs of her fingers. "You're trembling."

"I know."

"You're not cold."

"No."

“Not afraid.”

A breath. “No.”

“Good.”

When he kissed her it was not on the mouth but on the curve of her cheek near her ear, softly, tenderly, his fingers in her hair. She closed her eyes as the rest of her body opened to the caress in a rush of blood and heat. She knew she was wet upon the instant and was almost ashamed, but he pressed his mouth to her temple and whispered to her.

“It’s alright, Sunny.”

So gently. She turned her face against his jaw and felt the tears run warm between them and wasn’t certain whose they were. She kissed his throat, felt the telltale ridges of his scar as yet unexplained to her and so often invisible. The noise that escaped him made her knees give out. She pushed her hands into his hair, cool and wet but warm near his scalp, and fit her mouth to his. Slowly, slowly, he parted her lips, the glide of his tongue like silk across hers. Just there, now, but soon to be elsewhere, everywhere, moving in that same fashion as she held herself open for him. That’s what she wanted. That was what she wanted. Her breath rushed out. This then, was the seduction, and it was easy and wonderful.

Oh, God.

His arms tightened around her, pulling her hard against his labor-hardened body. She wrapped her arms across the back of his neck, hands locked around her elbows, and lifted her legs to encircle his waist. She felt him through his jeans, erect and heated against the seam of her pants.

Damn clothes.

Turning with her, he sat down on the top step of the porch. With both hands he pulled her blouse over her head, loosening it from the tangle of her hair. The night air, though temperate, was chill on her near-naked skin. Fitting his fingers around her upper arms he held her a little away from him, his eyes moving in languid consideration. Beneath the fabric of her bra her nipples stood taut, her own eyes fixed upon the generous proportions of his mouth.

“Look at you,” he breathed. “You’re stunning.”

“No, I’m not.”

He laughed, a crooked turn to his smile. “Yes, you are,” he said and stood up, taking her with him, standing her upright on the step below. Reaching behind, he unfastened her bra, then slid it from her arms. He had opened his mouth to speak again, but the words died unspoken. His gaze lifted from the fullness of her breasts to her eyes and stayed there as he stepped down beside her. Bending, he kissed her, once, twice, a third time deeply, his hand smoothing the hair down her naked back, never touching her breasts but leaving them exposed to the air, to the brushing of his t-shirt across their peaks, to the passing of his warm breath as he turned his forehead against her lips as though he would seek her nipples with his mouth, and then declining.

“Sunny ....”

“Roger?” She felt so heated, so volatile, so alive and giddy and about to lose her mind from lust that she actually giggled when she spoke his name. It was absurd, really, standing in the dark with this man, half-naked and willing to give him whatever he might ask for. Absurd and delicious.

“Let’s go inside.”

Sunny grabbed her shirt from him and her bra, then tucked her fingers into his waistband

near his zipper, the tips grazing his blood-engorged penis through his underwear. Backing up the steps, she led him across the porch.

“I’ve been alone a long time, Roger,” she whispered. “You need to know that.”

He took her hand from his pants, holding her fingers against the soft fabric of his t-shirt.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

She felt a flicker of uncertainty. “You won’t.”

“I don’t ever want to hurt you,” he said.

She stopped against the door, the handle cold in the small of her back. “Why do you think you might?” she asked.

Pausing, he cupped a breast in his large palm, rubbing his thumb in circles around her nipple, and then lowered his hand to her waist, holding her thrumming body immobile.

“I don’t know,” he said.

Sunny caught her breath. The expression in his eyes when he raised them to hers was unreadable, and all the more disconcerting because of that. She touched his mouth, inhaled, exhaled, opened her fingers along his jaw.

“Should we wait?” she asked him. “Will you wait?”

He was willing, he was ready, he was hard as heated stone inside his jeans and she knew she would melt and explode the moment he touched her naked body, but his words had unnerved her. The ringing phone forestalled the necessity of decision. He stepped away.

“You should probably answer that,” he said.

\* \* \* \*

Standing in the driveway, Sunny waved as her sister pulled out onto the road. If there had been any way to head her off, she would have, but Jess had phoned from her car only two minutes away. Her sister had been too outraged by what Scott had felt compelled to call and tell her to take no for an answer.

The conversation that had ensued had left Sunny feeling bruised and battered and far too tender. Jessica loved her. She meant well, but Sunny hadn’t really wanted to rehash her discussion with Scott at that point, or perhaps ever. Well, it was done now, all relived again with one added tidbit of information to top it all off. Scott was marrying Kathy.

That was, of course, the right thing to do. Scott just needed to bear in mind his actions that had precipitated his confession to Sunny earlier that evening. Kathy deserved better.

Sticking her hands into her pockets, Sunny rocked a little on her heels. She possessed another ache, as well, one that had nothing to do with the battering of old pain. Her underwear was still slightly humid with the residue of interrupted lust. She turned her gaze toward Roger’s truck. Funny, Jess hadn’t even asked about it. She probably assumed it belonged to one of Ned’s hired hands. It wasn’t quite the season for strangers to be abounding, but Jess wouldn’t know that. The rhythms of the land, of lying fallow, of planting, of cultivation and harvest, had no significance to her. You bought your veggies at the grocery store, some times fresher than others, but who knew why.

At the sound of a step on gravel Sunny turned her head.

“Where’d you go?” she asked as Roger came up to her side, slipped an arm about her waist and planted a kiss on the crown of her head.

“For a walk,” he said. “From the sound of your conversation on the phone, I figured you needed time with your sister alone. I just saw her pull out,” he added.

“Thanks.”

He stood beside her, the heat of his body appreciable, the scent of him, his breadth and height and lean, hard mass strangely familiar, as if he had always been there, just like that, a comfort, a kindred spirit, an excitement in the dark hours of the night. She turned toward him, pressing her brow against the firm contours of his chest. She could feel the beating of his heart, almost hear it, or was that her own? She didn't know where the sound of the one left off and the other began.

“Roger,” she said.

He stroked her hair, leaving his other hand to rest on the swell of her hip.

“I'm going to head home,” he said in the deep, uneven growl of his voice. “I'll come by again soon, maybe even fix that window.”

“What window?” she asked, lifting her head to follow the direction of his gaze. “Oh, that one.”

Revealed in the light of the new moon, she could see the crack in the lower pane of one of the second storey windows. He brushed her hair back from her face, kissing her gently on the lips.

“I'll give you a couple of days to get used to the idea of what might be us, how's that? And then I'm coming back. You can tell me to go away at that time, if you want, or not.”

“Oh, I think the answer will likely be not,” she said and he laughed, a low chuckle of humor. Releasing her, he strode toward his truck. She felt a renewed warmth of her blood as she observed his long, easy stride. Starting his truck, he drove slowly out of the driveway and turned left, flashing his lights once, forgoing the obtrusive sound of the horn.

As his taillights disappeared, Sunny walked back toward the house hugging herself against the chill of his absence.

## Chapter Four

As it happened, Sunny didn't see Roger in a couple of days. Pulling into her usual spot in front of the house after a long drive from the Philadelphia Airport, Sunny sat a moment behind the wheel in the dark, breathing a sigh of contentment at having arrived home after what had seemed an interminable period of time. Though she'd only been gone a couple of days, the trip had not been expected. Gracie usually went on the buying trips to New York for furniture for the store, but she'd come down with an outrageous allergic reaction to something she'd eaten. Sunny was tickled pink to be going in her stead, and alone, but there had been no time to prepare. Additionally, she had no way of contacting Roger except through Scott, and she hadn't wanted to do that. Roger wasn't listed in the phone book, nor available through Information.

Before she'd left, though, she had written him a note, tore it up, and wrote him another one, intending to leave it on the outside windowsill next to the front door in case he came by. Then she decided that Scott was more likely to find the note and so put the envelope in her purse instead, taking it with her to the airport when she left. Now, returning home, she found the window fixed, presumably by entry to the house through that very window via ladder, since the door was locked. Based on the fact that he had effected the repair despite the lack of her presence, she could only assume Roger didn't think she had run away.

Dropping her bag in the front hall, Sunny went to listen to the messages on her answering machine. There were only two, which didn't surprise her, as most people knew enough to call her on her cell.

"Hey, Sunny-girl."

Sunny's eyebrows arched. Scott definitely should have known to call her cell phone if he needed her.

"I was calling to tell you to expect an invitation in the mail. You know, addressed to Sunny O'Connell f/k/a Sunny *Black* and *guest*, figuring you might come up with someone to bring along, and what do you think happened before I called you? I bumped into ol' Roger and he wanted to know if I knew where you were, that he'd been by your house to see you and you weren't there. Friggin' arrogant back-stabbing prick. What does he think he's doing? And you? Christ, Sunny, I would've thought you'd know better. I could tell you things about that guy ...."

Sunny jabbed the delete button before subjecting herself to anything further, instantly fuming. Scott sounded drunk, or close to it. And what did it matter to him anyway if she was involved with Roger or anyone else? It was, frankly, none of his business anymore. Hadn't been his business since they separated and divorced, and not even before that, if he wanted to make an issue of it. His behavior during their marriage should have precluded any possessive assumptions on his part. Even so, she had kept right on trying to make it work, until that last time.

Releasing a breath through her nose, she played the next message, hoping it wasn't going to be Scott calling back with more of the same. It wasn't.

"Sunny, hi. My phone's fixed. I figured I had a reason to fix it now. I ran into Scott and

asked him if he knew how I could get in touch with you. He didn't seem pleased. I apologize if there's a problem there. Here's my number if you want to give me a call when you return."

Scrambling for a pencil, Sunny wrote the ten digits down on the corner of the phone book. She didn't delete Roger's message. Standing in the dim illumination of the nightlight in her kitchen, she liked hearing the sound of his voice, so she played it again, letting the deep honey-gravel tones wash over her. Her reaction to his voice was nearly chemical, a catalyst for slow ignition.

Shaking her head, Sunny played the message one more time for good measure, and then went upstairs to get out of her travel-rumpled clothes and take a shower. When she came out, she picked up the phone extension next to her bed, dialing Roger's number.

"Hi. It's not too late to call, is it?" she asked, glancing at the clock when she heard his voice.

"What time is it?"

"You sound half-asleep. I'm sorry. It's not quite ten o'clock. I just got in from an unexpected business trip to New York. I got to buy some fabulous furniture, which is always fun. It was my first time doing it alone, and I must say I don't think I did too shabby a job of it," she grinned into the phone, then sobered a bit. "I would have let you know, but I wasn't certain how to get hold of you."

"'s alright," he mumbled sleepily, then cleared his throat. "Welcome back. I missed you."

"I missed you, too," she said. And she had, more than she had wanted to admit until that moment, hearing the same sentiment from his mouth. There were sounds of movement on the other end of the line and then the noise of what was likely the stubble of his jaw across the mouthpiece.

"What are you wearing?" he asked, his tone more awake.

"Hey, this isn't an attempt at phone sex, is it?" she countered. "Because I haven't had the real thing yet, you know."

She heard his laughter against her ear, low and rumbling and sexy as hell. Closing her eyes, she leaned her face closer to the cold plastic of the telephone in her hand.

"No, it's not. I guess what I wanted to know was whether you were dressed to come out or ready for bed."

"To come out where?" she asked, eyelids fluttering open, gaze lifting to her own reflection in the window glass. She looked eldritch and pale, but the color in her cheeks was evident even so.

"Here, to my house," he said. "I was thinking you might want to go for a walk through the fields, if you're not too tired. There's a lovely sliver of a moon I can see through my window and the night's crystal clear."

She smiled against the receiver. "Give me directions," she said.

\* \* \* \*

The directions had seemed simple enough, but she passed the driveway several times before narrowing down the entrance. Unpaved, the lane was long and narrow and rutted, winding between fields readied for planting. With her window open she could smell the turned earth, hear the crunch of her tires on stone and dirt, the sound of a wind moving through the uppermost leaves of the trees in the hedgerow. Her headlights picked out eyes in the field. Deer.

The cabin stood well back from the point where the lane ended. He had warned her what to expect, said the house was an actual log cabin some two hundred years old, small and stuccoed with a steeply pitched roof and a rambling stone chimney. The porch out front was dark, but she could see lights through one of the windows. She had cut her headlights before parking to keep them from shining into the cabin. Climbing out of the car she quietly shut the door, walking slowly across a lawn of grass and shrubbery to the place where she thought the steps ought to be. Her thick hair was still damp underneath, making her shiver slightly. As she mounted the stairs, a shadow rose up from an Adirondack chair in the blackness beside the lighted window.

“Hi, Sunny. Found the place alright?”

“Took me a couple of tries to locate the driveway, but I’m here.”

“I can see that,” he said and stepped forward to put his arms around her.

She had never kissed a man before who was so completely at ease with and cognizant of the contours of her mouth. With his hands on her waist, he lifted her as if she weighed nothing and set her down on the wide porch railing, moving to stand between her parted knees. And he went right on kissing her as if there was nothing else in the world he wanted to be doing. Her body temperature rose and her respiration quickened and she pressed herself against him as his hand came down around the curve of her buttocks, sliding her closer still to the obvious evidence of a solid erection.

She pulled away, leaning her forehead against his collar bone. “Nice greeting,” she murmured. “Walk? What walk?” and was gratified to hear his rumbling chuckle again.

“Oh, I was serious about the walk,” he advised, hoisting her off the railing and onto her feet. “Come on, let’s go before the moon is gone.”

He took her hand to lead her across the grass, then released it to lever his arm across her back, fingers fitted comfortably into the place where her neck met her shoulder. She could feel their warmth, the occasional sliding movement as he stroked her hair back from her throat then resettled his grasp. The atmosphere, as promised, was of remarkable clarity, the stars bright, the narrow, sickle moon floating nearer the horizon. The smells of the night were wonderful, earthy and fresh and so much more heady without the distraction of full vision.

“It’s so quiet,” she whispered at one point. “You can’t even hear the road noise.”

“Like it was more than two hundred years ago,” he responded in agreement. “I couldn’t live any differently. I wouldn’t be able to stand it.”

She nodded in understanding, stepped closer to him, slipping her arm around his waist with her thumb hooked through his belt loop. He kissed the top of her head. “When these fields are planted with corn,” he said, “and the growing conditions are good, the stalks in late summer are taller than my head. You hear nothing, then, but the vast, sibilant hiss of the wind through the leaves.”

“I know the sound,” she answered, smiling. “There’s nothing like it.”

Pulling her to a halt, he stepped behind her, closing his arms across her mid-section, his chin propped lightly on her crown. “You wouldn’t consider marrying a man you’ve just met, would you?” he teased. At least she thought he was teasing. His voice was light, not serious at all, but he was holding himself very still.

Leaning back against his chest, Sunny turned her head to kiss the hard contour of his arm beneath the hem of his sleeve, and then looked back out over the valley. “There’s quite a view

from here,” she commented softly, avoiding any answer.

Spread below them, the lights of the long streets of the town cupped in the valley twinkled as the trees between swayed in the breeze, causing the pinpoint of illumination to wink in and out of existence like faerie light. Too far away for modern sound, for reality, it felt to Sunny as though she were looking through time from the past into a fey future, and she wasn’t exactly certain on which side she belonged.

“Once,” he murmured against her hair, indicating the valley with a sweep of his hand, “you would not have seen even that.”

“Do you wish you lived back then?” she asked, mesmerized by the minuscule circles he was drawing with the tip of the pointer finger on his other hand around her left nipple through her shirt. After a moment he slid his fingers underneath the soft material, running along the edge of her bra, and then he rested his hand against her breast and held it still.

“Not any more,” he whispered.

She let the implication of his simple statement drift and settle in her mind. When first she agreed to come here to walk with him, she had thought to tell him about Scott’s drunken message, but she realized there should be nothing of her ex-husband with them now. Tonight was about the two of them only. Roger’s words had solidified that for her.

She closed her fingers over his and held them there against her, feeling the pounding of her heart through his hand into hers.

“Roger,” she said.

He kissed the side of her throat, burying his face into her hair. “Will you stay with me tonight?”

“Yes,” she answered without hesitation.

\* \* \* \*

The ceilings of the cabin were low, retaining any gathered heat from the day. Exposed beams sat so low, in fact, that given another inch Roger would have been striking his head. In his bedroom the plaster between was mellowed with age to an eggshell color, stained with the residue of wick and fire and oil over the course of many, many years. Books lined one wall, a small dresser and a wardrobe sat against another, and in the center was what appeared to be an ancient four-poster bed barely contained beneath the ceiling. When Sunny asked him if the bed was authentic or a reproduction, he assured her it was the real deal. Piled high with quilts and blankets and an odd assortment of pillows, the bed looked inviting and comfortable and like an oasis one might call home. Beside it, on a low night table, Roger had lit a single candle.

He sat down on the edge of the high mattress, his hands clasped together between his knees. “Come here,” he said.

She did so, moving to stand between his long legs, her own fingers wrapped tightly together to keep her hands from shaking. He stared at the interlacing of her fingers for a moment, and then he raised his hands to her own, gently loosening her grip. Turning her hands, he lifted them to his face, kissing the inside of one wrist, then the other, pressing his mouth to the place where the blood beat blue and rapid beneath the shallow surface of flesh.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered.

“I’m not.”

“No? I am. Inside I’m stumbling all over myself with wanting you, with wanting to take you in every way imaginable, hot and hard and fast, but I’m also afraid, too. I don’t want to ... to

screw this up, Sunny. I don't want this to be just one night. I've waited a long time for something I could weep about, and crow with joy over, something that makes me laugh and want to share my innermost secrets, and I'm suspecting I may be finding that something with you. I don't want to screw it up. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Sunny swallowed over an unexpected lump in her throat. "Yes," she whispered.

"I won't hurt you. I won't leave you. I won't run off and father a child with someone else."

At that, she tried to pull away, but he wouldn't let her.

"There's still time if you want children, Sunny. If we reach that point in our relationship, I would be proud and humbled to be that man for you."

Ah, crap, she thought, I'm going to cry. Glancing up, he witnessed her tears and transferred both her hands to one of his, and then reached up with the other and wiped the sliding moisture from her cheeks. Sunny turned her face into the curve of his large, calloused palm, reassured by the gentleness of his touch, the warmth.

"For now, though, there's only one thing I want. Well, several things actually ...."

Despite her efforts to control her reaction, she smiled at him and kissed his thumb where it lay against the corner of her mouth.

"What's first on your list?" she asked.

"Take off your clothes for me."

She drew in a breath, short and sharp, and felt the heat of it run down into her belly and out through her pores. He released her hands and she stepped away. Stilling the trembling of her fingers, she loosened the buttons of her blouse one by one. Glancing up at Roger's face from beneath her lashes, she saw the flicker of candlelight move across his skin and in the depths of his steady, amber gaze. She shirked the blouse from her shoulders, letting it slide from her arms to the worn carpet on the floor. From Roger there was no movement but the momentary suspension of his breath.

Unfastening her jeans, she began to slide them from her hips, but he stopped her, fitting his fingers over her own. Leaning forward from the mattress he pressed his mouth to the hollow beneath her rib cage, then against the jutting bone of her pelvis before resuming his former position of rapt attention. Sunny pushed her jeans down her legs, shoved off her sneakers with her toes and stepped out of her pants, standing before him in her underwear and a pair of short, white socks. Self-consciously she crossed one foot over the other.

Reaching out with his boot, he trod gently on the front of her sock. She pulled her foot out. He did the same with the other. When he smiled at her, the devil was in his grin.

"Keep going," he said.

The bra was a front fastener, and she fitted her fingers to the clasp.

"Wait."

Lifting his arm, he twisted the clasp and let go. Confined to nylon and spandex, her breasts popped free, round and taut with yearning. Roger made a noise in his throat. "And these," he said, inserting a finger into the waistband of her panties. However, he seemed determined to hamper her efforts to remove them, gliding his fingers down into her garment and between her legs where he stroked the moist folds of her flesh with a light, maddening touch.

"You are soaked," he said in deliberate enunciation.

"Ah, yup," she agreed.

He laughed, sliding her underwear to the floor. "Come closer."

She complied in willingness. Standing before Roger while he had not yet removed a single stitch of his own clothing was suddenly the most erotic thing she had ever imagined. It was like being totally under someone's control and yet wielding all the power at one and the same time.

He touched her with his gaze first and his hands second, fitting his fingertips, the length of his fingers, the expanse of his palms to every roundness and declivity, the arch of every bone, the curve of every muscle.

"You're still trembling," he said.

"So are you."

"Hmm. You're right."

Cupping his hands around her buttocks, he slid from the mattress to one knee on the floor, opening his mouth across the heated flesh between her legs.

"Oh, God," she whispered, stretching for the beam above her head, too far for her to reach, but only just. She lowered her hands into his hair instead, moving her hips in a rhythm of his creation, feeling the pulse of her blood and the pressure of his tongue, slowly, slowly, slowly stroking across her labia, then circling around the engorged bud of her clitoris.

"Oh my God," she said again and went to pull away, but he held her fast, one arm across her hips and the other hand spread along the inside of her thigh to keep her steady, captive, within the confines of his mouth as she came. Then he stood up and lifted her beneath the arms, tossing her onto the bed. He laughed, a sound of mirth and satisfaction.

"That was nice," he said. "That was very nice."

And then he shed his clothes.

\* \* \* \*

The candle had burned down and was guttering in its glass. Shadows danced across the titles on the bookshelves, revealing an eclectic mixture of volumes, mostly related to history, and more of them pertaining to the eighteenth century than to anything else. Sleepily Sunny let her eyes close, soothed by the soft stroke of Roger's fingers through her hair.

"There's a lot I need to tell you, Sunny," she heard him say, voice distorted by a muffled yawn, "but not tonight. There are things you need to know ... but not tonight," he repeated, sliding his long body further beneath the mounded quilts to curl himself beside her.

*I could tell you things about that guy ....*

Hearing again the words in Scott's message, Sunny's eyes opened wide. She turned her gaze to the uncurtained window where the last of the candlelight reflected in the running, aged glass. In a moment the wick had snuffed and the room was in darkness. Roger's body was warm and solid and comforting against her back. She closed her eyes again.

## Chapter Five

If she hadn't been running so late from work, Sunny might have noticed sooner that things were not quite right in her house. There was nothing overt, nothing that seemed to be missing, no evidence of break-in, just something that felt not quite as it should.

Not bothering to put down her purse, she strolled around with a critical eye and thought, did I leave *that* there? Were her shoes where she placed them? Was that book on this corner of the table? Surely that photograph had been facing the other way ... nothing definitive, nothing alarming, nothing even about which she could accurately say, "aha!" and understand the reason she was feeling so spooked.

For several minutes she stood in the center of the living room, her hands on her hips. She frowned. There in the center of the burgundy throw pillow at the end of her couch was an imprint, as if someone's head had rested there. Not Roger's, even though she'd given him a key. Roger wouldn't make himself at home like that without her being there. He was too ... respectful was the word that came to mind.

Letting her breath out, she went to the phone and called Scott.

Kathy answered.

Startled, Sunny hesitated for a fraction of a second before greeting her.

"Hello?" Kathy spoke again.

"Hi, Kathy, it's Sunny," she said, sitting in the kitchen chair. She tossed her purse up onto the table. "How are you?"

Kathy didn't need to ask Sunny who. There was never any need to ask Sunny who. One unusual name, one Sunny in Scott's life. It had to irk her.

However, she didn't sound irked. Quite the contrary. "Hi, Sunny! Are you calling to RSVP to the invitation? I never did thank you for talking to Scott about all of this. I wasn't sure what was going to happen. Thank you."

Sunny blinked, holding the receiver momentarily away from her ear. The sincerity of Kathy's tone touched her. "You're welcome. He just needed a little sense smacked into that dense skull of his, you know? But as far as an invitation, I didn't get one. I know you're getting married of course," she added, not bothering to mention that the information had come from her sister and not Scott, "but I haven't gotten anything in the mail yet."

"No? That's odd. They went out two weeks ago. I thought Scott left you a message, too. He said he did."

Oh, he did, Sunny reflected. It had been a few weeks and she'd almost forgotten it. Almost, but not quite.

"I hear you're dating someone," Kathy went on without waiting for a reply. "That's great. Will we get to meet him at the wedding?"

Sunny's brows dipped. "Scott knows Roger already," she said. And that was exactly where the information regarding her 'dating someone' would have come. "You haven't met him yet?"

“Noooo,” answered Kathy uncertainly. “Not that I recall.”

“Well, I don’t think they’re that close, really. I’m not exactly certain what their association is.”

Perhaps, though, it was time she found out. Sunny made a mental note to ask Roger when she saw him next. Thus far, and not surprisingly, Scott had not been a topic of shared conversation between them.

“But you will come? It would mean so much to Scott to have you there.”

Sure it would, Sunny thought, but she said instead, “Send me another invitation so I can properly respond, and I’ll be there with bells on.”

“Okay, I’ll do that.”

“Before I hang up, is Scott around by any chance?”

“Not right now.”

“Do you happen to know if he came by the house for any reason?”

There was a brief silence. “No, I don’t. Why? Is something wrong?”

Odd question, considering. “No, no. I just thought someone had been here, but I’m not really sure.”

Another minute of silence, and then, “Should I have him call you when he comes in?”

“No. It’s no big deal. I’ll talk to you later, Kathy. Thanks.”

Hanging up, she made another circuit around the house, including the upstairs this time, and even ventured into the attic. Unfortunately, it was difficult to tell if anything had been disturbed up there. Recalling Scott’s last visit for paperwork, she strode over to the boxes of stored papers, eyeing the trampled dust. Well, that could have been from weeks ago or this very morning, as anything stirred up would have settled again.

She’d never followed through with getting all of his stuff out of the house. She had to make certain to take care of that, as well, just so there was no further excuse for him coming to the house uninvited.

Shrugging off her unease as a figment of too much stress during the work day, she went back downstairs to prepare her dinner.

\* \* \* \*

Restless, dreaming and not remembering the dreams that kept her coming to the surface of sleep, Sunny finally tossed the light coverlet off and sat up, running her fingers through the tangled hair across her crown. She pressed her eyes into the heels of her palms, and then turned toward the dark rectangle of the window.

Someone was there.

She made a noise, less a shriek than an expletive. Almost immediately she knew who it was. The seated silhouette was too tall for anyone else.

“Didn’t mean to startle you,” he said, his deep voice rougher than usual.

“Roger, what are you doing?”

He stood up, moving like liquid in the darkness. He was wearing a lightweight jacket, which he shrugged out of, tossing the garment over the foot of the bed. Standing beside the mattress, he looked down at her. “I worked late and when I got home there was a message on my phone reminding me that in case I was thinking about coming over, I had a key for the door. So I thought about it, and here I am. I didn’t have to think twice, actually.” He paused, then spoke more quietly. “You haven’t minded my occasional midnight appearance before.”

She could hear the slight bafflement in his voice, as if he thought she was accusing him of some impropriety. He ought to know better. She trusted him. From the moment they met. Hence, the key.

Sitting up against the headboard, Sunny rubbed her nose, then reached for the glass of water she kept on the bedside table. She took a large drink before speaking, trying to collect her muddled thoughts.

“I meant by the window. Why were you just sitting there?”

“I was watching you sleep,” he said.

There was a certain lack of inflection to his tone that gave her pause. “Hopefully,” she said, “not like a stalker, but like a lover.”

“Not like a stalker, I promise,” he responded. She could feel the vibration of his voice like a delicate hum in her bones.

“I hope I wasn’t snoring,” she said.

“You weren’t. You were talking, though.”

Sunny halted in the process of returning her glass to the table. “I was? What the heck was I saying?”

She slid over to make room for him to sit. The mattress sagged a bit beneath the redistribution of his weight on the edge, causing her to roll toward him. She propped herself up with her hands to either side of her hips. Beneath the ratty t-shirt she wore her nipples rose just from the scent of him. Chemical heat. Exactly what that was. Slow, chemical heat to be followed, the experience of the past weeks told her, sooner rather than later by combustion.

“Well,” he said quietly, “it wasn’t my name you were calling.”

No wonder he sounded upset. She figured she knew whose name she had been utilizing in her disturbed sleep, but she asked anyway.

“Your ex-husband’s,” he advised. She could sense his tension in the dark and stretched her hand to him, opening her fingers over the firm curve of his thigh in worn denim. He didn’t move, and then he lifted his hand and settled it over hers.

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “I wasn’t sleeping very well, as you’ll have noticed if you were sitting there long enough. Today when I got home from work I had the strangest feeling that someone had been in the house while I wasn’t here. Nothing definite, just a feeling. But I figured it wasn’t you.”

He was silent for a minute. “Not one of the farmer’s hands?” he asked.

“None of them has a key. Neither should Scott, for that matter.”

“No,” he stated, “he shouldn’t.”

Sunny frowned at his tone. “He doesn’t. I made him give it back months and months ago, when I realized he still had one in his possession. Of course, he could have made a copy at any time, I guess.”

Roger said nothing. After a moment he let go of her hand and crossed his arms to grab the hem of his carelessly tucked t-shirt and yank it over his head. She caught her breath. A trick of the shifting gloom showed her the one side of his chest, the tiny bud of his nipple hard with chill. He enjoyed it when she touched him there. For the time being, however, she refrained.

“Just what has your relationship been with my ex, Roger? Were you two--are you,” she amended, “friends, or what?”

Reaching down, he unlaced his boots and kicked them off with a grunt of effort. Then he

stood up and unzipped his jeans, but he didn't take them off. He looked down at her again.

"We were never friends," he said. "I don't even remember exactly how we met, but I ended up helping him with a few jobs, and he came over the morning after the storm asking for my assistance again, here. It's not as if I don't like the guy, but we're not close."

Well, that would explain Kathy not meeting him, but it didn't explain Scott's animosity in his phone message or his reference to 'backstabbing prick.' Obviously, Scott was taking things a little too personally. Now that she thought of it, that particular message was the last time she'd heard from her former husband. She'd been so wrapped up in the newness of her relationship with Roger and with work that she hadn't realized nor recognized the significance of that.

"I'll change the locks for you, if you want. But I get the new key, too. Right?"

"Why wouldn't you?" she asked. He said nothing, standing very still as he studied her in the darkness.

"I think I like you creeping into my bed in the night," she taunted, reaching out to grab the denim of his jeans between her thumb and forefinger. "Take off your pants, Roger."

For a moment longer he remained silent, and then, "I don't creep anywhere," he retorted, whipping back the covers from around her legs and throwing himself down across her, pinning her to the mattress. He kissed her soundly, deeply, and she pressed close to the welcome weight of his body, felt the solid heat of his erection straining through his parted zipper behind the cloth of his underwear.

"Let go of my hands and I'll help you off with the rest of your clothes," she whispered against his brow. He shook his head. In a matter of seconds he had her few clothes off and strewn about the room and his breath was raising a rill of downy hair across the skin of her lower abdomen.

"What time is it, anyway?" she asked, trying to fight free of him.

"About two-thirty," he answered, pausing in his pursuit only long enough to speak.

"You did work late," she said. He made no response. She wriggled loose of his grasp, but quickly he had her again and had deftly flipped her onto her stomach. His mouth moved along the curve of her cheek and up to the small of her back, where he then rested his chin lightly.

"I adore the shape of you here."

"Where?"

"Where your waist narrows and your hips flare. You have two wonderful dimples right here and here," he added, pressing his mouth to them both.

"I never noticed," she said.

"No one ever told you?"

"Nope."

Running his hand over the curve of her right buttock, he bit her playfully. "You're awfully wet, my dear. Are you sure you were having nightmares and not some dream more prurient in nature?"

"If I had been having dreams of that sort, it would have been your name I was calling out," she shot over her shoulder, squirming beneath the exploration of his fingers between her legs. "Take your pants off, Roger, would you?"

"Not yet. I'm not finished here."

Groaning, she buried her head in her pillow.

“Besides, I want to talk to you.”

She lifted her head up.

“About what?”

“Give me a minute.”

His tongue was an outstandingly blistering instrument when applied and before two minutes had passed Sunny found herself breathless and trembling, with the pillow clamped between her teeth to deprive him of the pleasure of hearing her scream. Spitting out the linen case, she spoke over her shoulder again.

“Take your freakin’ pants off, Roger.”

“Um, not yet.”

Latching onto the headboard, Sunny yanked herself free of his grasp and onto her knees. He let her go.

“That’s perfect,” he whispered. “Don’t move.”

Behind her, she heard his movements as he yanked off his jeans and then felt the shifting of the mattress yet again as he climbed back into the bed. His hands settled on her hips, his bent legs fitting between her own. He pulled her roughly back against him, his chest hard along the length of her spine, his breath warm across the place where her shoulder curved into her neck.

“Take me in your hand,” he whispered against her ear, “and guide me inside you.”

They had been together many times during the past weeks in ways that were precipitantly and wonderfully intimate, here in her house and in his own, yet she still trembled as if it all were new, shivering at the whipcord grip of his arms around her, the rumble of his voice, the feel of him hard and powerful slipping into that place of darkness and heat. Her vaginal walls convulsed around him.

“Oh sweetheart, I love when you do that.”

“It’s involuntary,” she said.

“I don’t care what it is. It happens every time I’m in you and I can’t get enough of it.”

Sunny closed her eyes. God, she loved this man. The realization that she didn’t mean just sex with Roger, but Roger himself, stunned her.

“What is it?”

“Nothing,” she whispered, grabbing onto the headboard and moving her hips, his hands sliding up her spine to settle against the back of her neck. “Just don’t let go of me.”

“Never,” he said.

*Never.* Now wouldn’t that be something perfect? No initials in an aging window sill. Just a promise that was kept.

And then she was spiraling away into a realm of all-sensation, of motion and fire and fizzing blood and sweat, of passionate, strangled words, of cries echoing in her pores, of height and tension and release, of plummeting satiation, of muscles stretched and sore, of the sleep of the replete curled in the arms of the peace-giver. Whatever they needed to say, she thought as she drifted off into a dreamless slumber, could wait until the morning.

## Chapter Six

“I like that dress. You look very sexy in it. Does your boss like it?”

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Sunny held her steaming mug of coffee to her lips, smiling at Roger over the rim. “My boss is a woman,” she said.

“Huh,” he responded, one brow arching.

“Jerk,” she said affectionately.

He laughed and picked up his own mug. He looked delightfully ruffled in the clothes he had retrieved from the floor that morning. Despite the firmly etched lines of laughter and concentration and old cares in his handsome face, he looked boyish, mischievous, happy. And tired. Running his fingers through his thick, dark hair, he set his mug down with a thump.

“The reason I worked so late was to complete the finish work on that last job. Next one isn’t scheduled until tomorrow, so I took the day off today. I figure I’ll run over to the hardware store when it opens and pick up a couple of new lock sets?”

“There’s money in the envelope,” Sunny told him, flicking a glance toward the telephone table. The envelope was still there, the one with her name on it. He nodded, arching his back to stretch his arms above his head. The early morning light gleamed in the slant of his nearly closed eyes, touched the dark stubble of his jaw. And the scar across his throat. Reaching back, Sunny set her mug on the counter behind her.

“May I ask you something?”

He lowered his arms, then slid his chair back and patted his thigh, indicating she should come and sit. “Shoot,” he said.

She sat down, ignoring the hand on her knee, and raised her fingers to lightly touch the scarred base of his throat. The hand on her knee stilled. She felt his whole body stiffen.

“What happened here?”

Grasping her fingers, he drew them away from his neck and set them down in her lap. He held them there. “That’s part of what I wanted to talk to you about last night.”

At the tone of his reply, her breath went in, then out, and she looked him in the eye, noting with the same cognizance she always felt when she saw what a stark contrast the amber was to the black length of his lashes, the dark texture of his hair, that his eyes were amazingly beautiful. She remembered the first time she had seen them and how she had felt as though they were gazing into her, revealing the ordinary information of her life to him. They didn’t look that way now. Their expression was guarded, barricaded. She felt her heart squeeze. His mouth opened.

“Wait!” she forestalled him. “Wait. Before you speak, I need to tell you something.”

“Okay,” he agreed cautiously, “go ahead.”

She dipped her head, studying the interlacing of their fingers, tracing the pattern with the forefinger of her other hand. His hands were so much larger than her own. She liked that, felt protected in their grasp. “Roger ...”

“Yes.” Quietly. Hesitant.

Lifting her head, she glanced into his eyes. For the briefest instant they were unguarded again. Tears started in her own.

"I love you, Roger," she said. "I just want you to know that, in case it makes a difference."

His t-shirt expanded with an indrawn breath. "Holy fucking shit," he murmured.

Sunny's lips twisted. "That wasn't exactly the response I envisioned."

His hand darted to the back of her neck, drawing her down against his chest. He pressed his mouth to the crown of her hair. When he spoke, his voice was thick.

"I love you, too, Sunny."

\* \* \* \*

With her bare feet tucked up on the couch beneath her skirt, Sunny stared at her black high heels lying discarded in the sun on the living room rug. An unanticipated request for a day off had been accepted without comment, as she had never asked without notice before. Lisa and Gracie were probably both wondering what was up, yet had refrained from asking.

Across the room Roger sat in the wing-backed chair near the window. It was not a position she wished he'd taken, but he seemed to require some distance between them before speaking.

"You remember what it was like to be a kid, don't you, Sunny?" he asked suddenly, unexpectedly, his head turned aside, his gaze intent on something out the window.

"Yes," she answered.

"I don't."

"What?"

"I don't," he repeated. "I have no recollection of my life beyond fifteen years ago."

Sunny blinked. She shook her head a little in confusion, as if by so doing she might rearrange the words he had spoken in such a fashion that they would make sense.

"It will be fifteen years this October, actually. Fifteen years ago this October I regained consciousness on the side of the road not far from right here and was picked up by a passing school bus driver and driven to a hospital. Good thing. I was almost dead. My throat was crushed so severely the damaged tissue nearly suffocated me."

Sunny tried to visualize that and couldn't. She wouldn't let herself.

"How--what had happened?"

"I don't know," he said, still gazing out the window. The sun was bright, the tulips in the garden by the walkway dipping in the breeze. Across the driveway she spotted one of Ned's seasonal helpers walking into the barn.

"The police investigated, figuring someone had tried to kill me, to strangle me with a rope."

"Oh my God," Sunny whispered. She pressed her fingers to her mouth, breathing hard against the tips.

"There weren't any clues, really, besides some fibers embedded in my flesh and the ligature marks. No witnesses, not even my own identity to help them. All I remembered, the only thing I remembered, was my name, and it was weeks before I could speak it."

"Didn't that help them identify who you were, locate your family?"

"My name? There are hundreds of Roger Macleods hereabouts, and across the country. Apparently the name goes back many years. All were present and accounted for, or dead in their

graves, except me. I didn't belong to any of the families unearthed. Apparently, I committed no crime either, because there were no fingerprints on record."

Sunny shook her head in a wider motion and said nothing. He turned to look at her, then. His handsome face was haggard, drawn with emotion. She saw his chest rise and fall beneath his sage-colored t-shirt.

"I spent quite a while in the State Hospital. I figure you should be aware of that."

Rising from the couch, Sunny crossed to the window near his chair, watching the blooms of the tulips, crimson red, yellow at the center, the dark stamen heavy with pollen. She held her hand out to the side and he slipped his fingers into it.

"Therapy, electric shock, meds, physical rehabilitation," he went on. "I learned a trade. I learned a lot. I learned I could read and did so, every day. Mostly about history. I have a thing for early American history. I don't have any idea why."

She felt him shrug in the length of the arm she clasped.

"Gradually I began to recall generalities, though nothing I could put a finger on and say to myself, 'so this is what I did then,' 'so this is who I am.' I remembered that I worked with my hands, but not what I did with them. I'm not particularly comfortable around crowds of people, but I hear that's a common enough affliction. I like the land. I like the changing seasons. I like the quiet. I like the nuances of this area's past. And I love you. That's not something I've ever said to anyone before."

Sunny sank her teeth into her lip, the tears rolling unchecked down her cheeks.

"Oh, God, Sunny, come here."

He pulled her down into his lap where she curled against him, weeping salt tears into the soft, wrinkled fabric of his shirt. "The first day I saw you," he whispered against her, "I thought to myself, 'here is someone real.' I wasn't wrong."

Sunny cried harder, stifling her outburst by shoving a fistful of his shirt against her mouth.

"Will you marry me, Sunny? I promise I will love you for the rest of my life."

\* \* \* \*

When Sunny told Jess the news, several days delayed from its origination, her sister shrieked so loudly she woke Colin up where he had fallen asleep, mid-pout, at the bottom of his playpen.

"Sorry, buddy," Sunny said to him when he eyed her sleepily, "your mom's just a little excited."

"I can't believe this!" Jess cried, bending to scoop her son out of the playpen. "This is so great. I mean, you haven't known each other all that long obviously, but you look so happy, Sunny!"

Sunny let her babble on as she went about the mechanics of changing Colin's diaper. Listening with half an ear and a fond smile, Sunny's gaze roved around her sister's house, noting anew the indications of her lifestyle, her preferences for suburban life to country, so different from her own.

"He wants kids, too," Sunny added, when Jessica had taken a break to draw breath. This sent her off into further peals of ecstatic sound and commentary. Chuckling to herself, Sunny went to get a glass of water from the kitchen. Propped on the counter was an invitation to Scott and Kathy's nuptials.

“Are you going?”

Jess looked up from nuzzling Colin’s round, bare belly, and then efficiently snapped his outfit shut. “I responded yes. Mark and I are going. I didn’t figure that would be a problem?”

“It’s not,” Sunny assured her. “Roger and I are going, too.” At least, she hoped he was going to attend. As there promised to be a crowd, she supposed there could always be a last-minute back-out. She wasn’t sure just how far his aversion to crowds extended. Or possibly, at this point, his aversion to Scott. “You’ll get to meet him, then.”

“Not until then?” Jess cried.

“It’s only two weeks away, numbskull. We’re sort of laying low, enjoying our time together, undisturbed.”

“Ah, I see,” said Jess with a suggestive leer, made comical by the fact that she had Colin clutching both of her cheeks in his chubby fists.

“Yes, you *do* see,” Sunny said, making her sister laugh outright.

Jess set Colin on the rug in the sun. His hair stood out around his head in a halo of narrow curls. “What does Scott think of all this?”

Sunny stood the pitcher of water upright, her glass half full. “He doesn’t know. And Jess, it’s none of his business until I make it his business, okay?”

Jessica’s eyebrows shot up, all innocence. “I wasn’t going to tell him.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I wasn’t!”

“Okay.”

Carrying her water into the family room, Sunny sat on the edge of the couch to watch Colin in his attempts at getting up the momentum for a crawl. “Jess ...”

“Sunny, what happened between the two of you?” Jessica interrupted before she could speak.

“Scott and I? You’re not talking about what broke up our marriage, are you? Because I really don’t want to get into all of that. You’ve heard it already, anyway.”

“No,” said Jessica, sitting down beside her, “I mean recently. You were getting along so well, considering, and now you seem angry. Is it because of the thing with Kathy and the baby and the two of them getting married?”

“No,” Sunny answered. It was because of the thing with Sunny and the lack of baby and the divorce, followed by Scott’s proprietorial assumptions and his advances, and the thing with Kathy and the baby and the two of them getting married, not to mention the last words she’d heard from him being directed against Roger and against her, while apparently drunk, and him with a new baby due in less than six months. She didn’t say any of that, though. She didn’t mention the fact that she believed Scott had been in the house without telling her either. That, at least, was solved by the changing of the locks. And if it had been Roger in the house, after all ... well, he would have said so, wouldn’t he? Of course he would. She knew he would. She *trusted* him. Frowning, Sunny returned her attention to Colin.

“I can’t believe how big he’s getting,” Sunny said instead, smiling down at Colin’s energetic attempts to propel himself across the floor in more than a series of rocking motions.

“You’re changing the subject.”

“That I am,” she agreed.

“I love you, sis,” Jessica said softly.

“I know you do. And for a long time, I thought you might be the only one I’d ever hear that from again.”

## Chapter Seven

“Good Lord, you are a handsome man.”

Standing before her as she adjusted his tie, Roger grinned crookedly. Despite his penchant for t-shirts and jeans, he wore the tailored gray suit with what was known as a casual aplomb, and even with the recent cut of his hair, his dark locks looked wild and windblown and incredibly sexy.

“You’re sure you’re okay with this?” she asked him again.

“Fine,” he said, stooping to plant a long kiss on her lips. Too long. They had to leave, and if he kept kissing her like that they weren’t going anywhere but back upstairs, or out into the living room, or maybe even the kitchen. Circling her fingers around the silk tie she’d just straightened, Sunny dragged him toward the door.

Before Roger backed the truck out of the parking space, he turned to smile at her.

“You’re beautiful,” he said.

“Oh, I see. Turnabout’s fair play and all that?”

“No,” he countered. “You are.”

“Mmm. Then thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Laughing, he headed the truck toward the road. At the top of the driveway, however, he stopped, braking hard. Sunny extended her hand to the dashboard.

“What’s that?”

Sunny looked where he was pointing. “What? Oh, that. Someone from the Lehigh County Preservation Society came by two days ago with that. I forgot to tell you. The LCPS people weren’t happy that I disposed of the fallen tree limb, said they should have been notified. To do what with it? Hang a hunk of bark from the wall in a museum? Anyway, the guy asked if he could attach the plaque to the trunk. I said sure, for a price.”

Roger glanced at her. “You didn’t.”

Laughing, she shook her head. “No. But he gave me a book in exchange for the privilege. It’s on the dining room table. Remind me to show it to you.”

Roger leaned across the seat, frowning. “What’s the plaque say? I can’t read it from this angle.”

“It’s actually rather morbid,” Sunny admitted, reaching out to smooth the cuff of his sleeve. “It says ‘The Hanging Tree’.”

“The *Hanging Tree*?”

Roger sat up, smacking the truck into park. He got out. Sunny rolled down the window on her side as he crossed the driveway. “It’s muddy there, Roger.”

Pausing at the edge of the gravel, he looked down at his shoes, then across the low lying grass. She could see him breathing, see the force of his respiration in the movement of his suit jacket. He glanced at her over his shoulder.

Oh, she thought. Oh, crap.

Climbing out of the truck she stood beside him. The hem of her silk dress blew against the backs of her calves. "I should have told him no," she said quietly.

She could hear him breathing now. He sounded as if he had been running. She could only imagine what thoughts were going through his head, what rumination about the inappropriate coincidence of having a tree bearing the official title of "hanging tree" so close to where he had nearly lost his life from strangulation all those years ago.

"I'm sorry," she said.

His hand came up to grasp at his tie, tightening just below the knot as if he wanted nothing more than to yank it off. The muscle of his jaw leaped into relief and he closed his eyes. Sunny waited. In time, his respiration stabilized. He lifted his arm to encircle her shoulder.

"Why do they call it that?" he asked. "The Hanging Tree."

"I'm surprised you don't know the story," she said. "Apparently, back when this house was built, the property was some sort of village center. Auctions and trials and meetings were held beneath the tree, and--"

"People were hung from it."

Sunny followed his gaze to the gnarled and enormous ancient branches. "Not from the tree. From a scaffolding standing beneath it," she told him quietly.

She saw him swallow, hard, and an involuntary shudder ran the length of his spine. He pulled her close and kissed her.

"Let's go," he said in dismissal of the subject. "We have a wedding to get to."

\* \* \* \*

Goodness, she hadn't seen a great many of these people in a long time, even before the split with Scott, when they had in the natural course of events just drifted apart. If any of them were surprised to see her there, they didn't let it show.

Kathy looked wonderful, patently pregnant, even though she wasn't really showing yet. Glowing. That was it. She was glowing. Sunny hugged her. She deserved it.

"So this is Roger?"

Clearly, the soon-to-be bride was impressed by the man on her arm. Maybe a little envious. Sunny tried not to feel any satisfaction in that. Roger was calm, friendly, confident. Sunny was proud of him. It was odd, but until they'd actually arrived she had been beset by this strange feeling that no one would really be able to see him, that he was a figment of her imagination. And Scott's, she reminded herself. Roger had managed to disappear whenever anyone else was around except the two of them. She was glad to put that bogey of nightmare to rest. She wasn't even certain where it had come from. She only knew that she was very much aware of his presence now, and that he was making quite the impression on the ladies.

She told him so.

With a grin, he waved that aside, tucking her hand into his elbow. "Where's your sister? I'm looking forward to meeting her."

"You'll probably hear her before you see her," Sunny teased, glancing over each shoulder. Just then, true to form there was a squeal of delight, quickly subdued. "She has arrived," Sunny stated unnecessarily.

When Roger turned to shake Mark's hand, Jessica mouthed something sufficiently complimentary about Roger behind his back.

"No," countered Sunny, "he's actually beautiful."

Unable to miss her words, Roger turned back to her, capturing and holding her gaze in a manner that made her blush. He touched her cheek. "I love you," he whispered for her ears alone. Angling her head, Sunny kissed his palm.

"Shall we all go sit down?" Jessica asked, grabbing her arm. "The ceremony should be starting soon, shouldn't it?"

Because the wedding was casual, there was no groom's side and bride's side, which was just as well, as Sunny wasn't sure where they would have sat. Sitting beside Roger, she felt thrilled, valued, cherished, captivated and captivating. He made more than polite conversation with her sister and brother-in-law, obviously taken by both of them.

The sun was warm on Sunny's hair and on her shoulders. Beyond the yard of Kathy's parents, where the ceremony and reception were both taking place, she could hear the sounds of the neighborhood, of cars on the street and children laughing and the occasional stertorous barking of a particularly shrill dog. She looked up to find Roger watching her. He winked and leaned close.

"We'll be back home soon enough," he whispered, "where it's quiet." And he laughed, a low noise against her ear.

Hell, she had to stop blushing.

Slipping her fingers into Roger's, she held his hand throughout the ceremony, fighting back tears. It didn't matter that it was Scott getting married or that he and Kathy were going to have a family together. Weddings always made her teary. They were a time of hopeful beginnings, and she wished the best for the bride and groom.

Pronounced man and wife, Scott and Kathy made their way back down the rose-petal-strewn aisle toward the rear door of her parents' home. Kathy's eyes seemed to deliberately seek Sunny's out and, finding them, hold for a moment. *Kathy*, she thought, *your union with Scott doesn't need my blessing. I just hope it works for you both.*

Still, she smiled in encouragement. Kathy smiled back, eyes moist. Scott leaned his head forward to peer past his bride. When his light blue gaze lighted on Sunny, then on Roger beside her, his expression transformed. Roger's hand tightened on hers. She thought she heard him swear beneath his breath. The moment passed, however, and everyone cheered the new couple as they disappeared into the shadowed interior of the house.

\* \* \* \*

Sunny watched Roger dance with her sister. Like the manner of his walk, he danced with earthbound grace and dignity. When asked where he'd learned, he had told her it was part of his physical therapy. He'd actually had to learn balance again. Quite obviously, he'd regained it and then some. Sunny couldn't wait to dance with him again.

"Well, well, Sunny-girl, you look ravishing, as always."

Sunny stepped into Scott's line of sight, trying to distract him from Roger, as his attention had moved immediately from her to the patio where the dancing was taking place. If he started making remarks about Roger she wouldn't be able to keep silent about it, wedding day or not. But despite his tone when he greeted her, and his straying focus, Scott maintained a courteous demeanor, nodding at people who passed with a bridegroom's smile. Thankfully, he disregarded Roger as a topic of discussion.

"Kathy looks lovely, doesn't she?" Sunny said.

Scott made a noise through his nose. "Oh come on, you don't mean that."

Sunny bit the inside of her cheek. "I do. Have you looked at her today? She's shining. I'm sure she's happy. How has she been feeling?"

Scott shrugged. "Not bad. Not sick anymore, so that's good."

"Any names picked out?"

"Nah. Not yet," he commented, raising the glass in his hand to take a drink as he watched his new wife speaking with someone in the grass. Sunny watched her, too. She really did look both lovely and happy. She wasn't wearing a wedding gown, but a very becoming dress of pale blue that was cut in just such a way that even if she was already showing, any bump was discreetly disguised.

"This is a good thing, Scott. A great thing. It really is."

He made another noise, the meaning of which eluded her.

"She looks beautiful."

"Hope she doesn't blimp up," he said, turning to face Sunny. The scent of alcohol was strong on his breath.

Sunny's eyes flew wide in anger on Kathy's behalf. "Scott! You really are a bastard, you know that?" she rebuked him in an undertone. "What are you drinking?"

Lifting his glass, he sniffed at it. "I dunno. Whiskey and something, I think. Smells like it. Wanna dance?"

She didn't, not with him anyway, but she didn't want to create a scene by refusing, either. Jessica had claimed Roger again, so Sunny wordlessly stepped out onto the patio with her ex-husband as the music began.

"That's my ass, Scott. My waist is up here," she said, yanking his hand up where it belonged.

"Sorry," he said. He didn't sound contrite in the least.

Throughout the dance, he kept jerking her close and she kept stepping back, making for an awkward performance of what should have been a series of simple maneuvers. He pulled her close for the seventh time, his mouth pressed to her ear. She could smell the whiskey on his breath. He'd had more than the one he still held in his hand, sloshing a rare drop or two onto the shoulder of her gown.

"I bet if I was Roger, you'd be pressed so tight against my cock there'd be no daylight between."

Rejecting the bait, Sunny pulled away again.

"I remember what it was like, Sunny-girl. I bet he's gettin' that good lovin' all the time, too, isn't he?"

"Leave Roger out of this," Sunny whispered fiercely.

"You know he's defective, don't you?" he went right on in a stage whisper. "Maybe not where it counts right now, keeping that tight little pussy of yours happy, but he spent a lot of time with the nut cases. He's not right."

Sunny's jaw tightened. "You sound ignorant and uneducated, Scott Black," she stated through clenched teeth. "Or are you just drunk?"

"Oh, I'm not drunk," he said, yanking her close again. "I'm just pissed off. That guy's fucking my wife--"

"I'm not your wife!" Sunny hissed. "You have a wife, and you better remember that! You stopped being my husband long before I caught you in bed with--what was her name? I bet

you don't even remember."

Wedging her arm between them, she pushed him back. He staggered before recovery, loosening his grip on her dress. A large hand reached out to steady him by the collar.

"Careful, Scott," said Roger's honey-gravel voice. "Watch your step."

He could have just been talking about Scott's proximity to the pool and other guests, but Sunny knew that Roger had heard at least a portion of the recent conversation. Exhaling, she turned her back on her former husband, taking Roger's arm.

"I like the land, and the changing seasons, and the quiet, too," she said to him. "Can we go home?"

## Chapter Eight

They went to his place, deep, deep into the quiet, into the haven he had created for himself. Now she understood why. They stood in the gloom wrapped in each other's arms, rocking back and forth to a silent music of their own like an echo of the wind through the trees. By the time they stopped, had grown still and the darkness had descended entirely, her thirty-dollar panties were soaked through, though he'd done nothing but hold her. Wordlessly he lifted her skirt and sundered the narrow waistband of her undergarment in a single pull, then turned with her to the wall and raised her in his arms, driving deep and hard and silently.

After, with her legs still wrapped around his waist, he carried her into his bedroom, where he stripped off all her clothes and tucked her beneath the mound of quilts. The night seemed unusually chill.

"Where are you going?"

"For a walk," he said. "I'll be back."

Sunny watched him shirk off his jacket and change his shoes, then leave the house still wearing what was left of his expensive suit. He was angry, she could see that. Not at her. Even so, as she listened to the front door close softly she thought:

*Don't stop loving me because I'm not exactly who you thought I was.*

He had left the small light burning. Sunny sat up on the high mattress of his bed, the bed that felt like home, and looked around his room. She went and used the bathroom, slipping into one of his t-shirts. When she returned she climbed back beneath the covers, staring at the books on the wall.

*I'll never know exactly who you are, but I'll not stop loving you.*

Maybe that was what had him worried, the fact that she never *could* know who he was. And neither could he.

\* \* \* \*

When he returned it was very late. Some innate sense told her that, because there was no clock in the room. The sounds of the night outside had changed, like the stillness before the dawn. She listened to him remove his clothes, fold them across the back of the maple rocker in the corner. He climbed beneath the covers, his long body chilled and smelling vaguely of wood smoke and fresh air and the damp places of the earth. Smoothing the sleeves of his t-shirt up her arm, he bent and placed his lips against the roundness of the lean muscle there. Even his lips felt cold.

"You're not asleep," he whispered. "You don't have to pretend to be. I'm sorry I was gone so long. I was thinking."

She rolled onto her back. "About us?"

"No. That was the one thing I didn't have to think about," he said. "I know who we are, together, don't you worry about that."

Reaching up, she smoothed his dark hair back from his brow. "I wish I had known you when you were younger," she said. "I wish I could tell you who you are. I wish I had that to

give you.”

“You do know who I am,” he said. “You are the only one who does.”

She slipped both arms behind his neck, drawing his head down. She kissed the sweep of his eyebrows, the full curve of his mouth. The breath from his nostrils ran warm across her cheek.

“What’s it like?” she murmured against his lips. “What does it feel like, being who you are?”

He thought a moment, climbing on top of her and fitting himself between her legs, propped up on either side of her body by his elbows. She pulled the covers up over his naked back.

“It’s like ... it’s like being on the other side of silence. Nothing is common. Nothing is ordinary. Everything is precious, and no one else sees it. No one hears the small things. No one understands the connection between each and every action, the finer moments of humankind and the revolutions of the earth. That is where I stand, and I stand alone. When you stand beside me I’m still here, but I’m not alone anymore.”

Sunny swallowed, unable to speak. She kissed him again, felt his mouth open to the pressure of her own, the silken glide of his tongue across hers. As she had that first time he kissed her, she felt her face wet with tears and did not know who shed them.

“You’re so good for me,” he said. “Hell, I’m even hard again. Care for another go?”

She laughed, scrubbing her face dry, then reached down beneath the blankets to close her hand around him. “Will you marry me, Roger Macleod?” she whispered.

“Too late,” he answered. “I believe I’m already taken.”

\* \* \* \*

The rain started just before daylight, drumming on the roof, rolling into the gutters, splashing on the ground outside the windows. Sunny watched the rivulets converge and flow down the glass, silver against silver as night lightened into day. Behind her Roger slept on his back, his arm flung above his head, his mouth slightly open and a sound like the growl of a young puppy emanating on occasion from his throat. Slipping from the bed, she wrapped one of the quilts about her shoulders and stood before the wall of books, tipping her head to read the spines. She felt vaguely uneasy, as if she were spying on some secret part of him, and in the same moment she thought, *there’s something I’m missing here*.

Running her fingers down the titles, she thought she began to note a pattern in his interest, besides the era. Pulling a volume out, she opened it to where it fell naturally from use. He had taken a highlighter to mark certain passages. In other pages small pieces of paper had been inserted. Some of these had notes on them in his hand, but even that varied depending, she supposed, on his state of mind at the time he jotted them down.

The light was too poor to read by, so she replaced the book on the shelf, crossing the floor to the rocker. Lifting his suit pants she hung them on a hook behind the door. There was no reason to hang them in the wardrobe. Even in the dimness she could see the mud stains on the knees. The dry cleaner would have a field day with them.

What had he been doing out there in the dark for all of those hours alone? Thinking, he said, and not of them, not doubting them, together. So what then?

Sunny sat down in the rocker, leaning her head against the back. His shirt was still there. She could smell him in it, familiar and musky. She turned her cheek against the wrinkled linen,

breathing deeply. Unconsciously she began to rock the chair with her bare foot on the wooden floor beyond the edge of the rug.

When they were married, she would sell the farm, or rent it out. But they couldn't live here, as much as she loved this place. It was too small. These were things they needed to discuss, but they hadn't.

Closing her eyes, Sunny continued to rock. She was scared, she was crazy in love, but she was also practical. There was nothing to be afraid of, love was wonderful, and there were matters to be discussed, to be decided. That was that.

God, she thought suddenly, how had he lived for fifteen years without knowing who he was? He knew who he was now, who he had been for that fifteen years, but what about before? How often did he think about that lack of knowledge, of memory? How could it not consume him? And with no point of reference, what was there to think of? She visualized the absence of memory like a hollow void, echoing with eerie silence. And he lived now the other side of that silence. That was what he had said.

Grabbing a fistful of his shirt, she held it closer to her face. She wanted to help him, but she didn't know how. There was nothing she could do, and he didn't seem to expect her to do anything but be there. And she would be.

Standing up, she stopped the rocker with her heel, and then wandered out into the main room. Sparsely furnished, there wasn't even a television, just as he'd said. Opening the front door, she stood against the screen staring out at the rain. A puddle was rapidly forming at the base of the steps. Subdued, the birds were singing nonetheless.

"Hey."

His arms went around her, the dark stubble of his jaw rough against her cheek.

"I didn't mean to wake you," she said. "You must be exhausted."

He shrugged against her.

"I've had worse nights," he said.

Straightening, he ran his hand over the crown of her head. "Breakfast?"

"Sure."

He walked away from her, into the kitchen. "When do you want to get married?"

"I--what?"

He chuckled, rummaging through the cabinets. "When do you want to get married?" he repeated. "How? Where? What do you want to do about living arrangements?"

She blinked, a slow smile spreading across her face. "What, do you read minds or something?"

"Just yours," he laughed.

Picking her purse up off the floor where she had dropped it the night before, she scooped the spilled contents back into it, flipping open her cell phone to check the time.

"Huh. I've got a message."

"Then listen to it," he said.

Entering her password, she raised the phone to her ear. "Sunny." It was Kathy. "Scott's gone. He left a couple of hours ago after a horrible fight. He wouldn't be at your place, would he? Let me know, please. Please let me know."

The message had been left at 1:45 in the morning. Sunny flipped the phone shut. Roger stuck his head out of the kitchen.

“Shit,” she said.

## Chapter Nine

“Why am I making this my problem?”

The question was rhetorical, as there was no one to answer. She didn't even have an answer for it herself.

After she had ascertained from Kathy that Scott hadn't returned home yet, Roger had helped Sunny check the house, just in case Scott really was there. His truck wasn't outside, but he could have parked that on any of the lanes into the fields and walked in. She'd called a few of his older buddies, the ones Kathy might not know. By the time the third one had asked why she even cared where her ex-husband was she decided to quit calling and just compile a list. If Scott didn't go home to his new wife by noon, then Sunny would turn the list over to her.

She called Kathy to tell her she hadn't seen him, hadn't heard from him, and to find out if he might have showed up. He hadn't.

“He will,” Sunny told her. God, but this was bringing back all sorts of bad feelings of her own. “Give him time, and he will. But don't give him a break. Don't let him get away with this type of behavior. I don't know what you need to do about it, but don't accept it, Kathy.”

Good advice. She should have taken a dose of it herself long before she'd reached the point where she had more than she could physically and emotionally stand.

Hanging up the phone, she decided to make herself a cup of tea. It was still raining and the day had a leaden look to it, closed-in and burdensome and not at all cozy anymore. Roger had told her he was aware of a few places Scott might be and had taken the truck and gone to check. The house felt empty without him. She missed him. She'd been by herself here since they got together, quite often, but today she felt his absence sorely even though she knew he would be back in an hour or two.

As the kettle began to whistle, she removed it from the heat and took down a cup, the tea bags, honey from the cabinet, engaging in the mechanics as if they were life-saving therapy. With the tea bag still steeping and the paper tab hanging on its narrow string over the rim, Sunny held the cup close to her face for the warmth and the aroma and the comfort. Passing through the dining room, she grabbed the slim volume the guy from the Lehigh County Preservation Society had given her and went into the living room. She turned the light on, necessary despite the fact that it was nine o'clock in the morning and curled up on the couch with the book on her knee and the tea cup on a coaster on the table at her elbow, fragrant steam rising toward the cream-colored lamp shade.

For a moment she stared at the cover where there was a picture of her house, taken about 1890. Then she tipped her head against the sofa back, closing her eyes. She was worried, worried about the men in her life, even the one she didn't want there anymore.

Raising her lids again, she opened the book across her leg and began to read. The language started off a little dry, but she was just looking for distraction anyway. The old photographs, however, were an amazing chronicle. Eschewing text for the time being, she flipped through the pages to view the photos and their captions.

“Ugh.”

Frowning, she lifted the book closer. Maybe that was just an effigy, some sort of recreation. But no, it was a real dead guy. She shuddered in horror. Apparently back in--1892, when the photo was taken, there had still been legislation on the books authorizing execution by hanging as well as use of this property for that purpose. This poor fellow was the last man executed on private property in the State, or one would hope, she mused. Prior to that, there had been no record of anyone being hung at “The Hanging Tree” for nearly a hundred years. Grimacing, but unable to help herself, she flipped back to the beginning of the chapter for the historical details.

And then the phone rang. Dropping the book on the cushion, Sunny ran to the kitchen to answer it.

“Sunny, hi, it’s me.”

“Jess! Sorry we cut out on you at the wedding like that.”

“It’s alright. I saw him pawing you from across the patio. So did Roger. That’s why he came over.”

“Yeah, well,” Sunny sighed. If Jess and Roger were able to see it, that meant numerous other guests had probably gotten an eyeful as well. No doubt Kathy knew, or had seen. No wonder she thought Scott had come to the house. He must seem like a pretty desperate, screwed-up person to her about now.

“He’s quite a guy, that man of yours. Roger, I mean.”

“Who else would you mean, Jess? Thanks.”

“Sunny?”

“Hmm?”

“Scott was here this morning.”

Sunny said nothing.

“He was more than upset. He was irrational, Sunny. I’ve never seen him like that.”

“I have,” Sunny said quietly.

“He was pissed as hell at you and at Roger. What is *up* with that? Why should he even care?”

“I honestly don’t know,” she said, more quietly still.

“And he was drunk. Drunk! I thought I smelled alcohol on him, but he seemed steady enough. It was only when he left that I realized the reason he didn’t listen to me was because he couldn’t, both because he was being such an idiot and because he was too drunk to follow coherent thought. When he got in the truck and drove away I saw him pick up a bottle from the seat and drink from it.”

“You let him drive away like that?” Sunny asked, something new stirring in her.

“Well, it was too late then. I called the police though. Hopefully they’ll find him before he hurts himself or someone else.”

“Good. You did the right thing.”

At the sound of wet tires on gravel, Sunny turned and looked down the hall toward the front door. Through the limited vantage point of the door glass, she thought she saw Roger’s truck. Instead of parking in his usual spot, though, he continued across the driveway and into the sodden grass, then on around to the other side of the barn.

“Jess, I’ve got to go. Roger’s back.” And something’s up, she thought. She felt a chill

of apprehension as she hung up the phone and scrambled into her sneakers. Stepping out onto the porch she saw that the rain was driving, huge drops pelting the soaked ground. Tucking her head against the onslaught, she ran across the driveway. The barn door was open. Not until she ducked into the cavernous building, where the rain was reduced to a reverberating rumble on the roof, did she hear the voices. Roger's. And Scott's.

"I wanted to go into the house." Loud, demanding, a little out of control.

"Not yet, Scott. Talk to me here."

"Talk to you? There's not much fucking point in that, is there? Where's Sunny? Her car's here. I saw it."

"She's with her sister. Jess came to pick her up earlier. They're out looking for you."

Roger's tone was calm, but with an underscore of something she couldn't identify. He was lying, the first thing that came to his mind. The wrong thing, but how could he know? And why was he lying to Scott? She was willing to talk to him, to calm him down. Sunny moved toward the stairs.

"You fucking prick, you're lying! I was there, at her sister's."

A moment's hesitation, and then, "Look, Scott, you're bleeding. Your truck is totaled. You might want me to just drive you to the hospital."

"Fuck you. Don't act like you're my buddy, my friend ...."

"I never was your friend, Scott. We had an undefined business relationship, but that was about all."

"Where do you think you're going? I want to see Sunny! Do you hear me? Don't you move."

"Scott, what are you going to do? Shoot me? She won't come back to you if you do."

Oh, sweet Jesus, Scott had a gun.

Sunny pelted up the stairs, feeling them vibrate beneath her feet, feeling the flower of blood in her brain, the cold, stark terror, the sound of Roger's name in her ears. At the head of the stairs she stumbled, sliding across the hay-strewn, dusty floor on her knees. A splinter drove deep into her palm. From the corner of her eye she saw Roger move toward her, then jerk himself immobile. She turned her head, her gaze falling with a strange stillness on the pair of long, hollow bores of the shotgun in Scott's hands.

Slowly, she raised her eyes from the gun to Scott's face. His eye was blackened and blood streamed from a gash high up on his scalp. Rainwater sluicing from his close-cropped hair didn't help, mingling with the blood that had not dried to cover his cheek, his jaw, the side of his neck, the collar of his shirt and the shoulder of his jacket. He was still wearing the suit he'd gotten married in, although it was a mess. Jess hadn't mentioned that.

"May I stand up?" she asked quietly.

"Sure, Sunny-girl," he said, flicking the barrel of the gun in an upward motion. She caught her breath, eyeing his finger on the trigger. Carefully she rose to her feet, yanking the splinter from her palm with her teeth. A thin trickle of blood oozed out of the hole.

"What are you doing with that, Scott?" she asked, indicating the shotgun with a nod.

"I was contemplating killing myself," he stated matter-of-factly. "But then I had a better idea."

Years ago she'd had a conversation with a veteran cop who had told her he always viewed suicidal individuals as homicidal, because once a person reached that point he or she

didn't often recognize the value of life in any form. Sunny drew a breath, let it out and repeated the process of breathing, thinking hard.

"Scott, why don't you just let her go and do what you have to?" Roger said, before she could speak again. "You don't want to hurt Sunny."

"Roger, I'm not going anywhere," she stated through her teeth.

"Aw," Scott ground out sarcastically. "Isn't that sweet? I don't want you going anywhere either, Sunny-girl. You may as well witness it when I do it. See what you've driven me to. And then you're next."

"I haven't driven you to anyth--"

"*Sunny.*" This, from Roger. Quiet, terse.

"That's right, Sunny. You listen to him and shut the fuck up. He knows about nut jobs on a firsthand basis, don't you, buddy?"

Roger didn't respond. Sunny turned her head, just a little, her gaze seeking his. His amber gaze was steady on hers, trying to tell her something. And then his lips moved soundlessly.

*I love you.*

Oh God, she thought, don't. Don't. Don't be the hero. I need you.

Roger made his move then, as if he didn't feel the weight of her plea in his soul, lunging across the wide plank floor with the impetus of desperation powering his muscles. Scott spun on his heel, raising the shotgun.

"No, Scott, no!"

One thought, one thought, one thought only. Sunny threw herself at Scott, at the shotgun. The powder went off in an explosion as loud and bright in the rain-driven darkness as the Hand of God.

And then there was silence.

## Chapter Ten

“Are you sure you’re alright doing this by yourself, sis?”

“Yeah,” Sunny said, standing for a moment with her eyes closed in the warm July sun. Then she looked down at the items in her arms, some of the things Roger had left in her house, and the book she had wanted to show him from the Lehigh County Preservation Society. She hadn’t had the heart to look at it again. There were a couple of magazines on top, too. These were for her. He would understand.

“Can you get those flowers for me, Jess?”

“Sure,” her sister answered, her normal exuberance subdued. Going back up on the porch, she lifted the container of carnations off the table.

Sunny liked the smell of carnations, slightly spicy and sweet. Roger liked them, too. He had said that once. She hadn’t forgotten.

Loading everything into the back seat of the car, Sunny stepped away and hugged her sister, smoothing her dark golden-brown hair back from her face.

“I love you, Jess.”

“I love you, too, Sunny.”

Studying her sister’s face, she remembered too, the day she had told Jess she’d thought she’d never hear anyone else say those words to her again.

Yeah. Well.

“Got enough gas?”

“Filled the tank yesterday.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Or the day after. I don’t know yet. I’ll call you.”

“Do you want me to check on Kathy for you?” Jess asked her as she climbed behind the wheel.

“Would you? Thanks.”

Odd, that. Taking her ex-husband’s pregnant wife under her wing, making certain she was cared for, made her regular visits to the doctor, prepared herself for the coming baby. Even if Scott hadn’t been in jail, Sunny was certain he wouldn’t be doing those things for her.

Swinging the car around, Sunny headed for the road, waving to her sister out the open window.

\* \* \* \*

It was a long drive, where she was going. She drove with the window open, feeling the warm wind of passage in her hair. The carnations were taking a beating, but she knew it ultimately wouldn’t matter. The scent was still there, blowing around the car. Occasionally other scents entered in from the roadside, tar, and cows, and the greasy odors from a restaurant’s exhaust fan, and then she was on the highway, speeding. She didn’t seem to be able to help herself.

When she finally reached the exit she turned onto a rural road once more. She drove

slowly, reluctant now. There. There was the church, and the aged, canted headstones. Drawing a deep breath, she put on her left blinker. She pulled onto the shoulder opposite the church's driveway, sitting in the car with the engine running, staring at the open door of the small, stuccoed building. There was a wedding taking place. A wedding on a Wednesday afternoon. What the hell was up with that?

Putting the little Hyundai back in gear, she glanced in the mirror and pulled out into the road, continuing on her way. Well, good luck to them, she thought.

The sign for the State Hospital was stark and utilitarian, though the flowered border was pleasant. Sunny followed the signs to the visitors' lot and parked, listening as the song on the CD played out. She was scared. She had to be honest with herself. She was afraid that he wouldn't know her, wouldn't want her, wouldn't ... anything.

Prior to this, she hadn't been permitted to visit. Today was the first time.

Gathering everything out of the back seat, Sunny shut the door with her hip, managing by sheer dint of will to manipulate the automatic lock on her key chain. She blew her hair out of her eyes. A light sheen of perspiration dotted her brow.

The doctor had at least been kind enough to speak to her whenever she called about Roger's progress. Apparently, the episode in the barn, Sunny throwing herself in front of Scott and the shotgun, had triggered something for him. The doc said Roger insisted it was memory, but it was doubtful. Or so said the doc. Whatever had happened, it was painful for Roger and had caused him to relive the trauma of fifteen years earlier, a profound setback when he had done so well in building a life since then. There was a medical term for it that Sunny couldn't remember.

Making her way across the parking lot in a constant balancing act, she reached the glass doors. Fortunately for her they opened automatically. She went inside.

"I'm here for my appointment to see Roger Macleod," she told the woman at the desk.

"Name?"

"Sunny. Sunny O'Connell."

"Right through those doors and to the elevator. Second floor. There's a conservatory. He should be there. Oh, and you'll have to leave those flowers here. Some of our patients are allergic."

Allergic? What on earth was in the conservatory, then? Still, she wasn't about to argue. With a great deal of fumbling, she set the carnations on the corner of the reception desk.

On the second floor, she expected to be stopped by someone, security or a nurse. But the lobby outside the elevator was open and airy and didn't have the look of a mental health facility, at least not her preconceived notion of one. A man in a suit coat walked toward her, heading for the elevator. Glancing at her face he slowed, then stopped.

"You're Sunny," he said.

She looked at him. "Yes," she said slowly.

"Roger keeps that picture you sent with him all the time. It's getting a little dog-eared in his pocket."

Sunny felt a flush of warmth, of hope. "You're Dr. Stevens?"

When he nodded, she adjusted her burden, holding out her hand. His grasp was friendly, confident.

"He'll be happy to see you."

Sunny smiled. She nodded at the magazines on the top of the pile in her arms. “We’re getting married,” she announced, knowing she sounded inane as she did it. “I thought he might want to see the dress I picked out.”

Smiling, the doctor patted her on the shoulder, then turned around and walked her to the conservatory, where he left her at the door.

\* \* \* \*

Sunny observed him for a long time, not letting him know she was there. His hair had grown during confinement. It lay along his neck in glistening, dark locks. He was still tall, of course, still lean and hard, even in his baggy hospital attire. She could see the movement of the muscles in his arms as he worked, cultivating the beds of the vegetables growing in the conservatory. She was surprised he didn’t sense her gaze as she stood there, careful not to rustle the items in her arms.

Suddenly, he spoke. “Sunny,” he said without turning around, “quit watching me and get over here.”

With a small cry, she dropped everything in a nearby chair and ran across the floor as he stood up, tall, taller than any man she knew, solid and warm and still smelling the way she remembered as she buried her face against his chest. He put his arms around her. She could scent the damp earth on his hands.

“I’ve been afraid,” she said, her tears dampening the light green cotton of his shirt. “Afraid that you ... that you ...”

“Hush,” he whispered, bending to press his mouth against her hair. “I love you, Sunny. And didn’t I promise you that I would love you for the rest of my life?”

## Epilogue

“Last pill, Roger. You’ve been weaned. I guess the day after tomorrow you go home, eh? I’ll miss you, buddy. Miss that pretty girlfriend of yours, too.”

“Thanks,” Roger answered. “Hopefully you’ll write or something, because I don’t plan on coming back here.”

Roger watched the orderly stroll away, and then he casually raised his hand to his mouth, spitting the pill out into his palm. He tossed the round tablet into the undergrowth. There was no weaning involved. He’d stopped taking the meds the day he saw Sunny again for the first time.

Sitting in the chair, he turned toward the sun. The leaves had begun their change, moving from the static green of summer to the oranges and golds and russet browns of autumn. On his lap he held the book Sunny had brought to him that day when she’d come to see him for the first time, the one she’d received from the Preservation Society. She didn’t know it yet, but she’d given him a gift beyond imagining.

He knew who he was.

Flipping open the pages, he stared at the name on the page. His name. Included was what remained of an article in an eighteenth-century periodical. The reporting outlined how one young Roger Macleod, carpenter turned highwayman--highwayman, that was something--had cheated the hangman when the rope broke during the course of his execution and he disappeared without a trace, presumably, so the article went, through the assistance of one of his associates.

No associate, Roger mused, just a bizarre and improbable circumstance that he still couldn’t quite get his mind around. The dates were the same, of the execution and his being found by the bus driver on the road, the anniversary for which was just two days from now and two-hundred and thirty-nine years apart.

Sunny would help him with this. They would work through it together.

For a long time he had been alone. He wasn’t alone anymore.

The End