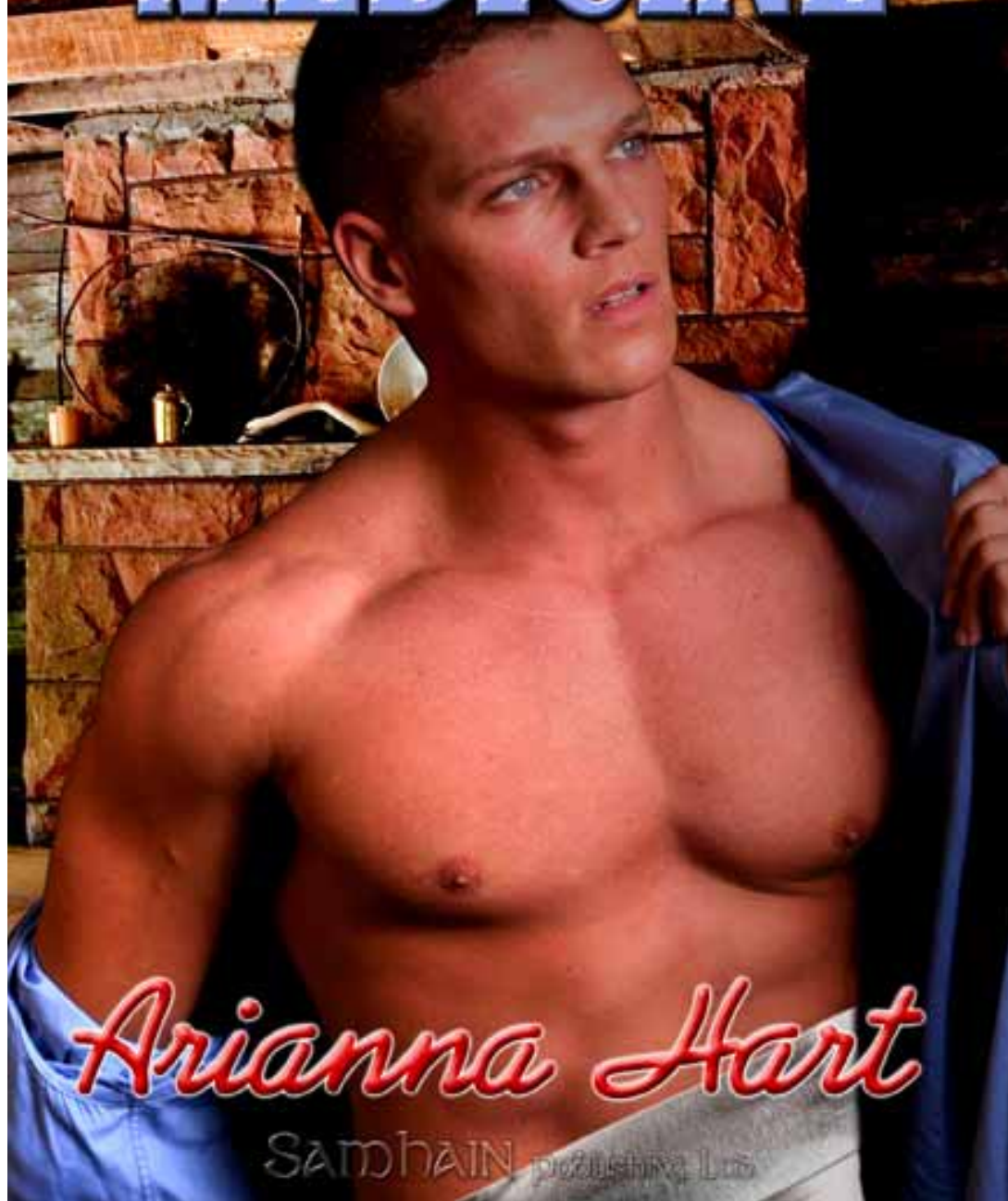


Take Your MEDICINE



Arianna Hart

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Take Your Medicine

Arianna Hart

Dedication

For my family, who is always there for me, no matter what. Especially my sister, Patti, this one's for you. And to my second family, my writing buddies who keep me sane—or at least what passes for sane for me. I love you all.

Chapter One

Jared cruised the waters of the Long Island Sound, trying to look like all the other weekend sailors out on the ocean. The choppy waves were getting smoother the closer he got to the mouth of the Connecticut River. Jared Romero could drive anything that had a motor, and quite a few things that didn't, but he didn't know how much longer he was going to keep this boat running.

The bullet holes in the side of the boat were leaking fluid as fast as the bullet hole in his side was leaking blood. He couldn't afford to stop running long enough to fix either hole. He knew he lost his pursuers before he hit the coast of Connecticut, but he also knew it wouldn't take them long to send someone else to look for him. Tracing him wouldn't be all that difficult to do. After all, how many boats had bullet holes running up the side?

As long as he kept moving no one could really notice, but as soon as he stopped it would be a matter of hours, not days, before his trail was picked up again. He needed to find a place to ditch the boat, and get medical attention quickly and quietly.

The boat lurched as he entered the mouth of the river and Jared stumbled against the wheel. The pain in his side flared to life with an intensity that took his breath away. His wound wasn't deep, luckily, but he had been steadily losing blood for the last hour. He ignored the "No Wake" signs and pushed the throttle for more speed.

There was one possible place he could ditch the boat unobtrusively. He might even be able to work in some care for himself, too, if he played his cards right. The boat started to sputter and jerk, and he realized he didn't have much time to shuffle the deck if he wanted to survive this last hand.

Jared pulled the limping boat up to the mooring for the nightclub on the river. He remembered this place from one of his visits with his friend Connor, who had recently relocated to Connecticut. The bar was located on the river and had moorings available to the boat traffic that coasted up and down the Connecticut River all summer long. On a Friday night the place was wall-to-wall people, and better yet, boats.

With teeth clenched against the pain, Jared steered his way carefully between two thirty-foot crafts. Even though fire burned in his gut, he still took the time to glance around and see if he left anything of value on board. The only things there were his laptop and a cooler. The cooler he could replace, the laptop was one of a kind.

Carefully slipping the strap of the laptop case over his head, Jared took a steadying breath before he made the jump from the deck of the boat to the dock. He wore a windbreaker, which would hide his blood-soaked T-shirt. It was nearing midnight, so he hoped no one would take too good a look at him. He paid the bouncer the exorbitant cover charge and wormed his way through the crowd. Most of the patrons were either drunk or well on their way.

The music throbbed and the lights flashed. Jared hoped the suffering he was experiencing wasn't written plainly on his face. He needed the chaos to cover his condition, but the pounding bass made his side throb, and the flickering lights made him dizzy. He stumbled his way through the gyrating crowds, wincing when he was jarred and elbowed in the

side. It felt like an eternity before he finally made his way to the exit and blended in with the night.

Jared walked as smoothly as possible through the streets. Luckily, the place he had in mind was very nearby. Unfortunately, the roads between the river and his destination were not the best after dark. Jared stumbled and caught himself. The last thing he wanted to do, besides leave a blood trail, was look like a drunk or an easy mark.

A faded, blue “H” sign was illuminated by a streetlight and he knew he was close. If his luck held he might just make it through the night. He went past the hospital, too many tricky questions to answer for a gunshot wound. Instead, he walked across the street to one of the many doctors’ offices that lined the street near the emergency room. When he read the one that said “Nordstrom, Galle, Keefer, and Sullivan, OB/GYN” he sighed with relief.

He went to the back of the building, and prayed his luck would hold. As it was, he was pushing the envelope of his good luck already. When he saw the brand new blue Explorer parked in the empty parking lot of the doctor’s office, he almost fainted in thanks, or blood loss, he wasn’t sure. Usually, he could break into a car in no time, but not tonight. Right now his hands were shaky, his vision blurry and sweat dripped into his eyes. It took him twice as long to break in and disarm the alarm, but he finally managed to get into the SUV and collapse in the backseat. The last thing he remembered was being grateful she didn’t drive a sports car.

Chapter Two

Macayla checked her watch, surprised to find herself leaving on time for once. Her shift was over at midnight, and it was only twelve-thirty, a new record for her. There was a lull in the baby business so far this summer, but Macayla knew it wouldn't last long.

She thanked her stars that the only patient she had in the last four hours was a mother of three who hadn't come in until half an hour before she delivered her fourth baby girl. The mother had joked that she could have delivered the baby herself at this point.

"But why mess up your own sheets?" Macayla quipped. Both mother and baby were doing fine. Dad seemed a little dazed by the thought of four daughters, but he was recovering nicely.

"Please talk Mrs. Harris into staying the full two days. She has three active little girls at home and can use all the rest she can get. I'm off for vacation after tonight, so I won't be able to do it," Macayla told the nurse as she finished writing in the chart. The nurse looked surprised for a minute, but quickly recovered.

"I didn't know you were going on vacation, Dr. Sullivan, going anywhere special?"

Macayla could see the wheels spinning in the nurse's head. Were there any single male doctors going on vacation too? Hospital gossip was worth more than gold.

“No, I’m taking some time off while it’s quiet. If I don’t use up all my time, Jane is going to have my head.”

“I’m sure Dr. Nordstrom is thinking, ‘What if she takes it all at once?’” The nurse smiled in camaraderie.

It was almost legendary how seldom Macayla took time off. If she ever decided to take it off all at once, the rest of the practice would be working doubles for months. And they would all do it too, because she had covered for sick kids, weddings, ski vacations, school vacations and various other vacations. She was always the one who covered for someone when they needed it, and the rest of the practice would cover for her in a heartbeat, if she only asked for it.

“I finally got tired of her begging me to do something. It was either take a few weeks off now, or end up kidnapped and shoved aboard some cruise ship. Talk to Mrs. Harris for me, I’ll see you in a few weeks,” Macayla said as she signed the last of the orders.

“Have fun relaxing, Dr. Sullivan,” the nurse called.

“Yeah, fun,” Macayla muttered as she left the maternity floor. Macayla had no idea how to relax. She saw this forced vacation almost like a suspension with pay. She could clean her condo—Lord knows it could use some heavy duty cleaning. That would use up a day, maybe.

Catching up on her karate practice would use up a few more days. When the practice got really busy she tended to miss classes and her cardio workouts. That would only last so long before her instructor, Dave, threw her out of the studio. She could visit with her friend Samara and their eight-month-old baby girl, but Samara had to work, and her husband Connor wouldn’t want company every day.

She could volunteer with her friend Fred in Boston for a few days. He ran a clinic in Roxbury, not the best area of the city, and Macayla spent a few days a month helping him out. Oh, no she couldn’t go this month.

The state was coming in to audit them for next year's funding, and Fred didn't want to look well enough off to afford two doctors even though she volunteered her time.

Maybe she could visit her brother? No, he was working for Habitat for Humanity this summer in rural Georgia. He probably didn't want his older sister cramping his style anyway. There were eight years between the two of them and, at twenty years old, the last thing Kevin wanted was his sister babying him. Macayla didn't consider what she did babying him, but he sure did.

Macayla was still trying to figure out how she was going to survive three weeks without work when she left the hospital through the emergency room and crossed the street to get her car. She always parked at the practice because it was easier than fighting for a spot in the parking garage at the hospital. After waving to the security guard, she rounded the corner and clicked the lock for the door, lighting the interior of the car. Automatically, she looked in the backseat for intruders. She did so out of habit, but almost jumped out of her skin when she actually saw a body in the backseat. She was digging through her purse to dial 911 when the back door opened and a man stumbled out.

"Stay back! I've already dialed 911 and if I scream, hospital security will be over here in a heartbeat!" Macayla backed up and prepared to defend herself. Mentally she kicked herself for telling the security guard to stay at his station. She was only going across the street, she was a black belt in karate, what did she have to fear? What an idiot.

"Macayla! Calm down."

"How do you know who I am? Did you read the registration? Why are you still here, run away before the cops get here!" Macayla was still digging in her bag for the phone. What was the point of making them so small if they got lost in your purse?

“Macayla, it’s me, Jared. Jared Romero, Connor’s friend. Remember?”

Macayla took a better look at the tall stranger leaning against her car. “Move into the light,” Macayla ordered him. Her hands shook, and her heart pounded. If it was indeed Jared, she had a lot more to worry about than if it was a stranger.

The first time she met him he had broken into her apartment and she held a gun on him, while wearing nothing but a towel. She had threatened to shoot him between the legs before she found out he was just bringing a phone so she could have contact with Samara while she and Connor were on the run.

Samara was Macayla’s best friend in the world, and Connor was her husband, who just happened to be Jared’s best friend. Jared hadn’t taken kindly to having a gun pointed at him and paid her back by kissing the life out of her. She had seen him on two other occasions, and in both experiences she had ended up the loser.

As he moved into the pool of light cast by the street lamp, Macayla noticed the broad shoulders, the height, the sheer power of him. She didn’t even need to look at his face to confirm his identity, but she looked up at him anyway. He was close to a foot taller than her five foot three inches, but she refused to be cowed by his size. She boldly stared at his chiseled features.

Oh yeah, she remembered the dark black hair, brutally cut in the military fashion. It did nothing to detract from his looks. His eyes were hazel, with more green than blue, and bloodshot now. His nose had been broken at least once, but it only added character to his stunning face. He had high, sharp cheekbones and a strong, stubborn chin. If it weren’t for the nose, he could pose in any magazine across the country.

“Satisfied?” Jared asked with a snap in his voice. He lurched over to the truck and practically fell over.

“What’s wrong with you? Are you drunk?” Macayla ran over to make sure he didn’t land on his face. He was pale as chalk and she could feel the heat coming off his skin. When she wrapped her arm around his waist, he hissed in pain.

“What’s going on? Are you hurt?”

“Gunshot, in my side, not serious, but I’m losing blood. That’s why I came here, to you.”

“Well, I didn’t think you were having a baby, but I didn’t expect a gunshot. What am I supposed to do?”

“Get it out, stitch me up, and let me go on my way, without any awkward questions.”

“Why should I do that?”

“I just knew you’d ask questions. Do you think I could lie down while you grill me? I’m not feeling too good,” Jared said as dehydration and blood loss got the best of him and he passed out in the car.

“I just knew you’d find a way to avoid answering my questions,” Macayla mumbled as she pushed his heavy legs in the back of the truck. “Don’t you dare bleed all over my seats. This is the first new vehicle I’ve had in almost ten years, you better not ruin my interior.”

Running into the office, she grabbed as many things as she could think of. She had a decent medical kit at home, but she didn’t have everything she’d need for minor surgery. As it was, she only had access to a local anesthetic and taking care of that bullet was still going to hurt like hell.

Macayla drove the short trip to her condo with her mind in overdrive. Where had he gotten shot? Why did he come to her? How was she going to lug his big body into her condo without anyone seeing her? It was after midnight, she should be able to pull around to the front door and get him out, then park the truck in her garage.

Her garage led into the basement of the condo, but Macayla didn't want to drag him up a flight of stairs if she could avoid it. She didn't know if she even could. He was really big, and dead weight was always hard to lift. She tried to put the word "dead" out of her mind.

"Come on, Romero, wake up. I don't know how I'm going to get you into the house by myself." Macayla gently slapped his face, and when he didn't wake up she slapped him a little harder.

"All right. I'm coming." Jared had the glassy-eyed look of someone with a fever, and he could barely stand, even with her help. Macayla had already unlocked the front door and had it propped so she wouldn't have to fight with her keys and Jared at the same time. She managed to help him through the door before he passed out again.

"Damn it, Romero, couldn't you have at least made it to the living room? Now I'm going to have to drag you across the floor and you'll probably get blood stains on my carpet." Macayla tried to bite back her anxiety. She had no idea how long ago he'd been shot, and she had no way of giving him more blood. She could give him IV fluids, but that was it. If he lost too much blood, she would either have to take him to a hospital, or watch him die.

Macayla managed to roll him onto a blanket and drag the blanket into the living room where she could spread out and have some room to work on him. She gathered as many towels as she could find, and methodically set up her tools.

Her mind running a mile a minute, she scrubbed her hands, put on her gloves and went about cutting Jared's jacket and pants off. He was too big for her to try to wrestle his clothes off, and she didn't want to waste precious time. She found a vein easily, inserted the IV and prepared to search for the bullet.

His wound was in his side. She didn't find an exit wound, so the bullet was either shot at the limit of the gun's range, or from a small caliber weapon. She cleaned the area of the entry wound, and used the towels to staunch the blood still seeping out. The fact that it wasn't gushing out was a relief. He'd probably passed out more from dehydration than from serious blood loss. She could solve the dehydration problem with the IV fluids, but he wasn't out of the woods by a long shot.

Macayla gave him the small amount of anesthesia she had with her and waited for it to work before she started probing for the bullet. She grabbed her forceps and gently probed the wound, and when Jared didn't flinch, she dug deeper. The forceps went in all the way to the hilt and she still couldn't feel the bullet. Bullet wounds were tricky. They could bounce around inside the body, causing extensive soft tissue damage.

The fact that he was still walking made her think the bullet hadn't hit his spine. If she couldn't find it soon, she'd have no choice but to bring him to a hospital so he could be operated on. The situation seemed to be leaning towards the hospital when she heard the "clink" of metal hitting metal. She'd found the bullet! She dried her bloodstained hands on one of the towels and got a better grip on the forceps. The bullet was no longer round and its irregular shape was making it difficult to remove.

Macayla was sweating, but hardly noticed. Her hands were steady, and her thoughts calm as she pulled the chunk of metal out of Jared's side, and applied a towel to sop up the blood. She took her surgical needle and thread and stitched up the wounded vein leaking so much blood. Then she took the staple gun she usually used when she closed caesarian sections, and stapled the skin of his side closed.

After checking the IV fluids, she increased their rate. Jared hadn't lost a lot of blood for a gunshot wound, but she was still worried. She

gave him an antibiotic through the IV so it would work quickly, then sat back on her heels to survey her work.

Jared would end up with a scar, but if he got through the night, he'd live. Considering he'd been shot, he'd gotten extremely lucky to have such a minor wound.

Macayla sponged him off and laid a blanket over him to keep his heat in. She turned off her air conditioning as well. The last thing he needed was cold air blowing over him. By the time she cleaned up her supplies, put the towels in the washer to soak, and changed her clothes, it was after four in the morning. She grabbed a pillow from the bunch on her bed and lay down on the couch next to her patient. She was asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Chapter Three

The ringing of the phone woke Macayla at ten that morning.

"Hello?" Macayla grumbled.

"Don't tell me I woke you up?" Samara asked in shock.

"I didn't get to bed until late this morning. What time is it?"

"It's after ten. What happened, late delivery last night? Isn't that always the way, on your last night before vacation someone has to come in at the eleventh hour."

"Uh, not exactly. Is Connor around today?"

"He should be back soon. He always goes to the YMCA on Saturday mornings to play basketball with some of the boys in the shelter there. Why?"

"Do you think the two of you could come over when he gets home? I have something I need him to see."

"You sound serious. Is it anything I can help you with?"

"I may need your help, too, I'll fill you in when you get here."

"Okay, if you're sure. I'll see you when Connor gets home."

"Thanks, I'll see you then."

Macayla went back to check on Jared. He wasn't as hot as he had been the night before, but he was still pale and warm to the touch. She deftly changed the IV bag, tucked the blanket around him more securely, and went off to make some coffee.

While the coffee was brewing she took a shower and started the laundry. She was feeling nervous, and wanted to hide as much evidence as she could. Maybe she had read too many murder mysteries, but she felt an urgent need to clean up all evidence of Jared's injury. After she had the room picked up, she emptied the trash into one big bag and hauled it out to the dumpster. It was Saturday, so the dumpster wouldn't be emptied for a few days. Hopefully no one would be nosing around in the huge bin before the truck came.

As she walked back to her condo, she grabbed yesterday's mail and surreptitiously looked around for anything unusual. Most of her neighbors were young couples or professionals like her. There were no children, and very few older folks. She didn't see anyone up and about. Everyone must be sleeping in.

It would be hard to get in unnoticed through the security gates, but she was nervous anyway. When she got back inside, she pulled the blinds closed as an added precaution. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up, she felt like someone was watching her.

Someone was. Jared.

"What time is it?" Jared asked in a sandpaper voice.

Macayla jumped a foot and turned around in a defensive stance.

"You just scared a good ten years off my life."

"Sorry, I didn't know you were so jumpy."

"I'm not, usually. Of course I don't usually have gunshot victims on the floor of my living room either. It's around eleven in the morning. How are you feeling?" Macayla checked his staples.

"Like hell, but better than last night. I don't suppose you have any pain killers around, do you?"

"I grabbed some ibuprofen on my way out, it's higher strength than what you can get over the counter, but it isn't a narcotic. Sorry, it was the best I could do under the circumstances."

"That's fine. I don't like narcotics anyway. I don't like being knocked out. I'd rather be in pain than out of control."

"Gee, that's a surprise. I'll get them and some water. Do you have to go to the bathroom?" Macayla helped him sit up next to the couch.

His bare chest was well muscled, tanned and a definite delight to the eyes. Macayla kept trying to think of him as a patient, but as she usually treated women, it was quite a stretch.

Even weak with a fever, and recovering from a gunshot wound, he just reeked of maleness. He was strong and solid, and when Macayla helped pull him up against the couch, she felt a tingle run up her spine. Something about this man screamed "Danger!" to her common sense. She moved away as quickly as possible without making a fool of herself. If he affected her this much she'd better stay a little farther away from him.

"No, I'm just thirsty. My mouth feels like cotton. I don't suppose you have any toothpaste handy, do you?"

"I do. I'll help you clean up after you take the medicine. I'd like to keep you on a clear diet today, and if everything is in working order, you can move up to eggs and toast by dinner time. I'll get you some water for now, then we'll brush your teeth. I think I'd be pretty anxious for a toothbrush too."

"You're not joking."

Jared leaned his head back. He hurt like hell. He was extremely sore where she had stitched him, and he felt like someone had beaten him with a baseball bat. Even feeling like warmed over death didn't stop him

from reacting to Macayla's touch. How had she managed to get his clothes off his unconscious body? Thank God he'd been asleep, it had to have been painful.

Most of their encounters were akin to tightrope walking over an alligator pit. Every step carefully thought out before being taken. One wrong move and you'd be in over your head with no way out. Jared just had to watch her to be aroused. Hell, he just had to smell her, hear her, think about her, and he was aroused.

He hadn't seen her since Connor and Samara's wedding in January, and her impact hadn't lessened any. Lucky for him she could put aside her enmity long enough to treat him. She was the only doctor he knew in this part of the country.

"Here's some water and some pills, be careful, they're big. I brought a toothbrush, some toothpaste and this emesis basin for you to spit in. I can't lift you from the ground, and I really don't want you trying on your own and splitting my stitches. I called Samara, and she and Connor will be coming over later in the day." She paused for a breath. Her movements were efficient and clinical, but Jared noticed her hands shook ever so slightly and she wouldn't look him in the eye. "I didn't tell them what it was about, so don't give me that look. I'm going to need their help if you want to stay alive."

"I really didn't want to involve them. I was hoping you could patch me up and I'd go on my merry way."

"Well, I dug a bullet out of your hide, and had to stitch up a vein, you won't be going anywhere for a while."

"I heal pretty fast, I'll be up and at them before you know it."

"That may be true, but you've lost a lot of blood, and you are very weak. If you're hiding from someone you're not going to have any stamina for at least three weeks. And that's being optimistic."

“Three weeks! I can’t afford to stay in one place that long.”

“Why? Who is after you? What underworld character have you pissed off this time?”

“What’re you talking about?”

“You can’t be doing anything legal if you are afraid to go to the hospital because they’ll ask questions.”

“As it happens, I was trying to save the civilian population from getting involved. I’m working for the government, sort of.”

“Then why can’t you go to a hospital? They have military hospitals for just such occasions.”

“I know that. I can’t go because the people who are after me don’t care who they hurt. My only chance of getting out of this alive is to avoid them for the next three weeks. After that, even if they kill me, it won’t matter. The damage will be done and they’ll be out of commission. That’s why I can’t stay here. My only chance is to keep moving. I can’t even get in touch with any of my contacts.”

“Well, I don’t see that happening without some help. You’re not going anywhere just yet.”

“I have to leave. They may have already found the boat I was on and managed to follow me here.”

“I’m pretty sure I wasn’t followed.”

“You don’t know that. I can’t put you or them in danger. I have to move.” Jared’s words started to slur together. “I thought you didn’t give me a narcotic,” Jared accused.

“I didn’t, but that was sixteen hundred milligrams of ibuprofen. It can make you drowsy, and you have no food in your stomach. Go to sleep. I’ll call Samara and work something out.”

“Don’t talk on the phone, they can trace anything. Play music when you talk.” Jared slumped down the front of the couch and was asleep before he could finish his warnings.

“What does he think I am? An idiot?” Macayla grumbled as she tucked the blanket around him.

Macayla got her digital phone out of her purse and called Samara’s digital phone. She hoped Samara had it on, she often left it in the car.

“Hey, ‘Cayla, where are you now?”

“I’m on my way to the mall, can you meet me there when Connor gets home?”

“I thought you wanted him to come over your place?”

“I managed to figure it out on my own. Now I need your help buying something for my brother for his birthday. I never get the size right when I buy for him.” Her brother’s birthday was in a few weeks. Of course she had gotten his presents months ago, but anyone listening wouldn’t know that.

“Alright, if you say so. I’ll meet you there for lunch, then we can go shopping.”

Macayla knew Samara wouldn’t be fooled by the conversation. She hoped that Samara would play along with the ruse until they could talk in person.

They arrived at one of the restaurants only minutes apart.

“Hey, ‘Cayla, could you find a booth in a louder spot or what?” Samara asked as she eased into the opposite side of the booth.

“Sorry, but I didn’t want to wait for a table.” Macayla scanned the room for listeners.

“So what’s the big deal? I know Kevin’s birthday is next month, but I’m sure you’ve not only bought his presents, but also wrapped them and

boxed them for shipping. Not to mention the fact that you've been buying his clothes since he was ten years old. I'm pretty sure that you know how to buy for him by now."

"You're right, of course. Listen, I've got a problem, and I need your help and Connor's help, but I can't have you coming to the house."

"Would you get to the point? This cloak and dagger stuff is killing me."

"Jared Romero was shot and ended up in the back of my truck, I fixed him up, but he lost a lot of blood and is still weak. I left him sleeping at my condo, but I'm worried about him. Knowing him he'll wake up and rip the IV out of his arm before I get back. I wanted Connor's help because he's going to need a secure place to hide for a few weeks while he regains his strength."

"I'm sure Connor will be able to help, but why don't you want us coming to your house?"

"Romero doesn't. He's paranoid, he thinks he was followed. That's why I had to meet you here at a bar where it's so noisy that no one can overhear us. All the precautions are making me nervous. This morning I cleaned up everything and threw it in the dumpster. Like anyone would be looking through my trash. I'm telling you, this paranoia is catching"

"Connor always says a little paranoia never hurt anyone. Can I tell him about this?"

"Yes, you would anyway. I'm just meeting you here so I have an excuse to buy Romero some clothes. I had to cut his clothes off to get to his wound."

"Oh, that sounds interesting." Samara smirked.

"Don't be an idiot. I had to get to his wound quickly. I didn't have time to pull his clothes off. When I'm in 'doctor' mode I don't see more than the area I'm treating. It's not like I was stripping off his clothes to

jump him. He could have been Mr. America and I wouldn't have paid attention last night." Macayla pushed her thoughts from this morning firmly out of her head.

"Last night, hm. What about today?" Samara shot her a knowing grin. "I know what it's like to try to resist such a gorgeous specimen of a man. Not that I did such a great job of it," she said wryly. "Thank God we're married now and I don't have to worry about resisting him at all."

"I don't think resisting him is going to be a problem. I had to argue with him about every thing I did. He's so egotistical, it makes me crazy. He thinks that I'm an idiot, like I don't know how to avoid a listening device. Anyway. I need to get him some clothes, and find a place to hide for about a month. Apparently, he only needs to lie low for three weeks, then whoever is after him will no longer be a problem."

"Who's after him?"

"I have no idea. Do you think he would actually tell me? Oh no. He just wants me to patch him up and send him on his way. And he with more stitches in him than my grandmother's quilt. Arrogant, male jerk."

"Should be a fun three weeks. Are you going to take care of him?"

"What choice do I have? He's going to be on the IV for at least another day. He'll need his dressings changed. I'll have to remove his staples in a week."

"What a great way to spend your vacation. Sounds just like work."

"Well, I really didn't have anything planned anyway. Besides, if I don't take care of him who will? I can't send him to your place and put the baby in danger."

"I'd rather you didn't do that. I'd do anything for Jared, but I've had my fill of running from gunmen. I like my life the way it is now. Boring."

“And I’ll do my best to keep it that way. I just need Connor’s contacts from when he worked for the government. I don’t think Romero has any help coming.”

“Why not?”

“He was shot, but he wouldn’t go to the hospital because they have to report gunshot wounds. He wants to avoid public places because he’s worried about getting others hurt. I would think if he was doing something for the government they would be able to protect him.”

“They didn’t do such a good job protecting Connor. It was his boss that was trying to kill him. Do you think that could be the same thing with Jared?”

“I don’t know. He seems to know who’s after him. He isn’t looking for anyone—he’s just trying to stay alive for three more weeks. He wasn’t exactly in a position to be grilled earlier. I’ll try again later when I go back.”

“You can always withhold his clothes if he doesn’t talk.”

“Right.”

Macayla didn’t know what Jared normally wore. The few times she had seen him in the past were mostly formal occasions. She didn’t think he normally wore suits and ties. She debated over a few items, then decided that beggars can’t be choosers. He’d wear whatever she bought him.

She got a few pairs of jeans, some boxer shorts, T-shirts, and a sweatshirt and sweatpants for while he was convalescing. There were a few button-down denim shirts that looked like they’d fit as well. If they didn’t she could send them to her brother. Luckily, she’d been able to salvage Jared’s sneakers last night, which was a relief. She really didn’t want to have to figure out his shoe size too.

When all was said and done, she'd spent well over two hundred dollars. Buying clothes for a man of his size wasn't cheap. Macayla was loading the clothes into the backseat of her truck after she said good-bye to Samara when she noticed the briefcase on the floor. As unobtrusively as possible she slid it into one of the bags of clothes.

She knew Jared was a computer wizard. Maybe the trouble he was in had something to do with what was on that computer? She hoped no one had seen it in her vehicle.

Driving home, Macayla kept her eyes open for cars following her. Trying to appear as normal as possible, she made sure she stopped at the gas station, the grocery store and the dry cleaners. At each stop she looked around for any car that was at any of the other stops. So far so good. Maybe Jared was just paranoid, but better paranoid than dead.

By the time she got back to the condo, she had been gone almost three hours. She knew Jared would be up by then, and prepared herself for a confrontation. In her experience, no man liked having to depend on a woman for anything. Leaving Jared almost naked, weak, and in pain was almost certain to make him take it out on her.

She wasn't wrong.

Chapter Four

“Where have you been?” Jared shouted as soon as Macayla walked through the door, loaded down with bags.

“I was shopping with Samara. What’s your problem?”

“Oh, fine. Go ahead and leave me here, naked and hooked up to these tubes. I hope you ladies had a good time. Did you get your nails done too?” Jared was in pain, and his bladder was almost bursting. He was too weak to get up off the floor, and he was afraid he would wet himself any minute.

“No, but that’s a good idea. I’ll make sure to do that next time. Now tell me, do you want to complain and whine, or would you like me to help you go to the bathroom? I’ve put almost three bags of fluids in you, I’m sure you have to go by now.”

Jared felt like a furious two-year-old. He desperately needed to relieve his bladder, but hated being so helpless.

“Romero. I’m a doctor. I deliver babies for heaven’s sake. I’m not concerned about seeing your pee-pee. I have a urinal you can use and I’ll even put a towel over it if you’re modest. I know it’s embarrassing for a macho guy like you to have to pee in a cup, but I think you’ll get over it. I promise I won’t look.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” He suspected she enjoyed his discomfort a little too much.

“Yes. It’s always been my life’s dream to have a grown man bleeding all over my new car, passing out on my floor, then acting like a baby who needs a nap. I can now die a happy woman. Either let me help you pee in this thing, or pee all over yourself, I couldn’t care less at this point.”

“Give me the damn cup.”

“Suit yourself. If you get any on my rug, you’ll have to sleep in it.” Macayla handed him the bottle.

“Get me a towel then.”

“Just because you asked so nicely.”

Jared was in too much pain to care that she was laughing at him. After he finished with the bottle, she emptied it in the toilet in the powder room downstairs. He watched her red curls bounce around her face as she brought back a basin of hot water and some washcloths.

“Now that you’re feeling a little better, let me tell you what’s going on,” Macayla said as she began washing him.

“Samara is going to fill Connor in on the situation when she gets home. I assume you trust him to do the safest, most paranoid thing. He’s going to find us a safe place to go. When he does, he’ll contact us by a pre-arranged signal, and then we’ll go wherever he tells us for the next three weeks. By the end of the three weeks I’ll have your stitches out, and you should be almost full strength. I want you to get up later today to try a short walk. The sooner you’re up and around, the sooner you’ll recover.” She wrung the washcloth out and dried him briskly with the towel.

“Are you hungry? I’ll make you some broth, and if that stays down, you can have scrambled eggs.”

Jared tried to concentrate on her words, and not the way her hands covering his body made him feel. It wasn’t easy.

“Thank you. I’m not really that hungry.” He took a deep breath to compose himself. “I’m sorry for being such a pain. I don’t like being helpless. It puts me in a foul mood.”

“What a coincidence, me too. I’ll make you the broth. You may not be hungry, but it will make you feel a little better. Trust me, I’m a doctor.” Macayla winked and turned her back on Jared.

He watched her walk away. There was a half wall separating the kitchen from the dining area and the living room. His gaze followed her as she went from refrigerator to sink to stove.

“So how does a doctor who delivers babies know so much about gunshot wounds?” Jared asked from his seat on the floor. She was extremely efficient, no wasted movements. She was also very easy on the eyes. Jared rarely had the opportunity to just watch her uninterrupted. Her body was shown off to perfection in jean shorts and a white T-shirt. Silky, bright red hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail but stray curls danced merrily around her face.

Her face was the creamy white of most redheads, the accompanying freckles sprinkled liberally across her nose and cheekbones. Emerald green eyes peeked out of long eyelashes. They were usually narrowed in aggravation when she was looking at him, but now they only showed concern. She had a face that belonged on a cameo, and a body that haunted his dreams. She was a small package, but sure packed a wallop.

“I did a stint in the emergency room when I was in med school. I was in Boston, so I saw quite a few gunshot wounds.”

“How long have you been a doctor? You’re only twenty-eight. I thought you just got out of med school.” Jared wanted to keep her talking, but he kept forgetting what he asked as he stared at her.

“No, I graduated from med school when I was twenty-three, then I did two years of post grad work before I joined this practice. I’ve been there three years now.”

“I thought med school was four years long?”

“It is. I made it in three. I graduated from college and high school in three years as well. Samara says I’m a classic overachiever.”

“That’s an awful lot to get done before you hit thirty.”

“Yeah, well I had incentive. Besides, I hated high school. I couldn’t wait to get out.”

“I hear you there.” Jared was a skinny computer geek in high school. His father had left them when he was still in grammar school. Jared hid himself in the world of computer games, and didn’t socialize at all. He wouldn’t return to those years for all the tea in China.

After high school he did a stint in the army. His skills with a computer earned him a place in Special Operations after completing his engineering degree. Grueling workouts in Special Ops helped him put on bulk, build confidence, and learn to look at the world outside of a computer. Having the extra muscle, combined with his chiseled features, and intense eyes made him more attractive to the opposite sex as well. It had been a long time since he had to find his company in a computer game. He hadn’t thought about the geek he used to be in years. That was probably one of the last times he’d felt this helpless.

“I bought you some clothes. Why don’t you see if they’ll fit? I had to throw your other ones away after I cut them off you. I threw out all the bloody clothes, bandages, and anything else that would point to a wounded man being in my condo.

“Smart thinking. Where did you learn to be so sneaky?”

“I’d like to say from my dad, but actually, I read a lot of murder mysteries.”

“Why would your dad teach you about looking for evidence?” Jared thought that was a strange father-daughter bonding activity.

“My dad was in the FBI. When I was little I wanted to be just like him.”

“What changed your mind?”

“He was killed in action when I was sixteen. It kind of changed my perspective.”

“I’m sorry. My mom died when I was eighteen. It’s tough to be on your own. At least you still had your mom around.”

“For another three years. She died of ovarian cancer.”

“Rough. So that’s why you became an Ob/Gyn.”

“Not entirely because of that. I had wanted to be a trauma surgeon initially. After a few months in the emergency room, I changed my mind. I wanted to be the doctor who said ‘It’s a girl’ instead of telling people their loved ones had died. The hours are murder, but overall, it is a pretty satisfying life.”

“It’s a job, not a life.”

“Yeah, well, same thing.” Macayla didn’t know why his comment seemed to fluster her so much. She’d never minded the demands of her job before. In fact, she’d relished the challenge. A little part of her whispered that maybe she used the demands to cut herself off from having to have a life. She shut that voice up quickly. Her life was very fulfilling, and she wasn’t going to let someone like Jared Romero make her doubt her decisions now.

“Was it your dad who taught you how to shoot? As I remember, you were pretty confident with that gun the last time I was here.”

Yes. He was a marksman, and enjoyed target shooting on the weekends. My mom used to call it a busman’s holiday. He made sure if I

ever pointed it at someone I'd be willing to shoot to kill. I think that shows in your stance. I know Samara can be accurate with a gun, but outside of a target range, she's hopeless."

"Have you ever killed someone in cold blood? It's one thing to talk about it. It's a different story to actually pull the trigger when the time comes."

"No, I've never been in a life or death situation. But I could do it. You either have it in you, or you don't. I do. No one will take anyone else that I love away from me again. Ever."

"And who do you love?"

"My brother, Samara, Connor and baby Caitlyn."

"What? No boyfriend? How come no man made the list, Red?"

"There's no man besides my brother and Connor I'd be willing to risk a jail sentence for."

"Not even the man you were going to marry?" Jared threw back at her.

Macayla couldn't believe he remembered her telling him about the walking dysfunction she'd almost married. "Especially not him. If I saw him lying on the side of the road, I'd be certain to put my car into reverse to make sure I ran him over thoroughly. How did you remember him?"

"You said I was just like him when you held your gun on me and I got a tad upset."

"Well maybe I was wrong. You walk upright instead of on all fours, so you can't be that much like him. Here, your broth is ready. I have to finish doing some laundry. Let me know when you want to try some of the clothes on and I'll help you out."

Jared grabbed Macayla's hand before she could run away. "Thank you." Jared's grip was loose, but wouldn't let her go either.

“Don’t mention it.” Macayla tried to pull her hand away. He no longer had a fever, but the contact almost burned her. “You had better hold onto your soup with both hands, you wouldn’t want it to spill in your lap.”

He instinctively protected himself and she fled to the laundry room.

Macayla folded the towels and sheets and put them away. It might be a good idea to pack a bag as well. She didn’t know if she would be leaving with Jared soon, but she liked to be ready for anything.

As she grabbed the extra tube of toothpaste out of the medicine closet, she noticed a package of birth control pills. As an Ob/Gyn she had different samples of pills all over the place. For the first time in eight years, she thought about taking them again.

Macayla sat heavily on the toilet seat, in shock. What the hell had put that thought in her head? She wasn’t even sure she liked Jared, never mind wanted to sleep with him.

That was a big fat lie. She knew she wanted to sleep with him. All she had to do was look at him and hormones she had forgotten about went swimming through her blood stream.

Okay, she knew she didn’t *want* to want to sleep with him. Lying to herself was something she refused to do ever again.

All right, no big deal. So she wanted to have sex with a wildly good-looking man, there was nothing wrong with that. It didn’t mean she *had* to sleep with him. It just meant she was still young and healthy enough to appreciate a fine specimen of manhood like Jared. Any woman with a pulse would consider sleeping with him.

If they were stuck together for three weeks, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, it could happen. No one said she had to do it, but it made sense to be prepared. She chunked them in her purse so she wouldn’t forget them.

That decision made, she continued to pack her bag. While grabbing her sneakers, she whacked her hand on the gun safe in her closet. *Speaking of better safe than sorry...* Packing a little protection of her own might come in handy.

She loaded the gun and put it in her purse too. Extra ammo she could keep in her suitcase, but it wouldn't hurt to be ready.

Pills and pistols, what a combination.

Protected in more ways than one, the only thing left to do was call Kevin and let him know she might be out of touch. She turned the stereo on and dug her phone out of her purse yet again.

"Hey, Sis! Long time, no hear. It's been almost a week since you've called. That's a new record."

"Gee, Kev, I missed you too, but it's embarrassing the way you gush. You're almost done with college, it's time you broke away from the safety of your sister and moved on with your life."

"Ha ha, very funny. What's up? You don't normally call during the day. Is all quiet on the baby frontier?"

"Actually, I'm on vacation for a few weeks."

"You? A vacation? That's a first. I don't ever remember you taking a vacation. What are you going to do? Why don't you go on a booze cruise or something?"

"You know, I was just thinking that it had been a long time since I had too much to drink, puked all over the place and passed out at some complete stranger's mercy. Maybe a booze cruise is just what I need to meet those needs." Macayla hadn't had more than a glass of wine to drink in her entire life. Control freaks rarely got drunk.

"Well you should do something crazy for a change. I kept you tied down for all your crazy years, now's the time to get wild since I'm all grown up." Kevin's voice held a note of rare seriousness.

“You still have two more years of school before you’re all grown up, bucko.”

“Actually, I’ll be done in the spring. I’m taking some classes at the University of Georgia this summer. I’ll pick up a few classes, and meet some southern women at the same time. What could be better?”

“How much are the classes? I’ll send you a check.”

“I paid for them myself already. I got a discount because of the work I’m doing for Habitat for Humanity. The director of the site is a Social Sciences teacher at U of Georgia, and he’s way cool. He hooked me up big time.”

“What about spending money? If you use the money in your savings account for classes, you won’t have anything left for fun.” Macayla chewed a nail. Kevin hated to be a burden, but Macayla wanted him to enjoy himself. She didn’t want him to have to work while he was in school, or push his way through for an early graduation like she did. Kevin was really social, and she wanted him to have fun—so long as he kept getting good grades.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll manage. If I need some money, I’ll ask before I apply for a job as a stripper at the local ladies’ club. I promise.”

“Wise guy. How did you get to be so sarcastic?”

“Must have rubbed off from my big sister.”

“I get blamed for everything.”

“Just kidding. Listen, have fun on your vacation, don’t worry about me. I’m fine, really, I like what I’m doing here, and the director is way cool. He said when I finish my bachelor’s degree he’d like me to apply to U of GA for my graduate work. He hinted at possible funding. They’re really cool down here.”

“Tell me that in August when you’re sweating your butt off. If you still like it down there after working outside all summer long, we’ll talk about a master’s degree from U of GA. For now, have fun, and try to stay cool.”

“Sis, I am always cool. You’re the geek, remember.”

“Dweeb.”

“Dork.”

“Nerd.”

“Loser.”

“That’s Dr. Loser to you, buddy. Don’t be concerned if it’s a while before you hear from me. I have no idea where I’m going, but God only knows if I’ll have a signal for my cell phone. If you can’t get in touch with me, call Samara and leave a message. I’ll leave you to your southern women. I love you, you geek.”

“Yeah, me too. Nerd.”

Macayla couldn’t believe how quickly her brother was growing up. It seemed like it was just last week when she put him on the bus for his first overnight summer camp. She remembered bawling as the bus pulled away.

The crying hadn’t lasted long. She’d been working third shift so that she could be home to put Kevin on the school bus, then study before she got a few hours of sleep. She’d had a sitter in the evening for when she went to class, but she hadn’t liked leaving him for long.

Now he was gone most of the time, and soon he’d be graduating from college. Time was passing her by faster than she could keep up.

She shook that thought out of her head. The sneaky little voice that kept suggesting she wasn’t happy whispered to her again that time was running out. She refused to listen. She was happy. Maybe she wanted to have children someday, but she had plenty of time left. She would not get caught up in self-defeating thoughts.

Shutting off the stereo, she left the room. Everything was as clean as she could get it. She couldn't put it off any longer, she had to go back downstairs and face Jared. How was she ever going to spend three weeks with him and stay sane?

Chapter Five

How was he ever going to spend three weeks like this and not lose his mind? He hated feeling this weak. His hands actually shook from the effort of drinking the broth.

The only problem was, his lower extremities didn't know that the rest of him was weak and in pain. The area between his legs was ready and raring to go every time Macayla got within touching distance. He didn't know what was worse, the wanting her, or the fact that he couldn't do anything about it. He'd been dealing with wanting her for the last year, he figured he could make it a little while longer.

"Do you want to put on the sweatpants? I bought you some jeans too, but I think these would be more comfortable."

Finally. Jared never thought he'd be so excited to put clothes on around a beautiful woman. "Not to mention easier to get on. Do you think we can try that walk now?"

"If you think you're up to it. I'll hold the IV bag. Let's get you up to the couch first, then we'll try to get you on your feet."

"If I fall, there's no way you're going to keep me on my feet."

"I know, but I can at least help you with the IV bag. We'll take it in short stages and see if you can make it."

"I hate this." He didn't even have the strength to work up a good case of anger.

“The sooner you get up, the sooner you’ll get better. Just don’t overdo it.”

Jared just grunted in pain. He was in so much pain it was unbelievable. The ten-yard trip to the powder room seemed to last miles. Collapsing onto the toilet seat, he tried to catch his breath. He never realized how many things you used your abs for.

Mercifully, Macayla left him alone in the bathroom. It was embarrassing enough to need her help to get that far, there was no way she was going to help him take a leak.

Heaving himself up, he took a look at his side in the mirror over the sink. The area around the staples was red and puffy. He’d been injured before, but never this badly. Every other time he’d bounced back after a night’s rest.

Maybe Macayla was right when she said he’d be out of commission for weeks. That wasn’t exactly part of the plan. At least he could go to the bathroom on his own this time. It took him a few minutes, but he was able to change his shorts on his own too. He felt like he had climbed Mount Everest.

“If you can poop, I’ll take the IV out and you can eat a real meal tonight,” Macayla called cheerfully from the other side of the bathroom door. Jared had never, ever, in his entire life discussed his bodily functions this much with a woman. Especially a woman he hadn’t even been intimate with.

“With an offer like that, how can I resist?” He was not going to make it through this.

Hearing Macayla’s laughter from the other side of the door didn’t help the situation any.

“Do you need to inspect my, uh, deposit, or can you just take my word for it?”

"I'll take your word for it. If you're lying to me, I'll put the IV right back in. I'm only shutting it off, I'm not taking it completely out until I'm sure you won't need fluids in a hurry."

"Great. Did you say you had some sweats for me? I think I can probably put them on by myself if you bring them to me."

"Okay. Just a sec."

"Oh, I found your laptop in my truck, I stuck it in one of the bags of clothes and brought it into the house," Macayla said, handing him his pants around the door.

She'd be relieved when he covered some of that skin. After she removed the IV bag he could put on the sweatshirt too. It was a shame to hide something that attractive, but she kept getting distracted when she looked at him. Better he get dressed, than she make a fool out of herself.

"Are you all set? I'll help you over to the kitchen table. It'll do you some good to sit up for a few minutes. Plus it's closer."

"Can you get me my laptop after we sit down? I need to check a few things."

"Sure. Let me take the IV out and then you can put on a shirt. I'll get your bag after that. I don't have an internet line, but you can use the phone line if you need to."

"I'll be all set. How do you function with no internet access?"

"I have it at work and in the hospital. If I need to look up something or check my e-mail I do it then. I'm at work most of the time anyway. Between work and karate, I'm only home to sleep and eat usually."

"Sounds busy. What do you do for fun?"

"I go to karate and cardio kickboxing with Samara. I go out with some of the people from work." She didn't mention that the last time she went

out for something other than a hospital function was over a year ago. “I play with baby Caitlyn. I read. I have lots to do to keep me busy.”

“I didn’t ask what you did to keep busy, I asked what you did for fun. Do you have to leave the needle in my arm?” Jared was looking a little green around the gills as he watched her manipulate the IV. *Hmm, wonder if he has a fear of needles?*

“It isn’t a needle, it’s just a hollow tube. I only used the needle to get the tube under your skin. See, it moves.” Jared looked at the IV wiggling in his arm and turned a deeper shade of green.

“Great. I didn’t realize that,” he said weakly.

“You’re afraid of needles, aren’t you?”

“Of course not.”

“Yes you are, don’t try to fool me. I can spot one of you a mile off. You can relax, I’m all done with needles. That is, unless you don’t take your antibiotics, then I’ll have to give them by shot.”

“I’ll take the pills, I’m happy to take any pill you want.”

“You know, you’re not such a jerk when you’re scared and hurting.” Macayla patted him on the arm.

“I wish I could say the same. Your bedside manner leaves a lot to be desired.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch. Here, I’ll help you get the sweatshirt on, then I’ll make you some dinner. How do you feel about chicken with rice and vegetables? I want you to stick to light foods for a while. I’m surprised you’re ready for more than scrambled eggs. I normally make my patients wait a day before they can have solid food.”

“You’re all heart. Anything is fine, I’m not picky.”

“Then we’ll get along fine. I can make simple meals, but my repertoire is pretty limited.”

“What can you make?” He was still looking a little uneasily at the IV site.

“Chicken, I can do just about anything with chicken. Spaghetti, macaroni and cheese, and chili are about it. I can barbeque too.”

“Sounds good to me. Why the specialty in chicken?”

“When Kevin was in high school he went through a phase where he wouldn’t eat red meat. I had to learn how to cook chicken at least three different ways so we wouldn’t get completely bored. Plus, money was tight, chicken is cheap.”

“How long did you take care of your brother?”

“My father died when I was sixteen and Kevin was eight. I finished high school the following year and went off to college. Dad had a big life insurance policy, so I had a free ride for my bachelor’s degree. I was cruising through college, taking extra courses instead of working, because I could. I finished my degree by the time I was twenty. I was blithely applying to medical schools around the country when my mom got cancer. I came home to help take care of Kevin, he was only twelve then, and my mom died within three months.”

“Wow, that was quick.”

“Yeah, it was in some ways. She didn’t die peacefully. It was a painful three months. By the time they found the cancer it had spread from her ovaries to her stomach and liver. There wasn’t much they could do. They tried chemo and radiation, but it was too far gone.”

“Then what did you do?”

“I went to a local med school, picked up a third shift job, and took care of Kevin.”

“You were awfully young for that. Wasn’t there anyone else to help out?”

“No, I have a few scattered cousins, but no one wanted a twelve year old boy. If I didn’t take care of him, he would have gone to a foster home. As it was, I had to meet with a social worker weekly in order to keep custody. It wasn’t easy, but we got through it. Mom had paid off the house with Dad’s insurance, and I was able to get scholarships to cover what I couldn’t pay for myself. I used some of the equity in the house, but I was afraid of using too much. I’m just lucky that I was able to get scholarships. If I’d had to get student loans, I never would have been able to send Kevin to school.”

“What happened to your dad’s insurance money?”

“My dad always took care of the finances, my mom really didn’t know how to manage a large sum of money. She paid off all the bills, paid for my schooling and the house. After that, there wasn’t much left. When she died, she only had enough insurance to pay for her own burial. There wasn’t any left over for more schooling for me, forget Kevin. I was lucky I got my first degree paid for.”

“You worked damn hard to become a doctor. Do you regret it?”

“Not one minute. I won’t lie, it was hard working and raising a teenage boy, but I wouldn’t have given him up for anything. That kid overcame the death of both of his parents within three years, and he never got into trouble, caused me any problems or didn’t do what was expected of him. We went to counseling, and I’m sure that helped, but I still think he just has a core of strength inside of him that got him through the tough times. He’s in Georgia now working for Habitat for Humanity for the summer. He just told me he’s taking some summer courses too so he can graduate early. He’s worried about taking advantage of me, when I was the one that used up all the insurance money.”

“That wasn’t your fault, your mother wanted to pay for your schooling. I’m sure she never thought that she would die and leave you with the burden of paying for his education.”

“That’s beside the point.”

“Then what is the point?”

“Kevin is not going to start his adult life with college loans if I can help it. I got a free ride, so should he.”

“Seems like you more than paid your fare, but I guess I can see what you mean.”

“Good. I’ll go get your computer, if you get tired, let me know and I’ll help you to the couch. If you can make it, I’d like you to sit up for another twenty minutes or so. You’ll be able to eat some dinner, then you’ll be ready for bed.”

“Bed? It’s only six o’clock; I won’t be ready for bed by six thirty. That’s ridiculous,” Jared scoffed.

He was asleep by six thirty-five.

Chapter Six

Macayla was reading in bed when she heard the thump, and then the cursing. Checking the clock she saw that it was after midnight. Jared probably had to go to the bathroom again. She put on a robe and belted it tightly before she went downstairs.

“Here, let me help you.” She slipped her arm around his waist and helped him stumble across the room. Just because he was progressing quickly, he thought he was all better already. Men!

“I didn’t want to wake you.” Jared gritted his teeth in obvious pain.

“I wasn’t sleeping, I was reading.”

“Another murder mystery?”

“No, a medical journal. Things change almost hourly in the medical field. If you don’t keep up, you could miss out on important information.”

“I didn’t think delivering babies had changed all that much in the last fifty years.”

“You’d be surprised. Delivering babies is only part of my job. I take care of women before and after they have babies too you know.”

“I guess I never thought of that.”

“Yeah, well, you aren’t the only one. Be careful in the bathroom, I don’t want you falling and ripping those staples.”

“Me either.”

Macayla got more pain medicine while Jared was in the bathroom. Since he was off the couch, she pulled out the bed and put clean sheets

on it. It would still be too small for his huge frame, but it had to be more comfortable than his present sleeping arrangements.

“Are you okay in there?” Macayla asked when Jared still hadn’t come out of the bathroom.

“Yes. I’m just trying to work up my courage before I get up,” Jared said through the door.

“Come on, I’ll help. I’m coming in, be sure you’re dressed,” Macayla warned.

Macayla wrapped her arm around Jared’s waist, on the opposite side from his wound. The bathroom was very small so she had to press herself right up against him to maneuver him out. Her unfettered breasts pressed against his chest and she felt the heat of him right through her robe. Great. Getting him across the room in one piece would be hard enough without worrying about whether her nipples showed through.

When Macayla eased him onto the bed, he looked up at her with surprise, “You mean this pulled out into a bed, and I’ve been squished into the couch?”

“Yes, I didn’t have a chance to pull it out before you fell asleep. Don’t complain, I could have left you crammed in the couch all night. Look, I even got you fresh sheets and pillows. Since I’m up anyway, I might as well check your dressing, I also brought you more pain pills.”

“Thank God.”

“Here, take them first, then I’ll check your side.” Macayla gave him the pills and some water, then went to get her scissors and more gauze and bandages. If he hadn’t pushed it too much, his staples would be ready to be removed in a few days. She cut the gauze wrapped around his waist, and gently pulled back the dressing. It stuck in places, which indicated dried blood. That wasn’t so unusual, but she noticed quite a bit of bleeding near the edges. He had been pushing too hard.

“Jared, do you want the staples out?”

“Yes. Can you do that already?”

“Not if you keep pulling them. They’re puffy and bleeding because you’re trying to do too much. You’ve been shot, you need to let your body heal. I can’t help you if you abuse yourself. I’m putting a new dressing on. If you behave, this will be the last dressing I have to put on. In a few more days I can Steri-Strip it and remove the staples. I can’t do that if you keep pulling open the wound.”

“Is that all, doctor?”

He sounded like a peevish child, and she just had to goad him further. “If you’re really good when I take the staples out, I’ll give you a lollipop.” She reached over him to rewrap the gauze.

“I’ll give you something,” Jared growled as he pulled her onto the bed.

Macayla was taken by surprise, and completely unprepared for the assault on her senses. One minute she was changing his dressing and he was acting like a pouty little boy. The next, he was kissing the life out of her.

There was no time to prepare her defenses. He had stormed the gates before she even knew he was at the door. She was kissing him back with all the enthusiasm contained in her compact body when she felt him stroke her rear end. He ran his hands from her butt to the tops of her thighs and back again. Her robe and the T-shirt she wore for pajamas had ridden up when she took her impromptu trip across the bed, so he touched the bare skin of her legs. Shivers went down her spine and the blood roared through her brain. She was lost in a fog, and didn’t feel the need to find her way out any time soon.

Jared's side hurt like hell but he didn't care. While Macayla had been bent over working on his side, her robe and T-shirt had gaped open, and he had a perfect view of her incredible cleavage.

He had been in agony watching her the entire time she was treating him like a four year old. He didn't know how she divorced herself from the spark that lit between the two of them, but he wasn't going to be the only one who was up all night in misery.

With one arm wrapped around her, he used his free hand to hold her head while he plundered her mouth. Her gasp of surprise was the only invitation he needed to invade her mouth. The burning in his side was nothing compared to the burning in his blood. The urge to touch her everywhere rode him hard, but he was afraid if he let go of her she would bolt. He didn't have the strength to play tag around the room. Instead, he pressed her closer to his chest so he could feel the weight of her breasts against him. He moved his hand down to her behind and gently squeezed.

As he reached around to pull her even closer, Jared's side protested the movement agonizingly and he caught his breath in a hiss of pain. Macayla froze immediately.

Damn it. He went from feeling her warm body under his hands to seeing her fumbling with the ties of her robe in three seconds flat.

"We can't just ignore this."

"Oh yeah? Watch me." Macayla walked around the bed without making eye contact and fled the room.



Macayla tossed and turned for hours before getting a sketchy few hours of sleep. Her dreams were vivid, and erotic. She blamed her state

on Jared, and rightly so. Her sex drive had been absent for so long, when it came back, it came back with a vengeance. It was like her body was making up for lost time.

Her last real boyfriend, heck, her only real boyfriend, she'd met when she was a freshman in college. That relationship had deteriorated into a physical and psychological nightmare that had only ended when her mother had died and she'd been forced to care for her brother and think of someone other than the walking dysfunction that was her boyfriend.

Looking back, she could see where she used her brother, school, and later work as excuses not to get involved in another relationship. Her therapist had said she wouldn't truly be healthy until she let go and learned to trust someone enough to have a sexual relationship again. Macayla thought that was bull, but she wasn't going to argue with an expert.

Although she no longer went to therapy, she thought her doctor might have been on to something there. Macayla knew she was something of a control freak, but really didn't see anything wrong with it. Hey, everyone had to have at least one vice.

She'd had men accuse her of being frigid, but she knew she was capable of feeling passion. Obviously, if she had any doubts they'd be taken care of now. Last night she had completely let go of all control and given herself over entirely to Jared's kiss. The fact that she was able to do so with little or no reluctance worried her.

Macayla was never going to be anyone's doormat again.

It had taken a long time to find her self-confidence and build up her self-image. She was not about to lose her sense of self because some gorgeous man wanted her in bed.

She knew that some relationships were between equals, but she had seen very few of them. Samara and Connor had one of those marriages,

but Samara had had to work pretty hard to get it through Connor's head that she was his equal. Macayla didn't know if she had that much patience in her. Samara was more laid back, things didn't get to her as easily as they did Macayla.

Isn't that an understatement?

It didn't matter what situation she found herself in, she tended to try to take it over and control the outcome. Somehow she didn't think Jared was just going to let her do whatever she wanted. He hated her telling him how to take care of himself, and he had come to her for help in the first place. She didn't see him taking a subservient or even equal role in a relationship. With him it would be his way or the highway and she was *never* going down that road again.

No, the smartest thing to do would be to keep things on a platonic level, and when the time came for Jared to go off to his next job she could watch him go without losing a piece of herself. She just needed to stay in control, and stay out of his reach. Whenever that man touched her she went up in flames.

With that resolution firmly in mind, she went downstairs to see how he fared through the night.

Jared woke up feeling better than expected, all things considered. The medicine Macayla had given him had made him drowsy enough to fall asleep, despite the pain in his side, and the pain in his groin.

As much as it galled him, he figured Macayla had her reasons for running away every time things got out of control. He had seen restraining orders when he investigated her past, but that was a long time ago. Could she still be gun-shy about relationships after all that time, or was it just with him? No, that wasn't it. She obviously felt

something for him; she just about exploded every time he touched her. There had to be more to her cold feet than an asshole ex-boyfriend.

But what?

If what she said was true, he was going to have three weeks to figure out a way around her reluctance—and the reason for that reluctance.

He smiled to himself when he heard her hesitant step on the stairs. The shower had stopped running close to an hour ago. She'd been delaying her trip downstairs, he would bet money on it.

"Well don't you look bright and sunny this morning," Jared said when she went into the kitchen without so much as a look in his direction. She was dressed in jeans and a green shirt that matched her eyes. Her hair was a riotous mass around her head.

He had seldom seen it loose, and hadn't realized how long it was. The curls hid the length and thickness of it, but when it was down, he was able to get the full effect. It was like a curtain of flames spilling down her back. The curls bounced over her shoulders and around her face in wild abandon.

Jared wanted to run his fingers through those flames, to push his hands into the heart of it and see if it burned as hot as it looked. His groin tightened instantly.

Jesus Christ. The thought of a woman's hair had never aroused him before. Was there any part of her that wouldn't get him worked up? She looked squeaky clean from her shower with no make-up to hide her creamy skin or freckles. She probably hated those freckles, but he found them enchanting. And arousing, God help him.

"Would you like some coffee?" Macayla asked.

"I'd love a cup. Black please. So what's on the agenda? Another discussion of bodily functions? More poking at me with needles perhaps?

Maybe another session of peeling my skin off slowly and painfully? What other delights do you have in store for me today?"

"As fun and exciting as those things sound, I think that we'll have to find some other amusements. I'm hoping Connor has had a chance to come up with a location for you. The farther away from Samara and the baby we are, the happier I'll be. It's been over twenty-four hours since you fell out of my truck, I'm sure whoever is after you will have an idea of where you are by now."

"I'm sure of it too. If we don't hear from Connor today, I'm going to need you to drive me somewhere, anywhere, so I don't endanger you or the O'Rileys."

"Why don't you tell me a little more about who is after you. Under the circumstances, I think I have a right to know."

"If it's up to me, you'll never have to have any contact with them whatsoever. The less you know, the better."

He could see Macayla gearing up to argue with him when the phone rang.

"Hello?" Macayla answered, giving Jared a look that promised their discussion was not over.

A smile crossed her face, searing Jared to the core. What would it take to get her to smile at him like that?

"I'll be right over."

"What's up?" he asked as she hung up the phone and reached for her purse.

"I'm going over to Samara's, I think she has a plan. Why don't you eat a little of this toast, I'll be back as soon as I know what's going on. You might want to take a nap, we may be traveling when I get back."

"I hope so. The sooner we get moving, the better."

Chapter Seven

Macayla got to Samara and Connor's house in record time. That itchy feeling at the back of her neck was happening again. She wanted to be on the move, fast. Hopefully Connor had come up with a plan.

"Hey Sam-Sam! Where is that beautiful godchild of mine?" Macayla asked as soon as Samara opened the door.

"Boy you got here quick." Samara handed over the chubby eight-month-old.

Caitlyn Alexandra O'Riley had her mother's blonde hair, and her father's cobalt blue eyes. The devilish personality was hers alone. She had four teeth, and was crawling, climbing, and basically getting into everything she could reach. Macayla knew she would be walking before long. Again, time was flying by faster than she could handle.

"Well, I figured you had more than shopping on your mind."

"Why don't you come into the kitchen where we can talk?" Samara suggested.

Macayla followed her through the living room, swinging the baby high overhead as she went.

"Good, now we don't have to worry about anyone listening in on us." Samara put some plastic bowls on the floor for Caitlyn to play with and poured Macayla a cup of coffee. "Connor put up some sort of scrambler that deflects listening devices. The only problem is that it has limited range so we have to talk in the kitchen. Here's the plan. Connor already

left, he's running mindless errands all over the place, trying to pull off any tails that might be following us. I'm going to go to the grocery store, like I told you over the phone, just in case someone was listening to that conversation."

"Jeez, paranoid much?" Macayla's gut clenched as she thought about someone listening in on her conversations and possibly putting her friends in danger.

"You know my husband, better paranoid than dead."

"God, I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. It's not like I didn't put you in danger when I had my little adventure. Turn about is fair play and all that."

"I don't think that includes life threatening situations."

"Whatever. Now listen to me and stop complaining. Connor has already arranged for a safe house to be made ready for you, but it's all the way in Maine. Jared isn't running from the government, so we can use their safe houses without worrying about that."

"How do you know he isn't running from the government?"

"Jared called Connor last night and they discussed what was going on."

"That's nice, he didn't bother filling me in. Guess it's too much of a liability to let me know what's going on under my own nose."

"Don't feel too bad, Connor didn't tell me more than that either. I didn't have time to worm the rest out of him. Anyway, as I was saying, I'll go grocery shopping. While I'm there, I'll pick up some supplies for you. I'll take your truck, and put the maps and directions in there too. Connor has a back pack for Jared, I think it has a gun in it, so be careful."

"I'm always careful with guns."

"I know, but it's probably already loaded, so don't drop it or anything."

“Oh brother.”

“Don’t roll your eyes at me, I’m just worried about you. I’m not going to see you for three weeks, and I don’t know who’s after Jared or what you’re up against. I hate stuff like this.”

“I’m not exactly loving it either. I remember what it was like when you and Connor were on the run. But things turned out okay for the two of you. At least this time we know how long it’ll last, and we know, or at least the men know, who’s after Jared.”

“I don’t know...”

“Trust me, I have everything under control.”

“Famous last words.”



Everything went the way they planned, for once. Macayla took the truck filled with groceries back to her place, parked it in the garage, and loaded it up with more supplies. When she had her bags, Jared’s few items of clothing, his laptop, and her advanced first aid kit loaded, she went back and got Jared.

Getting him down the stairs was no picnic, and if anyone was listening to them, they would have gotten an earful of Jared’s swears. Eventually Macayla got him into the backseat of the truck where she covered him up with a blanket so no casual observers would notice him. The windows were tinted, but she didn’t want to take any chances.

Macayla made one last trip through the house to make sure everything was locked and her gun was still safe in her purse. She had a permit to carry a concealed weapon, but she had never before felt the need to use it. She hoped she was just being overly cautious this time.

Something told her she wasn’t.

When she pulled out of her condo complex, she surreptitiously looked for any followers. Traffic was heavy and it was hard to notice any one particular car following her. She made a point to file all the cars she could see in her mind so, if they reappeared, she would remember them. She might not be able to notice anyone following her now, but as they went farther north, there would be fewer cars and it would be easier to spot a tail.

“How are you doing back there?”

Jared was bent double in the backseat and that just couldn't be comfortable.

“It's getting hot under this blanket. How much longer until I can get out?”

“Well, it's almost two hours to New Hampshire. By the time we get there, it should be safe enough for you to show your face.”

“Two hours! How long will it take us to get to the safe house?”

“It's out in the boonies, it's going to take us almost ten hours to get there.”

“Great. I'm glad you don't drive a sports car.”

“I'll need to stop for gas in New Hampshire, you can get out and stretch there. Until then, try to sleep, it'll help pass the time. We won't get to the house until late tonight.”

“Wonderful. I hope they have a bed there. A king size bed that I can stretch out on, I'm so sick of being crammed into tiny spaces.”

“Bitch, bitch, bitch. I opened the bed out for you, didn't I?”

“Yeah, and my feet hung a good six inches off the end.”

“Some people are never happy.”

“Just wait, Red, when I get my hands on you...” Jared left the threat hanging in the air.

“Promises, promises.” She really liked tweaking his tail, so to speak.

"If you weren't such a coward, I could have fulfilled some of those promises last night," Jared taunted.

"I wasn't being cowardly, I was being prudent. I'm not afraid of you."

"Prove it. We're going to be alone together for the next three weeks. I dare you to stay in the same room as me."

"I don't need to prove anything, and I'm not going to let you manipulate me." Macayla knew what he was trying to do. And damn it, it was working. She could never refuse a dare.

"Coward."

"I am not going to let you play me like a teenage boy on a dare. I don't have to prove anything to you, and that's final."

"Sure."

"I don't have anything to worry about. I know my own mind."

"Whatever you say." Jared was all but laughing out loud.

"I am not going to give in to your ridiculous dare."

"Fine."

"Alright! But I get to pick the room."

"It's a deal."

"Fine."

"Oh, Red?"

"What now?" she asked in frustration.

"Gotcha!"

"We'll just see about that," Macayla vowed.

Chapter Eight

By the time Macayla found the safe house, she was ready to drop from sheer exhaustion. Jared had long since fallen into a fitful slumber in the seat next to her. She had let him out of the backseat when they crossed over the line into Maine.

Since there was no one on the road at all, she figured it was safe enough for him. The area they were in was very isolated. Huge trees just beginning to bud lined the two-lane road she'd been driving on for hours. She passed the "road" to the house twice before she finally found it. It was only paved for about a hundred yards, then it was dirt for the next ten miles.

There were still piles of snow packed against the trees, and Macayla was glad the ground was still frozen. By the ruts in the road, she could tell that it washed out on a regular basis. Thank God it wasn't raining. She had no desire to see how well her four-wheel drive actually worked. She had bought her truck this spring, and didn't relish baptizing it in mud.

Jared had woken up when they hit the dirt road. It took almost half an hour to get to the house from that point, and she was sure he felt every single bump and rut. When they got to the house, Macayla took the keys out of the envelope Connor had left in the glove box. She left the car running and the lights on so she could open the front door.

“The place is a bit chilly. Why don’t you wait here while I light a fire and get the generator going? I can’t tell much in the dark, but Connor said it was well furnished, so you should be able to lie down soon.”

“I can help, I’ll start unloading the car.”

“No! Please, Jared, if you blow your stitches, I have no contacts up here and no way of re-stitching you. Just let me do it. It may take a little while, but I’ll get it done. If it makes you feel better, when we leave I’ll let you load up the car while I lounge on the couch. Okay?”

“I hate this,” Jared grumbled. “Just remember, we’re sharing a room.”

“Fine. It’ll save fuel anyway.”

Macayla took off with a flashlight around the building to look for the generator. Connor had told her it was just like starting a lawnmower. Macayla hated lawnmowers with a passion, that’s why when Kevin graduated from high school she sold the house and bought a condo.

Pull cords were not made for people with short arms. She had to practically wrench her arm out of its socket to get the darn thing working.

Luckily she didn’t need to lug any wood into the house tonight. Whomever Connor had contacted had laid in a supply for her. She and Jared had eaten some fast food on the way up, so all she had to do was get the perishables out of the car and the rest could wait for morning.

Oh, and she had to pick a bedroom for her and Jared to sleep in. She couldn’t believe she fell for the oldest trick in the book. .

Fumbling with the lock on the door, she pushed her way inside and flicked on the lights. It was so cold inside the house she could practically see her breath. Without wasting any time, she spotted an electric heater and turned it up full blast.

Not exactly energy efficient, but she wanted to be warm. She eased her conscience by mentally promising she'd only heat the rooms they would be in.

The house was one floor with a cellar. Macayla was not going to investigate everything tonight. She just wanted to find a room and go to sleep.

How she was going to do that with Jared around, she had no idea.

The first bedroom had a queen size bed, dresser and a closet. It shared a bathroom with the room next door. There was no way Macayla was going to share a queen size bed with Jared. He would take up the whole thing.

One down, two to go.

She went through the adjoining bathroom to the next room. This was perfect. A dresser separated two twin beds and a tall chest of drawers was against the wall. She'd check the other room to be sure, but she thought this would be a way to beat the dare, and not have to sleep right next to Jared all night.

A snicker escaped as she walked down the hall. He was going to be so ripped when he saw the sleeping arrangements. Served him right.

The last room was on the opposite side of the hall. It was the master suite, and Macayla was sure Jared would be moving there as soon as he released her from the dare. It boasted a huge lake of a bed and a gorgeous cherry dresser. The master bathroom had a separate shower and tub complete with whirlpool jets.

Macayla gave a sigh over the luxury she was passing up, but a dare was a dare, and she had no intention of losing. She went back across the hall and turned on the heat in the twin bedroom. The living room was warming up, but she would probably need to light the wood stove

tomorrow. She didn't bother turning on the heat in the kitchen yet, she just made sure the refrigerator was working and went back to the car.

Jared had fallen back asleep, which was for the best. She didn't want him trying to help, then falling and ripping out his staples or his stitches. It took several trips to get all the necessities inside. She still had most of the truck to unpack, but that could wait until tomorrow.

"Jared. Come on, wake up. I'll help you into the room and you can go back to sleep, I promise."

"I'm up, I'm up." He rolled his shoulders and stared up at her bleary-eyed. "I cannot wait to get horizontal. I am so sick of being cramped up." Jared groaned as Macayla helped him up the steps and into the house. She walked him down the hall listening to him mutter and complain the whole way.

"You didn't welsh on our dare, did you? You're taking this awfully calmly. You're up to something."

"Whatever you say. Our room is the second one on the left." Macayla struggled to hide her laughter. When Jared stopped dead in the doorway of their room and stared at the twin beds with a look of horror, she broke out into gales of laughter.

"You cheated," Jared accused.

"You said share the same room. You said nothing about sharing the same bed."

"You knew what I meant."

"Maybe I did, and maybe I didn't. Regardless, this is the only room with the heat on, if you want to find a new room, you'll have to do it tomorrow. Now here, sit on the bed and I'll help you get your shoes off and you can go to sleep."

"All right, Red, you won this battle, but the war isn't over yet."

"Don't be a sore loser. Now come on, into bed."

“I’ll get even, don’t you worry.”

“Whatever you say. I’ll be in the bed right here, as per our dare. Good night.”

Macayla went into the bathroom to brush her teeth, wash her face, and change into the long cotton nightgown she’d brought with her. One of her elderly patients had given it to her for Christmas one year and she’d never worn it. She generally wore extra-large T-shirts to bed, but had packed the nightgown as a precaution.

Good thing too.

It was a long-sleeved, high-necked, white cotton gown that pooled around her feet. She had to lift up almost a foot of fabric to walk in it without tripping. It was straight out of the Victorian Era and hid any hint of her shape. A smug smile lifted the corners of her mouth as she opened the door.

“Do you need some help getting to the bathroom?”

Jared looked at her standing in the doorway with the light from the bathroom behind her. The loose gown silhouetted every curve in her body. Her nipples were pebbled from the cold, and the movement of her breasts swaying under the gown mesmerized Jared. His throat was dry, and his mouth watered at the sight of her lush body revealed through the gown.

The whole point of making her share a room with him was to break down her defenses, to make *her* lose control, not him. He thanked God he was in the shadows so she couldn’t see the direction of his gaze, or the state that gaze put him in. He cleared his throat to answer her as coherently as possible.

What was it she asked again? Oh yeah, did he need help getting to the bathroom. Right, like he'd be able to walk across the room with those breasts pressed against his side.

"No, I'm all tucked in for the night."

"Okay, I'll turn out the light then." Macayla turned around to shut off the light in the bathroom and Jared groaned as her derrière was perfectly outlined. "Are you okay? Do you need more pain medicine?" Macayla asked, turning around again.

"No, I just moved too quickly that's all."

"If you're sure?"

"Oh, I'm sure I don't need any pain medicine."

"Okay. Goodnight." She shut off the light and ended his torment for the moment.



The next morning dawned bright and chilly. Macayla couldn't believe how cold it was. She had been wearing shorts at home—it was late June for heaven's sake. She couldn't believe there was still snow in the shade of the trees.

Wrapping a blanket around her for warmth, she shuffled to the kitchen to put the coffee on. She did *not* function without coffee.

When the caffeine had a chance to kick in, she was finally able to get her bearings. Tall trees surrounded the house, blocking any morning sun. No wonder it was so darn cold. She'd only packed one sweater and one sweatshirt. She had a feeling she was going to need more than that if it was this cold much longer.

Creeping into the bedroom, she carefully unpacked her clothes and tiptoed into the bathroom to grab her cosmetic bag. She noticed Jared

still sleeping and debated about running the shower. He had to be exhausted after their ride yesterday and needed to rest.

How convenient for her that there was another bathroom across the hall. Snagging her things, she slipped into the master bedroom and stared at the gorgeous bathroom.

She wanted to take a hot bath with the jets on, but decided that could wait until she had more time to relax and enjoy it. She still needed to unload the car and wanted to explore her surroundings a little bit better. With a sigh of longing, she cranked the hot water to just below boiling and stripped down. Stepping into the hot shower felt wonderful, but washing off yesterday's travel dust felt even better.

Squeaky clean and wide awake, she was ready to tackle the day fifteen minutes later. She pulled her hair into a sloppy bun at the back of her neck and let it do what it would. She had long since given up trying to tame it.

When she went back into the bedroom she had shared with Jared, she found him leaning against the shower waiting for the water to heat. He had shucked his sweatpants, and stood in nothing but a pair of boxers. The noise of the shower had masked Macayla's arrival, and Jared was unaware of her gaze roaming over his large frame.

Macayla had worked very hard to put his physique in proper perspective while she was tending to him. All that work tumbled down around her like a house of cards. His body was more incredible than anything she had ever seen, in person or in the movies. The muscles of his back bulged and rippled down to a narrow waist, tight buttocks and muscular thighs. His legs were like tree trunks, large and solid.

Apparently the water had heated up to the desired temperature because Jared pushed his boxer shorts down and stepped into the shower. Macayla's face flamed at the view of his naked butt, but for the

world couldn't move a muscle to let him know she was there. Once he stepped into the shower the spell was broken, but she still stood motionless for a few minutes more. The sight of his naked body was burned into her brain, and she didn't know if she would ever get it out.

She didn't know if she wanted to for that matter.

Shaking herself out of her stupor, she slipped into the room and put her things away. They would have to talk about what rooms they were going to move to, she was sure Jared would want the master bedroom. She quietly went to the bathroom door to pull it closed before Jared came out of the shower and gave her another show. She was feeling plenty warm now just from getting a glimpse of his bare backside, she'd have to turn down the heat in the house if she got a front view.

By the time Jared had finished showering and changed into jeans and a shirt, Macayla had her blushes under control, and was looking at a map of the area in the living room.

"How are you doing? I heard you in the shower. I was surprised that you were up and around already. It was rough trip yesterday, I can't believe you could even get out of bed on your own." Macayla knew she was babbling but couldn't seem to stop herself.

"I told you I heal pretty fast. It took me a little while to get from my bed to the bathroom, but I took it slowly and it wasn't so bad. I'm feeling a lot better actually."

"Don't the jeans bother your staples?" Macayla eyed his lean form in the snug jeans. Denim did wonderful things for that man.

"No, men wear their jeans on their hips, so they're below the staples. When do you think you'll be able to take them out?"

"That depends on how swollen the area is around them. Why don't you let me see them, and I'll give you a prognosis."

Macayla had Jared sit at one of the kitchen chairs so she could look at his side without him wobbling on his feet. She'd taken the IV out before they'd left for the trip and was glad to see the site healing nicely.

"I didn't put any new gauze on them, I didn't know where it was."

"Don't worry about it, since they aren't bleeding anymore you won't need a dressing. In fact, they're looking pretty good for only two and a half days. Let's give them a little more time to make sure the skin is holding, then I'll Steri-Strip you up."

"You said something about stitches too? Where are they?"

"Inside. I used stitches that will be absorbed by your body when you heal. I had to stitch up a vein that the bullet nicked. You're incredibly fortunate it wasn't a major blood vessel or I wouldn't have been able to do it on my own. You're also lucky that the bullet didn't have much force behind it, or you'd have been dead before you ever made it to my truck."

"What can I say? I was born under a lucky star."

"That, or God protects drunks and fools. Are you going to tell me what happened now? We're stuck here for three weeks, and I can be really persistent when I put my mind to it. You don't want me on your case for three weeks, trust me."

Jared looked at her and thought about her words. There was nothing he could do for three weeks. When their time was up, the information he had would end up on every front page across the country. He'd have to edit things a little, but he should be able to give her enough to keep her from nagging him. He had little doubt she'd keep at him until she got what she wanted anyway.

"As you know, I take contract work from various sources."

"Some of which are even legal."

"All of which are legal. I went legit after Caitlyn was born. I didn't want her godfather to be in jail or murdered if she needed me."

"I must admit I'm shocked. That was a very far-thinking thing to do. I'm impressed."

"Gee thanks. Does that mean I have improved my rating to 'human' on your scale?"

"You're getting there. As you were saying..."

"Right. You know I do contract work. My last job was for the feds. They suspected something was going on in a number of banks, and they were afraid if they ordered an internal audit, it would scare off the people behind the scheme. They wanted someone who wouldn't show up on the banking radar to basically audit the accounts of the four biggest banks in the country."

"So they called you."

"They wanted the best, and my name came up. I was able to get into the system undetected and with the help of a few financial geniuses, we figured out what was going on."

"Which was?"

"There's a coalition, an illegal coalition, of bankers. They're the upper echelon, the very top of the banking world, and they're as crooked as your lowest pick-pocket."

"What could they do? Aren't there all sorts of safeguards in place so they can't form a monopoly?"

"They didn't form a monopoly, they instituted a program that takes half a cent a week out of every customer's account."

"Half a cent, who would notice that? It doesn't even amount to much over the course of a year. That's a quarter a year for heaven's sake. You made them sound like the next 'Billy the Kid'."

“Think about it, a quarter a year from one account wouldn’t be noticed by anyone, right?”

“That’s what I just said.”

“Except that, each one of these major banks has close to five million customers, most with at least two accounts. Multiply forty million by just over a quarter a year, then add in the fact that they’ve been doing this for almost ten years with no one the wiser, and see what you come up with.”

“That’s something like ten million dollars a year. Right?”

“Yup, times ten years. All of it going to offshore accounts right through the internet, with no one the wiser.”

“How would anyone know? I’m probably one of their customers, and I’m really careful with money, but I wouldn’t notice twenty-six cents missing over the course of a year.”

“That’s what they were counting on. If only one bank did it, it wouldn’t have had the draw that it did. By having the four biggest banks in the country in cahoots, they have more accounts to pull from. Plus, by forming the coalition, they’re all in it together, which means they can cover for one another. They also have the power to derail any attempts made that could find them out. The only reason anyone had an inkling something was going on was because the system got hit with a nasty virus and had to be completely overhauled.” Jared took a deep breath and thought about how much he could say without putting her in danger.

“Some sharp-eyed computer tech figured it out and notified the feds. That’s probably the only thing that kept him alive. He found a problem with one of the codes and made a note of it. The next day, the code was fixed so he didn’t say anything to the bank he was working for. Later on he tried to figure out why it went wrong and how it got fixed. When he figured out what it did, he knew it had to come from the top, so he sent it

to the feds, who pulled him into the witness protection program. They've been trying to get enough proof to nail the entire coalition for years, but it's a long, complicated process. I've only been brought in at the tail end of things because they need help with the computer program."

"So how did you get shot? I have a hard time picturing some graying banker pulling a gun on you."

"It wasn't the bankers who found me out. It was the guy who wrote the program and formed the coalition, Shaun Hints. He's the king of white-collar crime. He has plenty of hired muscle to make sure his hands never get dirty."

"I just have a hard time picturing the president of a bank getting involved in something like this. Even if he wasn't doing the dirty work."

"If someone told you that you could make a million dollars a year, tax free, and no one would be hurt, wouldn't you do it? All you had to do was turn over your mainframe to me for one night while I installed a program, then after that you wouldn't have to know a thing."

"It just seems hard to believe. I mean, if someone approached me like that the first question I would ask would be 'what's the catch?'"

"The first one was probably the hardest. Once he was able to convince one Chief Financial Officer to let him into their system, the rest would fall in line. It always seems easier to do something you know isn't right if someone else is doing it too. Even if they had some trepidation about it, once they got their first bank statement from the offshore account, I'm sure they found a million reasons to justify their actions."

"That's the other thing, these guys aren't your bank tellers, they're the bank presidents, a million may not be chump change, but for them it isn't anything they couldn't earn on their own. Why take the risk?"

Jared didn't think she'd want to hear that taking the risk was sometimes the best part of a deal. "I think it was probably the fact that it

was a million, tax free that sweetened the pot. After all, they have to report all their earnings, and even if they make a million in salary the government is going to take a share. This way they got it all.”

“It’s hard to believe anyone is that greedy.”

“I don’t think they start off that way, I think it builds up over time. Anyway, the upshot is, I found the program in the four banks, I was able to trace it, and get solid evidence of the coalition. What I was not able to get was the proof of Hints’ involvement. We culled the weakest link from the coalition, and they’re getting everything he knows in exchange for a softer sentence. In the meantime, I’m supposed to lie low until all the depositions are taken and all the I’s are dotted and T’s crossed. If something should happen to me, they don’t think they could recreate the trace, and there is a chance the whole thing could get thrown out of court. If they can get a few more confessions, they won’t need my testimony as much.”

“And they’re supposed to have this whole thing wrapped up in three weeks?” Macayla asked incredulously.

“More or less. I only have to lie low until they have enough evidence to indict Hints. Once they get him, my trace goes into evidence, and it won’t matter if I’m around.”

“That’s comforting. Why didn’t they set you up in a safe house then?”

“They tried, Hints found out the location in less than twenty-four hours. Next we tried a boat, figuring if I was moving, I couldn’t be found. I’m pretty sure he hacked into the Coast Guard and got the boat’s identification number. That’s how I got shot. I was able to outrun their boat, but I got hit from a distance. If the boat I was in had been slower, it probably would have blown up from the bullets that hit the sides, as it was it died on the Connecticut River. Too bad, I liked having a boat.”

“What about this place? If he managed to find the other location, don’t you think this one would be as easy to find?”

“No, because it isn’t part of the witness protection program. It’s just a house that one of Connor’s old bosses owns. He had it built out here so he could be alone, yet safe from the drug dealers he upset over the years. The government wouldn’t build a safe house this close to a trailer park, too risky.”

“Then isn’t it too risky for you too?” Macayla asked.

“No, because Hints doesn’t know I have Connor as a contact, and Connor’s boss has no idea why he wants the use of the house. Hints might be able to find a connection between Connor and I because of our time together in the military, but we’ve never officially worked together since then. Plus, I don’t even know who owns the house, so I have no connection to the owner at all. Is it one hundred percent safe? Probably not. Is it safe enough for three weeks? I think so. I have a feeling Hints is more worried about covering his tail than he is about trying to eliminate me at this point. He’s probably already fled to some tropical island somewhere.”

“Yeah, but have his hired guns?”

Chapter Nine

Shaun Hints brooded in his mansion on his tropical island. He sat in his office overlooking the turquoise water of the Caribbean and wasn't soothed by its beauty. Indeed, its very calming effect seemed to mock the turmoil that engulfed his life. The waves should be boiling and seething, just like his thoughts.

He turned to his bodyguard, Rocky, who was placidly standing in his accustomed spot by the door. It didn't matter what room Shaun was in, he could look to the left of the door and there would be Rocky. There was something both reassuring, and annoying about it. Didn't he just once want to stand near a window or something? Be that as it may, Shaun contemplated his bodyguard before speaking.

"You're sure your men checked every boatyard from Washington D.C. to Nova Scotia and back down to Florida?"

"Yes sir. There's been no boat brought in to any boatyard for repair work to fix bullet holes. There was a boat similar to the one he was seen in, but it wasn't in for bullet holes. There're a lot of boatyards on the East Coast, but we made sure we checked every one on the ocean."

"Rocky, I sure hope you're not making excuses for the ineptitude of your men. You know how I hate excuses."

"No, sir," the bodyguard assured him earnestly.

He was a mountain of a man, six feet two inches and two hundred-fifty pounds of pure muscle, but was terrified of his pint size boss. It

pleased Shaun immensely to know that he, who was barely five four and weighed in at one-fifty soaking wet, scared Rocky down to his toes.

“Never mind. We’ll find Mr. Romero eventually. His type always seems to turn up like a bad penny. How are you doing on that other matter we discussed?”

“Good, good, sir. I’ll have the whole thing taken care of in a week or two.”

“Two weeks? What’s the problem, Rocky? Two weeks is much too long for this operation.”

“Well, boss, you said you wanted it special.”

“You had better make sure it’s very special. Two weeks is cutting it very close, those idiots in the Justice Department could have everything they need by then.”

“All they got is talk and that won’t do any good without a witness, now will it, sir?”

“It had better not,” Shaun growled.



Macayla had finished putting away their supplies for the time being, and was waiting for Jared to finish his recon of the house when she clued into something he had said before.

“Hey, Romero?”

“Yeah?” Jared said as he finished his survey of the available rooms.

“You said something before about a trailer park being near here. How’d you know that?”

“While you were unloading the car last night I looked at one of the maps Connor had left for us. There’s a trailer park about two miles back off the paved part of the road.”

“Oh. What kind of trailer park? Like doublewides or pop-ups?”

“I think it’s for summer campers. It backs up to these trees. Connor left me a note that said they have a little store there that sells some of everything. They even have barn dances every Saturday night, complete with a country western band and all the beer you can drink.”

“Gee, our own little slice of heaven.”

“What, you don’t want to go dancing with the tourists?” Jared flashed her another of his devastating grins and Macayla felt her knees turn to water. She was supposed to be an intelligent woman, but he turned her mind to mush.

“You can’t do any dancing for quite some time,” she said, trying to hide the effect he was having on her heart rate.

“Country western isn’t my thing anyway. Who knows? After three weeks we might want to get out and see other people just for the novelty of it.”

“You may have a point.”

“Tell me, what are we going to do to keep ourselves occupied for the better part of a month?” Jared’s eyes glimmered wickedly.

“I can go out for day hikes, I have plenty of journals I haven’t read, and I brought along some books that I’ve been meaning to read. I plan on sleeping late, taking relaxing baths in that beautiful tub, and practicing my karate. After the third day, I’ll just have to wing it.”

She had no idea how they were going to get through three weeks in the back end of nowhere. She hadn’t known how she was going to do it when she was on vacation at home, and there she had her friends, her karate studio, and her home to clean.

“How long have you been taking karate?” Jared asked.

“I started eight years ago, right after my mom died. The therapist Kevin and I were seeing suggested we do something together to find a

way to bond. I'd been out of the house for four years, and he was only nine when I went to college. We were really strangers in a lot of ways. A shared activity helped us to get more comfortable with each other. Once he got into high school he dropped out of karate to play soccer and baseball instead." Macayla thought back to how having something other than school and work had saved her sanity back then.

"I kept it up, that's how I met Samara. We were the only two women in the class so we were usually paired off together. We both have similar independent streaks, so we got along really well. I had never really had a best friend before. I was always younger than everyone I went to school with. It was nice to have someone to talk to, to lean on, and to laugh with. She helps me relax, and I make sure she doesn't let people walk all over her. It works out well."

"I can believe it. Although, I have a hard time believing Samara lets anyone walk all over her. She seems like a pretty tough cookie."

"She is a tough cookie for the most part. It's only with the people she loves the most that she can't stand up for herself. Her parents had her life scripted out for her, and for so long she followed their plan and was miserable. When she decided to branch out on her own it was hard for her. She hates to disappoint anyone, and she didn't want to let her parents down, but she was miserable teaching. She's much happier now."

"So you gave her the courage to go it alone, because you always have?"

"Not really, I just let her know I would support her decision, and be there for her either way. She was a big help to me when I was raising Kevin. She would help take him to games and practices when I couldn't get out of class or work on time. She listened to me worry when he was

out on dates, panic over how we were going to pay for college, and cry when he went to summer camp for the first time.”

“It must have been hard to raise a teenager when you were barely out of your teens yourself.”

“I was lucky, Kevin was a really good kid. He didn’t give me too hard a time.”

“So how did you manage to pay for everything and still have time for medical school?”

“I worked as a cleaning lady at office buildings at night. I figured out that I could clean the places in almost half the time if I got organized, so I busted my butt for half my shift, and studied for the other half. All the company cared about was that the offices were clean, as long as I did my job I could use my free time any way I chose.”

“So you were a cleaning lady huh?”

Macayla raised an eyebrow at his condescending smile.

“Yes I was, and a damn good one too. There’s nothing wrong with cleaning for a living. It worked out well for me while I was raising Kevin, I’m not ashamed of it.”

“I don’t think you should be. My mother was a cleaning lady, probably for the same reasons as you. My dad ran out on us when I was a kid. My mom raised me by herself until she passed away.”

“Is that why you wanted to make sure you were around for Caitlyn? Because your family wasn’t?”

“I never thought about it that deeply, I just knew that I didn’t want her to need me, and I’d be in jail for hacking into someone’s computer for cash. The right and wrong of it didn’t bother me so much until I thought about the responsibility that went with having a family again. Connor and I were both loners, we didn’t have any family except the army. When

you let people back into your life, you have a responsibility to be there for them.”

“You constantly surprise me, Romero, you really do. Did you ever find out what happened to your dad?”

“Yeah, once I finished my computer training in the army I searched him out. He never divorced my mother, he’s living with an ex-stripper in Texas. It really pissed me off that he would leave my mom, a woman who would have done anything for him, for some bimbo with size 44D boobs and bleach blonde hair. He works odd jobs, just enough to get him some beer and cigarettes.”

“Did you ever confront him? It sounds like you saw him.”

“I went to the trailer park where he lived, but I didn’t introduce myself to him. I got a look at what he had left us for and just walked away. I’d had this picture of what he was like in my head since I was a kid. When I saw the reality, I was pretty disenchanted.”

“I’d be pretty pissed off,” Macayla said, her heart aching for the lonely little boy who dreamed of his father.

“I was that too. When I got back to the army, I kind of lost it for a while. I went on drinking sprees, got into fights with superior officers, and got thrown out of bars. It was pretty ugly. After I landed in the brig, one of my commanding officers made it part of my probation that I see the company psychologist.”

“Was it helpful? I know most men have a hard time with the thought of therapy.”

“I was pretty resistant to it, but I had to go to ten sessions before I could get my full pay back, so I went. I guess it was as helpful as I’d let it be. The doctor told me that I felt betrayed by my mother because she never told me what a jerk he was. That I was hurt by my father for leaving, that I was mad at myself for building him up to be something he

wasn't. He said that I was turning all of those feelings into anger because that was an emotion I was willing to deal with."

"Sounds pretty accurate to me."

"Probably. He said the only way I was ever going to get my life back to normal was to deal with all the feelings, not just the anger. He was right. I no longer hate my father. It's more like I don't even care anymore. He made his choices, and he has to live with them. I feel badly that my mom had to work so hard, but in the end we had a much better life without him than we would have had with him."

"Sounds like you have the right attitude. My therapist said about the same thing to me," Macayla said without thinking.

"Oh, were you mad at your parents for dying and deserting you?"

"No, it had to do with something completely different." She really didn't want to get into her relationship with her ex-boyfriend, Joe. He had been gone for eight years, and good riddance. Every once in a while, she still worried he might resurface in her life. That was why she kept up with her karate, but Jared didn't need to know all of that. "Are you hungry? Would you like some lunch?"

"So my life is an open book, but yours is closed for discussion?" Jared asked.

"Hey, I told you all about raising Kevin, that's enough ancient history for one day. Let's get some sandwiches and eat them on the porch. It's finally warming up, and the fresh air will do you good."

"Sounds good to me. Macayla, I'll find out everything eventually you know."

"Maybe, but not today. Now, peanut butter and jelly or grilled cheese?"

Chapter Ten

Jared had done little but eat and sleep for the last week and he was getting damn sick and tired of being so weak. He needed to find out what the hell was going on with Shaun Hints, and he needed to find out now.

He waited all afternoon until Macayla went into the master bathroom for one of her prolonged baths with a book and some scented candles she found in the living room. Once he heard the water stop running in the bath and the splash that signaled her entrance into the tub, he pulled his laptop out of his briefcase in the bedroom.

It wasn't that he was hiding it from Macayla, but she wasn't an idiot and she would ask questions better left alone. He checked the battery. It had some life left in it, but would need to be recharged soon. His computer was a prototype so it had some very special bells and whistles. The battery was half the size of the lightest ones on the market, yet had twice the life of them. It could also access the internet via satellite without leaving an IP address to trace. And even better, it was fast.

It took a few minutes for the computer to boot, but once warmed up, he finally settled on his e-mail server.

If Jared had been using a landline, Hints would have been able to trace him in less time than it would take for Jared to finish checking his e-mail. With Jared's prototype, there was no technology for Hints to use to trace his IP address.

Technology moved so fast, even though it wasn't probable, it was still possible for Hints to trace him. He downloaded his e-mail messages to read later. There was nothing from his connection in the Justice Department.

That wasn't good.

Jared fired off a quick inquiry. He hated playing a waiting game, but had no choice. He had to lay low until all the evidence was gathered, and all the witnesses prepared.

Glancing at his watch, he figured he had a little more time before Macayla got out of the tub. He checked the rest of his e-mail, but didn't bother to reply. Most of the e-mails were job offers. Jared didn't think he was going to be in a position to accept any new jobs for a little while yet.

Luckily, he had a nest egg that would hold him over for years if he needed it. Too bad he couldn't touch it right now for fear that Hints would be able to trace his whereabouts.

The door to the bathroom opened as he closed down the computer. He quickly put it away and lay back down on the couch before Macayla came out of the room.

"Enjoy your bath?"

"Yup. I wouldn't try to take a shower for a little while, I'm sure I used up all the hot water."

"I'll wait until tomorrow morning then. What would you like for supper?"

"I don't know, what do you feel like?"

"Well, I can make pasta, or I can make pasta, but my specialty is pasta."

"Hum, I guess either I'll cook or we're going to have pasta."

"I'll clean up if you cook."

“Deal. How do you feel about chicken, mashed potatoes, green beans and biscuits?”

“I have warm and fuzzy feelings about mashed potatoes and biscuits.”

“Two of my personal favorites. I’m pretty much a fan of starch, in whatever form it appears.”

“Me too, especially with lots of real butter dripping all over it.” Jared’s mouth watered at the thought of hot biscuits with butter. Made the idea of pasta look pretty dismal. He didn’t feel up to cooking anyway.

“Is there any other way to eat starch? I once tried that no-carbs-all-protein diet, I lost seven pounds, but was so miserable for two weeks Samara force fed me popcorn like it was an intervention or something.”

“No carbs? That sounds like a punishment instead of a diet. Why were you dieting anyway? You’re not one of those women who’s always complaining about being fat when you really aren’t, are you? They drive me crazy.”

“No, I wouldn’t say I complain about my weight, but when you’re as short as I am every pound shows up. I usually try to eat a healthy, balanced diet and working out takes care of my occasional chocolate binges. This was just because I had sprained my ankle and was out of the studio for a few weeks. I was trying to keep from putting on the weight when I couldn’t work out to keep it off. I’d rather just work out longer next time. I got really sick of eggs by the end of the two weeks.”

“I can imagine. Do you need any help in the kitchen?”

“Can you make a salad?” Macayla asked.

“Of course, it goes well with pasta.”

Macayla laughed as she headed into the kitchen to begin peeling the potatoes. As she bustled around the kitchen, she surreptitiously kept an eye on Jared to see if he was tiring. They hadn’t done much but hang

around the house for the last week. He was moving cautiously, but well. She'd be able to take his staples out soon. He was careful when he bent over to get things out of the fridge, but he was able to get up without help. Macayla couldn't help but admire his backside as he did his bending, but she kept it to herself.

"So, are you going to move to the master bedroom after dinner?" Macayla asked as she put the chicken in the oven and started on the biscuits.

"Are you giving up on the dare?" Jared's voice was layered with mischief.

"No, I already beat the dare. I figured you'd want to spread out on the king size bed in the master bedroom after having your feet hang off the end of the twin bed all week."

"I didn't dare you to share a room for one week, I specifically didn't set a time limit. If you move out, you lose."

"This is childish. I'm an adult, I don't have to worry about whether or not I lose a silly dare. If you don't want the master bedroom, I'll take it."

"Go ahead, but then I'll know you can't handle it."

"Handle what?"

"You can't stand being in the same room as me because you want me and don't want to admit it."

"What are you talking about? I can handle anything you dish out. I don't want you, and I don't have to admit anything." Macayla kneaded the dough for the biscuits with a bit more force than necessary.

"Hey, you're the one who wants to move out of the room."

"I thought you would be more comfortable in the big bed, but if you want to play games, fine. I can take it as long as you can. I'll stay in the damn room with you, and it won't bother me one bit."

She didn't even see him coming. The next thing she knew, he was swinging her around and pulling her body to his. He put one of his large hands behind her head and held it while he plundered her mouth.

Macayla's hands were still covered in dough, and she didn't know what to do with them. The same magic that always hit her as soon as she got close to Jared had her in its grasp. The logical part of her brain shut down as her hormones took control of her body. Her knees felt rubbery, she could feel the heat building from stomach and spreading outward. Sharp bolts of pleasure speared her as Jared pushed her against the counter and stepped between her legs. She could feel his erection through his jeans, his chest was like a brick wall against her much softer one. He eased his way inside her mouth, tongues dueling, making the kiss more intimate.

When she didn't fight him, he released his grip on her head and ran his hands up and down her back. Macayla still didn't know what to do with her hands, she wasn't so far out of it that she forgot the dough stuck all over them. Jared solved that problem by lightly cuffing them behind her back. He used his free hand to tease her responsive nipples through her sweater. When she only groaned, he cupped the weight of them in his hand.

Jared moved his lips down the column of Macayla's throat and to the shell of her ear. He slowly slid his hand under her sweater and gently raised it to the clasp of her bra. Macayla was thanking her stars that she wore the bra with the clasp in the front when Jared released it and heat poured over her.

Waves of sensation rushed through her. Jared sucked on her nipple, gently squeezing her breast, and turning her into a puddle of sensation. She wasn't sure how much longer she was going to survive before she

begged him not to stop when the hiss of the potatoes boiling over broke the spell.

“Jared, stop! I have to get that. Stop, you’re going to get burned.” Macayla slid off the counter and took the potatoes off the stove. His hot body was only inches from her, making her knees weak and her hands shake.

“Why don’t you start a fire in the living room while I finish these biscuits. Dinner should be ready soon.”

“Macayla, you can’t hide forever. Why won’t you even talk about this? It isn’t going to disappear.” Jared ran his hands through his black hair.

“I’m not hiding from it,” Macayla said, not looking at him.

“Then what do you call it? You practically melt in my arms. God knows you set me on fire, what is wrong? Do you have some disease I should know about? Are you afraid I do? Just for your information, I don’t. I’m in perfect health.”

“You have a bullet hole in your side. You are not in perfect health.”

“Stop changing the subject. You know perfectly well what I mean. I’m not going to hurt you.”

“Maybe I’m just really careful about the people I get intimate with, and maybe I need more time,” Macayla said hesitantly.

“Is that what you’re saying? That you need more time? Because I’m willing to give it to you, but I have to tell you, I don’t know how much time I have in me.”

“I won’t be pushed into something I’m not ready for.”

“I won’t push yet, but it’s only a matter of time,” Jared threatened as he stormed out of the living room.

Macayla took a deep breath once Jared was out of the room. Her hands shook and her blood was still hot. If Jared had known how close she was to begging, she’d be mortified. She’d never felt such intensity in

her life. Granted she wasn't exactly experienced, but she wasn't a virgin either.

If it felt so good, why did she keep backing off?

Whenever she had a problem, she thought it to death. Samara always said she was so successful at anything she set her mind to because she beat any problem to smithereens by pummeling it with a barrage of logic. Macayla knew she sometimes over-analyzed things, but she didn't like to screw up. Better to think a situation through than jump in and make a huge mistake.

Macayla's only other relationship was a huge mistake from the start, only she was too stubborn to give it up. She'd been thinking a lot about Joe lately. It was probably a side effect of having Jared around. She hadn't had a relationship in more than eight years, and she had told herself she didn't need one either. Maybe she was a little gun-shy now that she had been on her own for so long.

It had taken her years to get over the physical and mental abuse Joe had heaped on her. She knew in her head that Jared wasn't like Joe in the way he treated women. It was obvious from his behavior around Samara and baby Caitlyn that he wasn't abusive, but she was still nervous. The man oozed danger and strength like some kind of cologne. She knew he had been in the military with Connor, and that he had combat training as well. That could account for some of the danger, but there was an awful lot she didn't know about him.

Perhaps when she knew more about him as a person she could feel comfortable enough to be with him as a woman. God knew she wanted him as badly as he said. The constant raging of her hormones was enough to make her teeth itch. He was right—it was only a matter of time before they ended this dance. Macayla just wanted to be the one to pick the tune.

Taking a deep breath, Macayla steeled herself to face Jared. She hoped he didn't hold a grudge.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes if you want to wash up first. I'll set it out on the table in front of the fire."

"Okay, I'll only be a minute." Jared looked like he had pulled himself together. His face no longer had the pained expression on it, nor did it have the thunderclouds of moments ago. Macayla hated the feeling of walking on thin ice, but it was better than fighting all the time.

Dinner was a quiet, stilted affair with little conversation. Jared was stone silent, and Macayla tried not to bring up anything that would get him upset. After the dinner dishes had been cleared, Macayla left Jared to the cleaning and retired to the bedroom. She didn't know how she was going to get any sleep with Jared in the bed next to her. The tension was so thick you could practically cut it.

She washed her face and changed into her nightgown before getting some of her medical journals to read in bed. She wasn't a big TV watcher, but even if she was they didn't have any TV service where they were anyway. It was either sit in the living room with the still brooding Jared, or read in bed. Reading in bed won, hands down.

Macayla was deep into an article on repeat caesarian sections when Jared came through the door to their room. She looked up as he passed her on his way to the bathroom. That man really was too good looking for her peace of mind. For the first few nights they were both so tired from the trip and Jared's wounds, they both were asleep in minutes. Somehow Macayla didn't think she'd be so lucky tonight. When Jared came back from brushing his teeth, he stripped down to his boxers and climbed into his tiny bed.

"I can turn out the light if it bothers you," Macayla said, trying not to goggle at his almost naked body.

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve learned to sleep anywhere, through anything. I’ll be fine.” Jared twisted and turned, trying to find a comfortable position in the twin bed.

“I’m almost done with this article anyway.” Macayla watched him as he tried to crunch his huge frame into the bed. His feet kept banging the footboard or his head smacked against the headboard. It couldn’t be comfortable.

“Jared, don’t you think this is silly? Just go into the bigger bed. You’ll be more comfortable and heal faster.”

“I’ll go if you go with me.”

“Fat chance. Go ahead and suffer then, but don’t say I didn’t make the offer. I’m done reading. Good night.” Macayla shut off the light by her bed and rolled over on her side away from Jared.

She could feel his eyes trying to pierce the darkness to her, but she didn’t care. He had no idea how stubborn she could be. The more he tried to push her, the harder she was going to dig in. And if he thought she was going to take pity on him and move into the same bed just so he would be more comfortable, he was sorely mistaken. With the ease of someone who was used to catching sleep in hospital lounges, Macayla fell asleep in minutes.

Jared was so keyed into Macayla that he knew the second she drifted asleep. He wasn’t the least bit tired. He tended to do most of his work at night anyway. After pausing to make sure she was really out, Jared slipped his jeans on and went to the living room to work on his computer by the fire. He might be stuck in the woods, but that didn’t mean he had to be completely out of the loop.

After making himself some coffee he got to work tracking the whereabouts of Shaun Hints. The challenge of going against someone of

equal talent was stimulating enough for him to forgo the coffee, but old habits died hard. Four hours later, he hadn't gotten so much as a glimmer of his location. It was frustrating, but fascinating at the same time.

He loved pitting himself against someone of this caliber. Unfortunately, he still had a long way to go before he could find more on Hints, and his battery needed to be charged. He should have done it that afternoon, but he didn't want to send up any flags for Macayla. Working around her wasn't going to be easy. She was intelligent, observant and wasn't afraid to call him on anything. If she thought he was holding back on her, she'd hit the roof.

Jared took the charging cord out of his briefcase and went into the room next to the one he shared with Macayla. He plugged the computer in there, and figured he could unplug it tomorrow when he went in to use the shower. Now he needed some sleep, although how much sleep he was going to get in that tiny bed was anybody's guess. When he crept into the room, he could see that Macayla had kicked the covers off one leg and her enormous nightgown had ridden up to the bottom of her naked derrière.

Maybe the time he was spending in a purgatory of his own making would balance out when he died. He slid under the covers and tried to ignore the woman next to him. Yes indeed, he was earning credits for heaven that was for sure.

Chapter Eleven

Macayla woke up with the sun. She stretched and got out of bed with a spring in her step. Her head automatically turned to her roommate, who was sprawled across his little bed. Macayla fit into the twin bed with room to spare, Jared could use some of her extra space.

He hadn't bothered with the blankets—or pajamas for that matter. Her gaze devoured every inch of his almost naked body. There were definitely worse ways to wake up in the morning. His face was turned away from her, so she had nothing to distract from the virility of his body.

She couldn't believe any one man could be so sexy even asleep. It seemed like it would only be fair for him to bottle some of that sexiness and hand it out to other less fortunate men.

What was wrong with her? This drop dead gorgeous man wanted to sleep with her and she pushed him away. She needed to have her head examined. Again.

The memory of his mouth covering hers made her weak in the knees. He was definitely experienced enough to make her enjoy herself even if he wasn't seriously easy on the eyes. Why couldn't she just let herself go and enjoy the experience? What was the worst thing that could happen?

She could fall in love with him and he would leave her to go on his merry way.

Okay, that was pretty bad. Maybe she wasn't so stupid after all.

Macayla did everything intensely, there was no “I’ll just enjoy the physical part of the relationship and we can part as friends”. That wasn’t her style. The only other person she had slept with, she had been engaged to. Granted she was only nineteen at the time, but she honestly believed she’d be with him forever. If she hadn’t felt that way she wouldn’t have lost her virginity to him in the first place. She didn’t consider herself old-fashioned, but she did feel that intimacy was emotional as well as physical. There was no way she could sleep with Jared without losing her heart.

As she slipped out of the room, she wondered if the battle to keep her heart whole was harder than recovering from a broken one. The kitchen floor was cool under her feet as she headed to the coffee pot. The coffee maker wasn’t set up the way she had left it last night. Jared must have made some coffee after she went to bed.

That’s funny. She didn’t hear him get up. She was usually a pretty light sleeper. A hazard of raising a teenager, she guessed. Jared must be a lot quieter sneaking around than Kevin had been.

Big surprise.

At least he was considerate enough to clean up after himself. Macayla was actually amazed at how neat he really was. He hung up towels, put clothes in the hamper in the bathroom, did the dishes, and put things away after he used them. Must have something to do with living with just his mother for so long.

Kevin was probably neater than others his age after living with her during his formative years. The last thing she felt like doing after cleaning all night and going to classes was cleaning up after a teenage boy. Jared’s mom must have felt the same way.

Whatever the reason, she was glad for it. She didn’t mind cooking and helping out, but she was no longer a maid, and didn’t intend to

resume her previous career. Macayla took her coffee and wandered around the house. There wasn't much to do, until she remembered what lay downstairs.

The lowest floor of the house wasn't a dingy cellar or a storage area. It was a gleaming home gym complete with full size punching bag and mirrored wall that took up the entire area under the house.

Macayla put her coffee in the sink, then ran to the bedroom to change into some shorts and a T-shirt. After tying her sneakers tightly, she ran downstairs to the beautiful, sparkling gym. She hadn't had a good workout in so long, she couldn't wait to get started.

Doing her warm-ups left her winded, and she realized she had been neglecting her workouts for too long. That made her decision a little easier; she would do a cardio workout on the bag today, then a weight lifting workout tomorrow.

The equipment took up most of the space in the cellar, so there wasn't much room to practice her karate, but she could make some room upstairs in the living room. It would be pretty big if she moved the couch and some of the tables closer to the fireplace. She would worry about that later, for now she had to find some music.

She found a CD player, and in the drawer below it, found a classic rock CD to work out to. She also found a box of condoms in there. Apparently, Connor's friend used this workout room for more than one purpose. She pushed that thought out of her head.

Making sure the volume wasn't loud enough to wake Jared, Macayla put on the boxing gloves she found, and got to work punching and kicking the heavy bag. After half an hour of that she switched to sit-ups, push-ups, and leg strengthening exercises.

By the time she finished, she was out of breath and sweaty, but she felt better than she had in days. There was nothing like forty-five

minutes of mindless exercise to take care of stress. Pounding on a punching bag didn't hurt either. Turning off the stereo, she put the boxing gloves away and turned around as a towel was tossed in her face.

"Pretty impressive, Red, but tell me, who were you beating up?"

"Gee, I don't know, you perhaps?"

"Why doesn't that surprise me? Here, have some water, you need to rehydrate after that workout."

"Thanks." Macayla didn't bother to point out that she was not only an intelligent woman, but also a doctor and knew she needed water after a workout. She was grateful for the water so she decided to keep her mouth shut. "I'm going to head up to the shower, then I'll make you some breakfast."

"Don't rush, I ate already. I have to say, Red, you look as good hot and sweaty as I thought you would. Maybe even better." Jared's eyes were so hot she was surprised all the sweat didn't turn to steam.

Macayla had no response and fled by him up the stairs. His gaze had turned her knees to jelly, and sent heat flooding through her system. She wanted to blame her rapid breathing on the workout, but knew better.

Jared watched her fly up the stairs and didn't try to stop her. He needed a minute to regroup. He'd woken up the minute he heard her turn on the music downstairs. He had seen the gym yesterday, but didn't think anything of it other than it would be a great place to rehab when he finally got the staples out of his side.

After helping himself to the coffee she left and a eating a bowl of cereal, he'd given in to the urge to spy on her. He was still in a morning fog, but any lingering exhaustion was soon dispelled as he watched Macayla work out. Her long legs kicked the heavy punching bag in a variety of strikes that impressed him with their height and strength. She

put a lot of body weight behind the punches and would probably be sore tomorrow.

When she ended her kicking and punching, and began doing sit-ups, push-ups, squats and crunches, Jared was amazed. He knew she was in good shape, now he realized she worked for it. And boy did it pay off. Her legs were muscled, yet smooth, her arms well formed, and her torso was flat with only a slight curving in her belly. She wasn't sculpted like professional body builders, nor was she so muscled that her shape was flattened, she was curvy and feminine, and mouth-wateringly beautiful.

Jared had been with many beautiful women once he finally came into his own, but none made him so glad he was a man as the little spitfire he was presently gnashing his teeth over. He was certain if he could just relieve the ache she had lodged permanently in his groin, he would get over this obsession he had with her. Well, reasonably certain anyway.

No woman had ever placed herself so firmly into his thoughts. Part of him blamed it on their situation. After all, when she was the only woman around, it made sense that he'd be thinking about her all the time. The other part of his brain called him a damn liar. She had set up shop in his brain since the first day he met her, and it didn't look like she was going away any time soon.

He didn't understand it. She wasn't the most beautiful woman he'd ever met. Yes she was gorgeous, but he'd slept with women who made their livings on runways and magazine covers across Europe. He just couldn't put his finger on what it was about her that kept him in a constant state of lust.

Maybe it was the fact that she didn't know what effect she had on him? Or maybe it was the way that she took care of everyone around her, from him to Connor and his family, to her little brother, to her patients. Or maybe it was her smart mouth. God knows why he would find that

attractive, but he did. There was something about this woman that he wanted, besides her delectable body, and he was going to keep after her until he not only figured out what it was, but also got it.

Jared climbed the stairs and poured himself some of the lukewarm coffee. He debated making breakfast for Macayla, but decided she would probably be too keyed up from her workout to eat now. He took his coffee and walked out onto the porch. It was still chilly outside and there was mist on the ground.

Where there was a break in the trees, a weak stream of sunlight shone through the mists, giving the forest a golden glow. Jared grew up in Iowa, he'd never spent so much time around this many trees. When he was in the military, he was in the jungles of South America, but that was nothing like the forests of Maine.

In South America the greenery was everywhere, vines fought with the trees and undergrowth for the light and water. Here there was the green of the pine trees, the browns of their trunks and the fallen needles littering the ground. He could hear the birds in the silence, and occasionally the man-made noise of a plane flying by.

He was amazed at the sense of seclusion he felt in the cabin. He knew there was a trailer park that shared the forest, but if he hadn't been given that information, he never would have known. Jared was by nature a loner. During his youth he was alone because he never fit in. As he got older he stayed alone by choice. There were very few people he trusted and called friends.

When he was working, he quite often went weeks or even months without contact from the outside world. After he finished his job, he usually hit the town, more for female companionship than any need to interact with his fellow man. He considered those fleeting encounters as a way of filling a need, like eating or breathing, a necessary biological

function. He figured he could spend the rest of his life in a place like this and never miss the outside world.

And if Macayla were with him, he would never leave.

Before he could figure out where that thought came from, Macayla joined him on the porch. She was dressed in jeans and a fuzzy black sweater, her hair pulled back into her customary loose bun with tendrils springing around her face.

“You look awfully pensive.”

“I was just looking at the trees. They make you feel so cut off from civilization, even though it’s only a few miles to the nearest town.”

“I know. I guess that’s the point of a place like this, to get away from it all, yet not be inconvenienced. I think I would go crazy all by myself here.”

Jared laughed, “I was thinking it was great, that I’d never want to leave if I lived here.”

“Really? You don’t strike me as the nature boy type.”

“I’m not, but I like to be alone. I’m not too big on crowds. I like the trees, the view of the mountains.”

“I guess they’re okay. I like living in the ‘burbs, I’d never make it in the city, that’s for sure. I don’t know if I could survive out here for long either though. I like living in my condo, I enjoy seeing other people, knowing if I get lonely I can just go out the door to see someone. I value my privacy, but I get pretty sick of my own company after a while.”

“You didn’t seem the social butterfly to me,” Jared said.

“I’m not really. I like to spend time with Samara, I like to interact with my patients, I like to go out for dinner every once in a while. I like to keep busy. In fact, I was racking my brain trying to figure out what I was going to do with all my vacation time when you fell out of my car.”

"I guess it's a good thing I came along, I would hate to have you be bored."

"Now don't get huffy. I just didn't have any projects going that needed my attention. My brother is away for the summer and didn't want me to visit and cramp his style, and I didn't have any vacation plans. I couldn't imagine spending three weeks with nothing concrete to do. It was just fortunate for you that you happened to get shot right before my vacation, otherwise I wouldn't be able to coddle you like this."

"Must have been my lucky day to get shot when you had the time to treat me."

"It sure was. Now, why don't we take a little walk through these woods? I want you to take it easy, but I think you should keep moving and build up your strength. It's been a week, I should be able to take the staples out tomorrow."

"That would be good. They're starting to itch. Can't we take them out today? I'm much better you know. It doesn't hurt that much to move anymore." Christ, he was practically begging her. Oh how the mighty have fallen.

"We'll see. Get up, we're going for a walk down the driveway and back."

Macayla set a snail's pace down the porch steps and past the truck. Jared wanted to move along but she held him back

"Jesus, you act like we're going up Mount Everest. It's just a walk down the driveway."

"By the time we're done, you're going to feel like you have climbed Mount Everest. It takes a while to build up your strength."

"Right."

Twenty minutes later, he couldn't believe how tired he was from just a little walk. He was ready to concede that maybe this time he wouldn't be able to bounce back so easily.

"Well, champ, how are you feeling?"

"How do you know so much about recovery? You deal with pregnant women."

Jared winced as Macayla gave him some water and helped him to lie down on the couch.

"Pregnant women have to recover, too, you know."

"Not from gunshot wounds."

"No, but women who have caesarian sections have major surgery and need more recovery time than your puny wound."

"I guess I never thought of that before. I just figured women have been having babies for hundreds of years, it couldn't be that complicated."

"I'll let you tell my next patient that."

"Don't get testy, I'm beginning to have more empathy for anyone who feels like this for weeks and has to take care of a newborn at the same time. I had Caitlyn for one night when she was four weeks old and she wore me out."

"They can do that, and Caitlyn was a good baby. You should see the ones with colic."

"No thanks, I'll pass."

"Coward."

"You betcha."

Macayla laughed and went into the kitchen to start lunch. Jared would be hungry after his walk. She put on some beef stew and warmed

up the biscuits from last night. If he was still hungry he could make a sandwich for himself—she was a doctor, not a maid.

“Lunch will be ready in a few minutes,” Macayla said as she walked into the living room. Jared was sound asleep on the couch. Snickering to herself, she laid a knit afghan over him. Good thing lunch could wait. By the sounds of his snores, he wasn’t going to be eating anything for a while.

She grabbed an apple and headed out the door. Now that the temperature had warmed up some, she wanted to explore the woods around them in greater detail. On their walk down the driveway she had spotted a trail so she headed for that now. Taking in the view, she marveled at the bits of snow still hidden in clumps beneath the trees.

It was sooner than she expected when she started to recognize the sounds of civilization. She heard people laughing, children playing and pans clanking. This must be the trailer park Jared had told her about. She hadn’t realized it was so close.

A sliver of resentment crept up at the intrusion of society into her isolated little world. That was so unlike her. She wasn’t a social whirlwind like some of the nurses she worked with, but neither was she a hermit. It didn’t make sense to resent the presence of other people.

Well, no one said she had to go any closer to the park. Macayla was turning around and heading back towards the house when she caught sight of a couple fondling each other against a tree not fifteen feet from her. Her black sweater and dark jeans must have made her blend in with her surroundings so the couple didn’t know they had a witness.

As she tried to quietly back up and remain unobserved, she caught part of the strangers’ conversation.

“Come on, Laura, I know you want it.”

A tall, stringy man tried to slip his hand into the opening of the woman's—Laura apparently—shirt. The tight button-down shirt was unbuttoned to about the navel. From where she was standing, Macayla didn't think he'd have a hard time missing his goal.

"Maybe I do, and maybe I don't, Jake. Won't your wife miss you?" the blonde asked, rubbing her thigh against the man's crotch.

"Nah, she's watching the kids at the playground. They won't be back for hours. Plenty of time for you to live up to all those promises you gave me the other night at the dance."

"Oh, you mean this." The woman unbuttoned the rest of her shirt and pushed her breasts out of the bra for the man to feast his eyes on. "And this," she said as she unzipped his pants and played with his cock.

Macayla was frozen with mortification. She was horrified at what she was seeing, and didn't know what to do. Here was a married man grabbing some woman's breasts as she played with his penis. And all she could do was watch!

She was still in shock when the blonde turned her back on the man and pulled her skimpy skirt up to reveal her lack of underwear. In front of Macayla's stunned eyes the blonde pressed her butt into his midsection. With a few adjustments, the man began pumping away at her.

Oh my ever loving God! Macayla managed to snap out of her daze and recover the power of movement. As carefully as she could, she snuck down the path and fled the scene of the adulterous couple.

She was still fuming about it when she stomped into the house, and slammed the door.

Jared, napping on the couch, jumped up and looked prepared for an attack when she stormed through the living room.

“Creep! Brazen hussy! Two-timing slime-ball!” Macayla stomped around the room looking for something to take her temper out on.

“I’ll own up to creep, but there is no way I’ll accept brazen hussy or two-timing slime-ball. What did I do now?” Jared was obviously confused.

“What? Oh you, you didn’t do anything. It was that fake blonde, bare-chested tramp that was on the path to the trailer park with her stringy, two-timing, low-life scum-bag boyfriend that I’m mad about.”

“Slow down, tell me what happened.”

“I was going for an innocent walk in the woods so I could let you get some sleep. I took the path near the mailbox that I saw earlier with you. The path led straight to the trailer park.”

“Probably because of the little store they have there. It would be much more convenient than driving into town when you needed some milk.”

“Whatever. Anyway, when I realized it led to the trailer park, I started to turn back, I wasn’t in the mood for company. Well apparently neither where the two lowlifes I ran into on the way back. I was walking around, minding my own business, and there they were, plain as day, fornicating in the woods. And he’s telling her not to worry about getting caught because his wife is with the kids at the playground! Of all the disgusting displays of human behavior, this had to have been one of the worst.”

“What’d you do? Man, a guy takes a nap and look what he misses.”

“Well, when I finally got my wits together I crept away, like I was the one who was doing something wrong. People like that make me sick. There they are, banging away at each other, and his wife is barely two hundred yards away. And you know what, even if they got caught, no one would even tell the wife. Everyone would be talking behind her back, but

the only way she'd ever find out that she could be exposed to disease is if someone let something slip accidentally."

"You sound like you have some firsthand experience with this."

"I have all sorts of experience with two-timing jerks. Not only in my practice do I see women who have been married for years suddenly finding themselves with a sexually transmitted disease, I almost married a cheating bastard eight years ago."

"You would have only been twenty years old. Isn't that a little young to get engaged?"

"If you could call it that. I'm sure you don't want to hear all the gory details."

"On the contrary, I'd like to hear everything."

Jared had a very stubborn look on his face. Macayla couldn't figure out why he would want to hear the ancient history of her disastrous love life, but she knew that look. He wasn't going to budge an inch until she told him everything he wanted to hear.

"Fine, you asked for it." She took a deep breath for strength. "I went to college when I was barely seventeen years old. I was somewhat shy. Hell, that was an understatement. I was always ahead of my class, so I didn't really know anyone my age, and the ones I did tended to be intimidated by the fact I was a grade or two above them. I didn't have a whole lot of social skills. Anyway, I went away to college, my mom wanted me to get the full college experience. She wanted me to join clubs and make friends and go out. She didn't go to college, and she had this picture that it was like a slumber party with classes, she thought it would be good for me."

She paused to gather her thoughts.

"It was awful. I'm short to begin with, I was a late bloomer developmentally, and I didn't know how to make friends with people two

and three years older than me. I was overwhelmed in classes by the talk of sex, it seemed like no matter what class I took, the discussions always led to sex. I didn't know how to handle it. I pretty much immersed myself in my studies. I would stay at the library for hours to avoid my roommate, who had revolving bedmates. When the library closed, the librarian insisted that I have a security guard walk me back to the dorm. Joe was usually on that shift and walked me back most nights. He was twenty-two years old, a former Marine—so he said. He was only doing campus security until he could get into the police academy. We got to know each other after a while and I fell hard. He was tall and good-looking, and he paid attention to me without overwhelming me.”

She stopped again, now came the hard part. The part where she had to admit what a naïve idiot she was.

“I think I see where this is heading, but go on.” Jared stared at her intently.

“When he asked me out for coffee, I accepted, and we progressed from there. I didn't know he had only been in the Marines for four months, and was discharged for ‘medical reasons’. Nor did I know that he purposely took the night shift knowing I'd be at the library and would need an escort back home. When I did find that out, it seemed very romantic to me. I didn't see anything wrong with it. After my freshman year, I couldn't wait to get back to school, I missed him so much. We hadn't done anything yet, I was only seventeen, and I think he was afraid of getting slapped with a statutory rape charge.”

Macayla took a deep breath and pushed back the humiliation that always came hand in hand with memories of Joe. She'd been so stupid. It was embarrassing to admit that even with her above average intellect she'd made the same dumb mistakes as every other teenage girl.

Jared didn't say a word or try to rush her, he just waited for her to go on when she was ready.

"Over the summer he had gotten fired from his job on campus for harassing a student. He said it was a set up by a girl he turned down. I was fool enough to believe him. I had gotten a small apartment off campus—I told my mother it was so I could concentrate without all the noise in the dorm bothering me. It was really so I could be with Joe, he was banned from campus. He would sleep in my apartment while I was in classes, usually sleeping off a hangover, then would eat whatever I had in the place and complain that I didn't give him enough attention. It bothered him that I had so many classes and that I spent so much time studying. When I would defend myself he would storm out of the apartment, and I'd be left crying over him until he came back and I apologized to him."

"Apologized for what?"

"Good question. I never knew. I just knew I didn't want him to leave me. He was the focus of my life, well, he never got above school, but I didn't do anything outside of class without him. I was never allowed to go anywhere without him. If I was late coming home from a class he would grill me about where I was, accuse me of cheating on him with some 'college boy'. If I dared to defend myself he would get mad. If he was drinking, he would get crazy."

"Did he hit you?"

"Not right away. I think if he had hit me in the beginning I would have left him, no matter what I felt for him. By the time the hitting started we had been together for two years, I had lost my virginity to him, we were talking about getting married. I felt like I had invested so much time in him, I didn't want to be wrong. I thought he would change. It's the typical story. He isolated me from everyone who cared about me,

making sure he was the only one near me. He demeaned me, mentally abused me, until the hitting was easier than the psychological abuse I had been dealing with for years. At least when he hit me, it was over for a little while. He would always be repentant afterwards. It was the only time I ever got flowers. Of course, it was always my fault, if I had just listened to him, been better in bed, gone shopping, wasn't so smart mouthed, whatever. It didn't matter the reason—I was always wrong, and he had to hit me.”

“How did you get out of it? I know that many women don't get out of abusive relationships easily.”

“It wasn't easy, that's for sure. We would break up from time to time, but I always went back. Even when I caught him sleeping with some tramp in my bed, in my apartment, that he was living in for free. I still can't believe how stupid I was.”

“You were young and naïve, you weren't stupid, and he took advantage of that.”

“It amounts to the same thing. Well, to cut to the chase, I graduated a year ahead of schedule, I was in the top of my class, and I received an award at my graduation. My mother was there, my brother was there, half my childhood neighborhood was there, but Joe wasn't. He didn't want to come to see me. That's when I knew I didn't mean squat to him. I went home and never called him again. The way we ended it was almost anticlimactic, we agreed to return each other's stuff. I was moving out of the apartment anyway, so that was easy. We never had anything in joint accounts—at least I wasn't that stupid. He had another poor idiot girl ready and waiting for him, so he didn't care that I left. I was depressed, but ready to move on, then my mother got sick and there was Kevin to think about, medical school, bills to pay. I just didn't have the time or the energy to think about him anymore.”

“Did you ever hear from him again?”

“He called once when I was doing my residency, looking to ‘talk’. I turned him down flat. He swore at me and said that I thought I was too good for him now that I was a big shot doctor. I agreed with him and hung up the phone. The next time he called it was to tell me I had better meet with him because he had some pictures I might be interested in seeing again. And if I wasn’t interested in seeing them, he was sure someone would be.”

“What type of pictures?”

“Oh, stupid pictures. You know, pictures of me in my underwear, dumb things you do when you are young and in love. I never thought those pictures would come back to haunt me, I had forgotten all about them actually.”

“So what did you do?”

Macayla could tell Jared was pissed off. There was practically steam coming out of his ears. He was very controlled about it, but she wasn’t fooled.

“I told him I didn’t care if he blew them up and put them on billboards, I never wanted to see him again, and if a little humiliation was the price I had to pay to keep him out of my life, well that was fine with me. Then I told my supervisor about it. Luckily for me, my supervisor was a woman who understood being young and foolish. When she got a package in the mail, she handed them to me without even looking at them, and that was the end of the story.

I took out a restraining order because my boss wanted a paper trail, but there was never an issue. For all I know he could have tried to publish them, but I figure most places won’t publish pictures like those without a disclaimer.”

“Well there are plenty of places that don’t care about the legalities of things like that you know. You should have had him arrested, for Christ’s sake.”

“There’s no need to get so upset about this. It’s ancient history. I haven’t seen him in years, the pictures were a last ditch effort to get either money or another free ride, when it didn’t work, he left me alone. I hope I never see him again, and if I do, I know I can kick his butt. He’ll never use me for a punching bag again, nor will I ever let anyone use me as a doormat ever again. If nothing else, that relationship taught me how to stand up for myself. I’ll never go back to that insecure, non-confrontational, little wimp again. I am not afraid to argue with someone anymore.”

“I’ll say. You know, I never would have believed you would let someone like that ruin your life, and continue to ruin it years later.”

“What are you talking about? He isn’t ruining my life, I have a great life.”

“When was the last time you went on a date?”

“Three weeks ago,” Macayla said triumphantly. It was a hospital function, but she did go with one of the anesthesiologists from the practice next door.

“And when was the last time you had sex?”

“I don’t see as that’s any of your business.”

“Oh, I think that it is. I may not know when you had sex last, but I can assure you, you will be having sex again in the near future.”

“Of all the nerve. Do you really think that this caveman routine is attractive? Gee, being grilled on my love life just makes me want to jump your bones. Are you insane? What I do, and whom I do it with are none of your business.”

“Well, I’m making it my business. Now tell me. When was the last time you slept with a man?”

“I’m not telling you anything.” Macayla started to storm out of the room. She got no more than two steps away when Jared grabbed her arm and pulled her back with a strength that belied his injury.

“Tell me,” Jared demanded.

Macayla looked into Jared’s face and knew he wasn’t going to let this go. She debated with herself before finally giving in. “Eight years ago,” she said in defeat.

“I knew it. You are letting that bastard control you even now.”

“No, I’m not. You sound like my therapist. She said I’d only be truly over him when I could enjoy a sexual relationship between equals. I’ve been a little too busy to cater to my social life, and to be honest with you, there just aren’t all that many men out there that I even want to get to know well enough to sleep with.”

“Well, whatever your criteria is, you’ll have to make some adjustments because I mean to be the next person you sleep with, so deal with it.” Jared let her go and stalked out of the room, slamming the door to the porch so hard dust fell off the ceiling fan.

Macayla couldn’t believe the nerve of that man. If she wanted to sleep with someone—when she wanted to sleep with someone—she would. No one was going to make her decisions for her. She didn’t care if she never had sex with anyone again, or if she screwed with the next man she saw. It was her decision.

Yeah, right. Who was she kidding?

She wanted to sleep with Jared. Sometimes she wanted it so badly she dreamed about it. Wasn’t it about time she stopped the knee-jerk response she had when someone told her what to do. Yes, she wanted to have sex with Jared, but she would do it on her own terms. She would

not be rushed into something just because her hormones were out of control. She wanted at least another week to make sure the pill was in full effect before she even considered getting intimate with Jared.

Well, more intimate. She'd met him over a year ago, but this week was the first time she'd spent more than a handful of days with him. Of course, she hadn't slept with Joe until she'd known him a year, and what good had all that knowledge done her? She'd been quick to judge others when they jumped into bed with men, then complained, when the glow wore off, that the guy wasn't what he had seemed. Well duh, how could you know if you only just met him? No one shows his true self in the beginning of a relationship.

She always thought it prudent to get to know someone, warts and all, before sleeping with them. Joe was able to hide his true self from her because she was young and stupid, she wasn't going to let that happen again. Until now she'd never understood how someone could sleep with a person on the first date. She was beginning to see how easy it really was. If she had never met Joe, and had normal relationships like most other girls her age, maybe by the time she met Jared she wouldn't have hesitated at all to hop into bed with him. Lord knew she wanted to.

Macayla was still doing some serious thinking when her stomach grumbled. She'd forgotten all about the stew she had simmering on the stove. Deciding that her problems wouldn't go anywhere if she left them for a little while, she went into the kitchen to spoon up some of the soup. She was trying to decide if she should get Jared from out on the porch and give him something to eat, or just leave the pot on when he walked into the kitchen.

"Macayla?"

“Oh good, you’re here. I made some stew, well, opened some stew before I left. Do you want some now?” Macayla asked, not meeting his eyes.

“That would be great, but first I’d like to apologize. I was way out of line. My mom had a boyfriend that knocked her around. She left him after a few months, but I couldn’t stand watching it. I’ve always hated to see men abuse women. I don’t understand why women stay in that situation, and I just get crazy when I think about someone hurting you.”

“You don’t have to apologize, it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. I need to say this.” He pushed a hand through his hair. “When you told me your story, I got so mad that you blamed yourself for everything. I wish I could have been there for you when you were going through all of that on your own. I wish I could have been there to cheer for you when you graduated, to help you when your mom died, to be there for you when you needed a shoulder to cry on. I’d like to kill that rat bastard because he was there and didn’t do any of those things. I know I’m not good with words, it’s sometimes hard for me to get across what I mean. I never meant to sound like a Neanderthal. Of course you have the final say as to whom you sleep with. I’d never do anything to hurt you or manipulate you, but I have to tell you, I really want to be the one you choose to sleep with.”

“When I make up my mind, you’ll be the first to know.” Her heart beat so hard she could hear the blood rushing in her ears. His words had spread a warm glow through her core and she didn’t know how to handle it. So she ignored it. “Do you want a sandwich to go with this stew?” Macayla needed some time to process what Jared said. She couldn’t believe the look on his face. She would never have believed someone could look both strong and tender at the same time.

Chapter Twelve

“Don’t be such a baby,” Macayla admonished Jared when he flinched at the sight of the staple puller.

It was more of a tweezer than a puller; it squeezed the staple in the middle, and the staple popped easily out of the skin. The nerves around the area weren’t fully healed, so there was almost no pain involved. After checking to make sure yesterday’s walk hadn’t done any damage, Macayla deemed Jared’s injury healed enough to remove the staples.

“That’s it?” Jared questioned when Macayla dropped the last staple onto the tray next to her.

“I’m going to put some Steri-Strips over the incision site to make sure it stays closed for another week, but take a look. All pink, healthy skin, with only the possibility of a slight scar. Not too bad a job if I do say so myself.”

“And these little pieces of tape will keep my insides in?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem, these are just to make sure the wound is completely healed. I’ve already sutured your insides, these are just for the skin. The strips will start falling off in about a week or so. In the mean time, you can start building up your level of activity. This does not mean I want you to be downstairs lifting weights, but it does mean we can take longer walks, you can start riding the stationary bike, and you can do your own laundry.”

“I knew that was going to come in somewhere.”

“All in the name of recovery.” Macayla smiled again. She was in uncommonly good spirits for someone who hadn’t slept much the night before. She hadn’t slept well with Jared in the room with her. It wasn’t that he snored, or was a loud sleeper, it was just that he was so male.

He had left the bathroom door slightly ajar when he went to brush his teeth and change for the night. Macayla had gotten a nice long look at his naked torso while she pretended to be asleep. The sight had sent her pulse soaring, and her imagination went along for the ride. It was far too easy to imagine running her hands along his ribs, over his back, through the hair on his chest. She had fantasies of doing the same thing with her mouth for hours on end.

With thoughts like that on her mind, it was no wonder she had painfully erotic dreams about rolling around naked with Jared on the big master bed across the hall. She had woken up unfulfilled, aching and wanting.

“Hey! Where are you?” Jared waved a hand in front of her face, pulling her from her erotic thoughts.

“Sorry, just thinking about a weird dream I had last night. Why don’t you take a walk and test out those new muscles. I’m going to go work out some more.”

“Okay, I’m outta here.”

Macayla waited until Jared was halfway down the driveway before she changed into her workout clothes. The last thing she had wanted was another run in with him. She was sore, both physically and emotionally, from yesterday. The only way to get rid of the physical soreness was to do more of the same. She hadn’t been quite sure what to do about the emotional soreness.

All during her workout, she thought about what Jared had said. It seemed so strange to have someone want to be there for her. It seemed like she had been on her own for a long time.

Her parents were there for her for while they were alive, but they had been gone for years. When they died, she had had no one to depend on but herself. She'd dealt with their deaths, school, keeping custody of Kevin, and keeping food in the house and a roof over their heads all by herself. She didn't mind the weight of responsibility; she never resented the sacrifices she made. It never occurred to her that she could ask for help, nor that someone would want to be there to help take some of the weight off her shoulders. First Kevin started talking about taking more responsibility for his education, then Jared said he wanted to be there to help her. She didn't know if she felt grateful for their caring, or resentful that they didn't think she could handle it.

Okay, time to stop being so defensive.

People were offering to help her, and she was taking it as an insult instead of a show of support. That was just plain childish, and she knew better than to act like that. How many times had she told her patients to let others help them when they first got home with their new babies?

Every time she discharged someone.

She was constantly telling women to let go of their pride and accept help from others. And here she was, trying to decide if she liked the thought of others helping her or not.

What an idiot. She really needed to relax some of her control issues. Kevin was only trying to gain a little independence, to help her out, to try to be an adult instead of her little brother. She could still help him financially, she had the wherewithal to do so, but she would let him decide what classes he wanted to take, and when.

By the time she left the cellar, her body was pleasantly aching and her thoughts were calmer. She might not have figured out what to do about Jared, but she was working towards finding balance in her life. It was a start.

Macayla headed for the shower, feeling the need for it badly after her workout. Concentrating on the ache in her shoulder, she wasn't prepared for the sight that met her eyes when she opened the door to the bathroom. Jared must have gotten back from his walk and decided he needed a shower too. Macayla's mouth dropped as she saw Jared about to step into the shower. She quickly did an about face, but not before she got a view to star in her next night's fantasies.

His body was so hot. Dear God, how was she supposed to burn that image out of her brain? Long ropy muscles crossed over his thighs and shoulders. And his butt, man, she was a sucker for a guy with a good butt. She better make that a cold shower.

Grabbing her clothes with shaking hands, she padded across the hall and used the master bathroom. Twenty minutes later her teeth were chattering, and she still wasn't sure she could trust herself not to just jump Jared the moment he showed his face. She hid in the room and read medical journals until she felt sufficiently fortified for dealing with him.

All her preparations went down the toilet as soon as she got one look at him sitting on the couch in front of the fire with the fading daylight shining through the windows. She was being betrayed by her hormones, life was so unfair.

"How about pasta tonight? And I'll cook. It's time I gave you a break in the kitchen."

Macayla looked at her watch, was it really that late? She was about to protest that she didn't mind cooking, but remembered she was supposed to let people help her. "That sounds nice, thanks."

Macayla sat on the couch drinking the wine Jared insisted she needed to relax. Never much of a drinker to begin with, two glasses of wine had her feeling downright giddy.

She was thinking maybe this relaxing business wasn't so bad after all when she heard a crash. Immediately she jumped up and ran into the kitchen. Jared swore profusely, trying to clean up a jar of spaghetti sauce that had smashed on the stone floor.

"Do you need any help? Be careful you don't cut yourself."

"I'm fine, thanks. I'm just mad that I was so careless to put the jar too close to the edge of the counter. No problem, I saw another jar of sauce in the pantry, I'll use that one. Go back in the living room and relax, I'll have this cleaned up in a jiffy."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course, I'm very self-sufficient in the kitchen."

"If you say so."

"Ye of little faith. You'll see, now go relax, I'll call you when dinner is ready."

Macayla went back to the living room with little reluctance. The only other person who had ever cooked for her since her mother had died was Samara, and they usually went out to eat when they were together. She could get used to someone else dealing with the menu, making the dinner and cleaning up the messes.

Of course, she'd made a deal with Jared about him cleaning when she cooked. Maybe he would forget about it tonight. Macayla had slipped into a light doze by the time Jared was finished preparing dinner.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty. Dinner will be ready in five minutes."

“Great.” Macayla stretched lazily. “I’ll go wash up then set the table.” She stood and stretched again, causing her shirt to strain over her breasts. She could see Jared was mesmerized by the sight and smiled to herself as she walked to the bathroom. There was something very flattering about having a drop dead gorgeous man staring at you with his mouth hanging open.

On the way back in, she watched as Jared efficiently strained the pasta, took the bread out of the oven, and put the salad on the table.

“It smells wonderful. Thank you for going to all this trouble. I can’t believe you lit candles. What is the celebration?”

“My recovery of course.”

“Sounds good. I’ll serve the salad if you want to get the rest on the table.” Macayla was certain something was up. Jared had a devilish glint in his eye, but she couldn’t guess what he was thinking.

Jared was a pretty good cook. The spaghetti wasn’t overdone, the salad wasn’t soggy, and the bread wasn’t burnt. Macayla was pleasantly surprised.

After doing the dishes together, they retired to the living room and Macayla went for a record third glass of wine.

“I had better not have any more wine, I’m feeling awfully warm.” Her stomach felt a little funny, and she was starting to sweat. She put the barely touched glass of wine down and unbuttoned her shirt a little.

“I don’t feel too warm, but I won’t stoke the fire if you think it will help.”

“I don’t know if that will make any difference, I feel really warm. I’m going to put my hair up, and maybe open a window or something,” Macayla said as she fled the room.

She tore off her shirt and put her hair up in a ponytail. She felt feverish, her mouth watered profusely and her stomach rolled like a boat

at sea. She recognized the signs and ran to the bathroom in time to vomit into the toilet. When she finished she didn't have the energy to do more than lay down on the blessedly cool tiles.

"Macayla? What's going on?" Jared asked from outside the bathroom door.

"Nothing," Macayla mumbled into the floor.

"If you don't answer me, I'm coming in," Jared said, obvious worry straining his voice.

"Whatever." She didn't care if the entire police force entered the bathroom, she wasn't moving from her spot for anyone.

"What's wrong? Come on, honey, why don't you get into bed, you'll be more comfortable."

"Just leave me alone and let me die in peace," Macayla said without opening her eyes.

"You only had a few glasses of wine, you can't be drunk."

"I'm not. Must be something in the food. Where did you get the sauce from?"

"I got it from the stores that were left here, remember? The sauce we brought with us I dropped on the floor. It can't be the sauce, I ate it and I feel fine."

"Well bully for you. Check the ingredients. Does it have mushrooms in it?"

"Hold on, I don't remember. I'll go check." Jared got up and left the bathroom quickly.

Macayla could feel the nausea rising and was glad for Jared's departure. She hated to show weakness in front of anyone, and she was way past weak at this point. She dragged herself up long enough to throw up into the toilet again, then collapsed against the floor.

"I had to go through the garbage to get the jar, but I have it now. Yes, there are mushrooms in it. Is that what is making you sick?"

"I'm really allergic to mushrooms. The sauce I brought with us didn't have them in it, so I didn't think anything of it when you said you were making pasta. It didn't occur to me that the other sauce could contain mushrooms or I would have said something."

"Can you take anything for it?"

"No, I'm lucky enough that it doesn't cut off my breathing or give me hives. I'll puke every ten minutes or so for the rest of the night, then I'll be fine. Really." Macayla just wanted to be left alone, she was hoping Jared would get over his guilt and leave her to her misery. She'd be dry heaving before long and really didn't want an audience for it.

"I can't just leave you here."

"Sure you can. I would really prefer it. In fact, you should probably move to the master bedroom because I'll be in here all night long."

"Oh my God, Macayla, I'm so sorry."

"You didn't know, it was my own fault for not checking out the other sauce beforehand. Now please, just go." Macayla was getting ready for another prayer to the porcelain god and wanted to be alone.

Jared left the room, but as soon as she started heaving he was back. He held her stomach, and then mopped her face with a wet washcloth. She didn't have the energy to argue with him when he helped her up off the bathroom floor and walked her into the spare bedroom. He pulled off her jeans and her bra and briskly washed her sweat-soaked body with a clean washcloth. He towed her off and put one of his much larger T-shirts over her small frame.

As Jared ministered to Macayla, he tried to ignore the fact that she wore skimpy, black, lacy panties under her jeans, and her breasts

strained the fabric of the shirt, even though it reached almost to her knees. He laid her down gently on the side of the bed closest to the bathroom, and then went in search of some ginger ale. The minute he shut the door he heard Macayla run into the bathroom again.

It was going to be a long night.

All through the night Jared mopped her brow, fed her ice chips, and encouraged her to sip the flattened soda. He caught snatches of sleep when Macayla rested between trips to the bathroom, but was always up to help her back to the bed when she finished yet another bout of vomiting.

By five the next morning, it seemed like the worst was over.

"I think that's the end of it," Macayla groaned as she came back from the bathroom and crawled under the covers of the bed to fall into an exhausted slumber.

Jared was still in the clothes from the night before. He wanted to get a little sleep while he could, but didn't want to leave Macayla alone. He kicked off his jeans and pulled off his shirt before climbing in on the other side of the bed. He believed Macayla when she said she was through vomiting, but he wasn't going to leave her alone until he was sure.



Macayla awoke slowly. She was warm, but not overly hot, and her stomach ached fiercely, but she didn't feel like she was going to lose its contents again. She knew from past experience that she'd be out of sorts for most of the day, but would recover by dinnertime.

She desperately wanted to brush her teeth and take a shower, but wasn't looking forward to crossing the cold floor to get to the bathroom. It

was only when she tried to throw off the covers that she realized she wasn't alone in the bed. Jared was sleeping deeply right next to her. She couldn't believe she could spend the night in bed with him and not even know it. Of course, she wasn't exactly in any position to get aroused, so she could have been sleeping with Mr. Universe and not been bothered by it.

She carefully made her way to the bathroom and brushed her teeth. She immediately felt better, and decided she would try to take a shower on her own. It wasn't easy. Her stomach muscles were sore from the strain she put on them through the night, and she couldn't stand up completely straight. At least she was able to take off Jared's T-shirt and take her hair out of the sweaty ponytail it was in.

A shower was imperative. She was covered in dried sweat, and her hair was waxy and lank. She stood in the shower and just let the water pour over her. It had been years since she had eaten a mushroom, she hoped it would be much longer before she ate another one.

"What are you doing out of bed?" Jared asked, barging into the bathroom without knocking.

"Taking a shower, I feel disgusting," Macayla said without moving from under the spray. She was too exhausted to get upset about his lack of manners. Besides, after last night modesty seemed pointless. He had seen her pretty much naked and at her worst. What did it matter if he looked at her through the shower door?

"Are you crazy? You spent the night throwing up. You're too weak to be in there by yourself. Why didn't you wake me up? I would have helped you get clean."

"It never occurred to me to wake you up. I'm perfectly capable of washing myself. Now if you would excuse me, I'll wash my hair then get

out of the shower. Don't worry, Jared, I know my limitations, I'll get right back into bed when I'm done."

"You bet your sweet bottom you will. I'll give you five minutes before I come in there and get you. You could collapse and get knocked unconscious, and drown in there."

Macayla thought he was being a little ridiculous, but she hustled through the rest of her shower anyway. She was wrapped in a towel when Jared returned to the bathroom.

"I've lit a fire in the fireplace in the master bedroom, I figured you'd be more comfortable there. I made some tea and toast, and I brought some of your magazines in as well."

"Well, didn't you think of everything? Thank you, Jared, it's been a long time since anyone has taken care of me," Macayla said softly. She was feeling all mushy inside and it worried her just a little.

Jared waited in the room until Macayla was bundled in her nightgown, then he wrapped her in a blanket and carried her into the master bedroom.

"Put me down. You just got your staples out, you'll hurt yourself!" Macayla's heart lurched. She was unused to being picked up like a sleepy three-year old.

"You don't weigh enough to put a strain on my arms, never mind the rest of me. Besides, didn't you say the staples were just for the skin? I'm fine, you're the one I'm worried about. I don't want you getting too tired. Sit here in front of the fire and I'll comb out your hair."

"Really, Jared, this is nice, but I can do it myself."

"Just try to relax for a change. I'm sure you think you're better, but you need a day of pampering to get back into shape."

"Is that your professional opinion?"

"Yes. Now be quiet and let me comb out this mess."

Macayla was still mulling over the novelty of having a man make tea and toast for her when Jared started to comb out her curls. He was much gentler than she expected. Her hair tended to snarl at the least provocation, but Jared patiently worked the comb through until the curls fell loosely about her shoulders.

“There, now it’s dry enough not to wet the pillow, into bed with you. I’ll make some new toast, that plate is probably soggy by now, but the tea should still be hot.”

She climbed into bed and drank some of the tea. It was weak and lukewarm, but soothing all the same. She ate the dry toast Jared brought in and read some of her magazines. Jared bustled about the room, stoking the fire, fluffing the pillows, bringing more fluids, and basically driving Macayla crazy.

“Jared, would you just sit down and relax? If you put another log on that fire I’m going to fry, it’s June for heaven’s sake. I don’t need my pillows fluffed, another blanket, or more tea. What is going on? Are you feeling guilty or is this payback for when you were injured?”

“I was just trying to help. You were really sick last night,” Jared said a little defensively.

“I had an allergic reaction. I’ll be recovered completely in a few more hours. I don’t need to be coddled like an invalid. I’ll be fine. Why don’t you sit down and talk to me, I’m getting pretty sick of these magazines.”

“What do you want to talk about?” Jared sprawled like a lazy cat at the foot of the bed.

“Tell me something about yourself. You’ve heard my life’s story, it’s your turn to spill your guts. No pun intended.”

“Ha ha. What do you want to know? I told you about my family, going in the army, there isn’t much else to tell.”

“Tell me about your first love,” Macayla said. She didn’t know what impasse they had crossed, but she was no longer uncomfortable around him. They had moved from weary strangers to cautious friends, and she wasn’t even sure when it happened.

“My first love, huh? My first love, or my first lover? They’re not always the same.”

“Maybe, maybe not. You tell me.”

“Well, since my first love was all three of Charlie’s Angels, I guess that doesn’t count.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“You really want to hear about this?”

“You betcha.” Macayla leaned back comfortably into the pillows.

“My first lover, and incidentally my first real love, was Patti McClain. She and I were in basic training together. I used to go to Mass on Sundays just so I could see her. There’re pretty strict rules about fraternizing during basic. I was still scrawny then—I told you I was a computer geek in high school, all arms and legs and skinny as a scarecrow. I bulked up a little in basic, and then I started weight lifting in AIT, but I was still a beanpole. I was really shy, I didn’t know how to even talk to a female, forget flirt with one. I had made it through high school totally ignored by the female of the species, and didn’t know what to do to change that.”

“I have a really hard time believing that.” Macayla couldn’t imagine someone not seeing his beautiful eyes or his sculpted cheekbones, even if he didn’t have the gorgeous butt back then.

“Believe it. Anyway, I was assigned to the same job as Patti and she kind of drew me out of my geekdom. She was the kind of person who made everyone feel special. She could get even a shy dweeb like me to talk and relax around her. Wherever we went, she was the life of the

party. She was the type of girl who made everyone laugh, and managed to do it without hurting anyone's feelings. She had hair like yours, curly, but it was brown, not red. Even though she was a little more experienced than I was, she never made me feel awkward about my inexperience. She taught me that it was what was inside me that mattered, not the size of my muscles or the size of my—"

"I get the point. So what happened?" Macayla asked. She didn't feel jealous of his past, which surprised her. Joe had taunted her with his past exploits, and she would end up in a fever of jealousy, just as he wanted her to.

"She was transferred to Germany, and I was tapped for Special Ops. We agreed that we couldn't carry on a trans-Atlantic affair and parted as friends. I still get Christmas cards with pictures of her three kids every year."

"She sounds like quite the paragon. Did you ever try to look her up after you got out of the service?"

"No, she was married by then, but it wasn't only that. We kept in touch when we could, and really became great friends. I enjoyed making love to her when we first were together, but I valued her friendship much more than her body. I didn't want to risk losing the one to get the other."

"That is amazingly enlightened of you. You really do surprise me sometimes. I expected you to give me a tale of losing your virginity in the back of a car when you were still in high school. You always struck me as pretty experienced in the war of the sexes."

"I wasn't exactly a threat to procreation in high school. After Patti and I went our separate ways, I had much more self-confidence and managed to cut a swath through the female population, but that got old fast. I think being brought up by a single mother gave me a little more respect for women."

"I would imagine it did. You really do surprise me sometimes, Jared," Macayla said softly.

She crawled over to where he sat and kissed him gently on the lips. It was a tender kiss of thanks, and Jared was strangely moved by it.

"What was that for? You never make the first move." Jared ran his fingers through her curls.

"Maybe because you took care of me even when I didn't want you too, or maybe it was because you aren't the womanizing bastard I thought you were. Or maybe it's just because I might actually be getting to like you."

"You must be sicker than you thought."

Jared felt something in the region of his heart turn over with a thump. It was the first time Macayla had responded to him without his dragging it out of her, and it was the first time she had initiated any contact with him that wasn't medical. His plan for seduction had gone way off track, but he had gotten closer to her anyway. Maybe some things were just better left to fate.

"If you're okay in here, I'm going to take a walk in the woods. It's a beautiful day outside, and my doctor told me I should get some exercise."

"That was a low blow, Romero. I'm stuck in here with sore stomach muscles, and you get to enjoy the day."

"Turn about is fair play. Why don't you take a nap, you didn't get much sleep last night."

"I don't need much sleep. I used to work twenty hour shifts during my residency."

"Well, you weren't throwing up during those twenty hours, so why don't you just relax anyway, I won't be gone long. If you're good, I'll make you some broth for supper tonight, no mushrooms."

"You're really enjoying this, aren't you?"

“As a matter of fact, yes I am. It’s not often that the indomitable Macayla Sullivan is down on her luck. I have to take advantage of it when I can.”

“Laugh it up, buddy, I’ll be better by dinner tonight, and you’ll be sore and tired from overdoing it today. Then we’ll see who’s laughing.”

“Who says I’m going to overdo it? I didn’t overdo it yesterday.” This lighthearted teasing was a side of Macayla he had never seen. It was kind of cute in the short term.

“Which is exactly why you will overdo it today. You’re feeling cocky about it now. Jared, you’re a man. You can’t help yourself. You’ll push it because you won’t believe that you can’t do anything you feel like. You won’t listen to me because I’m a woman and I obviously don’t understand the strength of a man, therefore I don’t know how much you can do. Trust me, you’ll overdo it.”

“Want to bet on it?”

“Not again. Just go on your walk. Maybe you’ll get lucky and you can see Miss Buxom Bleach Blonde trying her wiles out on some other sleaze ball.”

“Well, if you put it that way, how can I resist?” Jared laughed all the way out the door.

When Jared went to check back in on Macayla before he left, she was sound asleep. So much for not needing a nap.

He took the path that led to the trailer park, not to run into any blonde, but to go to the general store and check out his options. Now that he was feeling better he wanted to show Macayla how well he could cook. He was quite certain he wouldn’t astound her with his stuffed mushrooms, but he did make a mean chicken piccata.

A nagging fear in his gut made him want to get the lay of the land. There was only so much one could learn from maps, he wanted to get a

hands-on look at his surroundings. His expertise might be computers, but his training with Special Operations taught him a great deal about survival.

One of the first things he learned was to always have an escape route—or three—available.

The signs of approaching summer were finally visible. He could see more green in the woods, flowers were abundant in the clearings, and SUVs with bike racks were everywhere. With the number of tourists pouring into the park he would go fairly unnoticed. Just the way he liked it. A few more weeks and he would be in the clear, until then he didn't want to raise the least bit of suspicion.

Jared followed the path to the trailer park, wondering behind which tree Macayla had hidden when she got her unexpected peep show. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed not to run into any buxom blonde on his way through the park. Seeing the general store, he casually wandered inside. His manner seemed relaxed, but the close observer would have noticed his hands stayed out of his pockets, and his eyes were alert. His bearing marked him as someone who had spent time in the service, but only someone with military experience would know that.

As he turned a corner, he spotted a bottle blonde with her arms crossed over her rather large chest, talking to a skinny man with a nervous twitch. It could only be the couple Macayla had seen in the woods. What were the odds of two such couples in the same trailer park?

The blonde eyed Jared with a thoroughness that had him checking the position of his fly before she turned back to the man slowly backing away from her. Jared slipped around the next aisle and listened unashamedly.

"I'm glad you understand, Laura. I just can't lose my wife and family. My kids are more important to me than any woman. If Sue Ellen leaves me, she'll take the kids with her, and I just can't risk that."

"So you think you can just leave me, just like that? Screw me in the woods and walk off?" Her voice rose ten decibels.

"Keep it down. Do you want everyone in the park to know what happened?"

"I don't care who knows! Why don't I just tell your precious Sue Ellen what happened. Do you think she'll still want you after that? You can just kiss your precious kids good-bye then."

"She already knows, I can't keep anything from her. She was mad, but she's willing to give me another chance. That's why I can't risk seeing you again. Don't you see it was a mistake? I realized I still love Sue Ellen. I can't risk losing her and the kids. I'm sorry if that hurts you, but I won't be seeing you ever again. We're going to move the camper to another park today. I thought I should tell you before we just up and leave."

"You think you can just leave like that? Do you really think you can just walk out of here scot-free? Well I have news for you, Jake, no one walks away from Laura T. Hill without paying a price! No one!"

"I think I already paid my price. I'm leaving."

Jake fled and bumped into Jared on the way out of the store. Jared was probably the only one who knew the whole story. Curiosity made him strike up a conversation with the hapless Jake.

"Wow, I've heard of sore losers, but she takes the cake."

"You're telling me."

"Why don't I walk you to wherever you're going. She strikes me as the type to stab a guy in the back."

“No kidding.” Jake eyed Jared almost as thoroughly as Laura had. “Thanks, I’d be much obliged.”

“No problem, always willing to help a fellow man. That was some scene.”

“Don’t I know it. I’m just glad my wife and kids weren’t around. They’re waiting for me at the office. We’re leaving as soon as we pay up.”

“What happened? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I guess you could figure most of it out yourself. I was just plain stupid. I let my parts do my thinking and almost ruined my life. Me and Sue Ellen were high school sweethearts. We’ve been married for almost ten years. Got married right out of high school, and had our first baby a year later. We have two boys and a girl now, and I guess I was feeling a little of those old wild oats. Hell, I don’t know what I was feeling. Sue Ellen and I decided to take this vacation because the fire was dying. I was working overtime, she was busy with the kids, you know. Do you have kids?” Jake asked.

“Not yet, but I hope to soon,” Jared said, realizing it was true.

“Well, they can be the best thing that ever happened to you, but they can also take over your life. Sue Ellen was so busy making costumes, driving to soccer practice, dance lessons, Boy Scouts, plus taking care of the house, I guess I just fell to the bottom of the list. That’s no excuse for what I done mind you, but there was problems there to begin with.”

“No one can break up a happy marriage,” Jared said, wondering when he would get to his point.

“Exactly. Still, we came up here hoping to get closer together, only it seemed like all we did was run around with the kids, and you can’t exactly spark up the old marriage bed with three sets of ears close by. I said something to her, and she got mad and asked me if I wanted to do her with an audience. I stormed off to the dance hall and met up with

Laura. After a few beers and some glimpses of what she was showing, she seemed like just the answer. I still didn't give in, but I was mighty tempted. The next day she caught my eye and made some suggestions. I was still hesitant, then the next thing I know, I'm talking her into doing it in the woods. For Christ's sake, my kids could have walked by. I was just lucky no one saw us before I could tell Sue Ellen, or my life wouldn't be worth spit."

Jared didn't bother to correct him. He was finding this tale quite fascinating.

"Anyway, after we had finished, she started talking about where we could meet again. I told her I'd meet up with her tomorrow, but I had to get back before my wife got suspicious. I was walking back to the trailer, and Sue Ellen was alone waiting for me. She apologized for how she spoke to me and wanted to talk. Here she was telling me I was right and that she had been neglecting her duties as a wife, and she arranged to have one of the kids from the trailer next door watch the kids at the playground for a few hours so we could have some alone time."

"That must have been awkward."

"You ain't lying. I just fell apart and told her everything."

"That took guts," Jared said, meaning it.

"She wasn't happy, that's for sure. She slugged me one in the stomach, but if she had found out from someone else, she would have done a hell of a lot more damage. My Sue Ellen doesn't pull any punches. After she got over being mad, we talked some more, and she said she thought Laura was up to something. Women just have a feel for that kind of thing, you know. She said the same thing you just said, even though I was lower than a snake's belly, Laura wouldn't have been able to get a second glance if things were right between the two of us. I'm just glad I got away when I did. That lady is crazy. I'm gonna treat Sue Ellen to the

best dinner and motel money can buy, as soon as we can drop off the kids with her sister.”

“Good luck, man, you deserve a second chance. Don’t mess it up.”

“I won’t, that’s for sure. Thanks for watching my back, there’s Sue Ellen now. I appreciate the protection, and the ear. Sometimes a man just needs the opinion of another man.”

“Truer words were never spoken. Good luck with that dinner and the motel.”

“Thanks.” He crossed the lot and called out to a pretty brunette behind the wheel of a pickup. “Get her started, I’ll pay up and we’re out of here.”

Jared turned around and walked back up to the store, mulling over what the man had said. He hoped he would never be in a situation where he had to tell Macayla he had slept with someone else. He doubted he’d get away with only a punch in the stomach. Even though he hadn’t slept with her yet, he didn’t think she’d appreciate him catting around. He made his intentions quite clear, and as far as he was concerned, it was only a matter of time before they consummated the act. Neither one of them would be doing someone else against a tree, that was for sure.

Just the thought of Macayla touching another man was enough to put a scowl on Jared’s face as he re-entered the store.

“Now that’s a mean look. What’s a handsome fella like you doing with a scowl like that? You must need someone to sweeten your day.” The blonde slid up against him and ran her hands over his chest. “You just need a little honey to sweeten your mood, and Laura is just the woman to give it to you,” she said as she rubbed her breasts against his chest.

Jared couldn’t believe she was fondling him in the middle of a store. She had just caused a scene in the same store not five minutes ago, and here she was practically attacking him.

“Thanks, but I have plenty of honey at home,” Jared said as neutrally as he could. He didn’t want to make a bigger scene, but neither did he want to be molested in front of a rapt audience. He gently pulled her hands off his chest and went to the wine aisle. He picked a bottle off the shelf without even paying attention to the label, paid for it and left.

He was lucky he picked a cheap vintage as he only had a twenty on him. He hadn’t planned on actually shopping, this was only a reconnaissance expedition. He was lucky he had any money on him at all. He hightailed it through the park and went up the path using all the stealth he had learned in his years in the military.

Jared had never feared an enemy more than that cold-eyed blonde in the store. He wanted to make certain she didn’t realize he lived outside of the trailer park. The last thing he wanted was her showing up unannounced at the house.

He debated the wisdom of keeping the incident a secret from Macayla, but decided against it. If they ever ran into her together, he didn’t want any misunderstandings. He had the feeling that Laura wouldn’t stop her pursuit just because Macayla was in the way.

Chapter Thirteen

When Jared walked back into the cabin, he was still feeling a little jumpy. Which was the excuse he gave when Macayla tapped him on the shoulder and he spun around in a crouch.

“Well hello. Did you meet a commando on your walk?” Macayla asked him. He had immediately shut the door and was looking out the window when she tapped him on the shoulder.

“Worse. I met your Miss Buxom Bleach Blonde, and I have never been so scared.”

“Do tell.”

She did not look happy at the news. Better tell her everything as quickly as possible. “She was screaming at Jake, who was telling her that things were through and he was going back to Sue Ellen.”

“Hold on, hold on. Who is Sue Ellen? Start from the beginning, I’ve got to hear this,” Macayla said, curling up on the couch.

“It all started when I walked into the general store.” Jared proceeded to tell her the entire story, which had her mouth open in astonishment.

“You mean, she actually took him back?”

“Well, not before she got a shot in.”

“One punch, big deal. He threw away ten years of marriage for a quicky.”

"I got a good look at her, I bet she packed one hell of a punch. Besides, I guess what it comes down to is this, is one mistake worth throwing away ten years of marriage?"

"You've got a point, and I must admit I'm a little biased. I can assure you, if my husband ever cheated on me, he'd get a lot more than just a punch."

"Funny, I was thinking the same thing."

"Oh really?"

"Yes, and just so we are clear on the matter, I don't care that we haven't known each other since high school, nor are we married, there will be no others, for either of us."

"Really?" Macayla looked at him incredulously.

"Really."

"I wasn't aware that my life had anything to do with you."

"Don't give me that bull, Macayla. I may not be pushing you as hard as I can, but that doesn't mean I don't want you. And just because you haven't unbent your stiff neck enough to enjoy the pleasure I could give you doesn't mean that you won't. Until whatever it is we have between us is over, neither one of us will be straying."

"Is that so?"

"Yes." Jared could feel his temper boiling. He was sure she was just yanking his chain, but he couldn't help his knee-jerk reaction.

"And what exactly do we have between the two of us?" Macayla asked, looking a little annoyed herself.

"This," Jared said as he pulled her to him. He held her head in both of his hands and attacked her lips with his own. This was no gentle persuasion, this was an assault on her defenses, and it was massively successful. He overwhelmed her with his ferocity, pushing past her lips, storming her walls, drawing out every bit of feeling she had inside her.

He touched no more than her face, kissed no more than her lips, but her entire body felt the glow he had intended to ignite.

“Don’t ever think just because I play the gentleman that I am one. This will be finished eventually.”

Macayla didn’t know what to say. She stood there and stared at him as he walked out of the room. She was still standing in the same spot when he passed her on the way to the gym downstairs.

Part of her wanted to be mad—who did he think he was? The rest of her was still soaring in the heights he had taken her with one kiss. She honestly didn’t know why she wasn’t madder at his caveman behavior, but she just couldn’t work up the energy to get furious. This called for some serious back up. She needed help, and she needed it from someone she could trust.

Macayla walked to her room and dug through her bag until she found the digital phone Connor had packed for them to use. She powered it on and waited for whatever scrambling device was on it to activate. She had no idea about the technology behind it, all she knew was she could use it for a short period of time and be relatively sure she wouldn’t be jeopardizing their safety.

“Samara O’Riley, Editing.”

“Sam-Sam, it’s ‘Cayla.”

“Macayla. How are you doing? Is everything okay?”

“Yes, everything is just fine. I took out Jared’s staples yesterday. He made dinner and almost killed me, but other than that things are just ducky.”

“Oh no, did he give you mushrooms?” Samara asked, laughter in her voice.

“Not on purpose, they were in the spaghetti sauce.”

“Oh dear. Are you okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fine. That’s not why I called. Sam, I need some advice.”

“That’s a first, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, I just, well, I’m just—” Macayla couldn’t finish.

“Ready to jump his bones?”

“Exactly. Oh Lord, I’m so confused. I’ve only known him for such a short time, and my track record isn’t that great to begin with. How do I know if it’s right? How do I know if it’s more than just hormones?”

“You don’t. Macayla, this isn’t a test you can study for and pass. This is life, and sometimes you hit the jackpot, and sometimes you hit the gutter. You can protect yourself to some degree, but eventually you just have to close your eyes and jump.”

“I hate that. I never walk into something blindly. How can I just jump into a situation where I don’t know what is going to happen?”

“Macayla, you can’t control everything. Maybe it’s time you jumped. Hey I did and it worked for me.”

“Yeah, but Connor is Connor. He’s great. Jared is different.”

“Connor wasn’t exactly looking to get married and have a baby when I met him. I slept with him knowing I might never see him again. Even though I had never done that before, I just had this gut feeling that if I didn’t take the chance for once in my life, I would never have that chance again. I was lucky, it worked out, but there were some long, lonely months where I thought I’d be alone with only that one night to remember him by.”

“If you had never seen him again, would it have been worth it? Would you have had regrets?”

“Only that I didn’t sleep with him sooner. You can’t plan everything, some things are just left up to fate. That doesn’t mean you sleep with every man you come across, but it does mean when you meet a man like

Jared, you don't wait around until the last day to take the final step. Life can be very short."

"You don't have to tell me that. Thanks. I don't know if you told me what I want to hear, but you have definitely given me some things to think about."

"What are friends for? If you make the decision, look in the front pocket of your bag, I put some things in there, just in case."

"Why you sneaky little devil."

"Like I said, what are friends for? Just remember, I love you."

"Thanks, me too." Macayla hung up the phone feeling a little better. She didn't have any idea of where she was headed with Jared, but at least she was sure in the knowledge that if she fell flat on her face she'd have someone there to help her up.

Should she go down to clear the air with Jared? Maybe a little space would be best for both of them. She wasn't the type to hold a grudge, but there was a time and place for every discussion. The fact that she was still feeling a little overheated from Jared's kiss, and he was downstairs working out, possibly with his shirt off, didn't bode well for an intelligent conversation. She had never seen a man as good looking as Jared, even Connor wasn't as ruggedly handsome, and he was no slouch.

Thoughts like those weren't going to help clear her mind any.

Macayla went into the kitchen and started a meatloaf for supper. She wasn't sure if her stomach was up to that yet so she put in an extra potato to bake just in case. She cleaned up the kitchen and puttered around the house, straightening little things, cleaning the bathroom, making the beds. When she had run out of things to do and Jared was still downstairs, she figured she had better stop him from hurting himself.

Idiot man, he's going to overdo it just like I said. Why is it men think they are so much smarter than women? Macayla muttered to herself as she headed for the stairs leading to the home gym. As she stomped her way down, she was blasted by the music Jared had blaring from the speakers. His face was turned away from her as his arms pumped the free weights. He had his shirt off, just as she had expected, and his torso was beaded in sweat.

The muscles in his arms rippled with the effort he made to lift the weights over and over again. Macayla paused, speechless as she watched him work out. He was definitely eye candy. Forget eye candy, he was eye chocolate. The overhead lights emphasized his every asset—the glints in his midnight black hair were almost blue, his hairy chest was pumping up and down with exertion. His sweatpants sagged on his narrow frame and revealed the upper curve of his pelvis, a sight Macayla found irrationally erotic.

Her mouth hung open as she stood staring at him, wondering how to take her eyes off him long enough to form a coherent thought in her head. She had completely forgotten the reason she had come downstairs in the first place.

Jared dropped the weight and pressed his hand to his side. When he looked up and saw her, he lowered his hand guiltily. He stood and walked over to her, drying himself on the towel as he went. His chest moved up and down with his heavy breath from his workout. She said nothing as he came within inches of her. He stopped, waiting for her to make the next move.

Macayla stared at Jared, watching him as he ran the towel over his body. She wanted to be that towel, wrapped around that gorgeous chest, feeling his heartbeat, touching his body. She licked her lips as though she could already taste the salt from his skin. The rational part of her brain yelled

at her to say something, to break the spell, but her body wasn't listening. It was too busy watching him.

Slowly, almost against her will, she moved closer to him. She reached him, just a breath away from all that glorious skin, but he didn't make a move to touch her. She almost whimpered.

She wanted to be pressed against his chest, to feel the fire spread and burn. She waited breathless seconds for him to move, but when he did nothing more than grip the towel and stare at her; she knew it was up to her to decide what was going to happen.

She watched a bead of sweat work its way from the hollow of his throat, down his chest, over his stomach, and stop at the waistband of his sweats. She could feel her control snap as she saw the evidence of his desire directly below the devious drop of sweat.

Struggling to find courage, she stood on tiptoe and placed her mouth against his throat. She delicately licked her way from his throat to the oasis of his chest.

What a dilemma. She had dreamed about these acres of muscles for days now and, like a kid in a candy store, didn't know where to begin. She wanted to touch and taste everything at once, yet wanted to linger over it as well. She kissed a path between his nipples, and brought her hands up to run her fingers through the hair on his chest, grabbing his pectorals gently and rubbing his flat nipples between her fingers.

Jared remained silent, his hands gripping the towel. He held on for dear life, afraid to make a move and break the spell. Macayla devoured his chest—and his control. Her hands explored his torso like a blind person reading Braille. Fire exploded in his gut as her mouth trailed kisses over every inch, and worked lower second by agonizing second.

When she reached the waistband of his pants, Jared pulled her up to him.

“Macayla, you have about five seconds to decide if this is what you want, because if it isn’t, you had better run for your life.”

“You talk pretty tough, but I don’t believe a word of it.” Macayla ran her hands over his chest. It was like now that she had finally given in, she never wanted to stop touching him.

“No doubts? No regrets?”

“No doubts. No regrets, and no talking. Use that mouth of yours for something a bit more productive,” Macayla practically growled, grabbing his head and pulling it down to her.

Jared reached down and pulled Macayla up to him so her feet were no longer touching the floor. She wrapped her legs around his waist and set to work on his mouth, consuming him.

He didn’t give her any chance to change her mind. There was such fire inside of him, he was afraid he would conflagrate in thirty seconds and the whole thing would be over with. He reigned in his wildly roving control and clamped an iron fist around it. He wanted Macayla so mindless that she would be as crazy for him as he was for her. He knew she had unplumbed depths of passion inside her, he just had to find the trigger to get her to let go of the locks she had on those depths.

Jared held tightly to Macayla’s bottom and walked to the weight bench. He took his gaze off her long enough to know that wasn’t going to work out. Why did she have to choose the only place in the entire house that had no bed to suddenly let go?

Why? Who cared? She did and he would just have to make the best of it. Jared was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth. He’d figure something out, and quickly. He finally gave up and pressed her against

the wall where he could brace her against his muscular legs and not worry about dropping her as she slowly drove him mad.

She had wrapped her legs tightly around his waist and was running her hands frantically over his body. Jared pulled her arms away from him long enough to pull her shirt off, and almost dropped to his knees when he realized she wasn't wearing a bra. He cupped her breasts in his palms and laved kisses reverently over them. The little whimpers she made in the back of her throat spurred him on to dedicate a great deal of time and attention to those beautiful orbs. An effort that was obviously appreciated by the sighs of pleasure Macayla made.

Macayla didn't know she could feel this way. She kept thinking she couldn't feel any more, then Jared would touch her again and she'd fly even higher. The feel of his naked skin on hers was mindlessly exciting. The crispness of his hair against her nipples stirred her blood hotter and hotter. His calloused hands were rough and his lips on her breasts were tender. She wanted more. Of everything, the only thing her mind could comprehend was more. More touches, more kisses, more skin.

She became impatient with the barrier of his sweatpants and her own leggings. She unwrapped the death grip she had around his waist and slid down his body. When her feet touched the floor her knees buckled, and it was a good thing Jared was still pressing her against the wall or she would have ended up in a heap at his feet.

Franticly, she pulled at the loose drawstring of his pants and yanked them down around his ankles along with his boxer shorts. His shaft sprang to life in her hands, and she couldn't help but take a fluttery breath at the evidence of his arousal.

“If you keep touching me, this is going to be over before it starts,” Jared growled as he slipped his fingers into the waistband of her leggings and slid them to the floor as well.

When they were both completely naked, Jared pulled her to him again and began his own foray on her mouth.

Macayla rubbed herself sinuously against him, delighting in the feel of her naked body pressed against his strong, hard one. His kisses were bringing her to a fevered pitch, and she wasn’t sure how much longer she could last before she exploded.

“Jared, I need you, now.”

“Thank God.”

As he lowered her to the ground, he reached for the table next to her and opened a drawer. He fumbled around a few minutes before he pulled out a foil package. Ripping open the wrapper, he sheathed himself and then gently probed the area between her thighs. When she was almost frenzied with need, he slowly filled her.

Macayla couldn’t believe how tight, how complete she felt. It took her body some moments to adjust to the feeling of fullness, but when she felt the heat come back, she began rocking her hips in encouragement. When Jared just remained stationary, gritting his teeth and sweating, Macayla decided to take matters into her own hands. With a move she never thought she’d use outside of a karate studio, she scissored her legs and flipped Jared onto his back.

The unexpectedness of the move was one of the keys to its success. Jared’s look of shock was almost as enjoyable as the feeling of him being pressed deep inside her.

“My turn.” She leaned over him, her curls cascading in waves. She ran her hands up his chest until she grabbed hold of his head, and then bestowed a kiss on him that should have burnt the floorboards beneath

him. With a wicked laugh she leaned back and proceeded to rock her hips to her satisfaction.

“My control wasn’t great to begin with, you had better let me take over.”

“Not a chance. This was my idea, I want to do it my way.” She rocked even harder. Something was missing, and she was so close to getting it.

“Then hold on tight.” Jared grabbed her rocking hips with two hands and thrust forcefully up. Once, twice, three times and Macayla was a quivering, shaking, exploding mass. Her eyes squeezed shut as she convulsed through her first ever orgasm, and then collapsed across his chest. She barely felt him reach his own shuddering conclusion seconds after her.

“Sweet Jesus.” Jared groaned, lying flat on the floor. He didn’t think he could move if the house was on fire. He could feel Macayla’s rapid heartbeat slow, her breathing even out, but she still had her eyes closed. He laboriously brought his hand up to run lightly across her back, and felt her shudder in reaction.

“So that’s what all the fuss is about,” Macayla said dreamily, her eyes still closed.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never had an orgasm before?”

“You make it sound like a disease. If I had the energy, I’d be annoyed with you. As it is, I’ll forgive you, as long as you promise to give me another one later.”

“Oh, you can bet on that. I’ve been dreaming of ways to give you orgasms since the first time I kissed you and you set my blood boiling. I have many, many ways to bring you over.”

“Really?”

“Really. Now how about I make us up some dinner and we can take a bath in the whirlpool tub. I’ve had visions of you in nothing but bubbles, I want to see how the reality compares.”

“Dinner! Oh my God! My meatloaf!” Macayla scrambled off him and ran upstairs, grabbing her shirt as she went.

Luckily, Jared’s control wasn’t any better or they would have had a burnt dinner. As it was, they had time to clean themselves up a little before it was ready. Macayla was bending over to check the potatoes when Jared sauntered into the kitchen, wearing nothing but his sweats.

The sight of Macayla’s derrière peaking out from beneath the hem of her shirt sent the blood pumping through his veins again. This feeling had to lessen sometime, or he would never get out of bed. Just minutes after loving her wildly, he could already feel himself harden again.

Down, boy.

“Did you save the meatloaf? I was only going to make sandwiches.”

“It actually needs a few more minutes, I still have time to get dressed and make a salad.”

“Why don’t you just sit down as you are and I’ll make the salad?” Jared offered, going into the refrigerator.

“I should at least get some underwear on.” Macayla didn’t make any effort to move.

“Don’t. Please?”

“Well, because you said please. Let’s eat fast.”

“You’re reading my mind.”

Chapter Fourteen

Macayla never knew she had such a responsive body. For the next few days, she and Jared did little more than eat and make love. She had never in her life spent so much time in bed, but she wasn't complaining. Jared was a considerate, creative lover who made each experience an adventure. If this was an example of what he learned from Patti McClain, Macayla would have to make sure to send her a thank you note.

It wasn't like she was a virgin, but her experience was limited to one man, who apparently had a lot to learn about satisfying a woman. She had always thought that her inability to experience the raptures told by other women was her fault. That or they were just exaggerating.

As she moved on in life, she hadn't missed sex. She had thought others put too much emphasis on it. Now she was beginning to understand what they were talking about. She didn't think she was going to enjoy going back to her chaste life after Jared left.

Neither of them talked about the future, but Macayla knew as soon as Jared was free to leave he would be off like a shot. Once he left, he'd be out of her life for good. She wasn't going to settle for a relationship where she saw him once every few months, never knowing when he was coming or going, or who else he was sleeping with.

His lifestyle wasn't compatible with her career. She couldn't take off all over the known world, following him around like a gypsy. She didn't get her degrees from a cereal box, she'd worked too hard for them to just

give up her practice to follow some man around the country. Even if he was sexier than any man had a God-given right to be.

She refused to think about what was going to happen when they left the cabin. For the next week or so, this was their only world and she was going to enjoy herself as much as possible. She'd think about the future when the time came. But even as sexy as Jared was, she needed to get out of the cabin for a while.

"Jared, as much as I've enjoyed this interlude, I'm getting cabin fever. I know we can't really go into town, but could we do something? I'm getting mighty sick of the same four walls."

"I would be insulted except that I feel the same way. I never thought I'd say this, but maybe we could go to the barn dance?"

"Country music? Are you kidding me?"

"I really can't take you out for a night on the town, yet. I promise when this is all done, I'll take you out for a gourmet meal, dancing, a night to remember. For now though, all I can offer is Bob's Barn Band, Beer and Barbeque. Come on, I'm sure it will be memorable, and if nothing else we can people watch for a little while."

"I don't know..."

"You can eat someone else's cooking, and maybe even get some French fries," Jared said persuasively.

"Lots of fries?" Macayla asked, weakening. She knew it was a mistake to tell Jared about her weakness for the greasy, starchy wonders.

"I'll even give you mine."

"Alright, but just for the fries."

"If we hurry, we can get there in time to get a table, maybe in the corner away from the band."

"I'll hurry, believe me, I'll hurry." Macayla scurried to the bedroom.

She didn't know what the proper attire for a barn dance was, and her wardrobe was rather limited anyway, so she pulled on her tightest jeans and searched for something to wear on top. She had a white tank top that she normally only wore for working out. It would have to do. She squirmed into that and looked in the mirror. The top came with a built in bra, but as Macayla was rather well endowed, she was practically spilling out of it. She grabbed a flannel top and pulled it on over the shirt, unbuttoning it a little, but not enough to compromise her modesty.

Hmmm, she only had hiking boots and sneakers, better go with the boots, she wasn't looking to stand out after all. Looking at her meager cosmetic supply, she quickly swiped on some eye make-up, dabbed on some lipstick and grabbed some money out of her purse.

"Let's go, I want to eat my food before the band shows up."

Jared wisely kept his mouth shut and escorted her out the door.

The dance hall was larger than Macayla expected. A bar and miniscule tables surrounded a dance floor. A stage with enormous speakers took up most of one side of the building. Further back there were booths for families, and this is where Macayla and Jared headed.

Many of the families already there were headed out. It was time to get the kids washed up and in bed, not get gussied up and out for dancing. Jared and Macayla managed to get a corner booth and a harried waitress came by to get their drink orders.

"I'll have a beer, and the lady here will have a white zinfandel. When does the band come in?"

"Oh, they'll be here in an hour or so. Folks will start pouring in before too long. I'll get your order in right away. Once the singles start drinking, me and Lisa will be running our tails off and you'd be better off going to the bar for your drinks."

"In that case, we'll order two of the blue plate specials now, and then cash you out so you won't have to worry about us."

"Now that's right friendly of you. I'll put your order in so you won't have to wait, and I'll be right back with your drinks." She hustled off to fill their orders and get their drinks from the bar.

"Why'd you do that? And why did you order for me?"

"I wanted to get our meal before the band came, and I didn't want to be interrupted every two minutes, so I figured if we took care of everything at once we'd have a more peaceful meal."

"Okay, but I have a mind, I know how to speak. I can order all on my very own."

"I didn't mean to take over, I guess I didn't think. Do you want me to call her back over and order something different?"

"No, it's the principle of the thing, that's all. I get a little touchy when I feel like someone is trying to take over my life."

"It was only dinner," Jared protested.

"I know, I know. Let me see if I can explain it without getting into too much detail." Macayla paused while the waitress dropped off their drinks with promises to return with their meals soon.

Macayla took a sip of wine while she gathered her thoughts. "When my father died, I was crushed, I really looked up to him. We did a lot together, when he was home. I desperately wanted to please him, and when he died I was at a loss. I went to college and met Joe. I guess all the need I had to please my father got transferred to him. Soon I was letting him take over my life. It started out with small things, like dinner, but eventually I lost me, and became what he wanted me to be."

"I wasn't trying to take over your life, I just ordered dinner. I would never do anything to hurt you, you know that." He reached out and

grabbed her hand across the table. His face looked so hurt, she had to explain this better.

Macayla sighed. "I know that, I wasn't accusing you of it, it's just that alarm bells go off in my head sometimes, this was one of them, that's all."

"I'll try to keep it in mind. For now, let's have a toast. Here's to not eating our own cooking."

"Hear, hear."

Their meals arrived in all their greasy glory and they set into their ribs and fries like there was no tomorrow. When their faces were smeared with barbeque sauce, their hands covered in grease from the fries, and their stomachs stuffed full, they agreed it had been a good idea to get out for a night.

"So," Jared asked after they pushed their plates away in satiation. "How did you like the fries?"

"They were pretty good, they got high marks for the grease to salt ratio, and they were hot and crisp, but I have to say the fries at work are better."

"Everyone complains about hospital food, how could they be better?"

"People who don't work at my hospital come in for the food. They know how to treat their people right, and I love their fries. Why do you think I work out so much? I love to eat. Samara can eat and not gain any weight at all. I'm short, I eat fast food two times and I gain weight."

"Looks like you gain it in all the right spots if you ask me."

"With the way I've been eating the last few weeks, it's a good thing we have that gym downstairs. So, tell me, do we stay or go?"

The band had been setting up while they were eating, and the tables by the dance floor were filling up quickly. Waitresses rushed to and from the bar, shouting out orders and picking up drinks.

“Why don’t I get us a few drinks from the bar and we can watch for a little while, then decide if we want to stay or not?”

“Sounds like a plan, but let me go to the bathroom first. If I don’t pee I won’t be able to stay in these jeans much longer.”

“I must admit, I’m really enjoying those tight jeans on you. Maybe we should have come here sooner.”

“Don’t push your luck. I’ll be right back.”

Macayla sashayed to the bathroom. After she took care of her bursting bladder, she washed her face as best she could in the tiny sink. She had pulled her hair into a bun while they were eating to keep it from getting into the messy barbeque sauce. She took it down now and ran her fingers through it. It was too curly to brush out, so she just fluffed it and let it dance wildly around her face. She reapplied lipstick and headed back to the table where Jared was waiting patiently, tapping his feet to the country music blaring from the speakers.

“I can’t believe you like this stuff.” Macayla started to slide into her side of the booth.

“I wouldn’t go straight to like, but I don’t mind it. I’m a man of many, varied tastes. Here.” Jared grabbed her hand and pulled her next to him in the booth. “You’ll get a better view of the show, and you might actually be able to hear what I’m saying.”

“Not to mention that you’ll be able to look down my shirt.”

“That was an added bonus, yes.”

“You’re a pig, but I’m starting to like it. God help me.”

“I knew I could win you over eventually. Drink up, it’ll help you enjoy the music more. Bob’s Barn Band is not meant for sober folk,” Jared said, taking his own advice and tipping his beer back.

“You know something, in my entire life I have never had more than two glasses of wine in the same sitting. I don’t think I metabolize alcohol

very well. If you keep pushing wine on me things could get very interesting.”

“Well, we’ve eaten a ton, and it’s been an hour since your first glass, so I don’t think I’ll have to pull you off the table top, but if you don’t want any more it doesn’t bother me.” Just then the music bumped up another notch in volume.

“Get me another, I’m going to need it,” Macayla said, downing the rest of her wine. She was going to need all the help she could get. Besides, she didn’t even feel a little buzz, she’d be fine.

“Your wish is my command. Stay here and I’ll be right back.” Jared gave her a quick, hot kiss before he headed over to the bar. Macayla watched him walk across the floor. Man, he could fill out a pair of jeans. He really did have a nice butt.

His long legs ate up the distance until he got closer to the dance area where he had to slip and slide through the madly gyrating crowds of dancers on the floor. He moved very lightly and gracefully for a man, especially one of his size. He glided through the crowd with barely a ripple, and Macayla had to admire the sheer beauty of his movements.

Maybe she’d had too much wine after all, she was suddenly feeling very warm. Just watching that man move could melt an iceberg, no wonder she was hot. Of course, she was also wearing a flannel shirt and the place was filled with people. She unbuttoned the shirt and let it hang open. She wasn’t ready to take it off completely even though she had the tank top on.

Although, as she glanced around the room, she noticed many women wearing far less than tank tops. She spied several women wearing backless halter-tops, and strapless numbers that left little to the imagination. All things considered, Macayla was dressed pretty

conservatively. Certainly she was in much better taste than the blonde eyeing Jared by the bar.

Macayla's eyes narrowed as she watched the woman lick her lips. He was talking to the bartender, presumably ordering their drinks, and didn't notice the hungry looking female ready to devour him. Macayla couldn't believe it. It was the two-timing blonde from the woods.

Jared paid the bartender and made his way back to the table. Luckily for him, he never noticed the woman looking at him or Macayla would have gone through the roof.

"Here you go, honey, scooch in."

"I'm surprised you made it back alive."

"What do you mean?" Jared asked, looking a little puzzled. "The crowd wasn't that bad."

"The blonde at the bar looked ready to eat you alive. If you had even looked in her direction she would have probably attacked you right then and there."

"Who?" Jared asked, looking around.

"Don't look at her, you idiot," Macayla hissed. "She'll probably take it as an invitation. The blonde who's almost wearing that jean skirt at the bar. She's the one I saw in the woods. Christ, she looked like she wanted to eat you whole. It's disgusting."

"Gee, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you were jealous." Jared looked like he was enjoying himself thoroughly.

"If I were jealous, it would be over someone much more deserving of my hostility. That bimbo over there isn't worth my energy." Macayla knew she sounded catty, and also knew Jared was enjoying it. She took a sip of wine to buy herself time until she got her emotions under control.

The woman couldn't be faulted for drooling over him, he was damn sexy. Jared did nothing to encourage her, so there was nothing to get

upset about. It wasn't like her to get so possessive over anything. She needed to relax and cool down.

As she watched the laughter simmer in Jared's eyes, she decided cooling down was a good idea, and took the flannel shirt off, revealing the tight tank top underneath.

Jared's eyes practically dropped out of his head. Macayla's tank top was no more skimpy than any of the other outfits on the dance floor, it was just she had so much more to work with that it appeared erotically revealing.

"Maybe you should put your shirt back on," Jared said, eyeing the crowd to see if anyone else noticed the abundance of skin on display.

"No, it's much too hot, besides this is less revealing than ninety percent of the women here."

"Yeah, but they don't look like *that* in their tops."

"Well, then doesn't that make you the lucky one?" Macayla retorted, mischief lighting her green eyes. She folded her arms under her breasts and leaned towards Jared. As she did so, her breasts rose higher inside the shirt. Jared could feel his groin twitch.

"If you keep this up, we won't be here long enough to finish your drink," Jared warned.

"I don't want to leave yet, not when things are just heating up." She ran her hand up his thigh.

"Let's dance, it's the only way I'm going to get you to behave."

Macayla laughed and drank the rest of her wine in one swallow. He could tell she was feeling powerful and loving it. By the time Jared had managed to drag her to the dance floor, the band was taking a break and someone had put an old slow number on the jukebox. Jared pulled her into his arms and wrapped her close to him.

If she wanted to feel powerful, he'd let her know just how much power she had over him. He pressed his raging hard-on against her soft body and pulled her close. Without an ounce of shame, he gripped her butt so she couldn't escape. The feel of her soft breasts pressed against him was sweeter and more intoxicating than any drink he could think of.

They said nothing for a while, just swayed slowly to the music. Jared rubbed his hips suggestively against Macayla, and felt her breathing quicken against his chest. He eyed the room and noticed that no one was paying any particular attention to them. The other couples on the dance floor were wrapped in their own private worlds.

Jared rubbed his hand lightly up and down Macayla's back, covertly rubbing her breast with his forearm. His hand massaged her rear, and his leg rubbed against the junction of her thighs. He was making love to her in the middle of a crowded dance floor with no one the wiser.

He felt Macayla become breathless, and smiled in satisfaction as she reached up on tiptoe to offer her mouth hungrily to his. He broke off the kiss and nuzzled her ear, "Let's go home."

"Let me get my shirt." She shot him a sultry look between her lashes.

The blood pumped in her veins, and suddenly being with other people was a nuisance. She turned and walked as quickly as she could back to the table. As she moved, she noticed the blonde who had been eyeing him so hungrily slide up to him.

No way was she going to let that bottle-blonde hussy hone in on her territory. Macayla grabbed her shirt from the booth and headed back to where she had left Jared. She saw him standing straight up with his hands behind his back, and the blonde attacking him.

The last fragile leash on her temper snapped.

Her blood, already flowing like hot lava from Jared's teasing, immediately erupted like a volcano at the sight of the blonde with her arm around Jared. She was seeing clearly enough to notice Jared's discomfort, but completely missed his warning head shake. Macayla stomped all of her five foot three inches right up to Jared and the floozy throwing herself at him.

"Ready to go, honey?" Macayla's jaw hurt from clenching it so hard.

Laura looked up from her perusal of Jared's chest long enough to ask, "Who's that?"

"I would be the one he is going home with, not you. Now, you have ten seconds to decide if you want to let go of him voluntarily, or if you want me to pull you off him and kick your ass."

"Listen, little girl, I don't know where you come from, but unless he has a ring on his finger he's fair game."

Jared jumped in before Macayla could answer. "I don't choose to play your game. I'd appreciate it if you let go, I'd rather avoid a scene, but I won't stop her if she decides to knock you on your butt."

"That little thing, she couldn't scare a fly off a jelly doughnut."

"Time's up." Macayla grabbed the other woman's hand and twisted it until she let go and collapsed to her knees on the floor in pain. "You're lucky I'm in a good mood, if I was really angry I'd have broken your wrist. Go find your own man for a change." And with that Macayla threw her wrist away from her and started walking out of the bar without waiting for Jared to catch up.

"Macayla! Hold up!" Jared called racing to catch up with her. She was half way to the cabin before he was able to reach her. "It wasn't my fault, I was waiting for you, and she oozed up to me and just started touching me. I didn't invite it."

"I didn't think you did. I'm not mad at you, I'm just disgusted by her. I recognized her from the trailer park." She kept walking. "Why is it that some women only find men attractive when they're taken? I got out of there because I really wanted to hurt her. I mean really, and if I didn't leave, I wasn't sure I could trust my control."

"I doubt that. You're one of the most controlled people I know."

"I have to be. If I wasn't such a control freak, I could really hurt someone. I have too much knowledge to let my temper loose just because some tramp pissed me off."

"I understand. But just so we're straight, I have never, and will never betray a trust, I promise you that."

"You were the one who set up the rules, I won't be the one who breaks them. Now let's drop the subject. I was feeling hot for a different reason before, I refuse to let that sleaze ruin it for me."

"Hear, hear." Jared pulled her against a tree and cuffed her hands over her head. He pulled her into a searing kiss that dissolved any thought besides the feel of him against her. His free hand captured her breast through her tank top, teasing the nipple to attention.

Macayla moaned from the sensation, she desperately wanted his hands on her bare flesh. She tried to free her hands to touch him, but he wouldn't let her. He continued to tease her through her shirt until she thought she'd go mad. His burning lips moved from her mouth to her neck, to her ear, whispering racy words, daring her to respond even more. Macayla thrust her chest at him, all but begging him to touch her skin. Finally he slipped his hand into the velvet warmth between her breasts. Macayla almost cried out at the heat.

"I've been thinking of this since you took that damn shirt off," Jared murmured, pulling the shirt down to free her breasts.

"Me too," Macayla sighed pushing closer to him. "Let me touch you."

“Not yet, once you touch me, I lose all the control I ever had. Let me pleasure you before I cave in.” Jared scooped her up into his arms.

“Put me down. You’ll hurt yourself.”

“I’ll take the risk.” His voice rolled over her, enflaming every nerve in her body.

Her breasts were still exposed, and the combination of hot skin and night air was very erotic. The roughness of Jared’s shirt against her breast, the night breeze across her nipples, the warmth of Jared’s breathing was like a hundred little caresses, working her up to a fevered pitch.

Jared opened the door without putting Macayla down. When he got in, he kicked the door shut and leaned against it, ravaging Macayla’s lips again in a soul-searing kiss. This time Macayla’s hands were free and she latched onto Jared’s head like it was a lifeboat.

Once she realized he wasn’t going to impede her progress again, she pulled and tugged on his shirt to get it off him. Her own shirt she whipped over her head with little regard for modesty. She grabbed at Jared’s belt and pulled at the fastening of his jeans with frustration.

“I like it better when you wear sweats,” she muttered as she struggled with the button-fly.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Jared gripped the doorknob for dear life.

Macayla got his pants down to his ankles and didn’t bother to try to take them off completely, she had access to the parts she wanted to.

Jared was sweating but didn’t touch her. When she got on her knees and kissed her way up his legs, his knees almost buckled.

“Let’s go in the bedroom, I’m not going to make it much longer.”

“Neither am I.” Macayla wrapped her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. With a little wiggle, she slipped his length into her needy core.

“Wait, we need a condom.” Sweat dripped down his face over the muscle that jumped in his jaw.

“I’ve been on the pill long enough for it to be effective now.”

“Thank God.” Jared clamped down on her hips and pumped into her as quickly as he could.

Chapter Fifteen

Shaun Hints was not a forgiving man, and when one of his compatriots turned on him, there was a price to pay. It wouldn't do to have any of the other members of their little coalition feel that rolling over on him was the lesser of two evils.

The wayward stool pigeon who was going to give state's evidence in order to get a reduced sentence was now dead. The only loose end was that disgustingly brilliant Romero, and Rocky had a line on him. In a few days that end would be tied up as well. Rocky was making a trip to Connecticut now. It was only a matter of time before Shaun would be back in business, and Jared Romero dead.



Jared crept out of the bed without disturbing Macayla. It wasn't often that he got up before her, but they had made love through the night, and Jared was almost certain he had exhausted even her supply of energy. He put the coffee on and grabbed his briefcase.

It wasn't that he was intentionally hiding his computer use from Macayla, but neither did he want her involved in this part of his life. A few years ago, he might have worked for Hints, now he was pursuing him. It felt a little better to get his rush on the good side of the law.

For a long time the morals of his work didn't bother him. When he worked Special Ops, the things he did were outside of the law, but he'd justified them by saying they were all for the good of the country. When he left the military, his consulting jobs tended to lean more to the dangerous than to the mundane. Usually those jobs were on the up and up, but every so often Jared looked the other way and operated in a gray area of the law.

After Connor and Samara had honored him with being their first child's godfather, he had something of an epiphany. He was no longer answerable only to himself. If Connor and Samara died, he would be the one to raise their child. If he continued to look the other way and do things on the fringes of the law, he could easily slip completely over the line.

That was no longer an option.

Jared's skills were in high demand, he wouldn't go broke because he no longer took the lucrative, if questionable jobs. If he'd been worried about getting bored with the more mundane jobs, obviously that wasn't a problem either. Going into hiding, getting shot at and being chased up and down the East Coast had been anything but boring. Spending the last couple weeks with Macayla hadn't exactly been dull either.

He poured his coffee and booted up his computer. He hadn't even opened it since the day he and Macayla made love for the first time. He wanted to know what Hints was up too, but wasn't going to give up what little time he had with Macayla to find out.

Connor had been working behind the scenes—it was Jared's turn to trust his friend to get him out of a jam. It wasn't a pleasant feeling. Jared checked his e-mail, filing away the offers for jobs and focusing in on the e-mail from Connor. Opening it took some time because Connor had encoded the message so only Jared could access it. If Jared tried using

another computer, it wouldn't even show up in the mailbox. He tapped impatiently on the table, waiting for the message to clear. When it finally was readable, it was only one line:

"Stay put. Witness dead. Have a lead. Will call."

"Son of a bitch! What does that mean?" Jared swore, pushing his hand through his hair in frustration.

"What does what mean?" Macayla asked from the kitchen doorway.

"Oh, nothing."

"Well, it's obviously something or you wouldn't be so upset now, would you?"

"Just drop it will you?" He wasn't mad at Macayla, but she was an easy target.

"Fine, far be it for me to intrude on your life."

"Look, I'm sorry." Jared tried to control his frustration. "I'm mad at something, and you're here. I didn't mean to take it out on you." Jared held his hand out to her.

Macayla looked at his hand like someone would look at an unknown snake, not quite sure if it was poisonous or not. She slowly took it and let him pull her into his lap.

"I wasn't trying to pry. You seemed upset."

"I know. I just don't want you involved in this whole mess, that's all."

"Uh, don't you think it's a little late for that? I was involved the minute you fell out of my truck."

"I know, I know. I just don't want you hurt. You matter to me." He didn't know how to tell her his feelings, because he didn't know them himself. All he knew was that he couldn't stand the thought of her being hurt, especially if it was his fault. "The witness they were counting on to seal the case has been killed. I'm all they've got to build a case on."

"I thought what you had wasn't enough to put him away?" Macayla said, a frown of concentration on her face.

"It's not. That's the problem, they either have to find someone else, or take what they can get from me. I only know the computer aspect of it. I can tell them what was done, what banks allowed him access into their systems, but I can't tell them who the actual players were. I'm basically a sitting duck unless they find someone else fast, or Connor's sources come up big."

"What does Connor have to do with it?"

"He still has all kinds of sources, if he can find Hints, and we can get our hands on his computers, we'll be able to nail him."

"I didn't realize Connor was involved. So now we stay here until we find out what is going on with Connor?"

"Yes, and can I say that the shoe is not so comfortable on the other foot," Jared said, thinking back to when Connor and Samara were hiding out, waiting for Jared to find out who was trying to kill Connor.

"Serves you right. Unfortunately, my vacation time will be up soon, I'll have to go back to the hospital, then what are you going to do?"

"Go quietly insane. Have you ever seen *The Shining*?" Jared asked, trying not to think about passing long, lonely hours without her here.

"I always knew you were mentally unbalanced." Macayla grinned weakly.

"Let's just take it one day at a time. When do you have to be back at the hospital?"

"I have another week off, I was told not to enter the office before then. The head of my practice thinks I work too much."

"No. You?"

"Ha, ha. It's a good thing I'm going back to work soon. Being around you these weeks has turned me into a major slacker."

“So that’s all I’ve done? Made you relax?” Jared asked.

“Well, you did make me throw up, and drag me to a barn dance, and—”

“And?” Jared asked, nibbling at her neck.

“And made me want you so badly that I’ll forgive you your boorish behavior. Why don’t we take our coffee in bed?”

“That sounds like a great idea.” Jared shut the top on his computer, he couldn’t do anything to find Hints now anyway, making love to Macayla was a much more productive use of his time. Connor would get in touch with him when he found something, and not a moment sooner. His last coherent thought was that there were worse ways to spend his recovery time.



Jared absently waved to Macayla as she left for a supply trip to the general store. He was concentrating on some traps he had set up to find the crafty Hints, and he barely noticed she was gone. Macayla smiled to herself as she walked down the drive.

Now that he wasn’t sneaking around trying to hide his activities from her, she had to fight for his time and attention. He really was a computer geek in a gorgeous body. Maybe she should have made him keep his activities secret—he certainly gave her more attention when he couldn’t use his computer.

The space was probably good for her. In another week she’d have to go back to work. If things weren’t cleared up by then she could visit Jared on her days off, but it was a long ride to Maine. She didn’t have many weekends off, and she usually worked six days straight between call hours and office hours. She’d need some time to run errands, do

laundry, pay bills, and other necessary chores. She couldn't spend all her time running back and forth to see Jared. It wouldn't be safe for him either.

Maybe she could work something out with Connor and see about getting him a hideout closer to her house. "Okay, 'Cayla, slow down, we're taking this one day at a time, remember?" Macayla told herself out loud. She was so busy plotting and planning, she never noticed the shadow she picked up as soon as she entered the general store.

When she got home with the supplies, Jared had moved to the porch. Macayla checked on him and only received a grunt. Thinking about the night she had planned, she was glad he was otherwise occupied. She quickly dug out the scented candles she paid an exorbitant amount for and put them in the master bedroom. Once they became intimate, the larger bedroom became their room without a discussion.

Macayla had to admit she enjoyed waking up to Jared's arm around her. She didn't enjoy his cover stealing, but it was a small price to pay. After setting the candles around the bed, she made sure the matches were handy. Then she went back to their old room, where her bag was still residing. She wasn't sure what Samara had packed for her, but knowing Samara it would be something Macayla had never thought of.

Bingo! Samara had packed a negligee that would either stop Jared in his tracks, or knock him out cold. Macayla held the gown up to her and marveled that it wasn't too long. She had a hard time finding nightgowns that didn't drag on the ground, not that she'd looked very hard.

This gown was emerald green, and matched her eyes perfectly. It had two slender spaghetti straps holding up a rather plain, low-cut bodice. The waist was nonexistent because the gown fell straight as an arrow to the floor. There was a slit in the side that started at the curve of her behind, and played peek-a-boo with her leg when she moved it

experimentally. The gown was backless, and dipped to a point slightly north of her rear. It was very plain, no frills, no lace, but all the more devastating because of it. Macayla's curvy body provided all the frills needed to make it a showstopper.

She was going to have to buy Samara a big box of chocolates for this one.

Carefully hanging up the gown for later, Macayla went back into the kitchen. Jared was still on the porch—she would have thought the damn laptop would have lost battery power by now. Oh well, she wanted to get dinner started anyway. No chicken for them tonight.

She'd purchased the biggest, juiciest steaks the store had to offer. Humming softly as she thought about the night ahead, she marinated the steaks and put them in the fridge.

Next she scrubbed some potatoes for twice-baked potatoes, one of her personal favorites. She had deliberated over the vegetable. Corn on the cob went well with steak, but she didn't want to get all slobbery, and it was impossible to eat corn on the cob neatly. She didn't want any gas inducing vegetable like broccoli, so she went for plain green beans. Not a culinary coup, but adequate in this case. She made a salad, no onions tonight, and set that to chill as well.

The sun was starting to sink in the sky when she finished the potatoes. The setting sun would probably pull Jared out of his computer-coma, but she had better hurry in case he quit sooner than she expected. She pulled her hair up into a knot on top of her head and took a shower. She used the perfumed bath gel left in the master bath. She didn't recognize the name of the fragrance, but it smelled sexy and exotic, perfect.

Once she got out of the shower, she was stumped. She couldn't wear the nightgown to make the steaks in, if there was a spark from the grill

she'd go up in flames. She hadn't packed anything for seduction when they were scrambling around preparing to run.

She had to think, what did she have that was sexy? Nothing came to mind until she looked at her cut-off shorts hanging out of the drawer. If she wore those, and a tank top, instead of her normal oversized T-shirt, that would get Jared thinking about her instead of his stupid computer. She quickly slipped them on, forgoing underwear for the first time in her life.

She slipped sandals on her feet and headed back to the kitchen. Jared was still on his computer, and the sun was just a glimmer in the sky. She put the potatoes in the oven to warm, set the table, lit the candles, and started the grill. One would think the sound of her lighting the gas grill would pull him out of his stupor, but no such luck.

After she waited for the grill to heat up, she slapped the steaks on with a sizzle. Glancing over at Jared she counted the seconds it took him to smell the mouth-watering scent of grilling meat. "One, two, three, four, five—"

"Hey, is that steak?" Jared asked, looking up for the first time in hours.

"You betcha. If you hurry, you'll have time to shower and shave before it's ready."

"I guess I am a little scruffy. I like mine rare."

Jared raced for the shower. He hadn't shaved yet that morning, and he was a little stiff and sweaty from sitting in the sun all day. He glanced at the clock on his way into the shower. Eight hours and he was still no closer to finding Hints.

He had gotten a glimpse or two, but the bastard was just too clever, and time was running out. Jared hoped Connor had better luck finding

his physical whereabouts, because he was getting nowhere in cyber space.

Macayla was just putting the steaks on the table when Jared emerged from the bedroom. "This looks fantastic. I haven't had a good steak in years. When did you do all this?"

"While you were on the porch."

"I guess I get a little absorbed in my work. Sorry."

"I understand, I guess if I was trying to find the person out to kill me, I'd get absorbed too. But now it's time to put that away and enjoy the evening." Macayla had closed the blinds to block the setting sun, lit the candles, put the radio on and turned the other lights off.

Jared held the chair for Macayla, and noticed for the first time the fragrance drifting from her body. She smelled like a walking seduction, and Jared was snared in two breaths.

"You smell sinfully sexy. Did you get that at the general store too?" Jared asked, running a finger along the nape of her neck.

"No, it was something I found in the master bathroom. I liked it, so I thought I'd borrow it."

"Remind me to buy you some of your own. It's perfect for you."

Macayla smiled but said nothing else. The meal passed quietly, with none of their usual banter. Jared didn't feel like talking about his frustrating day. After a dessert of sherbet and wafer cookies, he helped her do the dishes.

He couldn't help but notice the length of her legs, the curve of her behind, the sway of her hips. There was something different about her this evening, and he couldn't put his finger on it. Whatever it was, it was making the blood pump in his veins.

“Do you want to have a drink on the porch? If we stick to the screened in area we shouldn’t get eaten alive by mosquitoes,” Jared suggested when they had finished the dishes.

“Maybe, I’ll let you know. Right now I need to use the bathroom, hang on a second.” Macayla gave him a sultry glance over her shoulder as she headed for the bedroom.

A few minutes later, he heard her call from the bedroom. “Jared, could you help me in here a minute?”

“Sure, what do you need—” Jared’s voice broke off when he saw her in the candlelit room. The soft shimmer of the candles made her skin glow like a pearl. Her hair was held up on her head and wisps of curls teased her shoulders. Her bare back curved gently to the line of the gown, and when she turned, Jared lost the power of speech.

“I just needed help opening the champagne. I’m not very good with this,” Macayla said, her eyes aglow. She walked slowly towards him, the length of her leg showing with every step. Her unfettered breasts swayed gently beneath the silk of the gown.

Speechless, Jared popped open the champagne and poured the frothy liquid into the flutes.

“A toast,” Macayla said, looking at Jared over her glass.

“To what?” Jared was amazed he could get that much out of his beleaguered mind.

“To a night we won’t soon forget.” Macayla drained the glass. When Jared had done the same, she took his glass from him and set it on the table next to the bottle.

She reached out and gently grabbed Jared’s hand and started to kiss it. She concentrated on only his hand, nibbling it, licking it, sucking on his fingers, but never moving beyond his hand.

So she worshipped his fingers, staring boldly into his eyes. When Jared had to close his eyes or go insane, she took his unresisting hand and slowly moved it over her body. She ran it over the silk of her gown, around the curve of her breast, down the curve of her hip, and to the hollow between her thighs. When she brought his hand to her shoulder to push the slender strap of her gown off, he could take his passive role no longer.

Picking her up he carried her to the bed, where he laid her down gently. Macayla bent one knee and lifted herself onto her elbows while she watched him undress. When he was completely naked he kneeled on the bed and cupped her face in his large hands.

“You do something to me, touch something in me that no one has ever done or touched. You’re everything.” He brought her face to his in a searingly gentle kiss.

His lips did more than caress hers they possessed her completely. His tongue dove in for a duel inside her mouth, playing with hers and teasing her unmercifully. The hands that she had devoted so much attention to now returned the favor and worshipped at the altar of her body.

The gown was soon discarded, and the glory of her hair released from its confinement. Jared brought her up and over so many times, she was practically weeping with emotion. When he finally entered her, he stared directly into the twin green fires that shone from her eyes, and watched the flames flare hotter. When moments later she reached her climax and closed her eyes, Jared finally gave in to the passion that he’d been holding in check since the minute he walked through the door.

Chapter Sixteen

Jared admired Macayla's backside as she walked down the driveway. She had said something about going back to the general store to get some more candles. He hadn't really been paying attention, he was following the thinnest of threads that might actually lead him to Hints.

He was so close to finding Hints, the pieces of the puzzle were coming together, finally. Connor had sent him an e-mail that said he was closing in too. In a few days this would all be over and he could—

Do what? It wasn't like Macayla could follow him without giving up her entire life. Did he even want her too?

Now there was a question.

Jared hadn't considered how his job would impact a wife and family. Once he was finished with one assignment, there was always another waiting for him somewhere else. He liked hopping from place to place, but could he ask Macayla to do that?

Was he willing to give up his career so Macayla didn't have to give up hers? What if he did and she didn't want him around anymore? The thought drove spikes right through his heart.

Jared pushed the unwelcome thoughts and their connotations out of his head. There'd be plenty of time to work this all out once he caught Hints. He'd make sure he and Macayla had a long conversation about it, later.

A little voice at the back of his head whispered that he of all people should know there wasn't always a later, but he pushed that away as well. He went back to chasing Hints through the cyber jungle where he was hiding.

His concentration was so complete he didn't notice he had a visitor until a shadow fell across his screen. Looking up, he saw the blonde piranha wearing nothing but a pair of skimpy shorts and a lacy bra. She had a come-hither smile that sent a chill down his back.

This was not good.

"Hi ya, handsome," she drawled, moving closer to him.

He quickly shut down the program he was working on and closed the his laptop. The smell of her musky perfume hit him in the face like a slap. Where the hell was Macayla when he needed her?

"Hello, Laura. Um, what are you doing here? And how did you find our house?" If she could find this place then anyone could. Damn it, now their safety was jeopardized. He had to get rid of her and fast. They were going to have to find someplace else to hide until he got the goods on Hints.

"It was easy, when your girlfriend was at the store yesterday I followed her home. Didn't think I'd seen you around the park. I remember good looking guys," she said with a leer.

"Ah, hm, I bet you do. You'll have to excuse me, but I think Macayla would be rather upset to find you here, you see she's a little possessive. And has a mean temper, it might be a good idea if you left while you still have the chance." Where was Macayla anyway? She should be back from the store by now.

"Oh, don't worry about her, I've got something that will keep her busy, I didn't take any chances this time."

“What do you mean?” What had this bimbo done to Macayla? Jared felt worry and anger fight for control. Laura was no longer an annoyance, now she was a threat to his woman and he knew how to deal with threats.

“Oh nothing, she is just going to be entertaining a friend of mine for a while so we can get to know each other better.”

The anger in his voice must have gotten through to her because she backed away from him, no longer hovering over him.

“Listen, I’ve never hit a woman in my life, but I’m about to if you don’t tell me what is going on in three seconds.” Jared got up and stalked her across the porch.

“It’s just a little fun, that’s all. Bubba wouldn’t hurt her for anything.” She scampered down the steps away from him.

“For your sake I hope he doesn’t, because if so much as one curl on her head is harmed I’m coming after you.”

Jared ran into the house and jammed on a pair of shoes. As he was crossing the kitchen he noticed Macayla’s purse sitting on the counter. He knew she carried a gun in there, God he hoped she wouldn’t need it. He brushed past Laura, as she ranted at him.

“What’s the fuss? She’s just another piece of ass. She ain’t got nothing over me!” she shouted from the safety of the driveway.

He didn’t even bother to answer her comment. Macayla was worth ten of any other woman he’d ever met, which made her worth a hundred of that bitch.

He just hoped it wasn’t too late to tell her that.



Macayla strolled along the aisles, knowing she had a dopey smile on her face, but not caring. Jared had been wonderful last night and she was still in a state of bliss over how well her plans had turned out. There was something to be said about a carefully crafted seduction after all.

After paying for some more champagne and candles, she walked out of the store and straight into the gut of the biggest pair of overalls she'd ever seen.

"Oh, sorry, I wasn't looking where I was going," Macayla apologized and tried to scoot around him. The mammoth lump stepped into her path.

"You sure have some pretty hair," he said, pulling painfully on one of her curls.

"Uh, thanks. I'd kind of like to keep it on my head if you don't mind." What was up with this guy? Maybe he was simple-minded or something.

"Are you a real redhead? I bet your bush is just as curly." He continued to step in her way, not letting her move around him to the path that led to the cabin.

She looked around. The area was strangely quiet. Usually there were kids and parents running everywhere, what was going on? Screaming for help wasn't an option, the only one who could hear her was the ancient man behind the counter and she didn't want him to get hurt by this mountain in denim.

"Uh, I don't think that is an appropriate discussion to have between strangers. I need to get home now, if you'll excuse me." Macayla tried again to step around him. If he was just mentally challenged, he shouldn't give her any problems, but if he was looking for trouble she wanted a little more space to move.

"You're not going anywhere until I see what color your bush is." He grabbed her arm and pulled her in closer, making her drop her bag.

“Wait a minute, buddy, you aren’t seeing anything.” Macayla’s panic level rose fast. She had to blot it out, to focus on what she needed to do, push everything else out of her mind.

“Come here, girly, let me see,” the mountain said as he pulled her to him with a tug of his ham-sized fist.

“Screw you.” Macayla knew if he pulled her in close she wouldn’t be able to do anything. She could have all the training in the world, but he was still a giant and if he wrapped those beefy arms around her she was toast.

“Ha, ha, I like ‘em fiery! I bet you’re a real redhead, you got the temper.” He swung her around like she was a rag doll until her back was to him and his other hand was free to roam over her chest. He squeezed her breast painfully before she could counter the spinning in her head.

He was only holding her with one hand, thank God. She could do something, *come on brain, work!* Panic was warring with training, until he squeezed her again, then temper took over.

Raking the heel of her sneaker down his shin, she jabbed her free elbow into his gut. It was like hitting the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man from the movie *Ghostbusters*. He barely grunted, but the shin rake was enough to get his attention and give her some room to move.

Macayla stepped away and rammed a back kick between his legs, which caused the release of her hand finally. She executed a spinning kick to the side of his head, and felt the impact all the way up her leg. She landed crookedly, but recovered enough to deliver a shot to his chin with the heel of her hand. He went down like a ton of bricks.

Sweating and sore, and not just a little bit scared, she started to run in to the store to call the police. Before she reached the door, Jared came flying through the trees to her.

“Macayla!” he screamed when he saw her. Panic, relief, and anger chased across his face. “My God, I was so worried. Are you okay, did he hurt you, what happened?”

“Slow down, slow down. I’m fine. I was just going in to call the police. The Jolly Jean Giant over there wanted to see if I dyed my hair, I gave him something else to consider.” Her knees turned to water now that the adrenaline was no longer pumping through her system.

“I was so scared, when Laura told me—”

“Wait a minute? When who told you what?”

“That bitch Laura came to the house and tried to get to know me better. When I told her never mind, you’d be coming home soon, she told me that you were entertaining a friend and we’d have plenty of time.”

“Oh really? So she set this up? Where is she now?” Macayla’s temper reared its ugly head. She could have been raped all because some bimbo wanted to get her hands on Jared. She’d kill the little tramp.

“I have no idea. As soon as she told me that, I grabbed my shoes and came running down here to save you. Only you saved yourself. What did you do to that guy anyway?” Jared asked.

“Not half of what I’m going to do to Little Miss Can’t-keep-her-hands-to-herself.”

“We don’t have time for that now. As much as I would enjoy you kicking the snot out of her, we need to pack up and get out of the cabin. If she can find us, anyone can. And after your display here, it won’t be long before the whole camp is abuzz with questions.”

He was probably right, but that didn’t make it any easier to stomach.

“Fine, but if I catch so much as a glimpse of her fake blonde hair on the way back I’m going to kick her ass from here to Canada.” Macayla grabbed the bag off the ground and stormed up the path. She really, really hoped Laura stayed around long enough for a good fight.

“She must be smarter than she looks, because she cleared out of here pretty fast,” Jared said when he finally caught up to her.

“Yeah, too bad. So where are we going to go anyway?”

“I have no idea, I’ll call Connor while you’re packing and we’ll make a decision later.”

Jared didn’t like not having a plan, and he really didn’t like rushing from one situation into a possibly worse one, but he wasn’t taking any chances with Macayla’s safety. She’d already been attacked once today, he damn well didn’t want a repeat performance.

Jogging into the bedroom, he grabbed the phone and waited for the signal to clear before dialing.

“O’Riley,” Connor answered.

“Connor, it’s Jared. We may have been compromised, we’re packing up. Do you think you can find us an alternate location?”

“Shit, I don’t know. I’m almost there now. Maybe if you give me enough time. Damn it. What happened? I just heard from Alex and they got Hints.”

“It’s a long story, I don’t know that we’re blown, all I know is that at least two people know where we are—”

“So it might as well be two hundred. Better paranoid than dead.”

“You got it,” Jared replied.

“I’ll work on getting you another place, go to a hotel somewhere for the time being, it might not be necessary since we’ve already got Hints.”

“But we don’t know what he sent after me before you nabbed him.”

“Right. Find yourself a hole, I’ll call in reinforcements and get there as soon as I can.”

Jared hung up and stuck the phone in his pocket. He reached into the bag and took out the gun too. Paranoia wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

The sound of breaking glass made him jam the gun in his waistband and fly to the door.

"Jared!" Macayla screamed from the kitchen.

He came running and found her crouched under the table, broken glass from the kitchen window scattered on the tiles.

"What happened?" Jared called as the front window shattered.

"Get down!"

No kidding. Jared hit the floor and wormed his way to some cover. The shots weren't coming at random, someone had them in their sights, and was carefully aiming.

"What the hell is going on? You don't think Mr. Stay Puft got pissed because I kicked his butt, do you?"

"No, I think that people talk, and Hints has enough resources to have ears everywhere. Stay down and I'll do a recon."

Jared worked his way across the room in a low crouch. He was sure it was one of Hints' hired guns, just as he was sure it was only a matter of time before they charged the house. The adrenaline flowing through his system made his focus sharper. He could hear the sounds of Macayla breathing, the hum of the generator and the rumble of the refrigerator.

He also heard the creak of the doorknob turning.

Throwing himself behind the couch, Jared aimed his gun at the door. His whole focus was on the slowly turning doorknob. Who was going to come through the door? Friend or foe? Suddenly the door slammed open, just as a body went crashing through the front window.

Jared turned and fired on the attacker coming through the window. Got his arm, but not the one holding the gun. He rolled through the

broken glass and shot again, wildly this time, trying to distract the other attacker. He prayed he wasn't too slow.

Macayla heard the glass break and then the gun go off. She didn't know who was shooting at whom, but didn't like the odds. Her purse with the gun in it was on the counter, which suddenly seemed very far away from her position under the table. She'd been reaching for it when the shot came through the kitchen window and abandoned it in her rush to find cover.

Stupid! She could really use that damn gun now.

Footsteps crunched over broken glass as a pair of black wingtips crossed the floor. Slowly. It wouldn't be long before whomever it was spotted her under the table. She needed to attack first and hope the surprise would give her enough time get the gun out of her purse. Good thing she kept it loaded.

Macayla found her center and held her breath. When the wingtips got close enough to her, she shoved the chair out from the table right into the shins of the attacker in the kitchen. Not stopping to see what damage she might have caused, she bolted to the counter and lunged for her purse.

Her hands were reaching for the strap when gorilla arms wrapped around her middle and pulled her off the floor. She wouldn't scream and distract Jared, damn it. She lashed back with her heel and only got a grunt for her efforts. Driving her hand up, she tried to claw at the face of the goon behind her, kicking and thrashing her head, hoping to strike something tender in the process.

She felt her fingers connect with something soft then heard the bellow before she was dropped to the floor.

"Can't you handle the girl?" the other man called from the living room.

“She damn near popped my eye out!”

Good, now she was going to take out his knee. Macayla spun and used the momentum to land a kick on the inside of his knee. She fisted her hands together for more power and was going to club him over his head when he pulled her feet out from under her.

Macayla landed on the kitchen floor hard. She scrambled away as fast as she could until she was backed up against the counter. Crap, she was trapped and he was coming for her.

Think! Oh God! What could she do flat on her butt? The goon was crawling towards her, practically foaming at the mouth. She was running out of options and he knew it.

“Please! Please don’t hurt me!” Maybe a little prevarication would throw him off? Bullets were winging overhead and she tried not to think of Jared facing down a gunman.

“Bitch, I’m going to do more than hurt you.” His gravelly voice sent shivers down her spine.

But her pleading did the trick, he left himself open because he was so busy thinking of her as a helpless little girl. Before he could figure out that he had many vulnerable areas open, she lashed out with both feet, slamming her heels into his nose and mouth with enough force to rock his head back.

Blood fountained from his nose, splattering on the floor. Macayla didn’t waste any time worrying about that, but stumbled to the counter to grab her purse. She dumped the contents out in her haste to get the gun, but she needn’t have bothered. Her attacker was face down on the floor groaning. She held the gun on him anyway.

Carefully walking around his prone form, she took a look in the living room, which had become unnaturally silent while she was fighting for her life.

“Jared? Are you okay? Talk to me.” Where was he?

A creak in the floorboards was the only warning she had. She spun around to see another attacker a foot away. Before she could get her gun up, a shot rang out and blood poured from the hole in his chest. He was dead before he hit the floor.

Jared lowered his gun and opened his arms to her. Macayla needed no further urging, and ran across to him.

“Oh my God, I thought you were dead.” Macayla sobbed into his shirt, reaction kicking in now that the danger had passed.

“Same here, baby. Same here. Remind me never to piss you off though, that’s twice today I’ve seen you take out guys twice your size. Makes me feel a little inadequate, actually.”

“Can we worry about your ego after we call the cops? I don’t think this cabin comes furnished with a jail cell.”

“I’ll have to call Connor first and see if he has anyone in the area he can trust. Hints has lots of money and can buy almost anyone he pleases. I don’t feel like taking anymore chances with your safety.”

“Fine, while you’re doing that, I’ll go tie up King Kong over there.” Macayla wiped her face on her T-shirt and went to look for some string that would hold the monster bleeding on the floor.

Before she could make it to the kitchen, the front door burst open. Men in FBI jackets came pouring through the house. They boiled in from the bedrooms, the kitchen window, and the broken front window.

Macayla could only stare in stunned silence as they grabbed Jared and carried him out the door.

“Jared! Where are you going with him?” Macayla screamed, running towards him, slipping on the broken glass on the floor.

Arms snatched her and held her while Jared was shoved in a car and taken away. She kicked out at the men holding her, thrashing and punching as hard as she could against her restraints.

“Macayla! Calm down! It’s okay, I swear.” Macayla vaguely recognized Connor’s voice, but couldn’t think with her head in a whirl trying to get to Jared.

“Jared! Let him go!”

“Macayla. It’s okay, they’re taking him to someplace safe for a little while. We got Hints. Jared’s going to be all right, I swear,” Connor said, pulling her away from the men holding her and hugging her tightly.

“I don’t understand. What happened?”

“We caught Hints, but he’d already sent his men to get Jared. I mobilized the team we had in place after Jared called me. I’m just sorry we weren’t here in time.”

“Where are they taking him?” Macayla couldn’t believe how lost she felt without Jared there. It was like a part of her was missing. “This is all happening so fast. One minute I’m buying champagne and candles, the next I’m being attacked.”

“It’s all over now. Don’t worry, they’ll keep Jared safe until he can testify. In the meantime you can return home without worrying about getting hurt again.”

Macayla thought it might just be too late for that.

Chapter Seventeen

The first week Macayla was home, she waited anxiously for the phone to ring, even forwarding her home phone to her cell phone when she had to go out. The second week, she stopped forwarding her calls, but still raced home to check her messages when she'd been out. By the third week she worked up the nerve to ask Connor if he'd heard from Jared yet.

He had.

"He's safe, honest. He's helping to retrace Hints' steps, that's all I can tell you."

After a month without so much as a word from him, even one through Connor, she got mad. Mad at herself for getting her hopes up when she knew better. Mad at him for not even having the decency to call and tell her he was alive. And most of all she was mad that she still loved him anyway.

Fat lot of good it did her now. She finally opened her heart enough to take a chance at loving again, only to have it blown off its hinges by Jared.

Well, it was time to bar that door for good. Lock it up and throw away the key. She never wanted to feel like this again. Maybe in a few more weeks she'd even stop reaching for him in the night.



Jared was free. Two stinking months in a hotel room with nothing but chain-smoking attorneys and FBI guard dogs. He couldn't so much as take a leak without one of them standing by the door. But it was all worth it. Hints was behind bars, and probably would be for a while. Jared might have to testify before the grand jury, but other than that, his life was his own again.

And he knew exactly what he was going to do first.

He'd had a lot of time to contemplate what direction he wanted to take now that this was over. He'd been chasing Hints for over three years, and he could honestly say he'd lost the thrill for the hunt.

His only focus now was hunting Macayla and pinning her down until she promised to marry him. She'd never actually said she wanted to get married and settle down, but that's what every woman wanted, wasn't it? And she must love him, right? Maybe he should call her first before he showed up on her doorstep after being away for two months.

What if she didn't want him anymore?

Shit. Just because they hadn't exchanged the words didn't mean the feelings weren't there. They'd just have to have a long talk about things now that all the excitement was over. Yeah, he had better call her first.

Who would have thought it would be so damn difficult to get in touch with one woman? When Jared called her at home he got the machine, when he called her at work he got the service or the secretary who took a message, if he called her cell phone he got her voice mail. Good thing he wasn't having a baby if she was this hard to get a hold of.

Jared had left messages for her with Samara, the maternity floor, and even her brother. That went well, the kid had no idea who he was. Definitely not a good sign.

It was time to consult the experts. And since Jared was such a wiz at digging out information, he knew right where to go.

Macayla's best friend, Samara.

"Jared. How great to see you. Connor is out with Caitlyn right now, but he should be home in an hour or so. Do you want to come in and have a cup of coffee?" Samara kissed him on the cheek.

"Actually, I came to see you. I need some help." Jared followed her into the cozy kitchen and sat at the table while she bustled around making coffee.

"Oh? With what? Connor said you might be looking to buy a house in the area. I know Caitlyn would love that, you're her favorite uncle you know."

"I'm her only uncle, but no, I've got a line on a few properties."

"Then this must be about Macayla." Samara sat and reached for his hand.

"What else? She won't answer the phone when I call, and she's not returning any of my messages. I've thought about breaking into her condo again, but I haven't gotten quite that desperate."

"No, I wouldn't recommend that. When was the last time you spoke to her? Did you have a fight? Macayla doesn't usually give the silent treatment, she's more of a duke it out until she's good and satisfied type person."

"Don't I know it. Uh, the last time I spoke with her was right before the feds took me away."

"Two months ago! You didn't call her while you were away?" Samara was open-mouthed with astonishment.

"I wasn't exactly on vacation you know. I had a fed standing over me every minute of those two months. I really wasn't in a position to have phone sex."

“No, but you could have called to tell her you were okay. Or you could have called her to tell her thank you. Or you could have just sucked it up and told her you care about her. You do care about her, don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t care. I think I might even love her.”

“Well that’s really definitive. I’m sure that will just win her right over, Jared.”

“What do you want from me? I’m no poet you know.” He ran his hand over his face and got up to pace the tiny kitchen.

“It’s not what I want from you, it’s what you want from Macayla. And I can tell you that you aren’t going to get a thing with that attitude.”

“So tell me what I need to do. What hoops do I have to jump through to get her to talk to me again?” Jared pleaded.

“All you have to do is tell her how you feel. That’s all we ever want, to know that you love us as much as we love you. If I know Macayla, and you can bet your butt I do, she’s decided that you were just using her for a good time and are now out seducing some other woman.”

“That’s ridiculous. She knows how I feel about her.”

“Really? How? Did you tell her? You don’t even know yourself if you love her or not, how is she supposed to know?”

“Well, she should answer the damn phone if she wants to hear how I feel. She’s never going to know if she doesn’t talk to me.” Jared felt panic start to nibble around the edges of his mind. Pushing the blame on her for not talking to him didn’t help, but it was all he had right now.

“Why should she? You could have called her at any time in the last two months. You called Connor.”

“How does she know that?” The sinking feeling was getting stronger and stronger.

“About a month ago she came over and asked Connor if he’d had any news from you. He told her that you were safe, that’s all.”

“Damn. I’ve gotten myself in deep haven’t I?”

“You sure have. Macayla is the strongest woman I know in so many respects. Handling rejection isn’t one of them. Do you want some advice?”

“At this point I can use all the help I can get,” Jared said.

“Don’t give up. She can be really stubborn, but all she wants is to know that you’ll be there for her no matter what. She hasn’t had many people there for her in the long haul.”

“You’re right about that. Okay, I’ll out-stubborn her.”

“Oh, and if that doesn’t work—”

“Yes?”

“Grovel. We women find that very attractive.” Samara laughed even as she pushed him out the door.



Jared was at the end of his rope. He’d tried everything in his power to see Macayla, including breaking into her condo again, and he hadn’t caught sight of her yet. Cripes, Hints was easier to catch than she was.

She’d led him on a merry chase, but he had her now. He’d charmed one of the desk nurses on the maternity floor to page him when Macayla was doing rounds. He’d gotten the page fifteen minutes ago, so he figured he had about fifteen more before she could disappear on him again.

This time he wasn’t taking any chances.

The nurse buzzed him into the maternity floor and gave him a conspiratorial wink as he walked by with the biggest bunch of roses he could find. He had two more surprises in the pockets of his jacket if those didn’t work.

“She’s in with Mrs. Flanagan in room three-nineteen. I asked Mrs. Flanagan if she minded an unexpected visitor, she said that would be fine. It’s her third baby, she could use a little company,” the nurse whispered as she pointed him in the right direction.

“Thanks, I owe you big time.”

“Good luck!”

He didn’t tell her that he was going to need more than luck to pull this one off.

Peeking into room three-nineteen, Jared saw a woman sitting up in bed with a baby over her shoulder. Macayla was marking things down on a chart and smiling at something the woman said.

Damn she looked even more beautiful than he remembered. Her hair was piled up on top of her head, and the green scrubs she was wearing actually flattered her slight frame. His heart thumped. This was it. If she shot him down now, he didn’t know what he was going to do.

Jared took a deep breath and walked through the door with a smile on his face. Even if she did shoot him down it would be worth it just for the look of astonishment she gave him.

“What are you doing here? You can’t come in here! This is a patient’s room!” Macayla couldn’t believe her eyes. Was this really Jared? She’d been dreaming about him for so long she wasn’t sure if she’d finally gone around the bend.

“Don’t worry about me, honey. You go ahead and pretend I’m not here.” Mrs. Flanagan sat back as if to enjoy the show.

“What are you doing here?” Macayla hissed at him.

“This was the only way you left open for me to talk to you, so I took it. You’ve been a very tough lady to get a hold of.”

“I’ve been busy.” What, was she supposed to just drop everything because he finally remembered her phone number?

“I’m sure, but now that you’re here and so am I, I have some things I’d like to say to you.”

Macayla prepared herself for the worst. Was he bringing flowers because he thought that would keep her from kicking him when he told her it was fun but now it was time for him to move on? Is that why he picked this location to corner her? So she wouldn’t make a scene?

“I realize I never told you how much you meant to me when we were in the cabin. I kept meaning to have a talk with you about what would happen when everything was taken care of and I was a free man again, but it never seemed like the right time.”

Jared held the bunch of pink roses like they were his last lifeline. He looked so damn sexy and insecure her heart almost thumped out of her chest at the sight.

“Then everything happened so fast and I was holed up with the feds for weeks, and that didn’t seem like the right time either.”

“I think we’ve said all we need to say to each other, Jared.” Macayla was not going to let him charm his way back into her heart just because he was so good looking he made her teeth itch.

“No, we haven’t. I have two things to say to you. And possibly two more after that.”

“Go ahead then and say it so poor Mrs. Flanagan can have her room back.”

“Oh don’t worry about me, I’m in no hurry to be alone.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Flanagan,” Macayla said, trying to speak calmly.

“First, I want to give you these before I tear them to shreds.” Jared handed her the slightly mangled flowers.

It would have taken a stronger woman than she to resist sniffing their heady bouquet.

“Next, I want to give you these. You’re right, the food here is really good.” Jared handed her a large order of French fries.

Macayla could feel tears burning at the back of her throat. He gave her French fries. He remembered her telling him that she loved French fries. What a sap, she was crying over a starch.

“And now that I have my hands free, I have one thing to say, and one thing to ask.” Jared took a deep breath then got on both knees in front of her. “Macayla, I have never, ever in my life told a woman I loved her, nor asked a woman to marry me. You are the only woman for me, and I will be absolutely devastated if you tell me you don’t love me and won’t marry me.”

He pulled a brilliantly shining diamond ring out of his pocket and held it in front of her suddenly limp hand. Her heart hammered and the blood rushed to her head. Her eyes swam with tears as he looked into them.

“Please, Macayla, love me, marry me.” He waited with the ring an inch from her shaking finger for her to regain the power of speech.

Macayla looked over at Mrs. Flanagan, not sure what to say, or even if she knew how to speak anymore.

“Honey, don’t look at me! Grab that boy with both hands and run away together,” she said, dabbing at the tears streaming down her face.

“Yes! Yes I love you, yes I’ll marry you.” Macayla laughed through tears of her own, pulling Jared to her and kissing him. The round of cheers and applause from the crew of nurses and orderlies outside the hospital room door was loud enough to wake the dead, never mind tiny baby Flanagan.

“Oh my God! I can’t believe I just told you I love you in front of my co-workers!” Macayla laughed, grabbing Jared’s face between her hands and kissing him again.

“Dr. Sullivan! Dr. Sullivan! Room three-oh-four is crowning!” a nurse pushed her way through the crowd to Macayla.

“Go, I’ll stick around to finish this conversation. You can bet on it.”

Macayla ran down the hall, still clutching the diamond in her hand.



Jared waited for Macayla in the doctor’s lounge until she had taken care of the new mother and baby and completed her rounds. By the time she stumbled into his welcoming embrace, she almost thought it had all been a dream.

Except for the sparkling chunk of ice she’d pinned to her shirt.

She unpinned it and handed it to Jared. “I locked the door, maybe this time we can finish our discussion uninterrupted.”

“Sounds good to me. It’ll be a little easier this time, now that I know what your answer will be.” Jared sat and pulled her onto his lap. Slipping the ring on her third finger, he kissed the digit and asked, “Macayla Sullivan, love of my life, will you marry me?”

“I will, Jared Romero.” Then she ruined the romantic moment by yawning.

“Come on, babe. I’ve got one more surprise for you then I’ll take you home and you can tuck it into bed.”

“I don’t know if I can handle any more surprises today.”

“Trust me.”

Jared pulled her to the window overlooking the river. The setting sun made the water golden and shimmery. She looked out, uncomprehending

until she saw the thirty-foot motor boat with the name “Take Your Medicine”.

“I figured since I was going to be living here, I’d need at least one hobby to keep me occupied while you delivered babies.”

“Oh my God, I just never thought—”

“Plus, we’ll need someplace to stay on our honeymoon where there aren’t any phones, guns or blonde bimbos.” Jared chuckled into her ear as he pulled her closer. “I got a job in Hartford working as a security expert. I’ve found my spot and I’m not leaving.”

Macayla started crying again. The tears trickled down her cheeks and dropped onto his hands. She was so overcome with emotion she didn’t know how to get it all out.

“Honey, what is it? I thought you’d be happy, not crying.”

“I am happy. I’m so h-h-happy I don’t know what to do,” she hiccupped. “You’ve given me everything I could ever want and I don’t know how to act. I love you so much, Jared. I wanted to die when they took you away. Then when you didn’t call I was so mad at myself for going and falling in love with you when I knew it was a stupid thing to do. I’ve been so miserable without you, and now I’m so happy.” Macayla cried even harder.

“I’m sure that makes sense in some alternate reality, but for now I’ll just be glad that you love me.”

“Sounds like a plan to me.”

Epilogue

Macayla smiled as she watched Kevin dance with baby Caitlyn. Eighteen-month-old Caitlyn had been the youngest flower girl ever, and no child could have been cuter. Kevin had walked Macayla down the aisle and was breaking hearts left and right in his tuxedo.

“Kevin looks like he’s having a good time,” Jared said, handing his bride a glass of champagne.

“He sure is. Samara and Connor don’t seem to mind him stealing their daughter. Hard to believe it was less than two years ago when the two of them had a shindig like this.”

“Yeah, and I kissed you in the babysitter’s room,” Jared said as he nuzzled the tempting space behind her ear.

“Yeah, and baby Caitlyn spit up all over your tuxedo,” Macayla laughed, tipping her head so he could have better access to her neck.

“Figures you’d remember that part of it.”

Jared was just about to remind her of the fire that started the last time he wore a tuxedo when the D.J. wrapped up the song and made an announcement.

“Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please. It is time for our final song of the evening, and I’d like to call on our bride and groom to lead us.”

Everyone turned to look at the two of them trading kisses at the head table. Macayla put down her champagne glass and nudged Jared to do the same with his.

“Aw man, I feel like I’ve been in a fishbowl all night,” he groused as Macayla took his hand and led him to the dance floor.

“You’re the one who wanted the big wedding—”

“Well, I couldn’t let Connor outdo me you know,” he teased.

“Then be quiet and take your medicine like a good boy.”

“And what do I get if I do that?” He leered at her.

“The best prize of all, me.”

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the fun with other readers as well as Ari!
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*Can a man who knows he shouldn't,
resist a woman who knows she can't?*

Midnight Temptation

© 2006 Dee Tenorio

Raven Remington has secrets. Only one of which is how badly he wants his personal assistant, Vanessa Kaye, the beauty who refuses to be anything more than professional. A smart man would remove himself from temptation, but Raven can't quite make himself ignore the longing in her eyes or the taste of her kiss. Soon, neither of them can fight their passion.

What Raven doesn't know is that Vanessa has secrets of her own...

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Midnight Temptation*:

"I'm not in love with her."

"I heard you last time," Sky laughed. "You missed a spot on the back fender!"

Raven shook his head. He'd promised their mother he'd be there early to spend time with the family, but the idea of how to get Vanessa to accept her "company car" hit somewhere around four in the morning and he doubted he'd get another such opportunity to do the work himself any time soon. A fast change into jeans he'd cut only that morning and a pair of work boots he hadn't worn in years and he'd been ready. Unfortunately, he hadn't been able to get rid of Sky. He'd rather have been alone, but Sky claimed wild horses couldn't keep him away.

Raven didn't have time to stop at the stables to find out.

He brought the hammer down on the trunk. The slide of the handle was nearly as satisfying as the screech and crunch of the head impacting the metal. Paint cracked, flecks flew everywhere. Again and again he

raised the sledgehammer, bringing it down from the highest point of his reach until the trunk was a mangled, dimpled mess. Just the way it should be.

“Whose car is that and why do you hate them?”

Raven finished his swing before looking up. Jordan must have talked their best friend into a visit as well because there stood his childhood buddy on a sand dune, looking crisply rumpled and vaguely irritated. You’d think as a doctor he’d be more accustomed to little sleep.

Perry Chase circled the front of the car, eying it from behind his sunglasses before joining Sky near the water’s edge just out of the hammer’s arc.

“Welcome to the fine art of Motor Vehicle Demolition!” Sky pointed with both hands at the mangled machine.

Raven rolled his eyes, took a drink from the water bottle he’d nestled in the sand at Sky’s feet and put it back. “Ignore him, Chase, I think he got into some old RMI samples.”

“Normally, I would, but since you’re the one half-naked pounding a—” Chase tore off his sunglasses. “Oh, God, was that an AMG Coupe?” He sounded pained. He probably was. Chase was a bona fide car buff. Oh well. Raven lifted the hammer again, ready to get back to it.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Sky voice, full of pride and laughter, made Raven’s back twitch.

“You Remingtons are a sick bunch,” Chase grumbled.

“Just wait till he uses the power sander.”

“How long has he been at it?”

“Oh, an hour or two. Can you believe it, he had the forethought to stop at the shop this morning and have them disable the security alarm.”

“Am I supposed to be shocked at the forethought or the destruction?”

"Hell, you can pick. I've never seen him like this. I'm amazed he hasn't broken a window, but he always was good with tools. Could never make a damn thing but handled them well."

"As you can see," Raven said over his shoulder to Chase, "Sky's practicing to become a sports announcer."

"Or a used car salesman," Chase agreed dryly. At least someone else thought Sky was out of his mind.

"I'm allowed to be impressed," Sky argued. Of all the damn things to finally impress him with, why did it have to be this?

"Why are you enjoying this so much? I thought you liked cars." Chase's voice bordered on betrayal.

"Raven's in love."

Raven wiped the sweat off his brow with a gloved hand, rolling his shoulders to loosen them up. He could forget the car and drag Sky into the ocean, maybe hold him under the water until he got some peace and quiet. Satisfying, maybe, but ultimately unproductive. Better to conserve his energy for what needed to be done. Still, he could request a little silence. "Kiss my ass, Sky."

"He's been telling me that all day," his brother explained to their guest. Did he have to sound so happy about it? Any other day, saying that could ensure a good month of silence.

"I thought there'd have to be icicles all over the place and a little horned, red guys skating around for Raven to fall in love."

"Thank you!" Raven spun around to tip an imaginary hat to his friend. He leaned on the upside down hammer pole and pointed to Chase for his brother's benefit. "You see? That's exactly what I've been trying to tell you all damn morning."

Sky nudged Chase with an elbow. "Would *Raven* expend this kind of energy destroying a seventy-thousand dollar car for anything but love?" Sky asked, nonplussed. "Take a look at the inside. He cut the leather

seats to ribbons, but he's brilliant with a roll of duct tape. That takes attention to detail. If it wasn't for her, you think he would have bothered making sure the springs were all safely padded and sealed?"

Chase's face skewed, his brown eyes inspecting Raven as if he were some kind of lab rat. "He's got a point. You don't even *wash* your own car, much less repair it. Couldn't you have hired someone to do this?"

Raven stood there, staring at them for a few seconds. He wanted to refute them, but they'd stumbled on the hole in his logic, damn it. It still didn't mean they were right. It meant he was getting to be as much of a control freak as Sky. He didn't have time to be arguing with them when he knew what and why he was doing. "Screw both of you."

"I always figured that when Raven finally fell in love with somebody I'd have to leave the country to maintain my peace of mind. I never thought it would be this much fun." Sky waved a dismissive hand at him when Raven turned to yell. "Yeah, yeah, kiss your ass, I got it. You're still missing that spot."

Annoyed instead of stressless, Raven went back to the repetitive swing of the hammer with more fervor. Obviously, marriage had sucked dry Sky's once impressive IQ. Sure, he *looked* deliriously happy. Losing your mind had that effect on you.

Granted, Evie turned out to be a decent, kind hearted woman, galling as that was to admit. Her son did happen to be smart and interesting; he even made Sky laugh. Their daughter might redefine the phrase "cute as a button" and none of them seemed to mind being in each other's presence, but did that mean love existed?

The car boomed a negative reply.

"Didn't think so."

Still, stupid or not, Sky did have an intolerable point. Raven felt...*something* for Vanessa. Whatever it was didn't seem in a hurry to go away, either. It was like having a splinter in his mind, this indefinable

feeling. Whenever he looked at her—hell, whenever he thought about her—it welled up with a fierceness that almost crippled his control. It was worse when she was walking away from him.

“You’re going to love this,” Sky said, just before Raven tuned him out. No doubt he’d tell Chase all about his problem with Vanessa. Great.

Something had to be done, it was getting out of control. He had to ensure he could burn out the need for her before she realized she wanted more than a casual affair and that he was the last man on earth to give it to her.

His lip curled at the thought of what happened between them being called casual. He’d done casual. This wasn’t it. A woman who made love the way she did... His stomach tightened just thinking about her face, her eyes, her body, even her voice. When it ended, she’d never be able to go back to the monastic life she once led. No, eventually, she’d be casual with someone else.

The hammer came down violently, slipping from his grasp and slashing into the sand several feet away, finally quieting his brother into pensive silence while he heaved in breath after breath.

Someone *else*?

Raven didn’t like the dark thing slithering through him, something alien and unwanted. It took him another breathless second to identify it and when he did, he was incredulous.

Possessiveness? Him? He didn’t have a possessive bone in his body; never had, never thought he would. But then again, hadn’t he come home after all these years—taken control of Remington Medical Industries—because he longed for something of his own? Something to put his mark on?

He eyed the car. Leaving his mark wouldn’t be a problem any longer. But was he trying to mark the car or the woman? Why? He couldn’t own her. He didn’t want to own her. He just wanted... He didn’t know what

the hell he wanted, damn it. All he knew was that this wasn't it. He wanted her. All of her. He wanted to know what she was hiding. Why she was so afraid. Why she wouldn't come to him. Most of all he wanted to know why he cared. But the answers weren't coming, not from this car and not from Vanessa.

Something would have to give.

In a takeover, occasionally concessions had to be made. Unpleasant ones. Change never happened without someone changing the status quo. Vanessa said she wasn't part of his life. Maybe she wasn't. But she would be. Soon.

He wasn't about to go to Sky's extremes, of course, but he was damn sick of doing nothing at all. Making room in his life for her didn't mean he was in love with her. It definitely wouldn't involve marrying her. This was just another acquisitions battle, that's all. Nothing that would require or inspire his heart.

He smiled, secure at last. How could it?

He didn't have one.

So is he, or isn't he? Gay, that is!

Project: Man

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Forced to take Federal Agent Nicholas Farley into her home while she translates a mysterious ancient Egyptian papyrus, Professor Emily Payne finds herself the centre of a federal government case, not to mention the unwitting target for a thief bent on stealing the papyrus.

If that isn't bad enough, she finds herself seriously lusting after the agent, a man she believes is gay, a man who seems to react as strongly to her as she does to him.

There's only one thing for a learned girl like Emily to do—start a new project, the aim to initiate Nicholas into the joys of loving a woman.

Could there possibly be a future for the crazy professor and the sexy, macho federal agent?

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Project: Man*:

Emily remained silent, her attention blatantly fixed on his lower body, her lip caught between her teeth. A flush stained her cheeks and if he didn't miss his guess, given the slight smile teasing at the corners of her mouth, raunchy thoughts filled her mind.

The blood immediately left his head and rushed south, his cock rising to the occasion and letting him know it was taking notice. Crap, he'd be in deep trouble here if he didn't get his mind—and hers if he was reading her right—off the sexual and onto the mundane.

"Um, Emily, the room. Remember? I still need a bed for the night."
Great, why did I have to mention bed?

Emily gave him one last lingering look before she spun about and strutted down the hallway.

“There are only the two bedrooms and a bathroom up here and this bedroom I’ve turned into my office.” She paused at the entrance to a small room.

Nicholas glanced inside. The room was totally disorganized, papers lying everywhere. On the desk. On top of the computer. All over the floor. Had someone broken in here as well? Or was this the way she normally worked?

Suddenly, he heard it. A slight noise. A rustle. A scratchy sound like someone dragging something along the wooden floor. And it was coming from the other side of the large desk.

He motioned to Emily to be quiet, slid his hand under the back of his jacket and drew the standard issue Glock 17 from the pancake holster attached to his belt. All his protective instincts rose to the fore. A rush of adrenaline invaded his system. It sharpened his senses and focused his mind. Cautious, breath held, he crept toward the end of the desk.

“That’s Ria, my cat. You won’t need the gun. She’s really very sweet. Well, most of the time.”

When Emily stepped up behind him and popped her head around his arm, Nicholas jerked in reaction. Taking a deep breath, he loosened his grip on his weapon and stared.

A jet-black cat with the most amazing yellow eyes squatted among broken shards of pottery. An errant thought, that the cat was very like her mistress, flitted through his mind. He quickly dismissed it as he realized how silly he must look, standing there holding a gun on a cat. He tucked the weapon away, bent down and extended his hand.

“Looks like she’s knocked a pot off your desk.” He tried to pick up a piece of the broken pottery, only to have the cat snake out a paw, claws extended, and smack him on the wrist. Blood welled immediately from the scratch. A loud hiss issued from the animal’s mouth. Nicholas glared

at the cat, but the bloody thing simply bared its teeth at him, its mouth curled back in what looked like a sneer.

“Oh, she knocked that off a few weeks ago. That’s how I found the papyrus. A friend on an archaeological dig in Egypt sent the pot to me. The papyrus was hidden inside.”

“Why haven’t you picked the broken bits up? If you walk on them with bare feet, you’ll cut yourself to pieces.”

“Ria won’t let me. For some reason she took an instant dislike to the pot. I’ve never seen her hiss at anything like that before. It’s a marriage pot. History shows the ancient Egyptians filled them with scented massage oils used to anoint the bride in a mating ceremony. The old folklore says if you introduce one of those into your household, your days are numbered, you’ll soon be mated for life.”

Emily chuckled. “Maybe Ria is worried I’ll get hitched and won’t have time for her. Cats are very territorial. She knocked the pot flying as soon as I set it on the desk. Now she won’t let me touch it.”

“Why not clean it up when she’s out in the garden?”

She shrugged. “Why bother? It’ll only upset Ria. If she wants to stand guard over a busted pot, who am I to say she shouldn’t? It’s lucky she didn’t rip the papyrus to shreds.”

Nicholas closed his eyes, shook his head and prayed for patience. “Where’s the papyrus now? Somewhere safe, I hope?”

“Oh, perfectly safe.” Emily reached inside the front of her shirt and extracted a folded plastic sleeve containing the ancient scrap of writing material from her bra. “No one would think of looking for it here.”

He groaned. No one but this woman would hide a priceless object in her underwear.

“Nicholas, are you all right? You’ve gone quite red in the face. Perhaps I should show you where you’re sleeping. Maybe you need to have a lie-down.”

She led the way into the other bedroom. A large four-poster bed dominated the room, flanked by two small bedside tables. A lacy cover and embroidered throw cushions, as well as the lace curtains hanging from the canopy of the bed, turned the whole room into a scene for seduction.

French doors framed by the same lacy fabric opened out onto a covered balcony. A cheval mirror stood to one side and an antique rocking chair, piled high with fluffy cushions, held pride of place near the open doors.

Open?

He ran his hand through his hair. Lord, she'd be the death of him. She'd gone out and left these unlocked, too. Shaking his head in disbelief, he turned again to face the bed.

"Ah, Emily, there's only one bed. Where am I supposed to sleep?"

Emily beamed at him. "Oh, I've thought about that. If you'd been a man, I mean a straight man, we'd have a problem. As it is, we don't have to worry."

"What do you mean by that?" A feeling of dread settled inside him.

"Well, you're too big for my little couch and I know for a fact I can't sleep on it. Seeing as how you're...you know...gay, I thought we could both share the room. It'll be like having a sleep-over."

Oh, for fuck's sake, she expects me to sleep with her? He found himself wildly attracted to the biggest kook he'd ever met and now he had to sleep with her?

With a silent curse, he struggled to damp down the surge of anticipation rippling through his body. He couldn't believe how hard it was to discipline himself, to clear his mind of the vivid mental pictures of himself and the crazy professor cuddled up together in that bed. Come to think of it, that wasn't the only thing that was hard.

He groaned at life's little irony. Here he was, with a woman who looked like an Egyptian goddess and he was supposed to pretend she didn't turn him on. Nicholas Farley, the heartthrob of the agency, the man who never had a problem with women. A man for whom self-control had never been an issue. And now his body was betraying him and he couldn't do a damn thing about it.

He was supposed to be gay.

Shana thought going on a job interview was going to be tough, she had no idea it could cost her life.

Spitfire

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Getting the chance to rescue computer guru Royce Renault's kidnapped niece is the opportunity of a lifetime for Private Investigator wanna be Shana Quinn. But when the kidnappers come after her will this be the last opportunity she ever gets?

Enjoy the following excerpt from *Spitfire*:

"Let me get this straight. Your car has been totaled, your house blown up, and now someone is taking pot shots at you, and all you can say is that we're getting close?" Royce's eyes blazed at her and his jaw began to twitch again.

"Don't get all tweaked out. Things like this happen when you're dealing with the folks we're dealing with. When they resort to kidnapping children to get their way, did you think they'd stop at crank calls?"

He let out a long breath. "I know we're dealing with monsters, I just didn't think it would go this far. I mean, this is like something out of a movie, not real life."

"Maybe not to you, but this is what I've trained for."

"You sound like you enjoy getting shot at." Thunder rumbled in the air, echoing the fury on Royce's brow. A bolt of lightning lit up the interior of the car showing the anger that had tightened his face.

"Look, I grew up reading unsolved murder cases with my dad, trying to figure them out before he did. I spent every weekend perfecting my shot. All I ever wanted was to help people the way my old man did. Now

that I'm in a position to solve a case and help someone I'm not going to back away just because things are getting tough."

The rain hit the car like a tidal wave, forcing Royce to concentrate on his driving and not on her. Thunder crashed all around them, and cars pulled to the side of the road to wait out the storm. Not Royce, he kept driving into the chaos like he was on a mission to prevail over the forces of nature.

"I'm calling in the FBI," he said at last.

"What? You can't do that. Sid could very easily find out and kill Allison."

"Sid isn't going to do anything that ruins his chances of getting the Helen project code. I won't see you killed because of my family. You're officially off the case."

"Bullshit!"

"I beg your pardon?" Royce turned off the highway and onto a back road. There were no streetlights and the lightning ripped the sky apart with every bolt. Thunder shook the car, but it was nothing compared to the fury in Royce's eyes.

"You can fire me if you want, but I'm not giving up. These guys are going to come after me whether I'm working for you or not. They aren't going to suddenly decide to leave me alone just because you fire me."

"I don't want to see you hurt. Can't you get that through your thick skull?"

"I don't want to see me hurt either, but giving up isn't going to stop it. I'm a loose end that needs to be tidied up. They can't afford to leave me hanging around."

Royce pulled into a little lot with the grandiose title of a "scenic overlook" and stopped the car.

"I hate this. I hate that you're right and there isn't a damn thing I can do about it. I hate that I feel this way and you're sitting there all calm

and collected while I'm ready to tear my hair out. I hate seeing cuts and scrapes on you, knowing there's more under the clothes and that it's because of me that they're there."

"I'm sorry you hate everything about me. I'm doing my job, and there's no crying allowed. Keeping this code of yours out of the hands of some greedy bastard is worth a few cuts and scrapes. It's part of the job and you can't stop it."

"Then try to stop this." Royce popped her seatbelt and pulled her into his lap. Her legs sprawled across the seat and his arms were the only things holding her up.

As he crushed her chest to his steely hard one, she had a second to gasp at his tactics before he swooped down and captured her open mouth with his own. Thunder and lightning shook the car, but it was nothing compared to the storm that raged inside her body at the touch of Royce's lips on hers.

His hand captured her head and angled it to the side, allowing him free reign to plunder her mouth. Shana wasn't about to complain, her body was hungry for his touch, and as long as he started it, she was free to enjoy him again.

Her hand fumbled on the side of the driver's seat for the button to move it back. Almost silently, it eased back, making some space in front of the steering wheel. *Gotta love a car with lots of leg room.*

Using her feet to get some leverage, Shana managed to get to her knees and straddle his lap. She could feel the raging hard-on pressing against her jean-covered mound, and the friction excited her almost as much as it frustrated her.

Her fingers dove into the opening of his shirt, popping the buttons off when they didn't come undone fast enough for her. She needed to feel his skin beneath her fingers, to touch him and glory in the strength of him.

He was so alive. So vibrant and responsive to her every touch. She wanted more and more of him.

Royce dragged his mouth away from hers and pulled her tee shirt over her head. The plain white bra she wore underneath was ripped off as well, and Royce wasted no time sucking her aching nipple into his mouth.

Flames seared their way through her body, striking her core with amazing accuracy. She rubbed against him, and tried to ease the desperate need he created, but the contact only made it worse.

"I don't have any protection." Royce gasped as she unsnapped his pants and reached in to clasp his erection.

Shana's hands shook as she fumbled for her purse. Her wallet tumbled to the ground but she managed to find her "emergency" condom. "Here. It's the only one I've got so be careful with it."

"Thank God, because honestly I wouldn't care right about now. I need to be in you."

With strength Shana had suspected but never seen, Royce pulled her up with one hand and yanked her faded jeans off her hips with the other. Her cotton panties came off her body, tearing with the force of Royce's impatience.

The sound of tearing cloth, and the fury of Royce's need for her made Shana feel powerful, wanted, and hotter than blacktop in July.

"Hurry."

"I am, but I keep getting distracted." Royce's finger dove into her cleft, his knuckle brushed against her over-sensitized nubbin and sent hot sparks sizzling through her.

"More, oh God, more. I want you, all of you."

"You first." Royce was sweating, panting as he teased her.

But Shana didn't want to be first, she just wanted him. Grabbing his length, she reared up and fitted him to her body, sliding down over his hardness until she was fully impaled.

"Together."

"Anything you say." His hips bucked, driving into her from below.

She was vaguely aware of the storm surrounding them, but it was a distant second compared to the storm raging between them. Sweat dripped off her forehead as she pumped on top of him. His hands clenched her hips, driving her on harder and harder. A lightning bolt hit and she threw her head back, not sure if the bolt came from inside or outside the car.

All she knew was she'd been struck and she'd never be the same. Her body quivered and spasmed from the force of her orgasm. Waves and waves of pleasure washed over her as she slowly came to earth. Royce was quiet beneath her, his thumbs rubbing circles over her hipbones.

"Are you done?" he asked, licking at the sweat pooled between her breasts.

"Oh yeah."

"I'm not." Royce drew her nipple into his mouth and thrust inside her at the same time. The drops of pleasure that had been rippling outward shot back to her core as his double assault on her senses devastated her yet again.

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