



SEX STINGs

LooseId

LOUISA TRENT

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Chapter One

Friday, March 16th, 2007. 5:35 p.m. Rear parking lot, Red Motor Inn, Cambridge, MA.

P.I. Daniel Murphy monitored the surveillance equipment from the front seat of his fully loaded Chevy van. Never lifting his gaze from the video screen, he observed his target.

Mr. Layton to his household staff, Cooper to his business acquaintances, Coop to friends and family...Pookie to his current boink...paced the perimeter of Room 503, no doubt waiting for his current partner in cheating to put in an appearance.

Despite advising his long-suffering wife "I'll be working late at the office tonight, dear," Pookie had left Allied Investments Corp., located in Boston's downtown financial district, the same hour as usual: Like clockwork, at 5 p.m. sharp.

No surprise there. Like rats in a maze, most folks stuck to programmed patterns of behavior. After riding the bumper of Layton's luxury Lexus for the past several months, Dan could attest that his target was no exception to this rule. Rain or shine, Pookie would come twice a week during his "overtime" work as an investment broker.

Too bad a jointly filed tax return failed to support the dude's strong work ethic.

After a CPA clued Mrs. Layton in to this major inconsistency, she grew a mite suspicious of her husband's dedication to his career. Those suspicions went right through the roof when Layton took to waxing his back.

And other erogenous zones.

That's when she called in the services of Daniel J. Murphy, P.I..

These days, unwaxed body hair was as rare as fidelity. Still and all, a sudden change in grooming habits could end up biting an unfaithful spouse in the baby-smooth ass. Sloppy

justifications made cheating a lucrative business, generating millions in revenue a year. Some of that money went to motel owners, open to bribes --

Like the oily gent whose palm Dan had greased in advance of installing long-range night vision cameras with built-in LED capabilities in Room 503, the suite the couple *always* used. The creature of habit thing again.

Shit! Suddenly the visual went from good to grainy, a no-no in the snoop business, and Dan jumped on the stick. Reaching under the console, he made a fast adjustment to the feed. Crisp pictures and clear audio kept the client satisfied.

From the looks of his tented boxers, Pookie was looking to get a little satisfaction, too.

As if on cue, the door to the motel powder room opened and out strode the cause of Layton's erectile anticipation.

Mistress Q.

Cute. Real cute. Pet names just tickled Dan silly.

With as much scripted dialogue as a porn star, the Dominatrix rolled her commendable hips toward her Slave-lover. Show time.

Dan blocked a yawn.

Same BDSM scenario. Same cheesy props. Same sleazy, generic motel room. Only the faces of the cheaters ever changed. Her Dommeme outfit? The average garden-variety perv could pick up the black vinyl short-shorts, with matching low-cut bustier and thigh-high boots, online for \$59.95, plus shipping. His studded dog collar? Mass-produced. Corner drugstores carried them, no plain brown wrapper necessary.

Yes indeedy, kink had become a real snooze.

But, as they said in the snoop biz, an eight-by-ten glossy was worth thousands in guilt bucks, and so Dan propped open his lids in an effort to stay awake.

Finally. A little hardcore action. Mistress Q was towing her bad boy by his leash to the bed.

Dan checked his watch. Maybe, he'd get home in time to watch March Madness on the tube after all.

A real knockout to begin with, the Dominatrix adhered to bi-weekly Pilates to keep the merchandise toned. Botox injections and cosmetic surgery filled in what nature had left out. *Her* boobs weren't real, but *his* screaming "O's" were golden.

Dan smirked. In a cosmic sort of way, it all evened out in the end --

Which was where Pookie preferred taking it. A vibrator set on high fulfilled some of Layton's latent desires; a supple leather whip achieved the rest.

Tossing her head like a sex kitten, her mane of bottle-red hair scattering, the fake boobs hardly stirring above her low-cut bustier, Mistress Q placed her hand on Layton's hairless back and down he fell, face down on the mattress, coils protesting.

Uh-oh. Squeaking springs compromised sound quality.

To compensate for the background static, Dan re-tuned the sensitive equipment --

Just in time to record the unfurling of Mistress Q's all-important fashion accessory.

Crack! Down came her whip. Layton's every ecstatic moan and groan, and whimper captured on tape.

Hard proof, like the kind Dan provided, broke divorce cases wide open. A few telling candid shots could mitigate hours of lawyerly bamboozling and tip the divorce settlement in the aggrieved spouse's favor. Layton craved humiliation? He'd get plenty. Right in his pocket*pookie*.

A successful endgame resulted in fatter alimony payouts. Richer property disbursement -- the house, the car, and Gerry the Gerbil. Incriminating evidence also put a better spin on who got custody of the kids.

She had two. He had four. Six messed up childhoods.

As the video feed rolled across the screen, Dan looked away.

Private investigation was dirty. And, man, he hated sitting in a parked van, behind one skuzzy motel after another, voyeuristically watching people screw up their lives. But up to his dick in debt, he had no other choice but to wrap up this case tonight and start in on a new snoop next week, another assignment sure to chip away at whatever integrity he had left.

He didn't have much pride remaining, not after quitting the Boston Police Department.

Dan shook his head. What the hell, with his lousy attitude, he would've eventually gotten his ass fired for insubordination anyway. His resignation had just made things easier for everyone concerned.

Except him.

No bellyaching -- he'd done what he'd had to do and, if the circumstances were unchanged, he'd do the same all over again, leaving out the part about becoming a drunk.

After quitting the BPD, he'd made love to the bottle for over a year before hitting the wall. He'd nearly lost the house. Did lose the furniture. Loan sharks knew his name well, and they wielded mean baseball bats. His kneecaps rode on completing this assignment.

Christ! What was he supposed to do?

Hell, not this. Not with six kids involved.

With a sigh for another lost commission, Dan flicked the erase button on the control panel, turned off the recorder, and drove off.

* * * * *

Terry Walsh smoothed a hand over the neat pile of hats and mittens she had finished ticketing with sale prices, her fingertips irresistibly drawn to a knitted design called "Faithful."

And for good reason. The intertwining stitches, closely joined and tightly secured, formed a repeating pattern that never strayed. An old-fashioned style, an old-fashioned sentiment. While she continued to stroke the nubby weave, her glance fell on a gold framed card, propped up against the gooseneck light at her counter workstation.

Crap! She still hadn't returned the Rotary Club invitation, and the dance at the Park Plaza Hotel was that coming night. Why had she kept putting off the RSVP's return?

Her intentions had been good. She'd meant to return the card. The day before yesterday, during a lull in customers, she'd even left Donna, her part-time seasonal employee, in charge of the cash register while she went to the post office. But she just couldn't let go of the invitation, couldn't drop the RSVP inside the mailbox slot. Her hand had actually hovered over the chute! Was that weird or what, Terry thought, stroking the woolen mitten she'd knitted that past summer for the next season. "At this late date, what choice do I have? I'll have to go. Rude not to go --"

"Did you say something, Theresa?"

"Oh, nothing. Just talking to myself, same as usual." Terry didn't look over at Donna. She kept staring at the mitten, fingering the mitten, caressing the mitten. What was up with her and the mitten?

Terry shook free of the glove and jerked her attention to her sole employee. "You know, it's almost closing time."

"TGIF, huh?"

"Yep, l-o-n-g week." Terry picked up a man's knitted cap. The festive pom-poms decorating the pointy top received a fluffing. Everything in the display case had to look just right. "Tell you what, since you're my best employee --"

Donna snorted. "I'm you're *only* employee."

"That, too. But since you're my best and *only* employee, I'll finish tagging the merchandise for the mid-season sale. You run along. Start your weekend early." Terry patted the hat some more. "Okay?"

"I'm not about to argue with the boss." Donna whipped off her hot pink smock, a one-size-fits-all variety that had "KNITTERS' NOOK" emblazoned across the front pocket, and hung the garment on a wall hook. "How 'bout you? Any plans for tonight?"

"The Rotary Club dance at the Park Plaza."

Donna's hands rode her hips. "Hey -- why didn't you mention the dance? You never said a word. Not until right now. I assumed you weren't going." Donna pulled on her coat. "I mean, no insult intended, but you don't go out a lot. All you ever do is...well...knit."

"I dance, too."

"You do?" she asked incredulously.

Donna was great for Terry's ego. "Yes."

"Well, you must lead a whole secret life I know nothing about."

"That's me, all right, the Mystery Woman." Terry forced out a laugh. "Actually, I just decided to go to the Plaza tonight. A spur of the moment decision. That's why I never mentioned the dance to you," she lied, stroking, stroking, alternately stroking, the hat *and* the same pair of mittens.

"The Plaza -- how exciting! And all I'm doing tonight is going to the North End for pizza with Tony. Same-old, same-old." Donna's shoulders lifted and fell. "Well, have fun. Tell me all about your night tomorrow. What you wore, who you talked to, who you danced with. You know, girl talk."

No, Terry didn't know. She'd never learned how to do "girl talk." But early on, she had learned how to slip into character -- any character -- and fake it.

If Donna expected gossip, Terry would supply the juicy conversation. Just like always, she would pretend to be the same as everyone else.

"Peace out," Donna called racing out the door, the bell tinkling in her wake.

All alone in the shop, Terry moved her fingers lovingly over the palm of the mitten.

Perhaps tonight she'd meet a special someone at the charity function. Perhaps they'd even dance. Perhaps he'd bring her back to his place --

Where she'd fuck his brains out.

She hadn't gotten any in a while, and perhaps this time would be different than all those other times.

Anything was possible, Terry conceded, holding the mitten like a lover's hand.

Chapter Two

Saturday, April 14th, 2007. 4:30 p.m. Boston, MA.

Dan Murphy squinted through a kumquat-sized clearing on the windshield.

Late that afternoon, without warning, an early spring snowstorm blew in from out of nowhere and socked in the Hub but good. The BMW's ultra-deluxe wipers limped along, barely keeping up with the mess.

Dan shook his head. Another botched forecast compliments of ACU-NEWS. The meteorological boys down at Channel 3 should shit-can the computer charts and try looking out a fucking window for a change...

With legal parking spots on the unplowed city streets as scarce as nude photos of Queen Elizabeth, Dan decided to ditch his fancy livery wheels -- a discreetly dark sedan for use by Forrester employees -- at the underground garage on Boston Common and hoof it to his destination.

After pocketing a fresh supply of easily hidden, micro video cams, he did just that, tramping through the ankle-deep "slight chance of precipitation" on foot, a foolhardy endeavor at best, what with his rubber sole shoes skidding like bald tires on the icy brick sidewalks.

Despite his bitching, Dan had to admit the pain-in-the-ass white stuff was pretty. The snow was quickly transforming dingy downtown Boston into an old-fashioned winter wonderland, a scene right out of a Currier and Ives calendar.

Only his calendar read April, not fucking January, and Dan could tell the difference --
As could the robins nesting in his Southie backyard.

Seeing this was spring, the chirpers had already winged their way back from Florida. Or South America. Or whatever the hell warm and sunny clime the feathered creatures usually vacationed. Proving even birdbrains had the smarts to desert the city during the bleak winter months...and the loyalty to return come Opening Day at Fenway Park. Go Sox. Boo Yankees.

Now, him, he couldn't skip town. Pre-divorce consulting cases kept him tied to the Bay State.

Another sore point. Just once, why couldn't a lead on a cheating spouse case ever take him to the balmy Bahamas? At least on the islands, he could've picked up a few rays while performing the smutty details of his career. But no. The same way a condom stuck to its wrapper, those of adulterous inclination always stuck close to home.

Narrowly avoiding several nasty spills, Dan fought the elements to swanky Newbury Street, where wind-driven drifts covered stately Victorian mansions and elegant brownstones, alike. The freezing slush and snow combo had piled up in front of chichi restaurants, snobby art galleries and upscale boutiques, the pristine ambiance so brand spanking new, local pooches had yet to lift a leg and redecorate.

Man, he wished he could see. But he couldn't, not even to the end of his big nose. Winter whiteout conditions applied. Only, at the risk of cyclical thinking, this wasn't winter. *This was goddamn spring!*

Quaint gas streetlamps did dick to improve visibility. Unable to make out more than a few snowflakes up ahead and shivering like he'd just come down with a real bad case of the DTs, Dan shouldered along. Uncomplainingly.

Where the hell are those sanding trucks when you need them, anyway? What? Was DPW waiting 'til August to break out the plows? Fucking idiots down at City Hall...

Instead of trotting his ass all over town, during a blizzard no less, he should've been home right now, cuddled up to a good book, a hard-boiled detective mystery, featuring a bombshell babe with tits out to there and a tough-talking P.I. who knew how to handle 'em.

Dan could identify. Up to a point --

Make that two points. He hadn't had the pleasure of feeling up a woman in a very long while. The P.I. gig had sucked the juice right out of him, leaving him hollow. He didn't need a sex therapist to tell him his career was doing a number on him. Looking up ahead, he saw nothin' but the same.

Not to go symbolic, but whiteout conditions applied to him, as well as to the weather. Snooping was killing him, turning him as cold and treacherous as the ice under his feet. He didn't like who he had become. Didn't respect himself no more. How could he get with a woman when he felt dirty?

Hunching his shoulders against a blustery gust, that, no shit, kicked his ass, Dan shoved his frozen hands deep into his jacket pockets. One at a time, he tried flexing his fingers.

Sonofabitch. All ten digits had gone numb, trusty trigger finger included. What he wouldn't give right now for a nice pair of warm gloves, his left nut included.

Who the hell was he kidding? *Left* nut? Fuck, he might just as well donate both. At least he *used* his hands.

Though, not for jerking off. Even his own fist wouldn't date him no more, not since he'd started up the P.I. business.

Owing to his strapped financial position, Dan couldn't afford to blow off prospective clients. So long as the money paid him was green, he accepted. Big cases. Small cases. He took them all on. Only in those circumstances where the cash would come to him laundered clean, did he refuse. Those clients could go take a flying leap. Or, if the pre-divorce cases involved kids -- those his conscience wouldn't allow. He'd tried, but he just couldn't go there.

Come to think of it, lately, he'd been refusing more assignments than he accepted.

But this current case, now this one looked routine. If he came through, successfully fulfilled the requirements of the contact, maybe he'd get some more just like it through referrals.

This client, William Forrester III, was loaded. Filthy rich. An old Boston family who could trace their arrival all the way back to the *Mayflower*. Natch, he was particular about who his only son, William Forrester IV, was involved with. So the elder Forrester had hired Murphy Private Investigative Services to perform a standard background check, including a sexual history workup, on one Thérèse Walsh, the woman the son was dating.

The family did not approve of the relationship. In fact, they had Miss Walsh pegged as an opportunist, a shady lady only interested in their son's wealth.

Dan had to say he agreed with the family's impression, and then he'd take their assessment one step further.

Preliminary research on the chick had revealed zilch. All his usual search vehicles had come up empty, leading him to conclude the name was bogus.

The little fraud could call herself whatever the hell she wanted. By the time he finished his investigation, her name would be mud. Dan had a good nose for this sort of thing, and thus far, the situation smelled wicked bad.

Dan suspected this Thérèse Walsh was hiding something worse than trying to climb the social ladder through marriage. The family figured gold digging, he figured criminal intent, and if the latter was the case, he planned on outing her.

Getting to the bottom of things would take time. The paperwork alone would wrack up a ream of billable hours. Good news for him.

Considering the highly sensitive nature of the investigation, natch, the family wanted the surveillance conducted on the q.t. . Since there was no other way to go, Dan had agreed

to keep the thirty-year-old heir to the multi-million dollar Forrester Shipping empire in the dark.

As a cover, Mr. Forrester had “hired” Dan on as the new company lackey/bodyguard/personal assistant/chauffeur. Basically, he was a gofer. Name it, Dan Murphy did it, and with a phony smile pasted on his kisser.

At first, the son had balked at the intrusion on his privacy. Understandable. But things usually had a way of working themselves out, and after a few weeks of running his ass off, Dan had made himself indispensable to Billy-boy.

As a reward for worming his way into the younger Forrester’s confidence, tonight Dan would get to meet his target, the “unsuitable” woman the family feared the son might eventually decide to marry.

Marriage. Chump territory. Why would any man, regardless of his net financial worth, leave himself open to the grief?

Please ‘em and leave ‘em was the way to go. Return to the same set of thighs and eventually the woman attached to those thighs would expect a shiny hunk of carbon out of the deal and a promise of a happily-ever-after.

Only the diamond part of that equation was real.

Fidelity was the stuff of fairytales. Faithful never happened in real life. So, why snow one another?

Another blustery siege of the white stuff whipped up, this one a beaut. To avoid a serious case of snowmanitis, Dan pulled up his pea coat’s wide collar and ducked into a doorway. Like a kid at a bakery window, he pressed his frozen nose into the storefront glass.

A shop girl inside waved.

Thinking to return the gesture, Dan dug his hand out of his pocket.

Owing to his numb fingers, his wave fizzled, causing him to settle for a nod. Owing to his numb lips, the accompanying smile didn’t work out as planned, either.

Still, obviously impressed with his savoir-faire, she mouthed “Come-in-out-of-the-storm” and grinned.

As in, *really* grinned. Hugely. At him. Her wide smile encompassed the lower half of her face and split her apple-cheeked expression from ear to ear.

Rosy, full lips. Laughing, Kelly-green eyes. Milky-white skin. Wavy brown hair shot through with red that zigzagged around her long slender throat and brushed her collar like a billion or so ballpoint pen springs.

Plump tits. *Whoa, yeah*. A plump booty, too. At least, what he could see. Her lilac-Sunday dress skimmed her curves, but still managed to keep him guessing.

No visible piercings. Or ink. A sweet homegrown Colleen from Southie, a good Catholic girl who expected the ring *before* hitting the sheets -- Dan could always tell. The

type of wholesome girl his mom would have loved for him to love. The kind of nice girl she would have loved for him to bring home, instead of fucking around like he had with 'hos and tramps and sluts he never would have brought home, not in a thousand years. Man, she was so DNHT.

Definitely Not His Type.

But as she walked away, he still feasted his eyes on her ass, which *did* turn out to be pleasantly rounded and which sprung him a hard-on the size of the Bunker Hill Monument.

Keep moving, lady. Get out of here quick.

When she did, he heartily approved of her sound judgment.

Then, she went and spoiled his good opinion of her.

Glancing over her shoulder, her sultry look reading like a gold-edged invitation, she winked.

Who was he to argue fate?

But would he arrive late for his appointment?

Dan checked his watch.

Naw. Plenty of time.

True, she didn't fit his lowly standards, but his foreskin was conveniently short on foresight. Good girls. Bad girls. His uncut ten inches didn't discriminate.

In theory, anyway.

After his recent bout with disinterest, his ability to get laid remained very much up in the air. After months -- no, make that over a year -- since he'd gotten his woody on, he was not feeling overly optimistic. His temperamental dick could limp out on him at any moment.

Dan pushed through the door. To the sound of a tinkling bell, he hung his pea coat on the coat rack to defrost, then took in his surroundings.

Holy shit! Yarn of every color, size and description lined the wooden shelves. Long pointy needles hung on the cork walls. Piles of folded woolen goods squatted on the tables. He'd landed himself in a sewing store.

"My mom used to knit," he blurted. "All the time. I tried once, too, but botched the stitches. I knotted the yarn all over the place." Luckily, the storm raging outside had emptied the place and so no one else was around to hear his unmanly confession.

The shop girl took a tall seat behind the counter and picked up her perfectly round ball of creamy yarn. *Click-click* went her long metal needles. "Tell me more."

"Before she got sick..." He paused, got himself together, spoke over the lump in his throat, "...Mom never sat still. And when she did take a breather in a chair, something or other always occupied her hands. Usually, like I say, skeins of wool. She would con me into holding up my arms for hours at a time while she wound the yarn into balls. Anyhow, somehow, like magic, all that winding morphed into hats and scarves and mittens."

And sweaters.

Just like the ones stacked on wooden tables around the store. He still had an Irish Fisherman's sweater, with big, thick, oatmeal-toned cable stitches and leather buttons, at home.

Dan looked down at his shoes. Geez, he hadn't thought about that sweater in years, but the memory came flooding back to him in the shop.

"My dad died when I was just a baby," he said, staring at the puddle he was leaving on the floor despite wiping his feet on the mat. "No brothers or sisters, just her and me in the D Street projects. After moving her out of there to a little house of her own overlooking Thomas Park, I'd go visit with her on Sunday afternoons. Man, but she used to cook! Roast beef and potatoes, or some other huge meal. Now, that she's gone, I miss her, you know?"

Feelings. A man's unmentionables. The stuff that never got talked about. Ever. Why was he telling this to a definitely NHT shop girl?

Click-click. "I run classes here at the store. Beginning, intermediate, advanced. Sign up, why don't you? Knitting frees up the mind and allows positive energy to flow."

Making a joke out of his very real need for such an activity, he hiked his shoulders up to his ears and grimaced. "What? Do I look stressed or somethin' to you?"

"Yes."

Despite that she was DNHT, telling himself he was only shooting the bull, wasting time until he had to face the elements again, he kept up the chitchat. "Back in the day, the Union tried negotiating stress out of the contract, but the higher-ups down at Headquarters wouldn't budge on the concession."

"Headquarters?" She raised her reddish-brown brows. "You BPD?"

"Used to be. Not anymore. Not since I quit."

She tilted the stark beauty of her jaw; her sharp eyes called his decision into question. "You didn't like being a police officer?"

"No, I loved being a police officer. Ever since I was a kid, cop work was all I ever wanted."

"Then, why quit?"

He shrugged, admitted, "I quit a lot of things."

"But why quit something you loved?"

"I didn't play well with others."

"Your fellow officers?"

"No. Admin. I don't take too well to orders." Especially, if those orders went past stupid into tragedy. And why the hell was he thinking all this? And, more importantly, why the hell was he opening up to her? Unless she could somehow magically undo the past, it was too

late to change anything now. What had happened had happened and he had to live with the responsibility of not doing more.

He pulled on a lopsided smile, the crookedness unrelated to his freezer-burned lips, and clamped down on his sudden urge to discuss the past. "Anyway, my beat included Newbury Street." He gave a shiver unrelated to his deep chill. "*Brr*. Tough area is the Back Bay."

A joke. Everyone knew 911 calls originating from this tony part of town were no more serious than complaints about jaywalking poodle-owners.

Dan snuck the shop girl a slanted glance. Any second now, she'd convulse in hysterics.

A second passed. Then another. A whole minute went by and no laugh. Not even a chuckle.

Tough audience.

Strange. He'd had her figured for easy, the type who would break up at his unquestionable wit. Then again, he'd also had her figured as a Southie girl, and now he wasn't so sure. Her manner of speech wasn't strictly Boston, and the difference was more than diction.

"I should get back to work." She held up a knitted *something*. "Nice to meet you --?"

"Murphy, ma'am," Dan said in his official police capacity tone, the one he had acquired years before and had never dropped, even after dropping his badge.

"Well, goodnight, Mr. Murphy. Don't let me keep you."

So much for his winning charm. For sure, he wasn't scoring here. Not only had his joke flat-lined, Miz Good Girl Shop Girl couldn't wait to get rid of him. Never mind handing over her phone number, she hadn't even given him her name in fair exchange for his introduction.

Knowing a shutout when he heard one, Dan lumbered back toward the door, grabbing his soggy wet coat from the rack in transit. After shrugging into the sleeves, he buttoned up tight and started heading out.

She called after him, "Daniel -- wait a minute!"

He held still as footsteps moved lightly behind him. Held still as she came around to his front. Before he could pull away, she rammed a multi-colored hat -- the dork kind, with a pom-pom decorating the pointed top, earflaps, and chin ties -- onto his skull. The matching pair of geek mittens she slapped against his chest. "Pull 'em on. Only squirrels give up their nuts."

Skittish, he was not. But man, the shop girl gave off some kind of strange vibes.

Rather than argue, he tunneled his hands into the geek mittens.

They fit! Usually, he couldn't find anything that would accommodate his extra-large size hands. And, come to think of it, the hat fit, too. Considering the size of his head -- extra

large, too, on account of having to house his extra large brain -- a hat that covered his skull was a rare find. A real treasure, in fact.

All nice and toasty, he beat it out of there fast.

Once out on the sidewalk, in a slow, flashback kind of way, he realized she'd called him "Daniel."

Had he given her his first name? And what was with her crack about "squirrels?"

His throbbing erection must've turned him forgetful, because man, he had not a clue.

Chapter Three

Terry stared out the restaurant's enormous bow window onto a view of Beacon Street, her restless fingers drumming the linen tablecloth to the beat of her pinging nerves. Then, turning her gaze away from the falling snow outside, she eyed the door once more.

Where was he?

I need to see you!

She'd gotten the time right -- the maitre d' had checked her off his 5:30 p.m. seating list. Not there was a run on romantic tables for two...or any configuration thereof...on such a stormy night.

After changing out of her work clothes into vamp wear -- a little black cocktail dress, bought on consignment, and high-heeled black leather boots, bought on sale, Terry had rushed to apply her makeup. With record-breaking speed, she'd fixed her hair in a sophisticated French braid, in honor of the world-class cuisine, and closed up shop for the night. Waiting what felt like an eternity for the only cab in town willing to pick up a fare, she'd arrived at the restaurant with not a minute to spare.

Obviously, her dinner companion hadn't fared nearly as well.

At 5:45, she sat at the intimate candlelit table alone. Though completely understandable, her date's lateness only intensified her apprehension.

Where was he?

I need to see you!

The edges of the tablecloth lifted and fell with her swinging leg. Just once, why couldn't her paranormal abilities reveal something about her own personal life?

But, noooOOOO. Though wired to receive messages regarding others, she was out of the loop when it came to her own inner mindscape. The more she tried to force the issue, the more her ESP revolted.

Psychic phenomena. An inexact science. Messages rarely came to her in a straightforward and linear fashion. Bits and pieces of unsolicited insights about complete strangers interrupted her at the most inconvenient times, sometimes, but not always, while she was knitting. Knots and holes, and bumps and wiggles, would appear like scattered pieces of a jigsaw puzzle in a woolen item and form a “code” which she would then later painstakingly interpret.

Terry played with her napkin. Being a conduit for psychic messages was no walk in the park. At one point, things had become so difficult, she had stopped knitting altogether.

For three weeks.

She'd never been so miserable in her whole entire life.

Miserable when knitting, more miserable when not knitting, she'd finally bitten the bullet and picked up her needles and skeins of yarn again. Like an e-mail inbox after a vacation, only without the spam, her mind had flooded immediately with psychic messages. And she couldn't press delete. Catching up with everything had taken her six months.

She'd learned her lesson the hard way. Never again would she pretend she could stop knitting, when she couldn't stop knitting. Not for any reason. Not to make herself happy. Not to make others happy. Not even if stopping meant she could be normal like everyone else.

She was not normal like everyone else.

Where was he?

I need to see you!

Knitting was her physical crutch, very much like mediums gazed endlessly into crystal balls. But unlike certain charlatans who merely *claimed* to communicate with spirits of the dead or whatnot, she actually could and did, but only at times. And, while grieving families of the dearly departed and whatnot compensated those fortune readers, her scrying came free of charge.

She did *not* profit from her psychic ability. Plain and simple, taking money wasn't right, not even to put chocolate cake on the table. She might not be normal, but she worked a normal job to pay the bills and support her need for an occasional chocolate fix.

Thus, the shop.

Knitting was her only skill. And the sheer chaos of dealing with a constant bombardment of insights made another livelihood out of the question.

Though -- she had once considered working as one of those phony-baloney TV psychics. Unfortunately, her presentation lacked polish. And dependability. She never knew when a message would reveal itself to her. Plus, the psychic TV field was all about

specialization, and she was a generalist. Her résumé, if she had such a thing, which she most assuredly did not, would bear out her global application of psychic phenomena.

Her inexact, hard to pin down, rarely reliably dependable, but mostly always correct, application of psychic phenomena.

Like her life at present, her abilities were all over the place. Resistant to cataloguing, they were scattered across the board, just like her. At times, she could intuit a person's thoughts, particularly if that person was somehow, in some way, involved in her knitted messages.

The point was, she never knew when some insight would spring into her mind, or what the grand scheme of that insight would entail. For instance, her remark about Daniel Murphy's nuts. Where had that insight come from? And, more importantly, what did it mean that she had zoned in on his thoughts, if only briefly?

Then there was her basic cynicism about anything extrasensory. Because she couldn't count on them or quantify them, because there was no seeming logic to her abilities, at times, she doubted their very existence. Her powers seemed like such a fluke!

Terry sighed. Her skepticism would suck the hocus out of pocus. In her doubting presence, levitating tables would crash to the floor. Ouija boards refuse to point. Horoscopes would forecast only bad news. Fans of tea leaf-readings would switch to drinking coffee.

Bottom line, dishing out swift and easy results wasn't how she worked. Though her success rate for accuracy was one-hundred percent, sometimes years would elapse between her receiving a message, putting it in context, and knowing what to do with it. And sometimes, at least initially, her predictions didn't make sense.

Just like her life.

She rechecked her watch, fidgeted some more.

Where was he?

I need to see you!

Why on earth had she started to date Bill Forrester?

They were a prime example of why mutts should never get together with the pedigree. What had she been thinking? A mongrel like her with a show dog like him -- how had she ever thought they'd have anything in common?

She never really had.

And yet, that night at the Rotary Club's dance, she'd pulled out all stops and pursued him. Mercilessly. Bill Forrester had never stood a chance.

They'd started seeing one another the middle of March. How had she ever lasted so long?

Yes, she had been frustrated with celibacy, but if she had wanted to jumpstart her sex life, why choose a high profile man like him?

Bill intended to get into politics someday. With that sort of exposure, she could just kiss her anonymity goodbye!

Instead, she would kiss him goodbye.

Weird. Totally weird, about that first night at the Rotary Club dance. Sure, Bill had good looks to spare and a tongue so smooth he could sweet talk sour grapes into *Cristal*, but right from the first, he'd bored her silly. And right from the first, she had never once thought of him in terms of long-range plans. They had no future. So why bother stringing him along?

It was almost as though she'd been using him! And she never did that. Never used people. Certainly, she wasn't interested in Bill's money. She didn't care two figs for his wealth. If she cared about striking it rich, she would have auctioned off her psychic abilities to the highest bidder years before. But she had never once thought of selling out, not even during those lean years, when she hadn't known where she would sleep at night.

Terry crumpled her linen napkin into a ball, then tapped her empty water glass. She had to get this breakup over with tonight!

Bill was moving in on her, asking more of her than she could give. As a seer, she required both physical and emotional space, not someone who stuck his nose in her life, who got too close, who -- wanted take her to bed.

Um. NO!

Sexing it up with Bill just wasn't happening.

Where was he?

I need to see you!

It was cold outside, frigid actually, but a huge fire roared in the rustic brick hearth at her back. Despite the warmth, she wrapped herself up in her shawl's woolen folds.

And an image of crinkled bright blue eyes and shaggy brown hair flashed through her mind.

Weird.

But what else was new?

Apart from a tight butt and an impressive bulge decorating a pair of worn jeans...why had her thoughts strayed to Daniel Murphy?

That man was trouble. Not because he'd made her breasts peak and her pussy moisten, but because he had made her drop her guards.

The shawl fit comfortably around her shoulders, and needed no adjustment. But an overwhelming and inexplicable compulsion drove her now, and in that obsessive need, she fiddled with the wrap, arranging the knitted rows to align perfectly, finally stroking the heavy stitches. Especially the purling.

A tiny ripple interrupted the intertwining yarn. She began picking at the malformation, her fingertips digging into the mistake, her gaze fixed on the door.

Where was he?

I need to see you! I need to see you! I need... YOU!

And there he was, an unbelievably tall man, his broad shoulders covered in snow.

Daniel Murphy.

Chapter Four

After the exchange of a few words, the restaurant's snooty French maitre d' pointed Daniel Murphy in her direction.

In front of her linen-covered table, he fiddled with the loaner cap and mittens. "This place is some fancy, huh? I bet they serve everything, from soup to *nuts*. Oh, that reminds me -- thanks for saving mine."

Uh-oh. This was what came of letting down her guards and showing off. Like a freak snowstorm that arrived without warning, trouble had entered her placid life.

"Only the left one," she corrected, maintaining her calm.

"Yeah, about that --" His raised brow dislodged a snowflake. "How'd ya know?"

And she'd thought Bill Forrester posed a threat to her anonymity! This man could do her in. "It's a common expression, Mr. Murphy. And all men pick the left."

His narrowed gaze made clear, he wasn't buying her explanation. To get his mind off her blunder, she needed to create a distraction.

That would be her chest.

She possessed a nondescript, even-featured, completely forgettable face that she could either play up or down, depending on her purposes. Her full figure could look either look dumpy or sexpot, depending on her posture and clothing. She was used to men talking to her bust, and earlier this man had difficulty peeling his leer off her boobs. Since ballerina posture showed hers to their best advantage, she dropped the shawl and pulled back her shoulders, putting her cleavage on the table, so to speak.

Daniel Murphy continued to make eye contact; his gaze never dipped.

But he did vigorously shake his head, as if to clear it, and that caused a white avalanche to roll from his broad shoulders. In all the subsequent brushing and shaking, he thankfully lost his train of thought.

Wearing a dazed expression, he scratched his forehead below the band of the knitted cap. "You Thérèse Walsh?"

"One and the same."

"That's a hot one." He started to laugh.

"Did I say something humorous?"

"Your name. What's a nice Irish girl like you doing with a name as French as *Maison Pierre's* fancy menu?"

"I don't believe my name, a French derivative or otherwise, is any of your concern, Mr. Murphy."

"Madame Thérèse Defarge was a knitter, too, wasn't she?"

Damn his dogged persistence! "Yes," she answered tightly. "I believe Thérèse Defarge did knit."

"Some coincidence, huh?"

"I'm afraid your meaning escapes me."

"You know -- Dickens. *A Tale of Two Cities*."

Her straight spine slumped just a bit. "I'm not a villainous character from an historical novel, Mr. Murphy."

"But with that name, your mother must have known you were destined to be a knitter --"

Terry examined the flatware's ornate pattern. Bill always took her out dining at the most ostentatious places. The pretentiousness never failed to annoy her. No one had stuck a silver spoon in her mouth at birth. Far from it.

She lifted her eyes to her interrogator. Though she should have bitten her tongue against her sudden urge to self-destruct, something compelled her to tell him, "As a baby, I was left on the steps of a South Boston church, with only that first name pinned to my blanket. As to my last name, I have no idea as to my parentage, so I go by several surnames. McCall, sometimes, the name of my foster parents in my first placement. At other times, I use Walsh, an unsuccessful, pre-adoptive home placement." She sighed. "Sometimes, I just say to hell with it all, and simply use Smith. So, Mr. Murphy, you see, I wouldn't know what thoughts ran through my birth mother's head."

But Terry had always wondered -- had her mother possessed psychic abilities, too? Had she known that, just like the vengeful, French Revolutionary antagonist, Madame Thérèse Defarge, her daughter would encipher messages -- albeit, involuntary psychic messages -- into her knitting?

Daniel Murphy's expression took on a contrite aspect, his voice lowered. "I shouldn't have said nothin'. Sorry."

No sorrier than she. This man was too observant, too attentive. Too damn perceptive. He'd made the connection between a Charles Dickens character in *A Tale of Two Cities* and her knitting abilities too easily. Clearly, she'd underestimated his intelligence. Plus, he'd most likely received training to pick up visual clues, body language, on people in his former job with the police.

Police.

What had she done? She'd shown off to a damn cop!

Cornered, she immediately went on the attack. "Why did you follow me? And please don't say to thank me for the loan of the hat and gloves. If you're some sort of stalker, let me warn you, I have important friends in high places in this city."

"He ain't coming."

She frowned. "I beg your pardon? Who ain...*isn't*... coming?"

"One of those important city friends of yours in high places who are supposed to scare me off."

She glared at him. Daniel Murphy's glibness set her teeth on edge. "To whom are you referring?"

"William Forrester IV," he said, with the sort of guttural intonation one normally reserved for the residue wiped from the bottoms of one's shoes.

In this instance, she thought the sneer was unconscious. From his defensiveness -- it took a defensive person to know a defensive person -- she concluded that Daniel Murphy didn't think much of people born with the advantage of wealth and influence.

Neither did she.

Unlike him, however, she knew how to mask her aversion. "Yes, what about Mr. Forrester?"

"He can't make your date tonight. A last minute business teleconferencing call to Europe, combined with the snow and everything, was gonna delay him past the point of courtesy, so, polite guy that he is, he sent me here to the restaurant to escort you home. You know, after you dine."

Dine. The word didn't exactly slide off his tongue. This was a man who ate *supper* promptly at 5 p.m. Daniel Murphy did not *dine*.

A waiter passed the table within earshot and Daniel Murphy thrust out his brutish chin. "That slick dude has been giving me the hairy eyeball since I arrived."

"Perhaps it's your Army and Navy store attire, Mr. Murphy."

"Yeah, well, considering the white dump, I left the designer-name threads at home tonight."

The rich wore cashmere, despite inclement weather, a fact she had come to realize only recently and her companion not at all. “Do you even know the names of clothing designers, Mr. Murphy?”

“Hell, no,” he said stoutly.

This was a man proud of his ignorance of anything smacking of the effete. At his tough, streetwise, Southie masculinity, a smile tugged at her lips.

She squelched the smile. Killed it dead. Her life depended on keeping her wits about her, and that meant keeping her defenses raised. The man was incorrigible. If she encouraged him, he’d only rise to the occasion and become more difficult. For the sake of her peace of mind, she wanted him gone.

Her body said something else again.

“I don’t know nothin’ about no designers. That was how come I left out the pertinent name dropping,” Daniel Murphy continued. “I was trying to bluff you out.”

“You did *not* succeed.”

“Figured as much. Listen, I feel stupid standing here, Miss Walsh. Put me out of my misery, would ya, and allow me to take a seat at the table. At least ‘til I finish my explaining.”

She put him off. If he sat down, she’d *never* get rid of him! “Why didn’t Mr. Forrester call me himself to explain? He knows my number.” Her number, but not her full address or place of employment, information she had deliberately withheld. Just in case. Experience had taught her to be careful.

“That was what I was trying to explain. Like I said, he got that overseas call and everything. You know how it goes, shit happens. Pardon my French.”

Yes, shit did happen. Even in fancy French restaurants.

She settled back into her brocaded chair. The maitre d’ hovered nearby, there for backup, if reinforcements became necessary. Bill was not only well known in the city, he was a big tipper. The manager would come to her rescue if shit happened here. But far too intrigued by Mr. Murphy, she resisted calling him over to the table.

There was most assuredly something going on here -- apart from Dan Murphy’s tight butt, which had it all going on.

Chapter Five

As if bored, and Terry certainly wasn't bored in the present company -- exasperated, yes, but not bored -- she propped up her chin on the heel of her palm. In no way or manner did she try to disguise her intent perusal.

William Forrester IV would never associate socially with the likes of this man. If Daniel Murphy intimated otherwise, she'd know he was lying through his teeth, the slight crookedness in the overbite a sign of early poverty. Despite a lack of cosmetic orthodontics, this brutish man smiled quite a lot. Unlike Bill, who rarely flashed his perfectly aligned smile. Daniel Murphy probably shot pool with his buddies, enjoyed pre-game tailgating parties before taking his seat high up in stands at the Pats home games. His alcoholic beverage of choice was most likely non-imported, far from *lite* beer, lugged home from the local *packie*. Bill indulged in none of those blue-collar activities.

After forcing herself to take a deep breath, Terry then forced herself to relax further into the thick upholstery. The repositioning of her body took her as far away from Daniel Murphy as possible without actually evacuating her chair and bolting for the door. As a matter of principle, she always gave law enforcement officials a wide berth.

But he was an *ex-cop*, she reminded herself.

An ex-cop with an undeniable sexual impact on her and, in whose company, she'd already slipped out of her serious character mode and revealed her true, fun-loving, low-brow nature, something she never did. To compound her error, in her knitting shop, she had felt safe enough with Dan Murphy to show off.

She didn't feel safe now. If anything, she felt more vulnerable than usual.

A good thing. Feeling vulnerable would keep her on her toes, keep her mental faculties alert. Feeling vulnerable would put the brakes on revealing anything else about herself.

Feeling vulnerable would prevent her from giving in to the urge to perform any additional cheap parlor tricks.

Daniel Murphy was giving off mixed signals, and those mixed signals were playing havoc with her people radar. Now that her snap judgment in regards to his obtuseness had come back to haunt her, she regarded him with a more discerning eye.

He had shaved, and that was about all the personal grooming he'd done. With quaint, old-fashioned gallantry, he said sheepishly, "Pardon me," and removed his loaner cap and mittens. This time, she had all to do not to cluck her tongue at seeing his shaggy hair. Forget a pricey Newbury Street stylist, when was the last time he'd paid for a ten dollar barber's trim?

The very *uncashmere* jacket, the faded *anti*-designer jeans, the cheap shoes turned down at the soles, the slouched stance, the imperfect, but ready smile, the tough manner of speech -- everything about Daniel Murphy confirmed his salt-of-the earth upbringing. Not only would Bill not choose this person as a friend, they'd never meet.

"You're saying my dinner date sent you, Mr. Murphy. But how do I know you're not lying? This might very well be a scam of some sort. For all I know, you've never met Mr. Forrester, never mind enjoyed a friendship with him."

"Friendship!" He snorted. "I'm not the dude's pal. I'm his new bodyguard/personal assistant/chauffeur."

Daniel Murphy waved Bill's private business card, the one with his very private cell phone number listed at the bottom.

Bill had mentioned the new hire. Not directly by name -- a mere employee didn't merit a name -- but Bill did say he'd employed a personal assistant. Not a secretary -- he already had several of those -- but someone to attend to his person. Not a butler. Too British. A personal attendant.

A bodyguard. BINGO!

Who better to look after the physical well-being of a wealthy man than a former cop?

As all the parts fell into place, she motioned to the chair directly across from her at the table. "Yes, please do join me. But only for a drink. Since Mr. Forrester can't make it, I won't be staying to dine." And the whole time he was here, she would remain on high alert. This guy would be no real threat to her, not as far as her psychic skills went. The sex angle, now that was a different threat entirely.

He hung the dripping navy blue wool jacket behind the chair and sat down. "You look different. I almost didn't recognize you."

"Cosmetics and a braid. Voila! I'm a changed woman." She called the waiter over. "Jacque, take my guest's order please. What's your poison?" she asked her rough companion. "Whiskey, straight-up?"

"Make mine water, Jack. None of that imported crap, either."

Inside, Terry giggled. She'd certainly hit that nail right on the head. "And I'll have another of the same, Jacque."

After the waiter backed away, Daniel Murphy offered as an aside, "I never touch the hard stuff when I'm working."

"Working? Why, Mr. Murphy, are you guarding my body now, too?" she asked coyly.

"Yeah...well. It's like this -- see, I figure I'm taking care of Mr. Forrester, only once removed."

Perhaps if she and Bill had already begun to sleep together she might have warranted his vigilance, but since they had done nothing more than kiss -- she'd never even given him one of her truly excellent BJs -- the extra effort on her behalf was unearned and so therefore undeserved. Plus, they were splitting. Although, of course, Bill suspected nothing in that regard. She never gave herself away.

Except, that is, to Daniel Murphy. Why had she joked around with him?

When the drinks arrived, she took a fast gulp from her crystal goblet. Her glass only differed from his glass in the label of the water contained within. Unlike Daniel Murphy, she did prefer the "imported crap" when it came to H₂O.

Her throat was so dry! Her nerves were more than a little on edge; they were as jagged as broken glass. Just as well, she never drank alcohol. Unlike Daniel Murphy, she was *always* working.

Daniel Murphy drained his tap water in a swallow. "By the way, call me Dan."

"Oh, really, I couldn't."

"You did earlier. Well, maybe not *Dan*," he stressed. "But you called me, Daniel, anyway. At the shop."

Terry took another fast gulp from her goblet. His inconvenient reminder of her slip puckered her mouth. "Yes, Mr. Murphy, I did call you by your first name. But that was before I knew you were on Mr. Forrester's payroll."

"What difference does that make? You and me --" He wagged a callused finger back and forth between them. "-- we're the same kind of person. We come from the same place. Maybe not the same neighborhood, but close."

"That's where you're mistaken, Mr. Murphy. I don't have the same sense of territoriality about a geographical location as you. I have few allegiances at all, not to people, not to places. I started out in South Boston, but I've lived everywhere in the state. And familiarity with the staff is always unwise."

Her "bodyguard" once removed hadn't gotten his broken nose from singing in the choir at Saint Monica's. The guy was a blue collar Joe. And he had an Irish temper. Naturally, he would take exception to her subtle putdown. Naturally, he would jump right in and try to adjust her snobbery.

She was counting on that very thing.

Hopefully baiting him would draw his attention away from her accidental-on-purpose slip of calling him by his first name. Why had she ever done it?

Just as she knew he would, Daniel Murphy shot back, "A foster kid with familiarity of servant etiquette? Luck out with a rich placement, did ya?"

Under the pristine white tablecloth, Terry clenched her hands into fists.

Daniel Murphy was a street-fighter, and so she had expected him to strike back dirty. But the breadth and scope of his verbal retaliation caught her unprepared. No knowledge of her parents, bounced from one foster home to the next, she was sensitive about her early years. The whole concept of household staff was foreign to her. She excelled at pretending, though. A poor foster kid like her had snagged the attention of the wealthy and well-connected William Forrester IV, hadn't she?

Under the guise of a pat with the napkin, Terry worried her bottom lip. She should never have revealed the circumstances of her birth to Daniel Murphy. Once again, why had she done it?

They shared a similar background -- both of them having grown up poor -- but apart from the obvious paranormal differences, they were not the same animal. Daniel Murphy might've lost his father young, might've lived in the projects, but he'd been loved, had the security of a home --

She hadn't been so lucky.

So, Daniel Murphy had better not try any of that commiseration camaraderie *bullshit* on her. What did he know about repeated rejection? And why was he trying to cozy up to her? He didn't seem the sort who would suck up to anyone.

"Nope," she said, schooling her tone to an even modulation. "No rich foster parents. And I suggest you take the chip off your shoulder when you speak to your employer. Mr. Forrester has no tolerance for hard-luck stories."

Hers included. This, at least partially, explained why she'd never mentioned her background to him. The affluent Bill had no real grasp of adversity. Of soul-deep poverty. Of the gut-wrenching worthlessness which went hand in hand with an empty belly and hopelessness. As the heir to millions in securities, he knew nothing of the inherent fear which came from living without any security net at all. Perhaps he might have felt a detached sort of pity for her, but she wasn't looking for anyone's pity. Nor was she looking for a free handout or even remotely interested in what Bill's wealth could do for her. She hadn't dated Bill for his money; she'd dated Bill despite his money. And she still hadn't quite gotten a handle on why.

"Chip on *my* shoulder," Daniel Murphy all but shouted. "Don't look now, but is that your sense of inferiority showing?"

At her outraged gasp, he rubbed a hand over his eyes. "Sorry. I can see I hit a nerve. I should've kept my mouth shut." He pushed his glass of water away.

“Would you care for anything else? French coffee, perhaps?”

“No. I’m a plain and simple guy. I’ll be lucky not to break out in hives from all the ambience of this place.” He looked around, said as if an afterthought. “So how come you knew my first name?”

His question was no spontaneous aside. He was scoping her out!

Her guards hiked to the roof. “You told me inside the shop.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I don’t think so.”

“Then Mr. Forrester must have mentioned his new bodyguard’s name and I only listened with half an ear, my unconscious supplying it at the right opportunity. Is Freud a good enough explanation for you?”

“Listen, I don’t want to take an adversarial role with you. I’m here to do what I can to make tonight go easier on you.”

Oh, she believed him. And that was the problem. Why was he putting up with her bitchiness? Apart from simply doing his supposed “duty” by seeing her home, he had an ulterior motive. She just knew it! Felt it. Not ESP, but her womanly instinct.

Her basic cynicism at play? Or something else? Something deeper? And why was she still bothering to talk to him? So what, he was on Bill’s payroll! She was an expert at pushing nosy people away. Why didn’t she just get rid of him?

For whatever the reason, she didn’t seem able to give him the boot, politely done, of course. So, after finishing her water, she settled the knitted shawl around her shoulders again, tucking the edges together in front, and then rose.

If he wouldn’t leave, she would. “You’d like to make this evening easier for me? Fine. Call me a cab.”

He jumped to his feet, intervening as she reached for her coat, a Madeleine puff knockoff, a good imitation and one that had saved her plenty. The genuine French article would have set her back a few months pay. If not for trying to impress Bill, she wouldn’t have bothered with the knockoff, which she considered not only an extravagance, but a complete waste of good money.

Why *had* she bothered?

“Cabs stopped running an hour ago.” Daniel Murphy held up her coat and, with the shawl crossed over her breasts, she slipped her arms into the sleeves. “And I left the company BMW at the garage.”

A darted gaze out the window confirmed that the storm was indeed still raging. “No problem,” she said absently, her thoughts going to her boots, the supple leather meant for keeping up appearances with Bill, not for walking through three-foot snowdrifts. The boots had been an impractical purchase at the time and more so now that she had decided to break things off between them. She’d be paying off the charge long after the snow had melted. And what would she have to show for it?

Not boots. Not a boyfriend.

Terry grieved the waste of money for the boots -- two blocks and they'd be done for -- but she didn't grieve ending it with Bill. "I live close by. I'll just walk."

Daniel Murphy shrugged into his navy-blue pea coat. She noticed he pulled on the hat and the gloves, the ones she had loaned him as a joke. And, because, it really was hideously cold outside. "Where do you live?" he asked.

"Right on Newbury Street." She intentionally omitted the number.

Dan Murphy walked beside her to the restaurant's foyer. "Funny, Mr. Forrester never mentioning your owning a knitting shop."

Nothing humorous about it -- she'd deliberately left out all discussion of what she did for a living. Bill hadn't noticed the intentional oversight, because many in his circle did nothing for a living except jet-set. And what she had or had not mentioned to Mr. Forrester was not Mr. Murphy's business and a moot point now. She never intended to see Bill again.

Not that Daniel Murphy had to know anything about her decision.

But she did owe Bill an explanation.

Tomorrow, she'd leave him a message on his machine and let it go at that. Cowardly, yes, but she just didn't want to have to deal with him or his family. He'd been a mistake right from the very beginning. Why had she ever picked up a man with money, power, influence...and a damn bodyguard?

Daniel Murphy cocked his stubborn Irish jaw. "Even funnier, seeing how the night is so stormy and all, that Mr. Forrester didn't send the car to pick you up tonight. At the shop, I mean. Does he know what you do?"

"Mr. Murphy, my time spent with your new employer doesn't include conversations pertaining to knitting." She slanted her jaw. "We converse very little, actually." She batted her lashes.

There! That little gem would give Daniel Murphy something else to ponder. Rather than speculate as to why she was being so evasive about her career, he would speculate about that little sexual innuendo.

She must give good head, he would think.

And yes, she did. Once. But she hadn't gone down on anyone for quite some time.

Terry sighed. She had to place that "Goodbye" call to Bill ASAP! No sense keeping him dangling. He had made no secret of wanting to sleep with her, but they were not having sex. Ever. Regardless of her pinging hormones.

For her, affairs of the heart had always been out of the question. But she did enjoy sex.

A little too much.

If she could take a pill to reduce her libido, she'd swallow the whole bottle. What a relief not to feel horny anymore!

In the past, when her hormones cried out for sex, she had satisfied her physiology with anonymous one-night stands. No sappy emotions getting in the way of need. Superfluous and meaningless encounters had been far safer for a woman in her tenuous position and so much more discreet. And then those empty and furtive *emotionless* meetings in the dark had started leaving a bitter aftertaste in her mouth, and so she'd stopped.

Unfortunately, her sexual urges had continued.

"Listen, Miss Walsh, I realize you don't dig my sparkling personality, but I gotta see you to your door. The boss will ask --"

"And since I realize you're out to score brownie points with Mr. Forrester, so as not to jeopardize your job, I'll allow you to walk me as far as my shop," she tossed back as they entered the restaurant's marble foyer.

She stepped to the side and he held open the door for her.

"You're going back to work? At this hour?" Daniel Murphy asked as she passed through to the outside, the gusty wind nearly blowing her over on the sidewalk.

"No. My work hours are already too long. But I was in such a hurry to meet Bill -- that is -- *Mr. Forrester* tonight, I didn't lock up properly." She arched a brow at him. "Shall we go?"

Chapter Six

Thérèse Walsh toddled along in the snow beside him, her fashionable knee-high, skinny-heeled boots more a hindrance than a help.

Dan hung close, but didn't crowd her. Tough keeping his target from breaking her fool neck and at the same time maintain his distance, but he'd spent his life walking a tightrope, and he was used to juggling midair. This woman obviously preferred no manhandling and happy to comply, he made sure no part of him accidentally collided with any part of her.

Except, then she went and slid again, and this time he knew she was going down. No choice but to, Dan hauled her up so she wouldn't fall on her shapely ass.

She let him have it. Nothin' she said. Just her eyes. Those two green elliptical cat eyes glowered at him.

Bad word choice. Not glowered. Glowed.

Maybe it was because she had spooked him, but did the sidewalk seem darker all of a sudden? And her pupils -- was it only him or were they larger?

If he'd had a few drinks under his belt, honest to God, he'd suspect her cat eyes of sucking all the available ambient light from the streetlamps. He knew one thing for sure: Like a laser sight on a firearm, her feline eyes had pinpointed the place of impact.

That would be him.

What ever happened to that nice woman from the shop?

Christ, but this new woman was brittle. She'd already flashed her claws at him, almost bitten his head off twice. Her hostility toward him was way out of line. And a complete turnaround from her behavior inside the knitting store, which had been a little strange around the edges, but still soft and womanly. Was Thérèse Walsh schizoid or something?

Whether a head case or not, the chick was hiding something. His client had real cause for concern. Dan had a nose for deceit and an aptitude for math. One sniff told him that Thérèse Walsh's numbers just weren't adding up right.

He didn't want to touch her. Hell, no! But a job was a job was a job. When her feet slid out from under her for like the umpteenth time, he stuck out his crooked elbow. "Take my arm."

Her cat eyes widened. "I can manage, Mr. Murphy."

What had he expected? Nice to him in the store, she'd been nasty to him ever since.

Whoa, yeah, now that he'd met the dragon lady, Dan well understood the elder Forrester's reservations about his son's new gal pal. But compiling a "sexual history" on this cold witch? Uh-un. Tracking the men in her past seemed like an incredible waste of time. He had her pegged for a virgin. She just seemed too untouched to be otherwise.

Yep, Thérèse Walsh was a cold-hearted fortune hunter, holding out her cherry for the big glittering diamond ring prize. If he found out she'd let *any* man in her panties, he'd be more than a little surprised. She had a sexy bod, all right, but as far as he could see, that was false advertisement. The lady generated zilch for heat. A complete lack of sex appeal...

His major hard-on agreed.

Funny man, he thought miserably, and shook his crooked elbow at her in emphasis, his dick prodding his fly at his dry and sarcastic wit. He could pretend all he wanted that she lacked sex appeal, but his ten inches showed him up as a self-deluded liar. "I said take my arm, Miss Walsh. And, just so you know, that wasn't a question," he growled in aggravation. Thwarted arousal did that to him.

"If you insist," she replied, slipping her hand through the bend in his elbow.

From out of nowhere, a swagger materialized in his step. "Yep, I used to walk this beat all the time as a cop."

"So you said, Mr. Murphy."

"I once took a bullet in the chest," he bragged, and he just never did that. "A three-inch medal of valor for one-inch of scar tissue."

"You know," she cooed, sparing him a reserved glance, "that hat suits you. Must be the clown pom-pom."

Shit. The dork hat. He'd forgotten all about it. Before leaving the restaurant, he had pulled it back on his thick skull. Even in the midst of a fucking blizzard, the dumb ass cap kept his head and ears warm.

Dan dragged an ice-encrusted mitten over his nose.

"Perhaps a tissue, Mr. Murphy, to blot the nasal drainage?"

Shit. Shit. Shit. *Fuck!*

While sniffing up the residuals of a nose broken one too many times for good sinus health, he turned away, pretending to window shop.

Her block was directly up ahead. The heavy snow had slowed to fluffy powder, and he could almost make out the knitting shop off in the distance. He'd insist upon seeing her inside while she locked up and then insist on seeing her home. After somehow accomplishing the next phase of his surveillance, he'd wash his hands of her for the night. Frankly, he couldn't wait. As agreed, he'd make his report to Mr. Forrester, then go back to his place and hit the sack -- after seeing to his manly needs in the shower. Man, when was the last time he'd jerked off under the pounding spray...?

Something -- tension, a pull of electricity vibrating through the frigid air, *something* -- yanked his attention back to Thérèse Walsh.

Suddenly, her footsteps slowed, then screeched to a halt. She stopped walking. Just stood still. In the middle of the friggin' sidewalk. "Hey, what's going on? You okay?"

Ignoring him, she withdrew her arm from his and rounded at the waist. First, she unzipped one wilted boot, and then she unzipped the other.

When she started to step out of the idiotic heels, he grabbed at her arm. "You can't do that! I don't give a shit how uncomfortable the boots are, you'll get frostbite in just your stocking feet. Then what will I tell my boss? You'll just lose some toes, but Mr. Forrester will fire my ass on the spot."

She shook him off, pitched the stiletto. Not at his head. Though, by that point, nothin' she did would have surprised him.

Horried, his mouth a gape, he watched as she took off, jogging down the one skinny swipe of plowed city street.

In her stocking feet.

For damn square, she was no marathoner. But she made up for a lack of athleticism with an abundance of insanity.

Jesus H. Christ! She ran like a woman possessed. When he put it into gear and went after her, he had a tough time catching up.

Coming alongside her, he panted, "Where the hell do you think you're going?" He gestured wildly, his breath coming out with icicles attached. "We just passed your shop a minute ago."

"The snowplow --"

"Yeah. About friggin' time the DPW justified their overtime budget --"

"Shut up!" Her scream was intense. "We've got to do something. The truck is going into a skid."

Too pissed for gentle reasoning, which was how he would have usually dealt with an escapee from the loony bin, he raged, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

“Up ahead. Ice.”

“No, that’s asphalt.”

He narrowed his eyes on her face. Her expression was luminous, transfixed; her gaze glazed over. High as a fucking kite.

What was she on?

Drugs on top of alcohol consumption?

Man, he knew how that went. Ten months, one week, three days of sobriety. But who was counting?

He’d starting marking off his calendar the night he’d introduced himself to a group of fellow suffering bastards and he’d been Xing off his time in hell ever since. He’d always drank, ever since his loner teenage years, but not until he’d quit the force had one hangover blended into the next, until no gap between periods of intoxication remained.

Ten months, one week, three days of sobriety. And he hadn’t played cards the same amount of time. Both activities had gone hand in hand. Both activities had landed him in a loan shark’s back alley office. After nearly losing everything, including himself, he had licked his addictions, but he wasn’t cured. Not by a long shot. He’d be in recovery for the rest of his life.

Dan toned it down, used a soothing tone. “How many cocktails did you down at the restaurant before I arrived tonight?”

“I don’t drink,” she said breathlessly.

Okay. Then, what psych meds had she skipped?

He was guessing something to treat psychosis. The woman was delusional, if not totally off-the-wall crazy.

And wouldn’t his client appreciate knowing his son’s lady friend was a closet head case.

“Mr. Murphy,” she wheezed, “That’s not asphalt. That’s black ice. And the driver can’t stop.” She pointed up head, her stocking feet still pounding the snow. “The kids. Need to get the kids out of the way. You’ve got to help me. I can do one, but I can’t manage both boys alone.”

Manage both? How, what, when, where, why?

Then he saw them. Two enterprising little fellas, about eight or nine or so, dragged snow shovels on the sidewalk. Kids after his own heart, they were admirably looking to make a buck from the adversity of others. While one hammered on a brownstone’s front door, the other one yelled something about cleaning out parking spots for twenty bucks a pop.

He lunged after her, hollering, “Help you?” He pulled her back forcefully, and kept a restraining hand on her. “But the boys are safe and sound on the sidewalk.”

The reasonable words had just left his mouth when the two young entrepreneurs decided to take their business to greener...make that *whiter*...pastures. Playing tag with one another, they bounded into the snowy street.

Directly in front of the plow.

That had just gone into a skid.

On a patch of black ice.

"Let me go," she yelled while he absorbed this information overload.

The swipe at his jaw woke him up. He still clenched her upper arm.

He loosened his grip, and she broke free. Took off like a bat outta hell. Running toward the boys, her arms wildly flaying, she cried, "Get back, get back, get back. You guys get back!"

The boys, now clued into what was going down, started backing up toward safety.

But the sand-heavy plow was gaining in momentum, all that tonnage about to slam into the kids.

Dan went into a sprint, passing Thérèse Walsh, who now dogged his heels.

And the truck kept barreling along, no sign the driver would brake.

With the stamina of a long-distance runner and the kind of agility he never would have suspected her capable of, Thérèse picked up speed and whizzed past him.

And then there was nothin', nothin' at all, just a cyclone of motion.

Dan blinked to clear his eyes. A gust of snow must've obscured his vision. By the time he could refocus, she had pushed the closest kid to the ground, out of the way of the plow.

Reaching the farthest most boy fell to him.

But even as Dan notched up his legs and extended his arms to tackle the kid standing fright-frozen in the middle of the street, he knew the gap between them was too great to close. Too damn late to even try.

His big feet never got the message.

With his lungs burning with the effort and his brain shutting down against the possibility of a happy outcome, his size twelves refused to quit. Knowing without a rocket strapped to his back, he'd never reach the kid in time, his run-down shoes raced to get the boy.

He'd played football in high school. A long time ago, but some moves, years don't erase. Sweat streaming down his cheeks and freezing, Dan threw himself through the air. In defiance of gravity and logic, he propelled himself forward, scooping up the skinny kid in his big hands like he was pigskin en route to a victory touch down.

Dan was no ballerina, so he came down hard. The kid still locked in his arms -- never give up the luggage -- and desperate not crush the air out of him, Dan rolled them both to

safety. A shovel went flying, and they slammed into a snow bank, both he and the boy winded, but out of harm's way.

"You okay, son?" Dan asked, once he caught a breath.

No answer. The kid stared straight ahead, comatose with fright.

Since Dan had very nearly given piss-testimony to his own fear, he understood the kid's emotional distress.

Understood, but didn't know what the hell to do to relieve his anxiety. Dan liked kids, but wasn't at ease with them. An only child, which meant no nieces and nephews to practice on, he just wasn't around kids much.

Dan was hunkering down silently next to the scared kid when Thérèse Walsh brought the first boy over to join the second. Squatting on the snowy ground, she hugged the kids to her. "You're safe," she softly reassured them. "Safe and sound. Both of you are very brave."

Within her sheltering arms, the kids started to cry -- the first step to recovery.

Over their tousled heads, she said calmly, "Mr. Murphy, please call 911 on your cell. The driver of that plow is having a heart attack."

The guy behind the wheel, though stunned and pale, looked okay to Dan. He put her comment down to a figure of speech, something to say after a traumatic event.

Then Dan took in Thérèse Walsh's intense face, those luminous green cat eyes, and he knew if the lady squatting on the ground said the driver of the plow was having a coronary, the driver of the plow was having a coronary. No questions asked, he reached into his pocket, pulled the cell, and placed the emergency call.

A few minutes later, to the blare of approaching sirens, she gave the boys in her arms a small, gentle push. "Timmy and Joey, go meet the ambulance. Tell the EMTs the driver of the plow needs their help. Okay? Tell them, it's his heart. That he requires oxygen. Go on now. Run."

The boys crawled out of her lap and took off, and Dan helped Thérèse Walsh to her feet. "We should get over there. You know, to the ambulance. The kids might forget what to tell the EMTs."

"They won't." She turned away.

Thérèse Walsh was taking off! Leaving him. Just like that.

Not on his watch, she wasn't.

Dan bombed after her. "Hey -- where you going?"

"Back to the shop."

He couldn't believe it! She was giving the police the slip. "The cops will want to ask us questions. We're eye-witnesses to a close call."

"Close calls don't count," she said, and kept moving. "And I dislike paperwork." She gave him an assessing stare. "Stay if you like, but I have more important things to do."

“Giving accurate accounts at accident scenes is a civic responsibility. And I obviously didn’t see what you saw.”

“A driver suffered a health issue. There was no accident -- except my own.”

“Whatd’ya mean?”

“I sprained my ankle,” she shot back.

He noted the limp and felt like real ass. “All the more reason to stay. The EMTs will get you in the ambulance and take you to the ER, where the nice docs will check you out.”

She wagged her head at him as he tagged her side. “Snow is the best thing for a sprain. The cold will take the swelling down. I feel much better already.”

Good for her. Personally, he felt like shit. If he didn’t blow off his pumping adrenaline, he’d join the heart attack victim in the ambulance.

Wanting to do something, but not certain what, he went the knee-jerk reaction route. Like a goddamn caveman, he scooped Thérèse Walsh up in his arms and headed back with her to the shop, her soft, curvy body cuddled close to his chest.

The store was no more than a few yards in distance, but winded and pissed and, hell, yeah, scared shitless, too, those few feet seemed like a mile. But rather than hurry the trip, he hoped those few yards stretched into tomorrow. For the first time in a long time, a woman felt right in his arms.

For the first time in a long time, he didn’t feel dirty.

Chapter Seven

Thus far, in the space of one snowy evening, Terry had revealed herself twice to Dan Murphy. And the night was still young.

First time, she could offer up no excuse. Blatantly, willfully, like a paranormal novice, she'd showed off her skills to him with that nuts and squirrel reference. Now this! Though she'd had no choice the second time, the results were still the same: she had revealed her skills to a complete stranger.

But what else could she have done?

Certainly, not stand back and do nothing so she could keep her secret life secret.

There was *always* a reason for everything that happened in her life, and absolutely no accidental occurrences. Something had compelled her to pull the shawl from the closet tonight when her sexy dress had demanded gossamer and slink, not heavy coarse wool and cable knit stitches. Then, in the restaurant, her fingers had gone repeatedly to the shawl. She had felt the bumps, knew a dire, life or death situation awaited interpretation, but not until she actually saw the snowplow had she pieced the psychic message together. Then, it was too late. She'd had no time to duck Daniel Murphy. And besides, in the crunch, she had needed him.

But why *now*? Why had she suddenly needed to involve someone else in a rescue, in her secret?

She had handled down-to-the wire situations before alone.

Not this time. This time she could not have handled the rescue of those two boys. If not for Daniel, one boy would have died.

At twenty-eight, she had never risked the disclosure of her paranormal powers. Not to anyone. Even as a child, old beyond her years, she had been mature enough not to reveal her

psychic ability. And yet, she had done so twice in the space of only a few hours. In front of the same man.

Apparently, Dan Murphy brought out the vulnerable in her, and that meant trouble, she thought, as he shouldered open the shop's unlocked door.

The man who had carried her through the snow was unarguably strong -- she was no lightweight. Daniel Murphy was also uncouth, uncultured, a broken-nosed, tough, Southie thug. Frankly, once he closed the door, she expected him to drop her. To simply let her fall like a sack of potatoes.

But no. He gently placed the ripped remains of her stocking feet on the floor of her shop.

Though -- he was looking at her strangely. As if he anticipated her pulling a nutty any second. Or perhaps remove a fairy wand from her sleeve and zap him one.

Nevertheless, he continued to stand close.

Brave man.

Slowly, no quick moves to upset her -- so he did think she was crazy! -- he removed the support of his arm from around her shoulders. "Let me help you off with your wet things."

No harm there. She unbuttoned, he lifted, throwing the knockoff coat carelessly over the back of a chair.

She expected no less. The European designer label was a fake, but even if it were the real deal, clothing would not impress Daniel Murphy.

Her bodyguard-by-association placed two hands on her shawl-covered shoulders, and pressed her down into a chair. "Let's see that sprain."

"My ankle is fine." And it was fine. The sprain served as a smoke screen to get his mind off what had happened.

"I'm checking out the foot, anyway. Lose the pantyhose." He looked away.

"Unnecessary --"

"Now we're talking." His gaze returned to her, only now his eyes contained a comical leer.

She swallowed her laughter. "That is not what I meant. I meant, I am *not* removing my stockings because you are not examining my foot. Your concern is kind but unnecessary."

"In light of your refusal to go to the hospital, checking out your ankle is damn necessary. Considering what almost happened, Mr. Forrester will expect a full account of tonight, all the pertinent details. Look, Miss Walsh, I need this job. I can't afford to lose another position."

She believed him.

However, what she knew, and he did not, was that she would soon be a moot point in the life of William Forrester IV.

Tell him. Now, Terry! Right now. Tell Daniel Murphy he won't get in trouble because you're no longer dating his boss.

"Turn your back," she said instead.

Her reluctance to tell Daniel Murphy the truth had nothing at all to do with craving his big, inelegant, Southie hands on her flesh. Nothing to do with her overactive sex drive. Nothing to do with wanting to keep Daniel around so she could satisfy her curiosity about how his toughness would translate in bed. It was only that, protocol demanded telling Bill first that they were through before blabbing the breakup to anyone else.

"Turn my back?" Daniel snorted through his broken nose. "You gotta be kiddin'."

She attempted to mollify the stubborn set of his chin. "Mr. Murphy -- I'm not removing my stockings while you look on. I'm no prude..." Was that ever the truth! "...but really, we're strangers."

Her turn to snort. To herself. Like she had never taken it all off in front of a strange male before...

Daniel Murphy blew out a breath. "Fine," he said, sounding cranky, and presented her with the back of his faded and worn, and unbelievably wet, Army Navy store pea coat.

Terry reached under her dress. While admiring the breadth of his shoulders, she heard herself say, "Besides, the stocking are not pantyhose." She undid one suspender strap, the released *snap* sounding seductive in the quiet shop, and then the other. The ribbons of the garter belt hung free. She adored vintage lingerie.

But why broadcast her private preference to Daniel Murphy?

Now, he'd assume she'd worn sexy underwear to augment her night out with his boss. A nightcap, followed by sex, at Bill's luxury waterfront condo.

And his assumption would've been dead wrong. She had planned to breakup with Bill at the restaurant. And, not in a million years, would she ever have returned with him to his condo. She hadn't worn the sexy lingerie for Bill.

In her promiscuous past, without question, she had been an easy lay. No foreplay, no clit stimulation whatsoever, she could still get off. Just the way nature made her, she guessed. She didn't even need a man. An itchy-bitsy sneeze could trigger an orgasm of Richter scale proportions, which explained why her one-night stand Romeos always strutted like cocky roosters, fully convinced they were the best lovers in the world. None of them realized, they'd left no lasting impression on her. No matter what they did or didn't do, during the act itself, the sex always satisfied.

It was afterwards that sucked.

Terry sighed. The stockings dispensed with, she surveyed her leg.

No swelling.

The lie she'd told Daniel Murphy had served its purpose, had allowed her to leave the scene of an almost accident before the police arrived and asked her a million and one questions. But now what was she supposed to do? How to explain a perfectly okay ankle?

"Mr. Murphy, you may turn around now."

When he did, she pointed to her wiggling toes. "See? Full motility." Useless to continue the con when the proof of her ankle's fitness was right there in front of his nose.

A different sort of proof teased the front of her own nose.

Heat rose off Daniel Murphy's body. He smelled so good, she could have writhed in orgasm right there in front of him. And wouldn't that have gone over well?

To reduce her awareness of his scent, Terry took only shallow breaths.

But then he knelt on the floor before the chair and reached for her leg.

Don't do this. Don't touch me. Leave right now, Daniel Murphy. Please leave right now before it's too late for me.

But, noooooOOOO. Without speaking, the pigheaded man began probing her foot.

His touch was cool and clinical, as impersonal as a doctor's examination, and still the light brush of his fingers against her bare skin rendered her pre-climactic.

On a surge of lust, she closed her eyes. Against him. Against her own rising fever.

Her sexual appetite had always been the bane of her existence, the thorn in her side -- her terrible weakness. Since puberty, she'd experienced strong physical hungers, dark urges she'd tried to ignore. The night she turned eighteen, she'd finally given in.

A college kid picked up at a Kenmore Square club had ended her misery. She couldn't remember his face, they hadn't bothered exchanging names. He was just someone with a penis. And he had made her scream with pleasure. Then again, so did a head cold. Viruses did have their compensations...

After that first furtive foray, she'd binged. Her selection hadn't mattered. The anonymous men were just partners in sex. When the light dawned that meaningless sex only brought a meaningless release, she'd stopped going to the clubs. Withdrawing into herself, she'd lived like a nun. For years. What was the point of having sex if afterwards she felt worse, not better, about herself?

Daniel Murphy observed, "You're wincing. Hurts like hell, huh?"

No, it hurt like the truth often hurt.

What lousy timing! She wanted Daniel Murphy. Lusted after his big body, the wide span of his thick-fingered hands. Her features had tightened with rapture, not pain. Although, with this man, only a thin line would separate the two, she predicted, her fingers stroking the nubs and knots of her shawl.

Caught in the act of arousal, almost moaning in ecstasy, she pretended stoicism. "I'm fine. Absolutely fine."

His thumb stroked over her skin. "Got any ice?"

Caught off-guard, her libido zinging, she pointed through the rear door of her shop. "Cubes in the freezer."

Now she'd done it! He had to leave, not hunt down the ice tray in her kitchen!

"I'll wrap some up in a towel. How's that?" he offered.

Too late to say, no, she nodded mutely.

Chapter Eight

Lost in desire, Terry lost track of time. Had Daniel been gone a minute? Fifteen? A half an hour?

She was only aware that he carried an ice pack when he returned, which he placed on her *un*swollen ankle.

"Sorry I took so long," he said gruffly.

"That's all right. So difficult finding one's way around unfamiliar surroundings..." Her voice trailed off in arousal. Oh, this was not good!

He took her hand, led her curled fingers to the pack. "Stay off the foot and hold the compress like this. Ice should do the trick."

No, it would not. Ice wouldn't bring down her fever, wouldn't relieve her arousal-swollen clit. Only Daniel Murphy could do that for her.

And she'd be as crazy as he most likely thought her if she even considered becoming sexually involved with him. This man would not only screw her body, he'd screw with her mind. Her questionable mental health depended on getting rid of Daniel Murphy.

"Thanks for all your help," she said dismissively. "Forgive me if I don't see you out."

"Before I leave, I need you to tell me what happened out there."

She delayed the inevitable by deliberately misunderstanding his question. "A narrowly averted accident is what happened out there."

"Yeah. Right. Agreed. But how did you know the driver was going into a skid?"

"I saw his pain-contorted face through the windshield. Guessing he was having a coronary, I also guessed he wouldn't see the kids crossing the street."

"That's a helluva lot of guessing." He stared into her eyes. "And you say you saw the driver's face. From that many yards away?"

"I have hyperopia."

He frowned. "Farsightedness?"

She nodded. "A rare form that allows me to see very distant images."

"Do you wear contacts?"

"No. Unfortunately, corrective lenses wouldn't help the condition." She wished!

"An operation? A buddy of mine just had laser surgery. He couldn't stand wearing contacts --"

"There is no cure for what I have, Mr. Murphy."

"Tough break. But to look on the bright side, you'd make a great marksman."

Thank the stars for gun control! Had she a gun in her hand at that moment, she would've shot herself --

Okay, perhaps not herself. *Way* too drastic. A photo of herself, perhaps. A photo of herself on a bad hair day. And not with a gun. Probably with a dart. Well, she'd at least throw a shoe at the picture. Though, in fear of damaging rental property, the shoe would probably be a soft-soled, fuzzy, bunny slipper. But -- she loved those slippers. And bunnies. And most animals. Particularly, wearable cartoon representations of animals...

Ugh! She was hopeless! She couldn't even have a violent fantasy without huge twinges of guilt and remorse.

But she knew one thing for sure, she wished she had telekinesis. If she had telekinesis, she would pick up Daniel Murphy and move him to a rice paddy somewhere in China. Why wouldn't he just go away?

He cocked his stubborn jaw at her. "But farsightedness doesn't explain how come you knew those kids were about to cross the street. They gave no indication."

"I know them," she fibbed. "They always visit their grandmother," she said, making up the story as she went along and hoping he'd buy it. "And she lives on the opposite side of the street. They always cross there."

He nodded. "People are creatures of habit."

"Correct. Now, if you don't mind, Mr. Murphy, this creature of habit has had a long and tiring evening, and would like to get ready for bed."

His brows wiggled. "Can I help?"

"No, thank you." As if she were in pain -- and she was, but not due to her ankle -- she crossed her legs gingerly, one kneecap carefully balanced over the other, making a mental note not to swing her supposedly injured foot.

He mustn't suspect she could play hopscotch all over her shop floor, her weight carried on the foot she'd told him she'd sprained. If not for the horrible ache growing within her body, the terrible pulsing within her pussy that cried out for attention, she wouldn't have risked crossing her legs in his presence. As it was, Terry squeezed her thighs together.

She needed sex. A night-long bout of sex, and there was no outlet in sight. Even if Bill had been available, she would not have called him. They were over. Finished. Through. All that remained was to tell him goodbye, a call that would have to wait 'til tomorrow.

Or, perhaps a bit longer.

She disliked the thought of dragging on the inevitable, disliked the idea of being an opportunist, but that call would remove her one excuse to see Daniel Murphy again.

And she very much wanted to see Daniel Murphy again.

But, for right now, he had to leave. She couldn't, for the sake of her own survival, afford for him stay.

She needed to think. To reason out why he was here. To put the pieces of the puzzle together. She couldn't do that in his presence.

Edgy. Antsy. Burning up inside. A hot desire that clenched her belly and had her literally wanting to claw the air while hissing.

To still her hands, she clasped them in her lap; her teeth, applied to her bottom lip, kept the sibilant vocalizations inside. Even so, subtle vibrations raced through her body. Would he notice?

How could he not?

The chair legs actually rocked.

Just like her.

Luckily, he'd probably put her trembling down to shock, the kind of low blood sugar upset a sweet drink would stabilize.

Little did he know, a two-liter bottle of syrupy soda wouldn't help her shakes. Nothing would help her shakes.

Except him.

And sex.

Why hadn't she recognized her attraction to him before now?

This was the worst her hunger had ever been. An achy need for sexual release consumed her. The urgency, the horrible compulsion, stemmed from Daniel Murphy.

He had to leave. Right now. Before she ate him up alive.

Her intense reaction to him had a pulse of its own; her arousal fed on his continued presence. After trying her damndest to push him away, she would *not* be held responsible for what happened if he stayed.

Daniel still wore the knitted cap she had loaned him. By rights, he *should* have looked more than a little ridiculous with the flaps covering his ears and most of his strong jaw. He *should* have looked hilarious with the twisted yarn string tied in a fanciful bow under his rugged chin. But there was nothing funny about his appeal, nothing funny about the way he made her throb.

Run, Daniel, run. Get away from me fast.

She had thought they were not the same animal. How misguided could she get? Certainly, he could not read minds -- if he could, he would have fled from her by now -- but undoubtedly, something linked them. The erotic pull was too strong to believe otherwise.

She hadn't worn panties tonight, the first clue that something was dreadfully wrong. When she'd dressed, she had taken a thong from her bureau drawer, only to fling the tiny slip of black satin back inside with the rest of her conservative, and not so conservative undies. Even that skinny string had seemed too much to wear between her legs. Wanting to be free of any and all restrictions, she had opted to go bare under her garter belt.

So that Daniel Murphy could get at her faster?

Not Bill's bodyguard.

Daniel Murphy. The man who had sought refuge from the snowstorm inside her knitting shop. And she did make the distinction.

Daniel Murphy, the bodyguard, did not ring true to her. But Daniel Murphy, the son of Esther Murphy -- yes, she knew his mother's name -- touched her.

She wanted *that* man to touch her intimately.

Her core. Her cleft. Her seeping wet pussy.

Before she'd left her apartment, her cunt had moistened, the lubrication dripping down her legs, as if that one part of her that could not be fooled had anticipated seeing Daniel again. She'd denied the attraction, of course, tried to fight the awareness, but her thoughts had gone to him repeatedly during the course of the evening, while cabbing to the restaurant, while waiting for Bill to arrive. So, naturally, she had snapped Daniel's head off, behaved like a cold bitch toward him, when he had appeared, rather than Bill.

She should have known then to escape.

In the past, encounters with anonymous men had answered her need for sex, but no man had ever left a lasting impression upon her.

She squirmed in her seat with Daniel's lasting impression.

Conscious of her wetness, her bare pussy, her swollen clit, she rubbed her thighs together to appease the demands of her greedy flesh, all the while willing the source of her torment to go.

Stop torturing me. Get out of here.

Daniel shuffled his large feet. All of his body parts were large, why should his feet be any different?

"I could maybe make you a nice cup of hot tea, heavy on the sugar. You don't use that fake sugar crap, do you?" He did what he hadn't done inside the restaurant -- he dropped his eyes to her chest.

His glance admired her curvy figure. The “fake sugar” remark was no backhanded slap at her inability to fit into zero-sized fashions.

“I can’t stand that sugar substitute shit,” he continued, his lids at half-mast. “I like most things kept natural.”

Then, he wouldn’t like her. And he certainly wouldn’t approve of the decidedly *unnatural* sexual activities she enjoyed.

Bill had not been the right partner. Too fastidious. Too perfectionistic. Too damn prissy. Some of her more prurient needs would have horrified him. Bill was too elegant for messy sex, for scratching, biting, hurting sex. For her yen for risky exhibitionism. For her need to submit, only to switch to dominance mid-fuck.

Would rough and tumble Daniel Murphy be horrified? Would messy passion turn him off?

He smiled. “Anyway -- you could use something to get your blood going.”

Her blood was already going. And yes, he had noticed her tremors. “I’ll make tea later. After you leave.”

“I could maybe do something else for you, whatever you needed.”

Her mouth went dry. Daniel would do whatever she needed?

While she gawked, thinking up the numerous possibilities, she managed to shake her head in the negative.

He pulled on the jacket he had removed upon entering the shop. “I don’t understand what happened tonight, but I want you to know, I admire your courage. What you did took guts. Raw guts. Later, Miss Walsh.” With a tinkling of metal bells, he left.

In the wake of his departure, frosty air rushed into the shop. Terry filled her lungs with the chill, let the cold draft sweep across her flushed face, absorbing the frigid temperature into her bones.

Ah, that was better! Already, her fever had started to dissipate --

Truth. Stick to the truth, Terry. Don’t deny you’ve got a problem. Admit something is terribly wrong and deal with the situation.

Truth. No blast of frozen air would disperse her heat. She could go outside and roll around naked in a snowdrift and her flesh would still burn. The belligerent thug from Southie had done the impossible. Daniel Murphy had gotten to her. With him, she felt something. Even his brief touch had left a lasting sensation.

The horrible gnawing hunger inside her belly grew stronger. And her breasts! So heavy, so achy. Her hardened nipples hurt. The cream of her lust coated the insides of her taut thighs. Her slick vagina ballooned with receptivity, the void inside her crying out to be filled, to be penetrated. Not by some anonymous lover, whose name she wouldn’t bother to ask, whose face she would forget as soon as the tremors of orgasm abated. By him. By Daniel.

Terry drove her knuckles into her mouth and gnawed on her flesh, the biting a displacement for the urge to ram her knuckles between her legs, her sudden compulsion to masturbate displacement for craving Daniel's thick folded fingers rammed into her pussy. He had barely touched her, they had yet to kiss, and here she was fantasizing about him fisting her, him fucking her.

Sweat drenched her. If she could've molted like a snake in the spring, stripped off her too-tight, too-hot skin and slithered away, shed her outer covering and become someone new, she would have done so in an instant. But she was stuck with the same old her, an unusually controlled woman with an intense desire for sex, a starved woman whose appetites no random pickup had ever satisfied. She needed a very specific man.

She needed Daniel Murphy.

The chair toppled as she leapt from the seat and raced for her makeshift apartment behind the shop.

Throwing off the restraints of her clothing en route, she headed for the tiny bathroom.

Years before, the City of Boston had commercially zoned the brick row-house style building for three small businesses, one on each of the floors. A prior tenant had installed a sink and toilet for employees' use on the street-floor level. When Terry took up illegal residential occupancy, she had converted the functional but Spartan half bathroom into a full bathroom, the plumbing done on the sneak. However, with not enough room to install a tub in the narrow dimensions, she had to get by with a utilitarian shower stall --

With a hand-held, powerfully propelled showerhead.

Terry toppled into the self-contained enclosure and turned the water on cold. Strung out on arousal, she adjusted the spray to pulsate pure pain.

The chrome wand, held high above her head, as far as her extended arm could reach, delivered frigid spikes to her skull. A turn directed an icy sharp lash across her breasts and belly. Finally, when she could no longer put off the need, she impaled herself between the legs, the sharp icicle of cold water a poor substitute for the man she craved.

She rocked back and forth within the close confines, entombed within the narrow stall, entombed within her tight, achy, hot body, desperate for more than what the arctic water could provide.

She needed relief, had to have relief, from the horrible tension that twisted like a fiery tourniquet inside her.

The chrome wand fell with a metallic *clunk* from her hand; a twist took care of the running water. Perspiring, even as icy droplets clung to her skin, she didn't bother to dry off, but simply stumbled back out as she was, naked and on fire. Two footsteps took her to the bedroom. Writhing against a tall bureau, the solitary piece of furniture containing floor to ceiling drawers that held all of her neatly folded possessions, she captured a breast.

Her nipples protruded enormously, the jut obscene, the pigment of the areola enflamed. The hardened tips pointed upward, as if begging for a lover's touch.

But not any lover.

Daniel.

He wouldn't go gently on her. Not because cruelty came naturally to him. Not because he got off on deliberately hurting a woman. No, Daniel would take her hard and fast, he would roughly penetrate her body, because...because...

Unable to complete the sentence, Terry hid her hot face against a raised shoulder, and then turned away from the mirror.

No need to look into the mirror that hung above the bureau to confirm a flush suffused her entire body, a red telltale stain that painted her pale skin from her throat down to her belly. As her pre-climactic expectancy spun out of bounds, she pulled away from the bureau. When her spine cleared the furniture, she reached behind her and opened the middle drawer. By touch alone, she negotiated the interior.

Buried beneath a pile of kinky lingerie that only she ever saw, she removed the sex toy she used with abandon, but only when she had no other choice, only when she had no other recourse, only when she would go crazy if she didn't use it.

Other women went on and on about their battery operated gadgets. Not her. She hated vibrators, hated the pliant silicone, the bendable rubber, the malleable vinyl. Organic toys suited her much better, especially those made from trees.

She'd always thought trees were imbued with magic. Life passed under the canopy of their branches, the passage of time recorded in the rings circling their trunks. The state of their bark gave living testament to the past and predicted the state of the universe in the future, almost like a psychic.

The sculpted wood dildo, carved from seasoned cypress but with the tensility of steel, was of huge proportions. Her hand only partially closed around its rigid girth. As the promise of release hovered within a few firm thrusts, she licked her lips in anticipation, her thoughts returning to Daniel, her mind completing what her brain cells had balked at finishing before.

Daniel wouldn't go easy on her. Entering her harshly, he would drive up into her tight clasp with uncharacteristic force. And he would do so, not because that was his usual style of lovemaking, not because he derived some sick pleasure from hurting a woman, but because...

But because, desperate not to forget him, to have a memory to cling to after he had departed, she would beg him to.

For once, she wanted a lover to leave her with more than loneliness and emptiness after sex. Greedy for Daniel's big, tough body, she wanted something lasting, something to linger after the tremors of orgasm subsided. A bruise. A welt. A bite. A hurt that would cause his face to stick in her mind.

A sign that would signify they had once come together.
If only for one night.

Chapter Nine

The heavy wet snow changed to intermittent flurries and then finally finished. Under a clear sky, Dan hurried back to the underground garage on the Common to pick up his fancy livery wheels.

Just like his beat-up Chevy van, the BMW came fully loaded. As soon as the car door shut tight, he got right down to business, running a test on the video cams he'd planted inside Thérèse Walsh's apartment, as per his client's specifications. The feed would soon tell him if he'd positioned the surveillance equipment to their optimal advantage.

He hadn't had all that long to do the job, not with Thérèse waiting for him to return with an ice pack for her ankle, but he'd worked with swift efficiency, hiding the lenses so that nothin' would get past him. The tiny cams, small enough to hide in the pockets of a jacket, only needed to cover a limited square footage of living space. The apartment was a studio -- a small kitchen "area" attached to a tiny bedroom.

He'd avoided the bathroom. If she took a lover in there, he'd miss some cum shots, but the few principles he had left balked at a complete violation of a target's privacy. Contrary to popular belief, very little action ever occurred in the john. No ambiance. And only athletic types ever got it on in the shower. Bad on the knees and back, and assorted joints. And there was the slip factor to consider. Most men didn't think getting laid was worth a month spent in traction at the chiropractor's office.

What the hell. Even if the subject were a red-hot mama and her lovers all sexual gymnasts, steam tended to cloud video lenses. He wouldn't miss much fucking.

Dan switched the set on, adjusted the screen and volume, and settled into the BMW's leather interior for a short look-see --

His jaw dropped. The target was naked. Uninhibitedly naked. And she appeared to be dancing solo, nary a twinge of discomfort showing on her face as she gyrated on *both* feet.

Ten seconds in, Dan flung off his pea coat. With his heavy breathing fogging up the windows, he could've used the defrost.

Before crushing disappointment in himself had cost him all interest in sex, he'd occasionally trek his ass down to his favorite adult sex outlet and pick up a whacking-off video.

This feed put every porn film he'd ever seen to shame.

What Thérèse was doing against a highboy dried out his mouth and brought his hand to the front of his jeans, where he grabbed at the bulge forming under his zipper.

Holy Christ. He had caught his target, naked and beautiful, beautiful and naked, shapely thighs spread, one bent arm flung over her eyes, jerking off.

Well, the female equivalent of jerking off.

And she was going at it. As in really getting into it. No timid stroking this. No sweet and tender courting. The lady was jack-hammering what looked to be, holy shit, a tree trunk into her slit. The mellow hunk of wood glistened with her juices. Man, she held the dildo like a club.

"Poor darlin'," he whispered. "You're starved for it."

William Forrester IV might be a stand-up kind of guy, but, for damn sure, Billy-boy wasn't doing right by his lady. Otherwise, she wouldn't be chasing down her own pleasure so strenuously.

The long white column of her throat arching, she flung her head back against the chest of drawers. Hard. The back of her skull actually bounced. Too far gone to let bumps and bruises disturb her, adrenaline pumping, she most likely hadn't felt the impact. This was a woman carried away, swept away, by sex.

In a word, she was smokin'!

Like the snowplow had done earlier, her wavy brown hair zigzagged, the thick strands bouncing over her shoulders, the weight dragging the loose curls low enough to wrap around her tits.

Her huge tits. The distended ends jutting upwards, two compass needles pointing north.

His hurting dick approved of her sense of direction.

Plenty turned on, Dan removed the dork hat and swiped at the sweat pooling on his forehead.

He hadn't had a woman in over a year, hadn't *wanted* a woman in more than a year, but he wanted one now.

Her. He wanted her. He wanted Thérèse Walsh.

Behind the steering wheel of the BMW, in the middle of the Boston Common Garage, he yanked down his fly and got out his hurting dick.

The head was already glistening, ready to go.

He picked up the dork hat, ran the knitted weave over his plum-toned flesh, and his hand began pumping the blood-engorged length.

"Softly, Thérèse," he moaned. "Go slower. Make it last, darlin'. Oooh, you're hurtin' for it. You gotta need it so bad. So don't I, so don't I, so don't I..."

Her bent elbow came away from her eyes. He could see her face now, and he watched her expression as she stared straight ahead, right into the lens of the video cam. A woman about to come. A woman about to scream.

He reached for a bag, the rumpled remains of his lunch, and grunted out an end to his voyeurism between the folds of coarse brown paper. Afterwards, he cleaned up as best he could, his gaze still watching -- no, making love to Thérèse -- and then flicked off the screen.

A guy could only take so much frustration.

Besides, he had to keep his late night meeting with William Forrester III. His wealthy client had insisted upon a full accounting of how his first meeting had gone with Thérèse.

And he expected visuals.

* * * * *

A snooty manservant, dressed in a penguin suit and who walked like he had a ruler stuffed up his fluffy ass, led Dan into the library of the Beacon Hill residence. Even making allowances for the lousy weather, the darkly ornate room was overheated.

Or, leastwise, it seemed that way to Dan. He started sweating buckets as soon as he crossed the threshold.

Forrester didn't stand or extend his hand. The Boston Brahmin, a stately old geezer with a shock of white hair and a nicely trimmed goatee, remained seated behind his dynastic desk, barely sparing Dan a glance over his frameless bifocals. "Do you have anything to report, Mr. Murphy?"

Thus far, they'd enjoyed a cordial beginning to their symbiotic, P.I./client partnership. Dan anticipated that mutuality to continue -- to both their benefits -- and so he wasn't about to bite the hand that paid him by getting pissed off over his client's cold shoulder. He wasn't the millionaire's pal; he was the millionaire's contracted employee. Plus, even if he didn't like being deferential, he was hardly in a position financially to take umbrage at the slight.

"Actually, Mr. Forrester, the setup went better than I anticipated. This trail is going smooth as glass. Just like arranged, I met with the target at *Maison Pierre* down on Newbury Street." Why bother relating that they'd met earlier at her shop? "She didn't eat, on account of the snow and everything, but she seemed to buy into my cover."

"You drove her home?"

“Walked her home, sir. No legal parking anywhere in Boston tonight. Snow regs in effect. But, as it turned out, this worked to my advantage. I was able to keep up a running dialogue tramping through this white shit -- forgive my language, sir -- and that’s something I wouldn’t have been able to do, not in the car. Me sitting in the front seat and her in the back would have impeded the informality of the conversation. Leastwise, that’s how I see it.”

Dan stuffed his pea coat pockets with his hands. “Anyway, sir, everything went off clean as a whistle. No questions on the target’s end pertaining to the setup, no impediments whatsoever in establishing a rapport. Nothin’ out of the ordinary happened,” he said, conveniently omitting the episode with the kids and the runaway snowplow.

Man, that incident still sent shivers up and down Dan’s spine. That was some strange shit. And he wasn’t buying Thérèse Walsh’s explanation. He’d known farsighted people, and they couldn’t see stuff *that* far off in the distance. And not through the snowy windshield of a moving vehicle.

But he was keeping his concerns under his hat. For now, anyway. The subject had rescued those kids from almost certain death. As a courtesy, at least for tonight, he’d keep her odd behavior to himself.

“Can you tell me anything else about our female friend?” Forrester raised bushy black brows, the darkness a foil to the whiteness of his hair. His stylist had to dye the brows. No way were they natural.

Dan started in on giving an oral history on the target. Not conjecture. Solid information, he had learned thus far. “Thérèse Walsh owns and operates a small knitting boutique on Newbury Street.”

That got his client’s attention. Forrester’s dyed brows practically flew up over the top of his white head. “She’s a common shopkeeper?”

“She’s owns a shop, sir. I wouldn’t say that was common...”

“And where does this common shopkeeper reside?” Forrester asked, talking over Dan.

“The subject maintains a small studio apartment behind the shop, same street number. Because of some serious fire reg violations on site, I suspect the rental unit might be illegal.”

Now, the word “illegal” caught Forrester’s interest. “This woman is breaking the law?”

“In a manner of speaking. I think the original intent for the space was storage and she brought in a hotplate and a bed. There’s a bathroom, but that don’t mean nothin’. She’s living within the shop itself. Damn dangerous, all around. I’ll check out the zoning down at the Hall tomorrow.”

“If she’s living illegally on the premises, I want that fact reported. I want her prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Sir, in the scope of things, her tenancy isn’t exactly a federal crime.”

“Her illegal use of private property speaks to her lack of character. I want her evicted immediately. Find out the name of the building’s owner, and notify him.”

Forrester tapped his fingers on the desk blotter. "I don't understand this. My son led me to believe this woman was of independent wealth."

"No. She's a homegrown girl of low economic means. At least as far as I can ascertain. Grew up an orphan, no clue as to her parentage."

"Illegitimate, too?" Forrester's lips thinned, the pinched flesh blueblood-toned. "Oh, this situation is absolutely abhorrent! My family goes back generations."

What was the geezer's beef? The girl was the American dream, for Christsakes! She had pulled herself up by her bootstraps and had made something of herself. "I'll check further, natch."

"See that you do, Mr. Murphy."

Dan's back went up. No one told him how to do his job.

Pushing down an urge to run off at the mouth, he maintained his silence. But if this bullshit continued, he was walking. Yeah, he was hurting for money, but he was no man's bootlick. And another thing -- true, he'd quit the BPD over a principle, but that move hadn't played out against character. Bucking rules came easy to him, especially if those rules needed breaking. Man, he'd loved protecting the good ol' US of A as a marine, but even in the service, all the idiotic military regs had chafed. Not seeing eye to eye on some of the petty military bureaucracy explained why he'd put in his time and then quit, rather than go the career route.

Yep, he had a slight problem with authority. Namely, he didn't like following an order that had stupid written all over it. Could've been his Irish ancestry or his take-no-shit-from-anyone mom, but his same rebellious streak had cropped up in the BPD, too. When police admin had ordered him to do something he thought was irresponsible, like using a virtually untested rubber bullet plugged into a crowd-management weapon, he'd balked. But loving his job like he had, he'd gone through appropriate channels before tendering his resignation. First, he'd tried to convince his superior officers of the stupidity of using such a weapon --

He'd gone to the mat against the use of the compressed-air pellet gun. Talked himself hoarse. Talked himself damn, fucking blue in the face. When that hadn't worked out, he'd begged for further training, pleaded for what the suits called "independent analysis" from the hot-shots in the know, requested a delay in the weapon's implementation.

His arguments had fallen on deaf ears. When he failed to get admin to hold off using a weapon that in his opinion had been a tragedy waiting to happen, left with no other alternative, he'd flatly refused to carry the gun.

Actually, he'd told police admin to go fuck themselves. Because in the end, a man had to live with his conscience.

He'd never regretted quitting rather than use that poorly conceived idea. But he would go to his grave regretting the death that had later occurred when a contingent of his *former* fellow officers, in full riot gear, had descended upon a crowd of rowdies celebrating a

sporting event victory and fired rounds of those rubber bullets. He would always wonder -- could he have done more?

And the eerie thing was -- right from the outset, he'd had a bad feeling about what was going down with that weapon. When he got feelings like that, and he did more often than he cared to admit, he rode them to the end.

In this instance, he had showed up in town the night of the tragedy and had tried to disperse the crowd on his own, managing to convince some kids to move along.

His effort had been too little, too late.

While somehow managing to arrive at the right location, at the right time, his intervention had not averted the tragedy that had followed.

Chapter Ten

His client broke into Dan's self-examination. "Did you get the audio/video equipment set up in Miss Walsh's apartment?"

"Yeah. Piece of cake. Four small cams, panoramic view."

"The film you've collected so far, if you please." Forrester reached a hand across the shiny desk; the manicured fingers wiggled.

Dan's own dented and bruised fingers clenched. The supportive documentation dragged his pocket low and took him with it.

Did he really want to hand over a feed of his target in a private moment? To what end? Why should Forrester care if the lady -- uh -- *did that thing with the thing?* Doing *that thing with the thing* proved nothin' --

Except, that the lady had a very healthy sex drive.

Dan couldn't forget her face as Thérèse Walsh came. She practically exploded in pleasure, the cream of her orgasm running down her thigh. Her look of rapture had sent him right over the top.

Dan hedged. "Got next to nothin' to show you so far."

Forrester flexed his fingers. "Then I'll take what you do have."

"Got nothin', I said. I only ran a test. Which I erased. Sir, you gotta be patient here. The P.I. case is only a few hours old. If this Thérèse Walsh is up to any sexual hanky panky, believe me, I'll get her indiscretion on tape. Nothin' escapes my camera lenses."

"I'm looking for any sort of sexual malfeasance on the part of Walsh. Thus far, she's proven herself a liar and a law breaker." He sniffed. "A shopkeeper squatting in an apartment is not who I want for a daughter-in-law. I believe my son might have serious intentions toward this opportunist and I want those intentions squelched."

Forrester sat back in his leather chair. "Originally, along with her background, I requested you produce a sexual history that would give me an assessment as to Miss Walsh's sexual susceptibility to male attention. I requested this done so that I could make a determination as to her future faithfulness to my son. I now realize this projection was too conservative in approach. I need to prove direct sexual impropriety. To that end, Mr. Murphy, I am broadening the scope of this investigation to include proving, beyond a shadow of a doubt, the sexual malfeasance on the part of this slut."

Dan didn't like his client's tone or his language, not when used in reference to the woman who had saved two small kids that night, not when used in relationship to the woman who had made him feel something he hadn't felt in too long a time, namely clean. That she had also turned him on was a cherry topping the sundae.

But what was he supposed to do -- deck his boss, a man twice his age? The old geezer had to be pushing seventy, and one of the few remaining names in his dwindling client base who could maybe give him a future referral.

He had to bring in the job! This millionaire coot represented Dan's last holdout against busted kneecaps. Bad enough his P.I. business was on the skids, he didn't want to end up a charity case in the hospital, too.

Still, a lesson in civility was in order. "Hey, Mr. Forrester, you got no call maligning any woman like that --"

Forrester waved aside Dan's moral outrage. "I've sent my son out of town for a few days on business. His absence should clear the field for you to provide me with the photos I need to make this happen."

"How do you suggest I do that?"

"You're a clever man. I'm sure you'll create an opportunity." His broad smile lifted his facial hair. "There's a two-hundred thousand dollar bonus in it for you, if you can end this ludicrous fixation my son has for this girl."

The blood drained from Dan's face. Initially, he had owed slightly less than that amount to bookies. Exorbitant interest, accrued daily, brought up the total. And the clock was ticking on repayment. The bonus on this case would wipe the slate clean and then some. He'd be free, out from under, able to start all over again in some other field. Obviously, he was not cut out for P.I. work.

Was he cut out for this?

He didn't think he had what it took, but over-attachment to working kneecaps made him stop and hear him out. "I'm listening, Mr. Forrester."

Not since his mom's funeral had Dan stepped inside a church, but if he ever visited again, he'd like to know he could still kneel on a pew. Currently, his odds of genuflecting looked less than fifty-fifty.

Loan sharks were not nice people.

Neither was Forrester.

A prick was a prick was a prick, even if he was wearing a smoking jacket in a Beacon Hill brownstone mansion, and Dan saw plenty enough pricks in his P.I. work without becoming one himself.

Too bad, he needed the money.

And too bad needing the money explained why when Forrester elaborated, "If this Walsh woman isn't screwing around, you understand what I expect you to do," Dan didn't tell him where to get off.

Instead, he tried reasoning with his wealthy client. "Yeah, about that, sir. The thing is -- what you're suggesting is entrapment --"

"Legal terms have no relevancy here. I want that woman out of my son's life and I'm willing to pay top dollar to ensure it. Enter you. Take this woman to bed and get the fuck recorded on tape. Better yet, make it multiple fucks, with her clawing your back. Better still, fuck her in the ass."

Dan's jaw cocked. His cock twitched. For damn straight, the Police Academy never taught stings like this one. As to the personal side of things -- back in the day, he never had gone in for sexual bullshit. Down and dirty sex, hell, yeah, but he had always been on the up and up with the woman involved. No lies and lines. Now he was supposed to use both, turn on the charm and seduce the panties off his target.

What charm? And, by the way, had his creep client gotten a gander at Dan's beat-in, South Boston mug?

Unless Thérèse Walsh went for in for the kind of ugly that came with smashed up noses and bad attitudes, she wouldn't be dropping her drawers for him. No sirree. Not at the risk of losing her meal ticket with her wealthy Billy-boy.

So how was Dan supposed to trash the affair between his target, Miss Thérèse Walsh, and his client's heir apparent?

"Mr. Murphy, I hope I didn't go through all the bother of sending my son out of town for nothing." The classy veneer disappeared from Forrester's vocal cords and the Boston Brahmin laid the deal on the line. "You have two days to screw Thérèse Walsh and get the encounter in living color on film."

Dan was going down for the count on that stipulation when Forrester hit him again. "Oh, and I'm adding one more requirement to our contract. I want to be able to see the surveillance of the bitch's apartment in real time. You are to return here tomorrow and set me up with the necessary hardware to make that possible. Now, goodnight, Mr. Murphy. My butler will see you to the door."

Dan thought about his kneecaps a quarter of the way home. Thérèse Walsh took up the remaining three-quarters of his ruminations. His preoccupation explained his sloppy

inattention to details. By the time he realized that three hairy gorillas awaited his presence inside his kitchen, a five-knuckle punch had jabbed his eye.

As he reeled from the blow, seeing more stars than the Science Museum's Planetarium had to offer, the larger and least intelligent of the three dim-witted Ventura brothers, asked, "Got the money?"

"Geez, if I knew you fellas were coming for a visit, I would've baked a cake. How's about a round of nerve calming herbal tea, all around? Let's see, there must be some chamomile in the cabinet --"

The middle Ventura brother nodded. "You're a real funny guy, Murphy."

"So, I've been told." His rosy Irish-American ass the goon understood his wit. The goon probably couldn't tie his own shoelaces, but by the beefy look of his thick neck and arms, something told Dan the gorilla wielded one helluva mean baseball bat. "Let's not be hasty, here. You'll only repent in leisure."

"Where's the muthafucking cash?"

"My assets aren't exactly liquid at the moment." Unlike his knees. They felt like victims of global warming. "But I'm working a case, and you'll have the full amount at the end of the week."

"See that you do, Murphy."

"I'd like to show you gentlemen the door..." The second time that night, he reached for the ice cube tray. "But as you can see, I have a medical emergency. Don't want to lose my good looks, donchya know, so don't let me keep you."

Laughing amongst themselves, his company left.

Chapter Eleven

What a difference a day made in New England! After Saturday night's bitter arctic freeze and a foot of slushy snow, Sunday afternoon sported sunshine, spring temperatures, and mostly bare pavement. As most of the precip had already melted by the time her class had arrived, she hadn't needed to break out her rusty shovel from storage to clear a path from the sidewalk to the door. In view of her general malaise, she was grateful not to have to perform that heavy chore.

All night long, she had tossed and turned in bed, her slumbering shallow and not terribly restful. Consequently, today, though the sun shone, she did not. The reason for her present tenseness lay at Daniel Murphy's feet.

The former cop had haunted her dreams. Sexy dreams. Arousing dreams. Dreams which left her hot and wanting.

Why him? Why had he disturbed her sleep?

She went to the movies all of the time. Any number of big screen hunks, lead and/or supporting, could have sent her tripping over into any number of orgasms, all of them divinely multiple. But in her dreams, had she enjoyed steamy hanky-panky with any of those male actors?

NoooOOOO. Just to be contrary, all her partners had worn Daniel Murphy's face.

Even while the horny scenes unfolded, Terry had been cognizant that she was asleep. And still, the images had played out. His rough hands on her breasts, her belly, between her legs -- even now the lush eroticism of those dreams had her panties moistening.

Frankly, she felt more than a little unsettled. Not quite unhinged -- not yet -- but not calm, either. Expectant was more like it. Something was about to happen. She just knew it.

This was doing her no good. She would not think about the dreams or their cause anymore. She would not let Daniel Murphy tear her apart like this. She would concentrate

on something else, anything else, to divert her mind from sex. Otherwise, she'd never make it through the day.

The shop. Her little knitting store not only paid the bills, the business kept her grounded, focused.

Her students had started to arrive with their knitting supplies. One by one, they waved, hung up their outerwear, and then took their seats in the instruction circle.

After the Christmas rush, business always slowed. After a few disappointing post-holiday sale years, she had wised up and set aside the last two hours before closing on Sunday for knitting lessons.

Changing demographics had given a boost to the "hobby" industry. As a larger and larger segment of the population approached retirement age, leisure time pursuits gained in popularity. After putting off recreational interests -- particularly those in the labor-intensive, domestic arts and crafts -- in favor of career goals, those same women were now turning out in record-breaking numbers for knitting classes offered in adult education classes and in shops just like hers all over the country.

Terry surveyed her students. Her class well represented the graying of America, but she found few silver heads bent over their needles. These ladies were in their prime, energetic and alive. They flaunted youthful appearances, sharp minds, and a hunger to stay active and keep learning.

She offered Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced courses, and not a slot stayed unreserved. This season, many of the knitters had decided to make lap blankets, with a jaunty fringe, for football games, each project as unique and interesting as the knitters themselves.

"Let's get to work, ladies," Terry said, and took her instructor's seat in the middle of the ring.

She loved teaching. The gossip that accompanied any gathering of women, especially "sewing circle" types of activities, made her feel normal --

Two hours later, Terry's sense of normalcy came to an abrupt end.

After taking another stitch on the row, the loop suddenly knotted.

Sighing, she drew a fingertip across the horizontal row.

That last knot was not the only one to have popped among the stitches -- she had just been too involved in the class to notice.

Luckily, the lesson was over, and she could put the piece of work aside for later interpretation.

She rose to her feet, a sign to her students to get their supplies together. "Any questions before we wrap for the week?"

"Speaking of wraps, Theresa, are you offering a workshop again this year on shawl making? I'd love to knit angora wraps for my daughter and daughters-in-law in time for Christmas gift-giving next year."

Well used to deadlines and the scheduling involved in juggling family and career responsibilities, these ladies planned ahead.

Unfortunately, Terry never could. With psychic messages bombarding her at every turn, surprises awaited her each day.

"You know," she said, touching the bumpy weft as she folded the piece, "now that you mention it, what I'd love to do is take a trip to Ireland and bring back authentic heritage patterns for shawls. I was thinking triangles, squares, circles. Openwork, with textured stitches and lace edgings."

"Stunning," the ladies all agreed.

"When do you plan to leave?" one knitter asked while gathering her gear together.

"Actually, I have no real plans." Terry stroked the knot in her work. "The idea just sort of sprang up. Right now." She had never been anywhere, really, which made her sudden urge to hop a plane and travel to Ireland all the more...well...weird.

"Go with it," a dazzling, platinum blond grandmother said, leaving the knitting circle. "The very best vacation Hal and I ever took was the one we booked a day in advance." Turning, she offered a wink to all the ladies still getting their supplies together. "I tell you, that spontaneous adventure revitalized our marriage. Of course, nine months later, Katie was born." She smirked. "And that's a whole other story."

All the knitters laughed.

Terry did, too. She didn't think she'd ever have a lasting relationship, never mind a baby, not with her misfit life, but dreaming was nice.

Correction. Some dreams were nice. Other dreams just ruined her sleep.

After placing her needles and ball of yarn aside, Terry straightened her loose overblouse. Busty proportions meant never tucking tops into waistbands -- unless, of course, she wanted to draw male attention to her statuesque curves, which, due to her all-female class, she never did at work.

Terry stood by her counter. As her students departed, she called gaily, "See you next week, knitters!"

The shop emptied and she was alone.

Except for one student.

Eliza Cummings, one of the youngest members of the group, had lingered.

"Theresa, I just want to thank you for all your help. When I was down in the dumps, you were so supportive! I loved having the baby, but I felt so alone, so isolated at home after

being out in the work force all my adult life. I had no one to talk to, no one to confide in. And forty-one was so old to give birth for the first time. I felt so inadequate!”

“Nonsense!” Terry quickly interrupted. “You’re a wonderful mother. I saw you with that lucky kid when your hubby picked you up here after class last week. Exhaustion had sapped your energy, that’s all. How are you doing? I wanted to ask, but didn’t want to be intrusive.”

Eliza smiled. “I’m much improved. Six weeks ago, at your suggestion, I went to the doctor and a simple blood test confirmed a hyperactive thyroid, a common problem after childbirth. The jitters and insomnia were symptoms of an easily treated medical condition! If you hadn’t pulled me aside after class and spoken to me, I don’t know what I would’ve done. I’m so grateful to you!” Eliza swept Terry up into a bear hug.

Just as the bell tinkled.

Dan Murphy walked into the shop. “You two gals having a meeting of the sisterhood or somethin’?”

Eliza turned. “This wonderful woman helped me so much. See you next week, Theresa. And thanks again.” The new mother hurried out the door.

Lucky her.

Terry couldn’t leave. She lived here, which meant she was stuck.

Her hormones pinging, she glared at the man of her erotic dreams. “What are you doing here again today, Mr. Murphy? And what’s up with the shiner?”

Chapter Twelve

Daniel Murphy placed two items on her counter, and pushed them toward her. "I'm here to return the hat and gloves," he said, answering her first question.

"Keep 'em," she said without bothering to look in their direction.

Huge hands and thick headedness would put any knitwear to the test. What would she do with a stretched-out-of-shape hat and mittens?

His bashful "Are you sure?" brought her gaze to his.

As if uncomfortable with the gift, he fiddled with the drawstring on his hooded black sweatshirt -- quite a change from his heavy pea coat from the night before. Boston weather would confuse anyone's wardrobe. Not that she would remotely classify his clothing as a "wardrobe." More like an afterthought, something he threw on to avoid arrest for indecent exposure. Exhibit A: the old jeans he wore today.

She lowered her sights to the faded inseam, to the worn spot made by the left-sided arrangement of his big, thick coc --

With enough force for whiplash, she hiked up her gaze.

What was wrong with her? Hadn't she learned yet that trouble would find her without having to go looking for it?

Don't go there, Terry. You had your hands all over that region last night in your dreams, without reliving the experience now.

Daniel spoke again. "So -- how did you help her out?"

Terry trailed her finger along the counter to the loaner hat and gloves he'd just dropped on top. His body heat radiated from the knit. "Help who out?"

"The woman who just left."

"Um. Oh! With a meatloaf recipe."

"Huh?"

"I helped her out by giving her a recipe her husband likes better than his mom's."

He frowned. "Really? You gals hug over recipes for meatloaf?"

"Would I kid you?"

"No," he said, just a little too fast. "You don't have a sense of humor."

Oh, yeah, funny guy? Try living with constant psychic messages and dirty dreams and off-the chart sex urges and see how long YOU'D keep YOUR damn sense of humor.

"You should leave," she said abruptly, proving how unfunny she could be when she put her mind to it. "Not to be rude, but I have someplace to go."

"I'll drive you."

"Why?"

"Because your boyfriend wants me to stick close. He must've told you so on the phone when he called you to say he was going out of town for few days."

"His secretary called to give me the news. Actually, she left word on my cell phone. I never spoke to Bil -- er -- Mr. Forrester." Terry hoped her relief didn't show on her face. She hadn't wanted to speak to Bill, and his going out of town presented her with a guilt free opportunity to avoid telling him the truth, which was: she wasn't seeing him again. She could continue seeing Dan Murphy with a clear conscience.

"So, I'm available to take you out for a bite," he continued. "Or, shopping. Or do whatever you gals generally like to do." His shoulders lifted and fell. "You know, so you don't get too lonely."

No one in their right mind would ever view Dan Murphy as an enlightened man with feminist leanings. He was who he was --

She was who she was too, so she let his unbelievably chauvinistic remarks pass. "I'm not going far. Just a few stops on the T."

"How come you're hopping the T? Where are your wheels? Listen, if they're in the garage for a tune-up, all the more reason for me to chauffeur you around town. Mechanics can take days fixin' --"

She stopped him. "I don't own a car."

"You gotta own a car. Everyone owns a car."

"Not when they live downtown, they don't. When I can walk most places, why would I need a car?" And how could an impoverished psychic like herself afford the insurance, the gas, the parking condo fee? If not for her illegal apartment accommodations, she couldn't have afforded to live on Newbury Street or anywhere within a ten-mile radius of the inner city. Urban housing did not come cheap.

As to the car, or her lack thereof, the RMV should send her a thank-you note for not taking to the road. Forget the hazard of talking on a cell phone while driving! What about the hazard of receiving a psychic message while driving? A wee bit dangerous.

And why had she suddenly started thinking in Leprechaunese?

Must've been that conversation she had with her knitting class about perhaps traveling to Ireland someday.

The point was -- when a prediction grabbed hold of her mind, too distracted with its deciphering to bother with incidentals like stop signs and traffic lights and double yellow lines, who knew what might happen? Then, there was the small matter of the driver's license she'd never bothered to obtain. After funneling nearly all her attention and energy into her visions, she had very little of either left over for anything else.

That might, perhaps, explain the mystery of Bill.

William Forrester IV only required she look good while hanging dotingly on his arm. Very few of her brain cells had gone into keeping him amused.

Daniel was a different animal altogether. The guy commanded her full concentration. He kept her mind sharp --

And her emotions edgy.

There was more to him than met even her seer's eye.

She reached for the hat and gloves, said as ungraciously as could be, "So, do you want these or not?"

"Hell, yeah, I *want* them. They kept me warm. And after I got used to the -- uh --"

"Dorkiness," she supplied, stroking the thick wool stitches.

He pulled an embarrassed face. "There's nothin' to compare with homemade stuff. Homemade stuff lasts a lifetime. I still have the sweater my mom made me when I was fifteen. 'Course, as a punk-ass teen, I never wore nothin' she made. But, you know, even then, in my surly youth, I knew she made the sweater with a lot of love, and I appreciated the sentiment. So, yeah, I'll take the hat and gloves and say thanks." He winked. "By the way, they fit like they were made for me."

Baloney, she thought, dropping her gaze to the two items under discussion.

She expected to find the hat and gloves stretched out beyond recognition, but they weren't stretched out of shape at all. Horrified, she extended her palm over the glove.

Just as he reached to scoop the gift back into his possession.

Their hands came within a scant inch of colliding.

The night before, Daniel had run his fingers over her ankle, a clinical exam of her non-existent "injury" prompting the closeness. Still, the event had proven a test of her endurance. Now, his proximity had escalated from something to endure to sheer torture.

His nearness left her stunned. Left her breathless. Sexual awareness raced through her, as uncontrollable as it was undeniable. And to add to her misery, he didn't remove his hand from where their fingertips almost, but not quite, touched on the geek mitten.

"We could maybe go out for a bite to eat after I run you over to wherever you're going," he offered. "How's that sound?"

Their eyes connected -- a soulful caress -- even if their hands did not.

What she didn't know about Daniel, she could speculate. She knew he was built like a bull, brute strong. She speculated his muscles were a byproduct of a tough life that had made him hard-bodied rather than the result of pumping iron in any gym. She knew that, rather than have her walk barefoot in the snow, he had gently picked her up in those hard, muscled arms and carried her back to her shop -- this after saving a little boy from a runaway plow. As hard and tough as he was on the outside, that was how soft and gentle his heart was on the inside -- a lasting gift of his childhood.

She was a product of her childhood, too, a misfit who'd been tossed around from foster home to foster home. A lack of love had toughened her heart. Unlike Daniel, she was soft on the outside and as hard as nails on the inside. Unlike Daniel, she knew how to look out for herself.

She lived in an outlaw apartment. Meaning she owned a hotplate, no stove. Her kitchen was more make-believe than real. No, she had never missed a meal in her life, but most of them had been macaroni and cheese or some other starchy and highly caloric *comfort* food. And she couldn't afford to go the takeout route. The truth was, her curvy figure resulted from an unknown gene pool...and years of poor nutrition, a dire consequence of poverty. Though she'd like to eat healthy and drop a few extra pounds, fruits and vegetables were pricey. Pasta, on the other hand, had a long shelf life, was inexpensive, and made an easy one-pot meal, all her single burner could handle.

And so, from a purely hardhearted, mercenary point of view, if Daniel was paying for dinner, she'd go. Too many fattening meals eaten alone in the back of her shop had made her as hungry for companionship as for a healthy salad.

As long as she guarded her tongue.

Loneliness had finally caught up with her and brought a regrettable urge to confide in someone. In him. In Daniel. A big tough former cop from South Boston who, in this day and age, still referred to grown women as "gals."

She ought to have her head examined.

"Sure," she said, pulling away from the seductive closeness of his fingertips. "To both dining out and to a lift."

"If you don't mind my asking -- where are you off to anyway?"

"The old 'hood."

His brow furrowed. "Southie?"

She smiled. "Yes, Daniel, South Boston."

She had to get word to an elderly lady that her wounded soldier grandson would make a full recovery, though he'd lose a leg in the process. Chain of military command cranked out information at a snail's pace, and the woman had worried long enough.

Terry had sorted out the knitted message early that morning. All that remained was to think up a believable excuse to cover her psychic knowledge.

Chapter Thirteen

Three quarters of an hour after dropping Thérèse Walsh outside an Andrew Square three-decker, she finally returned, her eyes red-rimmed.

As she didn't seem ready to tell him what was up, Dan banged a U-ey and drove over to Castle Island, the place he always went when he didn't feel much like talking.

Despite yesterday's blizzard, Boston had a way of changing things up fast. Today was prime springtime baseball weather, balmy and sunny. Castle Island couldn't get any closer to the ocean, and only a hint of snow remained. They walked side by side, still not talking, just looking out at the waves and following the antics of the gulls.

When her silence stretched on, he tried breaking her out of her funk. Even if she got mad at him, an argument would be better than this. The woman wasn't ordinarily big on opening up, she wasn't much of a talker, but this kind of quiet wasn't healthy. Personally, he walked the beach when he was feeling low, but those blue occasions were few and far between. Personally, though he lived alone, he liked company.

Except, the knee-busting variety. He could've done without the social visit of the Ventura brothers.

"Flat shoes." Should she happen to look over his way, he vigorously nodded his approval. "Good choice in shoe wear for a walk."

She looked all of sixteen in her shawl-thing, with her hair done up in braids and her face makeup free, just an ordinary Southie girl out for a stroll in flat shoes.

Regardless of what she wore or how she fixed her hair, she was a looker. But now that she had dressed down, he couldn't help asking himself again what the hell she was doing with William Forrester?

“Wicked pisser nice day for a walk, too,” he said to her continued silence. “You know, I almost didn’t recognize you, with that shawl-thing you got on and your hair fixed like that. Like one of those chameleons, you always look different.”

She scowled at him. “What do you mean by that crack?”

“Nothin’. I didn’t mean nothin’ And it wasn’t no crack. You have a talent for changing your appearance. That’s all. When I first met you, I thought you looked like a shopgirl, and then that same night, you glammed it up, and now you look like fresh-faced kid in that shawl-thing.”

“It’s called a poncho, and I dress accordingly.”

“According to what?”

“Appropriateness, Daniel. Something you would know nothing about.”

“Guess not.” He stuck his hands deep in his pockets. “You look as young as one of Mrs. McNamara’s thirty or so grandkids...”

She stopped cruising along. “How did you know I was visiting Mrs. McNamara?”

“She’s a townie. On account of I grew up here, I know everyone.”

“But there were three apartments in that building. How did you know which one I visited?”

“On account of you went all the way to the top floor. Mrs. McNamara has been renting that same apartment since she was a bride. And before you ask how come I know you climbed to the third floor, Mrs. McNamara pulled down her kitchen shades. She always does that when she has company, so the nosy next door neighbors can’t look in on her while she’s entertaining. ‘Course, she’s usually entertaining gentleman callers, but the same principle applies.”

Her jaw dropped. “Gentlemen callers. Mrs. McNamara has to be over eighty!”

“And a fine looking woman at that, too.” He wiggled his brows. “And lust doesn’t discriminate based on wrinkles. She’s had a tough time of it in life, especially lately, so who am I to begrudge her a cheering romp in the sack?”

“See -- her grandkid, Paul, was injured in Iraq, and she’s been a human wreck ever since. The kid is only nineteen. His big brother, Sean, a good buddy of mine, has been half out of his mind, too, over his kid brother’s condition. No one would tell the family nothin’.”

He shook his head. “I told him -- Sean that is -- that we would go down to Flynn’s Tavern, pizza on me, when the family got the news that Paul’s condition had improved. His condition’s gotta improve, you know? The kid has his whole life ahead of him. Damn sad --”

“You owe your pal a pizza. Paul is doing better. I went to see Mrs. McNamara to tell her so.”

“You don’t say? Hey, small world, us both knowing the same family. And really? The kid’s gonna be okay?”

“Really.”

And then her eyes welled up.

Shit. “So how come the tears if it’s a really?”

“He plays hockey. Loves the game, according to his grandmother, and he’s about to lose his leg.” The wet streams poured down her apple cheeks.

Dan couldn’t help himself. With a heave and a whoosh, he pulled her into his arms. “Tough break about the leg, but Paul’s a strong s.o.b.,” he said against the top of her head, “and he’ll do fine. The point is, he’s gonna come home. You know?” He patted her back while she sobbed into his sweatshirt. “And knowing him, he’ll be up on skates again. Playing hockey again, too. In no time, he’ll go right back to smashing skulls against the boards, same as always.”

Crowds and sea gulls -- both flocked to Castle Island. But the miserable snowstorm of the day before had brought out the dog-walkers in force. Since Terry and he stood in the middle of the walkway, folks with pooches in tow had to go around them. Some pedestrians shot them dirty looks for the inconvenience. Others just gawked. He shielded her as best he could from the spectators. The sensitive type, and a lady to boot, she’d never turn around and give them the finger or nothin’, like they totally deserved. He’d never been with anyone quite like her...

A runner, his hooded windbreaker covering most of his features, slowed his long-legged stride to a crawl. As he passed, he sent them both a cocky grin.

Knowing that k.o.’ed-tooth smile anywhere, Dan placed the shadowed face with a name. “Hey, Frank, take a fucking picture,” he yelled convivially. “For real, a photo will last longer than your good looks.”

Frank jogged in place, keeping up his heart rate. “Murphy -- you know what? Blow me.”

“Can’t, baby. Giving up meat for Lent.” Puckering up, Dan blew him a kiss. “But thanks for asking. And watch your filthy mouth around the lady.”

After the friendly exchange, the runner raced off and Dan wrapped a protective arm around Terry. Her shoulders had started to shake. In fact, she was shaking all over.

Shit! Now look at what he had gone and done. Always running off his big mouth. He had scared her.

“No cause for concern or nothin’,” he reassured her. “Frank’s a pal of mine. He’s running the Marathon this month, so he’s in training. That’s why he couldn’t stay and shoot the bull. ‘Course training doesn’t explain his piss-poor foul mood. Frank always has a hair across his ass. Sister Mary, down at Gates of Heaven Middle School, tried everything, including soap, to correct his language, but the guy still talks with a gutter mouth. But, apart from the four-letter words, he’s a good fuck. Give ya the shirt right off his back, will Frank.”

Despite that satisfactory explanation, Terry still shook against his side. To see what was up with her, Dan tilted up her chin with his thumb and gazed down into her face. "I don't believe this! Is that a smile you're wearing, Miss Serious?"

She bit her lip, shook her head negatively.

"You're full of shit. That is too a smile."

She seemed to shrink into herself. "We should get going. People really are staring."

"So what? I say we give them something to look at." He bent his head, and did something he had never done in school -- he applied himself.

To her mouth, while her lips still held the remnants of a smile.

Like he had just squeezed on about a bucket of crazy glue, he sealed his mouth to Terry's plump, and, hell, yeah, *still* grinning mouth.

Natch, her lips tasted of tears. He wished they didn't, but there it was, they did. Out of respect for her recent upset, his tongue stayed put. No move to deepen the kiss, no sneak attempt to weasel his way into her mouth. To be strictly on the up and up, he entertained plenty of thoughts of entering, but thinking and doing were two different things. A man couldn't be blamed for being single-minded -- one track mindedness was just how men were made. Dawgs, all the way. But this was just a companionable kiss, after all, and he treated it as such. She'd been crying, he was cheering her up, in an effort to make her watery smile last. Everything else faded into the background, working the sting, included.

But then, things escalated. As her salty-tasting lips clung and little cat sounds emanated from her throat, he seriously lost himself in the moment.

She was soft in his arms, not brittle, like he would have conjectured, and liking her softness very much, he took a step closer, into her, wanting to feel her poncho-encased breasts brush the front of his suddenly too heavy, too impenetrable, sweatshirt. Why the fuck had he worn a bulky sweatshirt on such a balmy spring day?

Murmuring, moaning, mouthing his mouth, she leaned into him. Wanting to hear those sweet sounds she made a little better, in his mouth better, he gave her lips a prod with his tongue. Not a big prod. A small prod. He was a dawg, not a wolf.

Like the top of a honey jar, at first, her lips stuck together. Then they opened, the sweetness he found within all the nicer for the brief wait. He went inside, his tongue searching out and finding her tongue, his ears picking up her sexy noises, his cock going from heavy to hard in response. As his growing bulge made the acquaintance of her belly and he felt the urge to grind himself against her, in the middle of a public boardwalk, no less, dribs and drabs of consciousness resurfaced.

Holy shit! She had a boyfriend. A *boyfriend*, for Christsakes. Never in his life had he moved in on someone. He might not believe in fidelity or happily ever after no more, not since he started working as a P.I., but he didn't dick around in another man's territory, either.

He started backing off.

Until he recalled that dicking around in taken territory was exactly what William Forrester III was paying him to do.

He was *supposed* to lay it on thick. Choreograph some smooth waltz moves or some rumba sexy ones, depending on which the lady preferred. He was *supposed* to play up to her, dance to any tune she requested, like some sort of frigging cruise liner gigolo. Then, he was *supposed* to make like a porno star with her, pump his ass, pump her ass, too, and get it all on tape.

Man, this was some seriously deep shit.

Last night, with visions of a bonus dancing behind his swollen-closed eye, the injury compliments of the Ventura brothers' visit, he had considered doing the deal. Now, Dan thought maybe he wanted no part of a phony seduction.

Because the kiss was real and growing more so.

Behind the meeting of their mouths lurked some genuine, two-sided motivation. Working the advantage would turn the kiss dirty.

Then again, his knees were counting on him to follow through on the sting.

What the hell was he supposed to do?

With his head all messed up and his dick clamoring for a quick exit from his jeans, he jumped back Jack. "Sorry."

And he was sorry. Sorry they didn't have the whole damn world all to themselves. He was no damn exhibitionist and, regardless of what he'd told her, gawking dog walkers turned him off, not on. Sorry that petty outside concerns, like his kneecaps, were horning in on his enjoyment of her. Sorry that he had to ask a question that might very well ruin everything. But he had to ask the question, had to know, once and for all, what kind of woman she was...and what kind of man her answer would make him.

She fingered her bruised mouth. He noted her cheeks had flushed pink.

Her lips had clung. He knew it. She knew it. The question was this: What would they do about it? Or, more precisely, what would *she* do about it? And how would he react?

While preferring to feel her up, not out, he forced himself to pose the dreaded query, "You being the boss's girl and everything, I shouldn't oughta have done that, huh? I meant that kiss to console you, but things got out of hand."

"In case you didn't notice, I'm still weepy here, Murphy. Console me some more." Her eyes, luminous if a little bloodshot, locked him in a look that spoke volumes

He understood the message her eyes were sending, but maybe the meaning behind her words had escaped him. Hey, it happened. Words hung him up at times, tied him in knots. Words were not his specialty. Listening came in a close second.

He forgot all about being cagey and rephrased the question as bluntly as he knew how to make it. "What about your boyfriend?"

"I have no intention of mentioning anything that happens today to Bill. This is between you and me, and it stays here between you and me."

Like the commercial went, everything that happened in Vegas stayed in Vegas, and considering what went on there, "mum's the word" made for a sound philosophy. The problem was: They weren't in Vegas. They were in South Boston, and different rules applied.

Her answer floored him. And disappointed him, too. Her answer opened up a can of worms and left him floundering in moral confusion.

Fuck his knee caps! Things would have been so much simpler if she had shot him down.

What the hell was he supposed to do now?

Nothin' was easy. Because over and above everything -- his grateful kneecaps, the bad taste her answer had left in his mouth, the right and wrong code he tried to live by -- she still made his cock sit up and beg. He was still attracted to her. Very attracted. And now that she'd given him the go ahead, he could blame the sting for behaving like a *dawg*, thereby snowing his nagging sense of right and wrong, and proceed with impunity.

Only he couldn't. There was too much at stake here, too much at risk. He needed time to reason out his moral dilemma. Were a pair of knees worth selling his soul? What did wanting to fool around with someone else's girl make him? What did her agreement to fool around behind her boyfriend's back make her?

He shied away from that last perplexity. She wasn't a cheat! No supporting evidence to prove his good opinion of her, only a feeling he had, but that feeling was strong and growing more powerful with every minute he spent in her company.

"C'mon," he said. "Quit dragging your ass here. I'm starving."

She looked starved, too. Sort of like he was an ice cream cone, jimmies and all, and she wanted to give him a nice big lick. No woman had ever paid him so fine a compliment. Anxious to forget ambiguous moral complexities and lead her away into fantasyland, he dove for her hand.

But then, wouldn't you just friggin know it, she dragged reality back into the mix.

"You're correct," she said, sadly, and dodged his hand.

"Huh? I'm never correct. Let's go." Once again, he dove for her fingers.

"We shouldn't have kissed. Not here," she said, speaking low. "And we shouldn't hold hands, either. Not in public. Being seen with me in intimate circumstances might prove unwise for you. You work for the Forrester's, remember? And Bill is well known, citywide. You'll lose your job if any of this gets back to him. The situation could get unpleasant. For both of us."

So -- she did know about her boyfriend's character, or the lack thereof. And, for the first time, Dan looked at this surveillance from a different perspective. From *her* perspective. If she got caught on tape doing the horizontal fandango, she'd lose a creep as a boyfriend -- a good thing from his point of view. Not so good from her point of view.

William Forrester III was one mean hombre, and apples never did fall far from the tree. One well placed phone call to the right people down at City Hall about her illegal apartment, and she would get evicted. Could be, she'd lose her place of business, too.

He could understand why she'd gotten involved with a rich dude like William Forrester IV -- she was a poor girl and all that money had bedazzled her. For all he knew, Billy-boy was supporting her, which made him her meal ticket. Dan's teeth weren't exactly straight either -- project kids did not get their smiles straightened -- so whatever her hard luck story, she had his sympathy.

But not his respect if she cheated.

And if he continued going down this road, he could kiss his own tarnished self-respect goodbye as well.

After that, everything fell into place.

Whatever spin he put on this, respect was the crux of the matter.

That kiss had been very sweet. And hot. And dick-hardening sexy. If he caught one just like it on tape and a pussy shot, too, he'd have two intact kneecaps to look forward to.

And she'd have what to look forward to?

Getting evicted? Or maybe worse. Old Man Forrester could make things hard for her in Boston. Money talked and that mean coot could most likely cast the net of his influence citywide. The wealthy learned how to push their weight around at the tit.

Dan retracted his palm. "Let's go get that bite to eat I promised you. Order what you like." Since he had nothin' but lint in his pockets, he added for the sake of full disclosure, "I'm on a Forrester expense account."

She grinned. "In that case, screw 'em, I'm ordering large."

Unable to face her, Dan kept his sights on the waves crashing on the beach as they started walking.

Chapter Fourteen

They made their way along the pedestrian causeway to the grass-roofed fort up on the hill, a scenic spot overlooking the ocean. The vantage point offered the best panoramic views of Boston Harbor and the city skyline.

Daniel's arms hugged his sides, his full attention given over to a freighter chugging through the water below. His absorption in the ship, when he must have seen countless ships like it before, told Terry of her companion's discomfort.

Daniel no longer tried talk as a method of jollying her out of the blues. And that was fine. He'd found a much more effective remedy for elevating her melancholy mood.

That kiss. That wet and sloppy and tearful and *un*private kiss had shocked her out of her sadness over a teenage hockey player losing his leg to war. Though fully clothed, the closest she'd ever gotten to being totally naked with another human was that kiss with craggy-faced Daniel Murphy of the biting sense of humor and foul language, the chauffeur and personal bodyguard of the "boyfriend" she planned on dumping.

Could her life possibly get any weirder?

Though foolish on so many levels to become involved with an employee of the man she was washing out of her hair, she planned to succumb to Daniel's South Boston blarney and laugh her way through a hot bout of sadness-defying sex with him.

Tonight.

One *long* night that would stretch into tomorrow. She was greedy for whatever moments of happiness they could squeeze into those impermanent hours 'til dawn's light brought them both to their senses.

She liked him. And she was growing more and more determined to take him to her bed, if only for a short while. He was a gift to herself, a luxury she couldn't afford, was bound

to feel guilty about afterwards, but would enjoy, at least temporarily, and then, hopefully, *never* forget.

How could she not remember those twinkling eyes?

"Here we are," he said, holding open one side of the double-hung doors for her.

"Thank you, sir," she said jauntily, keeping everything light despite that horribly, wonderful, mind-blowing kiss, and preceded him through into the little restaurant.

With no more ships to use as an excuse to escape making eye contact, Daniel looked directly at her. "Ever had take-out from Sullivan's?"

"No."

"But you grew up in Southie too, right?"

"No," she told him again, "I was born here, but grew up elsewhere." At least, she *assumed* Southie was her birthplace. The church steps might just have been a drop, so to speak.

Years before, she had tried to trace her origins. But the information pertaining to ten different foster home placements in the first eleven years of her life before graduating to group homes during puberty had gone up in flames, all her records lost first to red tape, then to ashes.

"Sullivan's is your basic cheap eats sort of place," Daniel continued. "Greasy burgers and limp-dick, salty fries. Excellent cuisine in other words, and you can't beat the view. I'm thinking coffee regular and the house special with the works. Except maybe for the onions."

She didn't believe it! Was that a blush creeping up into his face as he stepped up to the counter to place his order?

"How about you?" he asked, dare she say, bashfully. "What will you have?"

"Salad." A prompt reply, given without any lengthy reflection.

Apparently, thoughts of sexing it up with Daniel had diminished her usual need for comfort food. That acknowledgement sent a warm tingly flush into her cheeks, too.

Like a couple of teenagers in the throes of their first hormonal crush, they took their respective takeout bags outside to a bench, where they sat side by side, not touching, not even accidentally, their lunches spread over their laps.

Dan was right: the views really were terrific. Although still early in the season, people surrounded them. Munching on food, just like them. Looking at the fort. Flying kites. Parents with kids skimming stones across the water. But beneath all that good, normal energy, lurked an almost overwhelming, dark compulsion to jump this man's bones. She doubted "normal" women experienced the same intensity of arousal.

Of course, how would she know what "normal" women felt in their private heart of hearts?

She'd never had a mother, never had a female friend to whom she could pose such a delicate question or with whom she could share intimate aspects of her life. ESP had opened up her realm of experience while conversely closing her off from the usual social outlets. A need to hide her secret ability had stolen a large chunk of her life, had severely narrowed her day-to-day existence.

She had always wondered if there were others like her in the world. Not telepathic charlatans -- she had no tolerance for that ilk, frauds who tried to bamboozle the public for financial gain -- but genuine soothsayers born with a curse/gift such as hers, who could, in one form or another, predict events in the future. Perhaps finding others like herself would help fill in the blanks about where had she come from.

Her mirror told her Ireland, but with her French first name, she couldn't know for sure. What were her roots? Who was her birth mother? Her father? Had either been like her? Why had they given her away? Were they even alive to ask?

In her frustration, Terry violently stabbed a piece of lettuce with her fork.

She lived in the shadows, a cloaked existence that had recently begun to grate. Dammit! She needed to know the whys and wherefores of her.

Daniel stopped chewing his burger, no onions. "I never asked -- how come you know the McNamara kid?"

"I don't. It's one of those six degrees of separation thingies," she said, repeating much the same lie as she had told Paul's worried grandmother, but with some elaboration. "I got the inside poop through an out-of-state acquaintance, who had a serviceman friend in Iraq, who happened to be dating a military nurse at the army hospital where Paul is being treated."

Daniel scratched his head, crossed his eyes. The comic! "Huh?"

"The information came up in a random conversation. I was elected to circumvent military red tape and tell the grandmother the scuttlebutt since I lived in Boston, too." She sighed. "Weird, huh? Odd occurrences like that seem to fall into my lap all the time." And that admittance was the closest she had ever come to telling another human being the truth about herself.

She negotiated the means of delivering her psychic information on a case-by-case basis. Whenever possible, she did so, anonymously, through a phone call. But today's situation called for a personal visit. The recipient of her message was elderly, and the news was not all good. As usual during a personal visit, she had taken precautions to maintain her anonymity, leaving no trails that would lead back to her. She had changed her appearance, and had mumbled her name during the introduction. When backed into a corner and pressed for more information than she could safely give, she lied. What choice did she have?

It was a small world, as proven by Daniel's acquaintance with the McNamara family. That acquaintance had tripped her up, compromised her anonymity.

She never should have accepted the ride to South Boston from Daniel, but hopefully, he would accept her embellishment of the facts and forget the connection. There could be grave repercussions for her if he didn't let it go.

Terry stuffed her mostly untouched salad away in the brown paper bag. Suddenly, her healthy appetite had fled. "I prefer you not mention anything about knowing me. That nurse, for instance, might lose her job if her soft-heartedness got back to anyone. Breach of security or confidentiality or something -- you understand."

"Sure. Whatever you say, Terry."

My! The intimate way he spoke her name! As if they had already become lovers.

Only none of her one-night stands -- she could hardly classify any of those groping and fumbling sessions as anything more meaningful -- had called her Terry. No one ever called her *Terry*. She reserved that nickname for use in her most private thoughts. Everyone else called her Theresa. Unaccountably -- perhaps, she supposed, to lend some sophistication to her background -- she had introduced herself to Bill as Thérèse, her French birth name, rather than the more common Americanized derivative. To her recollection, that was the first time she had done so. And she always remembered irrelevant details.

A relevant detail prompted her to repose her previous question. "You never did tell me how you came by your black eye, Daniel." How easily she slipped into calling him by his first name!

"A scuffle."

"With whom?"

"Acquaintances. I guess you could say I hang with a rough crowd."

Such honesty! Unlike herself, he told a truth that showed him in an unfavorable light, rather than lie.

A shiver of reluctant admiration raced through her. "Can we go?"

"Cold?"

"The ocean breeze." Unlike him, she lied with ease. Finished stuffing her plastic salad container and fork into the carryout bag, she stood.

Though the breeze was pleasant, almost warm, thankfully, Daniel didn't question her shiver any further. He simply piled up his greasy burger papers, securing them in his brown paper bag as she had done, and came to a stand as well.

He held out his hand. "I'll take that."

After she'd numbly handed over the remains of her lunch, he tossed the bags through the air, landing them both in the trash can.

Shooting hoops -- all so ordinary! And she would never be ordinary. And neither, she was beginning to think, was Daniel Murphy.

"Let's get you home," he said.

Home. Little better than a storage closet behind a knitting shop, a cheerless place in the universe no one, except Daniel, knew existed. Not even Donna, her employee, realized she lived there. During work hours, Terry always kept the door locked. Just the thought of returning to that un-*homey* space filled her with dread.

She led a life of self-enforced isolation, of lonely seclusion. To protect her secret, she deliberately kept everyone at bay. At least sex offered her closeness with another human being in the moment. And in this moment, she had a horrible, burning, desire to let someone in. Not inside her head, not inside her soul, inside her body. To surrender herself. Physically.

To him.

To the honest seduction of Daniel Murphy.

If only for one night.

* * * * *

The little overhead bell on her knitting shop door was still tinkling when Terry threw off both caution and her knitted poncho and attacked Daniel Murphy. Vaulting into his chest, she flung her arms around his neck, and plied her lips to his mouth, a sneak assault in the dark. Before he could protest, she was driving her tongue down his throat.

He pushed her gently away. Two hands on her shoulders, he kept her at an arm-length's distance. "Terry, I'm sorry. I can't."

"It's me, isn't it?"

"No! I'm attracted to you. Very attracted. But you're already taken."

"I told you at Castle Island, what we do together remains between us, so don't worry about losing your job."

"This has nothin' to do with Forrester being my boss!" he exploded, before saying quietly, his hands dropping to his sides, "At least not in the way you think."

"Then what?"

"It's just that -- none of this is morally right."

Morally right? Words like "morally" and "right" had gone the way of the dinosaur, but here was a man who believed in those old-fashioned ideals.

Going up on tiptoe, to compensate for those extra few inches lost to her ballerina-style shoes, she now gripped him, not to hold him off as he had done to her, but to pull him toward her again. When she was certain he couldn't escape, she combed her fingertips through his windblown hair, hair a little too long, a lot unkempt, totally gorgeous hair. "Bill Forrester doesn't own me."

"Yeah, well, from where I'm looking, he does."

Honest, with standards, and completely un-PC points of view -- once again it struck her that Daniel was a throwback to earlier times.

Her sexual history was nobody's business but her own, but she felt compelled to set him straight on one score, a score that would have meaning for a dinosaur like Daniel Murphy. "I never gave Bill a promise of exclusivity. I'm an independent woman and I play the field. Your boss has absolutely no claim or hold on me."

His lids dropped like stones, heavy with desire, his features tightened with arousal. "Oh -- um -- I figured he did. That you two had an understanding."

"No understanding."

"But he wants one --?"

"Yes, Daniel, he does. But I'm a free agent." And, because she had standards, too, she wouldn't tell him any more. Not that she had intended to break up with his boss before she and Daniel ever met. Not anything about the nature of their relationship, including the fact that they'd never had sex. That information belonged to the parties involved, namely Bill and herself.

But as to tonight -- tonight, she needed someone, and so long as she could keep her secret life all nicely covered up, her physicality compartmentalized and removed from her psychic soul, she would strip her body bare.

Today had been an ordeal. Telling that worried woman her beloved grandson, a boy she had raised since infancy, would return an amputee had cost her. Another's anguish was so difficult to bear. Sex would provide her the opportunity to vent against a war injury that had forever changed a young man in his prime. Sex would help her get over her own grief, her own sense of impotence. Sleeping with someone would make her feel less alone in the universe. Her psychic ability cut her off from everyone.

Not tonight!

Daniel wanted her. The hard bulge against her soft belly told her so. Was he hungry enough for sex to place himself in her hands? Was he brave enough, trusting enough, to slide between her lips? Or, was he still wary of her? Would he still fight her off? Did he still think she was loony tunes -- oh, yes, she had seen those doubts about her sanity in his eyes.

Slanting her jaw, she kissed him. Lightly. Slowly. Her mouth closed. Then, she deepened her seduction. Allowing her lips to separate, she thrust her tongue into his mouth. His welcoming mouth -- his lips had parted, too. At his groan, she severed their connection, purred into his ear, nipped at the lobe, placed little bites down his neck to his throat.

"Got you," she purred, spider to fly, and started pulling at the obstacles that barred his skin from her mouth.

The sweatshirt landed on the floor, and she ripped at his shirt buttons. First with her teeth, and then with her hands. Popping some out, breaking the round plastic disks on others, she tore his collar open and then discharged the shirt.

"You don't wear an undershirt." She smiled. "I heartily approve."

She heartily approved of his erection, as well. Advancing her seduction further, she reached for him, her grabby hand capturing that oh-so-firm proof of his masculinity. Her finger traced the length confined in denim. Laughing with genuine mirth at his expression -- one part astonishment, one part rhapsody -- she one-handed his crotch, unzipped his fly and took him out.

Fondling the sac underneath, his balls bouncing, she squeezed her fingers together.

She had Daniel Murphy in the palm of her hand, right where she wanted him.

He was lovely. Hugely hard and enormously thick. Dripping pre-cum, perhaps?

In the dim light, she couldn't see much, but after a quick skim across the head, her fingertips came away with a promising slick. She couldn't wait to sample a droplet.

She started sinking to her knees.

A hand fisted on her shoulder stopped her from dipping all the way. "Er -- Terry -- honest to God, we cannot do this. Not now. So stop. You're beating me up here."

"Hush," she whispered in the darkness, and wriggled out of his hold. "Just let me." One hand flattened on his flat abs she pushed him back to the wall. Only the matter of a few inches of so, but with enough force to tell him she meant business.

"Tested?" she asked, bending her knees.

"Last year. Clean. And no contacts since."

"Then I'm honored to be the first after your dry spell. And I'm healthy, too." The foreskin had retracted -- his penis was uncut -- and kneeling on the floor, she tongued him, scooping a promising bubble of pre-cum from the bulbous crown. With a grin, she swallowed the droplet down. "Mmmm. Delicious. I knew you would be."

"You're fucking killing me here, Terry."

"Don't die yet," she said with a happy chuckle and kissed the top of his cock, a slow and luscious preamble of what was to come.

She licked him. A full wet rasp from top to base, then buried her mouth in his wiry pubic hair, her teeth deliberately pulling sharply on a curl, just to let him know the kind of sex she preferred.

"Ouch!" His fingers clenched on top of her head. "Jesus, Terry. Knock it off."

Daniel Murphy was honest, deeply honorable, and entirely chauvinistic in regards to sex -- not necessarily in a bad way, but still the attitude was there. And like all such relics of the past, he didn't take kindly to a woman who took the lead --

Fine with her. She often assumed an obedient, subservient role in sex. By giving men what they wanted, she controlled the encounter, withholding and bestowing pleasure at her whim. There was pleasure to be had in dominance.

But there was power to be found in submission.

Now of all times, she needed to feel powerful. She'd felt so weak today, so drained. Her ESP had sucked her dry.

And she intended to do the same to Daniel.

"Am I too rough?" she asked sweetly, her head bowing, already slipping into the familiar role-playing pose.

"Why? Do you like playing rough?" he countered, she *thought*, uneasily.

"Yes, Daniel. I do like playing rough."

"Then, you're not being too rough. I want what you want. But --"

"Have no fear. Generally speaking, I'm the receiver -- you know?" She bit him, an abrasion near the crown.

"Not good. Not good at all. This has gotta stop," he growled.

Regardless of what he said about stopping, she started in. Cupping his balls tighter, she mouthed his cock, and then opened her lips over him.

Sucking. Milking. Engulfing him.

She could hear him gulping in air, heard the back of his head thump against the wall, could imagine his throat working.

She gave him some teeth.

He gave her a lusty moan, a sexy groan, both thrilling to her ears.

She was sliding up and down his staggering length, and he was pumping, and the quiet air of her knitting shop grew noisy with wet sounds. She basked in his throaty grunts, the tightening of his cock inside her mouth, the heaviness of his balls in her hand, the punishing weight of his hands on her head, rough, so rough. Did he realize he had stopped being gentle?

A half-laugh, half-shout, tore from his throat. His skull crashed back against the wall. "*Agggghhhhhh.*"

Cum filled her throat, and she swallowed vigorously. She was still licking her lips when he jerked her up to her feet and took her mouth.

A dark kiss, an ungentle kiss, a rough kiss that promised her a night of submission, a night of restored power.

He broke their lips apart. "Thank you," he said solemnly -- seriousness from a man who wore deep laugh lines on his craggy face.

"Don't mention it." She found his hand in the darkness, gave the thick fingers a tug, drew him toward her living space out back, to the bed where no one else but she had ever slept.

He dug in his heels, put himself away. "I can't, Terry. You're gonna think I'm the worst selfish prick in the world, but I can't stay."

"Why not?"

“There’s a time down at the Am Vets and my drinking buddies are expecting me.”

That was where he must’ve gotten the black eye, she thought promptly, and then just as quickly heard the error of her ways: in the dark, his shaking head had caused the air to stir.

“I’m not going drinking tonight at the Am Vets with buddies. I’m a recovering alcoholic. I don’t drink no more. No poker, either.” His tone implored her to understand. “I have to go see Forrester Senior tonight. A meeting. And I can’t screw up. Not this time. I have to handle this job right.”

“Okay,” she said, releasing him from the obligation of her. “It’s work.” She gave him a little push. “Go on! I don’t want you getting in trouble over me.”

He picked his clothes up off the floor at a run. At the door, he paused. “Are you gonna be all right?”

She smiled. So like him to ask! “Of course.”

And then he was gone, racing away.

The tears started falling long before the brass bell stopped tinkling.

Chapter Fifteen

Dan's big feet stalled on the sidewalk. At the curb, he gave up all effort to leave.

No gentleman deserted a lady after getting his own. No gentleman left a lady unsatisfied.

But he couldn't do any of that satisfying in her bedroom.

William Forrester III expected him to set him up with the capacity for real-time feed. He'd pump his own ass for the prurient benefit of hidden cameras but no way was he exposing Terry to prying eyes. No live feeds! He was not installing the equipment in Forrester's mansion. True, the Ventura brothers would break both his legs if he didn't produce the money he owed. But hey, it was also true that modern medicine was doing great stuff with knee replacement surgery these days. Docs rigged up patients to pain pumps and everything. Not that he could use narcotics, not with his history of addiction, but there was always meditation --

Before Terry had chance to lock the door, he burst back into the shop. Stalking to where he caught her, somewhere in the middle of the floor, he ground his mouth against her lips. They fell back, hit the high counter, their bodies twisting together like pretzels, their hands grabbing and groping, both of them too far gone for delicacy. His palm smashed her breast; her palm smashed his balls. Both of them howled like hurting animals, not exactly the stuff of romance, but it was the stuff of real.

Eventually, they came up for a ragged breath apiece.

"Don't go," she panted. "Please don't go. I need you to stay."

He might not be Harvard material, but stupid he was not. He got the message, loud and clear. The day had been tough on Terry, and she needed something to get her over the hump. Sex acted as a relief valve, a way of coping with sadness or stress or just the crap of life. So why delay? They both wanted the same thing.

Removing his hands from her shoulders, he scouted out his car keys in his pocket.

Terry misunderstood his intentions. Never mind crediting him with the intelligence of an Ivy Leaguer, she didn't invest him with the IQ of a rock. The crazy woman actually thought he was blowing her off.

"Please, Dan? I don't want to be alone tonight." She sniffed.

Had she been crying?

She did it again -- she sniffed.

Fuck! She *had* been crying. On account of him?

She looked up at him from under her lashes, wet and clumpy spikes that glistened in the light shed from an outside streetlamp.

Yep. She was crying on account of him, all right.

Why'd she even bother? He wasn't worth one of her teardrops. Worse still, she was looking at him like he was her solution. And though he was nobody's answer to nothin', for her, he wanted to be.

"You're in for the time of your life." He brayed like a donkey -- his way of cheering her up. "I may not be pretty, but I'm pretty damn good in bed."

"Conceited ass."

That was better. Humor was what he'd been going for. Already, her streaming tears had started to dry. Now, they were getting back to level ground. Now, they were talking the light and bantering language he understood. Her need for sex -- that he could deal with -- but her tears were something else again.

He thumbed a glistening drop en route to her chin. "Here's the thing -- we can't stay here. I wouldn't be up to my usual, lady-wowing performance. Your bed sucks. I got a look at it when I went for the ice pack that time. A door supported on a stack of books with a skinny inflatable mattress on top ain't no bed at all. I got a real bed."

She swiped at her eyes. "Goody, goody for you."

"It's a king," he bribed.

"Go on. Rub in my crummy sleeping accommodations some more, why don't you? See if I care."

But she did care. Not about the fucking door that subbed as her bed -- about the kid who had lost his leg. That kid was what her sadness was all about and the cause of her slings and arrows.

He marched onward, ducking the barbs when he could, taking them like a man when he couldn't. "I'd like to share my bed with you."

Scrutinizing him, she folded her arms under her amazingly womanly breasts, pillows of softness that had spilled over the hollow of his palms. Christ, but he loved her breasts.

"Are you asking me back to your place?"

He nodded. "Hey, you're no more shocked than me. I want you to spend the night and the next twenty-four hours, too. Seeing that you're the first, you should feel honored."

"Kiss my ass, Murphy."

He winked. "As soon as we get there."

The promise must have been the dealmaker.

"Just so happens, you got lucky, Murphy. Tomorrow is my day off and the shop is closed."

Terry grabbed her purse, took his hand, and out the door they went.

He was lucky the cops didn't bag him. Breaking all manner of speed limits, they drove back to his place with his lead foot pressing the floor.

He couldn't wait to get his hands on her, his mouth on her, his tongue up inside her. And yeah, he couldn't wait to show her his little house.

He'd bought the single family for his mother right after coming out of the service. After her passing, he went from frequent visitor to full-time resident. The mortgage payments were Mount Everest steep, the ongoing repairs continued to be a colossal pain in the ass -- hauling out the ladder and re-shingling the leaking roof was his next project -- but after all was said and done, fixing up the place offered him a sense of accomplishment and purpose. For a man who thought a cemetery plot was the only piece of real estate he'd ever own, his two-thousand square feet of South Boston filled him with pride and his future with equity. He could take losing his knees, but he could not take losing the house.

The trip to his place had been tension-filled and mostly silent. Both of them with their minds on sex, Terry and he hadn't tried to talk. And as much as he wanted to show off where he lived to the silent woman who walked with him up the stairs and inside, he decided to delay the grand tour 'til later. Other, more important, things to show her came first.

Inside the front hall, Dan hit the light switch, and then took Terry in his arms.

She felt so damn good.

Pulling her poncho out of his way, he nuzzled her breasts. His mouth found a nipple and he pulled on the tip through her stretchy top and bra. She cried out, the raspy sound pulling his trigger. The bed that he'd bragged about, that lame inducement he had offered as an enticement to get her to his turf, seemed much too far away. He had to taste her, right here, right now!

She wore flat shoes and little bitty socks, which meant no pantyhose to get in his way. He didn't want nothin' getting in his way. Letting go of her nipple, he fell worshipfully to his still fully functioning, at least for the present, knees.

"Wait a minute," she snapped, her irritation bringing him up short as he reached under her pleated skirt for her panties. "I thought you understood -- I'm not interested in guys who fall at my feet. A heavy hand in the bedroom is what I need from you tonight. Dominance."

She tossed one of her girlish braids over her shoulder. "I'm a sub, Daniel. Can you handle that?"

Oh, Jesus. Not that D/s shit! Terry was just full of surprises, none of them, so far, good for his digestion. What had he gotten himself involved with here?

He choked down this latest bit of getting-to-know-you background information, not liking the flavor one bit. That D/s shit was a game, and he was too old and tired...and turned on...for games. Couldn't she tell he had no control, not with her?

If he had any control, he would never have gone back inside the shop for her tonight, because man, this scene was way too complicated for a simple guy like him. All of this, all that had happened and was happening still, was beyond him. Way over his head. He wasn't looking to get involved with any woman, not in his present messed-up situation -- feeling dirty on account of he was doing a job he hated, trying to lay off gambling and booze, trying to keep the house and his kneecaps, too. He was not in a good place to be with a woman right now.

But the strange part was -- from that very first sighting of Terry until tonight, all the events had conspired to throw them together, as if fate had stepped in to give him the boost he needed to save his kneecaps.

Too bad, he couldn't make those events work in his favor, couldn't go through with the sting. Stupid. But there it was.

The woman he was supposed to seduce, that Old Man Forrester was paying him big money to seduce, had proven all too easy to seduce without him even trying, and here he was, unable to take advantage of the situation. After enduring one hell of a rotten day, she had fallen prey to human weakness and was using sex to get past sadness, and he couldn't manipulate that need.

The joke was on him, all right, because he thought maybe he was falling for her, and despite all the shit going down, he wanted real with her.

D/s wasn't real. Role-playing was phony and fake, and everything he hated.

"Terry, just so you know, I ain't into that scene."

She laughed throatily. "You have a Dom streak a mile wide, Daniel."

"Okay, maybe, but I'm just too rough and tumble for acting."

"I like your lack of sophistication. Most Doms are too sleek for my tastes. I like your uncultured toughness. It's not a put-on veneer. Your toughness is part of you."

Terry drew herself up -- for a sub, she was one hell of an assertive woman -- and looked him right in the face. "Now, are you interested or not?"

Not.

But he was interested in her, enough to play along. Once. And once only.

“Don’t never question me again in that tone of voice,” he growled. “You want a Dom, you got a Dom. And starting right now, I’m gonna do what I want to you. Everything I want to you. Got it?”

“Yes, Daniel,” she sighed, softness wired in steel.

What a little contradiction she was! And how much more complicated could this situation get?

He finished lifting her skirt, and palmed her over the barrier of her panties, his fingers picking up her heat, her wetness, the softness of her pubic hair. *Real.*

He dived in, broken nose first, and inhaled her at the indent.

Ah. He loved how she smelled, appreciated that she’d left things alone, as nature intended. He moved his cheekbone back and forth across the slinky-covering of her panties, and her pubic hair dampened some more. Putting it right out there for him, her thighs spread. Fell open.

He dug his fingers into the panel of her underpants and gave the slinky stuff a yank.

The slinky and moist material clung, refusing to budge.

Her wetness was an honest compliment. A real compliment. Just like his hard-on.

Applying little in the way of finesse, he tugged the underwear down her legs. She lifted one shoe, then the other, while he took them off her.

Unable to help himself, he held her wet panties to his face and inhaled her scent, and then sucked on the panel, drawing her womanly taste into his mouth. Going without for so long had cleansed his palette, and her essence stayed on his tongue, spicy and sweet, and salty.

Like it or not, inconvenient or not, complicated as all hell, Terry did it for him. All the women who came before had just primed him for her.

With her taste in his mouth, with the music of her moans playing across his eardrums, he kissed her first, and then opened her up, his mouth right there at the opening.

Her thighs splayed wide, she made no move to prevent his quest for knowledge. His fingers spread on her bare belly, and he pushed his tongue up and in.

Her wetness. Her dripping wetness.

At that moment, he forgot all the inconveniences, all the complications, and what he would have preferred. At that one moment, he only wished his tongue were longer.

As she murmured and moaned, her body wide open to him, he shot his tongue in and out, and then took aim at her clit, rubbing the swollen flesh fast.

Her hips heaved, her thighs trembled, and not exactly unaffected himself, he was doing his own fair share of shaking. What with all his booze binging after quitting the job he had loved, he had lost weight. The waistband of his loose jeans and boxers had slipped. In his

kneeling position, sweat raced down his back and trickled into the uncovered crack in his ass. Not real dignified.

Dignity had never seemed less a priority, not with Terry mewling and ripping at his hair. She had started to crest, started to surf the wave, wet suit on.

“Uh-uh-uh,” she panted, and came against his mouth, her creamy climax the finest of praise, praise he swallowed with unprideful relish before lifting off and saying, “Get naked.”

A bad feeling warned him that tonight was his only chance to make a lasting impression on her, and he intended to work the odds in his favor. He wasn’t sure what exactly he wanted, except he suddenly wanted more than just one night with her.

“I never inquired -- do you live alone?” she asked softly.

He turned her to face the wall, tongued both plump ass cheeks. “Why?” he said, and licked the crack in her ass before kissing her ass, just like he had told her he’d do.

“Because,” she said in a small voice, “I wanted to know your thoughts on having anyone else, like a roommate, for instance, join us.”

“You’re with me tonight.” He smoothed his hand over her bare ass cheek. “And I don’t share.”

Except with William Forrester IV.

They were both doing the same woman and if that didn’t stick in his throat nothin’ ever would. No need for her to know the extent of his territorial nature, no need for her to know how much her being with someone else the same time she was with him made him want to puke. He had one night to get this right, one night to convince her that sexual exclusivity was the way to go, as long as that sexual exclusivity was with him.

She took a deep breath. “I don’t participate in ménages either, Daniel.”

A good surprise this time. “Get naked, Terry,” he said again. Letting a warning note creep into his tone, he got to his feet and added, “Now.”

Her breathing caught. Excitement?

“All right,” she whispered, and licked her lips.

Oh, yeah. Excitement. *Shit!*

As far as he was concerned, BDSM was a whole lot of nonsense, but he wanted to make Terry happy. And he’d make no objections if a slice of that happiness came his way, too.

While she chucked her clothes, she dropped another bomb on him. “I’d like to explore certain disciplinary practices.”

There went his slice of happiness. This BDSM shit just got worse and worse. “Define *explore*. How far do you want this exploration to go?”

“When I’m bad, you could set me straight through corporal punishment.” She had a hard time with the bra; her fingers faltered on the hooks.

“I’ll do it,” he said softly. He needed time to digest this latest kink in their evening.

His knuckles grazed her skin. Soft skin. Perfumed skin. Female silky skin with a smattering of freckles lighting up the milky paleness.

He hadn't helped a woman out of her clothes in a very long time, but like riding a bike, undoing a bra was just something a man never forgot how to do. With a little metallic *ping*, the scrap of nylon hit the deck.

He stepped to the side, watching her full breasts topple.

Her tight, rose nipples made his still functioning knees go weak. Her belly to the wall positioning made his heart falter.

Around her shoulder, she looked over at him, her green eyes sizing him up. "A strapping would be nice right about now."

Shit. Shit. Shit. She was egging him on, testing him -- mind-fucking him with her outrageousness. How far would he have to go here? What would he need to do to prove himself to her?

Slowly, he withdrew his belt from the loops of his jeans.

He let the belt come down across his palm. *Slap!*

"Come out a little ways from the wall," he told her.

When she had, he walked up to her. Reaching around her spine, he caught the womanly fullness of a breast.

And nearly ejaculated right there and then.

His fingers closed around the heavy weight. "You've got a nice set of tits," he said crudely in his best pretend Dom voice. "Plump, but firm." He swallowed. Hard, because there was no spit left in his dry mouth. "I like a woman who knows how to use her tits. Do you know how to use your tits to entice a man?"

He removed his hand and she sashayed her shoulders, her breasts swaying back and forth.

Even as he recoiled from the concept of master and slave, he appreciated her effort to please him. And it occurred to him that maybe pleasing *her* was the key to getting her away from Bill Forrester, all on her own, without the help of incriminating ass-pumping, blue movies.

But not with the use of a strap.

He loved her plump breasts. And man, he loved her plump ass, too, way too much to flay the skin off those round, cheeky cheeks.

Fully dressed, his dick stowed away, the belt dropped from his nerveless hand.

"What's going on?" the supposedly submissive demanded to know.

"Ain't going that route. Not now. Not never. Especially not with you."

"But --"

“Fuck this BDSM shit. I ain’t no fucking Dom,” he said raggedly. “We’re doing the usual stuff here. No BDSM, none of that disciplinary crap neither, and no damn role-playing shit. We’re doing vanilla, even if I have to spank your ass and tie you to the bed.” He shook his head. “Here on out, we do things my way.”

With a full head of steam worked up, he kept right on keeping on, not quite grasping the reason behind her low sexy laughter, a lusty laugh, which made not a smidgeon of sense to him. “Have a little faith here. You had a bad day, and I know you’re sad, but I can give you what you need without drawing your blood or making me faint.” He took a deep breath and plunged ahead into that faith he’d just suggested she try. “No tricks, no gimmicks, no showboating. Let’s keep it real, okay?”

Terry had a long neck, and her braids bared the nape. He applied his lips to the sensitive flesh.

Her thighs began rubbing together. Reaching out her arms to the wall, she pressed her palms to the painted surface, her hands crossed at the wrist, a slave pose he’d seen enacted one too many times in porn magazines to ever find stimulating in reality.

Unfortunately, in reality, just about everything Terry did shot his stimulation through the roof.

The metallic grate of his zipper reverberated in the front hall as he got himself out. His erection leading the way, he gave her a taste. Not only of his dick, but of the man attached. He was no knight in shining armor, but no BDSM gamer, either.

He wanted to make sweet love to Terry --

And despaired that, in her state of mind, sweet might fall miles short of the mark.

Chapter Sixteen

Terry hadn't had sex in years. And during her promiscuous period, randy, clumsy, mostly inexperienced males had fumbled with her in the dark.

Daniel Murphy was no randy and inexperienced boy. His hands didn't fumble. Neither was he clumsy. Large, yes, but not without a tough sort of grace. His manly hands came with a callused grip; the penis ramming between her legs from the back was huge. Forceful. Dominant. Heavy. Just what she needed.

But, disappointingly, he had yet to engage her. The head of his cock, wide and wonderfully hard, butted across the mouth of her moist vagina, but didn't enter. In fact, his thrust seduced, then retreated.

At his taunting, she clawed the wall with her fingernails. "Damn you! Stop teasing me, Daniel."

"No tease." Leaning over her, he rounded into her and kissed her jaw. His hand tenderly kneaded her belly, and then lowered as light as a whisper to the apex of her thighs.

Agh! For a tough man his brand of lovemaking was frustratingly delicate. And temperate.

Deliberately, she dragged her aching nipples across the rough surface of the wall while rubbing her rear end against the abrasive front of his jeans. At last, some relief!

And then came some more, when he found her clit and rubbed, then penetrated her moist folds, first with just his fingertip, and then going up to the knuckle, her wet arousal easing his way into her passage with an easy slide.

She needed more. She needed friction. She needed him to fill her. Ungently fill her. Quickly fill her. *Get it over with, Daniel.*

"Please?" she begged.

A second thick finger worked its way up inside her, another digit soon followed. All three began to move, and her body went rigid with expectancy.

Daniel crooned as soft as a lullaby, "Just let everything bad that happened today go. Just concentrate on this."

Despite wanting the taking done quickly, she began heaving to the steady and smooth rock of his fingers. Her pussy began swelling with a honey slow bliss, while his free hand, the one that lightly rode her left hip, slipped lower and moved to her buttock, massaging her tense muscles. His caring concern touched her.

The first sign of escalating danger.

Daniel took up all the air, all the private space inside her. He left no room for any disconnect between her body and her mind. His gentleness made her stay in the moment. With his moderation, with his refusal to rush, Daniel was introducing her to a previously unknown sensation -- a mature man's unselfishness.

She struggled against him and his gentle slowness. Struggled against giving into his unselfishness, truly giving in, powerlessly, giving in, no safe word anywhere. This, what he was doing to her, had nothing to do D/s role-playing, because this was no game. There was no top. There was no bottom. There was only Daniel being Daniel. And herself being herself.

She just couldn't cope anymore. A lifetime of aloneness had finally caught up with her, and here was Daniel offering her genuine human contact, imperfections and all, and for the first time in her life.

He picked her up in his arms and started walking from the front hall toward the rear of the house.

Inside the bedroom, he moved to the only piece of furniture in the room -- the king-sized bed he had mentioned. After tossing back the covers, he placed her in the middle of the mattress, covered her back up, and switched on the ceiling light. Then, he stripped off his clothes.

A long and admiring look confirmed once again that Daniel Murphy was no boy. His build was all over large. Boxer solid, rather than swimmer sleek. Workman muscled, but not Mr. America sculptured. His strong shoulders could bear the weight of the world and perhaps carry a few secrets.

Not hers.

Insane, to even consider telling him. Terry had never told anyone her secret, and she had no intention of opening herself up to him now, of revealing the most hidden part of herself. Sex yes. Intimacy, no.

In full control of her and of the lovemaking, he kissed her mouth, and completely out of control, she couldn't help but kiss him back. Being in bed with this man seemed so normal, so right, so everything she had come not to expect. "Oh, Daniel --"

“Missionary,” he said forcefully. “Face to face. My big nose bumping against your button job is how we’re doing things. Lights on, so I can see your reaction. Oh, yeah, and one more thing...feel free to tell me if I’m not hitting all the right target spots, so to speak. It’s been a while for me, and I ain’t perfect.”

He felt perfect for her when he shifted his position to between her legs.

He dropped his jaw. His breath, warm and scented of coffee, tickled her “button job.” How could a man say something like that and have the expression come out sounding absolutely charming not absolutely false?

There was nothing false about Daniel. Nothing duplicitous. He was a straight arrow in a crooked world. His character shone bright and decent on the surface, and went cellular deep.

“Okay so far?” he asked.

“Fine,” she said grudgingly, and brought her arms up so she could bring him closer and duck her face into his chest at the same time. She couldn’t let him see her expression, which surely must be horrified and dazed. “No more foreplay. I’m ready.”

“Christ, I hope I am,” he mumbled, and began the slow glide between her legs.

Though some might find the missionary position tame, routine, lacking in adventure or even downright boring, she found the belly to belly, breast to breast, closeness in a bed, of all places, positively scandalous. She never thought her breaths would mingle with a partner whose face she would recognize the day after and whose name she knew in advance. This was a brand-new experience!

Their sweat glued them together, their lips joined, their noses bumped, their fingers laced and held on to each other tight.

There was no place to hide!

His slow and gentle, *considerate*, possession rocked her preconceptions about sex to the core, negated all her prior understanding of the act as something undertaken furtively in the dark, something rushed. She had known nothing about this slow and gentle joining of her body to another, not until Daniel made them one. Always before, regardless of what orifice her partner penetrated, regardless of the physical pleasure, she had felt emotionally alone in the universe.

No longer.

As Daniel entered her, he filled more than simply her body. He filled her soul. And for the first time ever she understood what sex was supposed to be all about. They weren’t two individual bodies fucking their way to a separate completion; they strove and moved together toward a completion impossible to find alone.

She’d never been so scared.

Terrified, actually, of losing herself completely to him, as they both approached climax, she willed herself to resist both him and what he offered. She would not shatter! Willing

herself to go numb inside, willing herself to refuse the gift, willing herself to give up the very thing sex had always lacked before, she willed herself to cease feeling anything beyond the physical.

With a hoarse shout, he came.

So did she, but not with his openness. A half-swallowed cry of orgasmic release, her mind shut down against the possibility of anything more.

As his cum poured out of her, she turned her face to the wall.

She thought after he had disengaged he would take her emotional withdrawal as a sign that he should leave, go clean up, leave the room.

But no. Not Daniel. Far from taking her coolness as a dismissal, he pulled her back to face him. With dogged persistence, no artifice whatsoever, he chastised her, "What the hell happened?"

"Nothing happened. I came. Didn't you hear me?"

"Yeah, I heard."

"So, don't worry. You were wonderful." Turning back to face him, her mask of indifference in place, she reached a hand to his shoulder and rubbed along his upper arm. "I never had better."

"Don't do this to us, Terry," he said gruffly.

"Don't do what? I'm not doing anything but complimenting you on your excellent sexual prowess. The earth moved right off its axis."

"Cut the shit, Terry. I don't need those kind of ego strokes. I've been to hell and back, and I know the difference between what's real and what ain't. Be real with me." He thumbed between his brows, at the bump in his broken nose. "Something most definitely did happen. You were right there with me, the whole time, too, and then I lost you, right at the end." He pointed a finger at her face. "You deliberately held out on me."

"I told you -- I *came*."

"Yeah, you came. But I lost *you*. I'm not talking about your cunt, here."

"My," she said with a laugh, "that is just so rude." And refreshingly honest. Daniel always cut through the fat and got to the bone. And he was getting to her, all the way down to her bones, which was why she had to get away from him.

She tried another tactic. "We just didn't click all the way, that's all. We're just not completely right together. Incompatibility happens. You know, I like it edgy, and you like it reverent. Under the circumstances, I think should leave. Please take me home." She flung back the covers, placed a foot on the floor.

"No." He pulled her back into the bed.

"I'm confused." She'd never spoken truer words! "We tried it, it didn't work, and so there's no point staying."

"You're staying."

"Damn it! What do you want from me?"

"Another chance. I want to correct whatever I did wrong the first time."

"Daniel, it's not like I'm a test you can retake to improve your score."

"No, you're damn puzzle and somehow I screwed up the pieces." He puffed out his cheek and blew out a gusty breath. "Listen, if it's the kink angle, if that's what you need to stay with me, I can do kink."

She turned her stunned gaze back to his. "Kink?"

"That's right. Whatever you say, however you want it."

Kink would certainly keep the feelings at bay. Kink would help her maintain an emotional distance from Daniel. Kink would keep everything in perspective, which in this case, meant keeping everything on a sexual level, the only level she was willing and able to handle. Of course, he couldn't know that or he would never have suggested a foray into the sort of sexual practices he obviously had no use for.

She frowned. "But don't you need a certain amount of time for recovery?"

"Recover! Recover from what? You didn't give me nothin' to recover from."

"You're being unfair," she said resentfully. "You got off, too. You climaxed!"

"Yeah. Big fucking deal. Could've gotten that same result from my own damn fist. If I wanted to jerk-off alone I would've jerked off alone. But I wanted to be with you, not just your cunt. Don't treat me like I'm some sort of fucking dildo."

She said defiantly, "Now, you're being both rude and coarse."

"No, I'm being real," he said. "Onto your belly. Get over."

"Get over, yourself, Daniel Murphy."

He grumbled, "I've heard that one before."

"Daniel," she said, placating him. "Forget the kink. If you can't drive me home, I can always take a cab."

"How many times and in how many ways do I gotta say it? I don't want you to leave. What I want you to do is stop shutting me out."

"I can't do what you want me to do." Two hands on his shoulders, she started pushing him away, started slapping him anywhere she could reach. She was fighting for her life. Or, at least her life as she knew it, which was miserable, but familiar. Better the devil she knew... "Give up, Daniel."

"Not until I get an honest reaction from you. We go 'til I collapse. Or, you scream my name. Or tell me to quit."

She wailed at his obstinacy, beat at him with her clenched fists, but didn't tell him to quit. Unlike him, she wasn't generous. She wasn't open. She certainly wasn't honest. Closed-

off and selfish, and basically dishonest, she couldn't give up the physical release he offered. Nor was she going down without a fight.

He reached and turned her, placing her prone on her belly. She sprawled there, his knee anchoring the middle of her back.

"Stop hitting me," he warned.

She pounded the mattress instead, then raising her leg -- hard to do in her face down position but she was desperate -- and tried kicking him off.

His hand came down hard. *Smack!* A shocking surprise to her posterior. Not only did he know how to cut through fat and get to bone, he knew how to cut through light and fluffy romance and get to the dark underbelly of eroticism.

Regrettably, his authoritative tendencies thrilled her too, and she had to struggle all the harder to escape his emotional pull.

"Do as I say, Terry, or you won't have to tell me to quit. I'll walk." He grunted something she couldn't hear clearly, some phraseology most likely obscene, and then growled, "Who am I kidding here? I can't walk away from you, Terry. I think we might have something here and I want to give that something a chance of a future, beyond tonight. You want edgy, I can give you edgy. Believe me, I got plenty of edgy."

At his admission, she stopped fighting him. Telling herself it would be easier just to let him get on with it, do whatever he wanted to do to her, she went limp. As long as she maintained her emotional detachment, she would prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that they weren't right for each other.

"Get up on your hands and knees. Doggie," he specified.

She proceeded to rise. With his cum rolling down her leg, she docilely obeyed. This, she could deal with. This she could handle. Now she could cope. Meaningless sex was her old stomping ground, after all.

Completely in control, she arranged herself, arms and legs bent, up on all fours. The position, hardly new to her, served as a reminder of all those past irrelevant encounters with nameless and faceless, and forgettable partners.

Except, Daniel was none of those.

Be careful of what you wish for the wish may just come true...

She hadn't wanted to forget this man and, to her torment, she realized now she never would.

Suppose, just suppose, she left herself open to another torment. Suppose, she did give into Daniel's coercion. Suppose she did succumb to his warmth, his kindness, his, *damn*, gentle tenderness, and she allowed herself to feel genuine emotion. Not only physical release during the act, but the *real* intimacy Daniel kept harping on?

The end result would remain unaltered: Leaving him.

He'd suggested trying for a future together. But if she couldn't trust this straightforward man with her secret, what sort of future would she have with him?

Living a lie. A lie would constitute their life together. That would cheat Daniel. She was many things, but a cheat she was not.

The other possibility, of course, was to reveal all, tell him she was a psychic.

Ha! Like that would work. Like he'd ever believe her. Like he wouldn't think she was completely off-the-wall bonkers!

Daniel would expect scientific proof of her abilities, and when she couldn't produce logic to explain her paranormal phenomena, he'd positively freak. And who could blame him? Her gift, her curse, freaked *her* out most of the time.

Believe her, not believe her, he would suffer her unorthodox way of life. And from the looks of this bedroom, Daniel had his own unique set of problems. She didn't need to be psychic to understand something had gone terribly wrong in Daniel Murphy's life.

Where on earth was his furniture? Why had he quit the police force, an occupation that animated his voice whenever he spoke of his former career?

Many questions, no answers. If Daniel wasn't such a straight arrow, she'd almost believe he was keeping secrets, too. He certainly seemed to avoid discussing certain issues. If he didn't avoid their discussion, altogether, he certainly circumvented them.

She supposed she could have asked, like a normal person would ask, "Where's the furniture?" but questions like that would lead him to believe they could pursue the very intimacy she desperately needed to avoid. Plus, who said anything about her being a normal person?

Terry blinked in the light from the lamp. Always fuck in the dark -- the first cardinal rule of anonymous sex -- and she'd broken that rule. She could not afford to disregard the rest.

Tonight, she'd open up her body to Daniel, she'd trust him with her physical being, while keeping her emotions and secrets...true intimacy...locked up inside. They would have sex. And tomorrow, she'd leave him with her feelings untapped. He could penetrate any orifice he chose, and she would enjoy every single occasion, but she wouldn't let him penetrate her emotions.

Daniel reached under her ribcage; his big hand captured her shifting breast. A thumb flicked the nipple. A thick finger separated the folds of her labia. "I understand clamps come in handy during BDSM games," he said.

Clamps?

Her mouth dropped open. This proponent of the missionary position using clamps? This, after flatly refusing to try anything but vanilla?

Her neck fell, her hair tumbled, she couldn't catch her breath. Every nerve ending flamed, every muscle tensed. She had never been so aroused in her life. And not because of the mention of sex toys, but because sexually conservative Dan was going the whole nine yards for her.

Feelings, pained and intense, rose up and choked her. She didn't deserve this unselfish man! How would she ever be able to hide who she was from him, even for only one single evening of sex? How would she be able to withstand the horrible, beautiful, feeling-saturated climax that had already begun to ripple through her? How would she ever be able to tolerate the utter loneliness of a life without him?

She should walk away -- no, *run* away -- before she got in too deep.

Though she should have called it quits, gotten up off the bed, in her selfish weakness for Daniel, she couldn't give him up. Instead, she used Bill as a means to smother the emotional honesty between them. Not a lie, only a slight twisting of the truth. "I want you to know, I'm seeing your boss as soon as he returns."

Saying nothing in reply, Daniel drove into her from behind.

Chapter Seventeen

Two hands bracketing her hipbones, Daniel moved in and out of Terry. Forcefully. But carefully. He didn't want to go too deep, but he did want to hit her G spot.

She felt good. Better than good. Terry felt right for him. And not just for his dick. He could've sworn he'd felt right for her, too.

For some reason, she hadn't been there with him that first time. That first time, a scream away from coming full throttle, she had shut down on him and retreated. Oh, yeah, she climaxed. Half-heartedly. What good was it if she only gave him that?

He wanted more. He wanted all of her. But after doing everything in his power to make sure she wouldn't close him out again, he could feel her slip away.

She fought him, even as she spun out into pleasure.

Why was she refusing him all of herself?

In order to get her away from Bill, a guy who was all wrong for her and who she didn't love -- he could tell -- he had to own her. All of her. But he didn't want to brutalize her during this battle of possession. He had patience. Everything would get resolved in due course.

As she writhed in orgasm, he gritted his teeth against his own building climax, and pulled out. As she trembled afterwards, he rubbed a hand along her flank to calm her. "Sore?"

"No."

"No?"

Her braids had come loose in the struggle; she looked back at him through the mass of her reddish-brown hair. "That's what I said."

"If I'm sore, you gotta be sore. We've been going at it for a while."

“Well, you’re mistaken. I’m fine.”

He got off the bed. “Stay right there.” He pulled on his jeans and left for the adjoining bathroom, returning with the lube. Standing to one side, he told her, “Onto your knees and face me.”

Without saying nothin’, she straightened her spine and came up to a kneeling position on the bed. When she tossed her head, and perspiration-wet strands whipped around her shoulders, he thought for sure he would lose his load. His gaze fixed on the swollen entrance to her body, a passage he had used for the last hour without the result he wanted, he got a grip on his shaky control. “Open your legs.”

She splayed her thighs.

“You can do better than that,” he said.

She widened the split.

And he lubed her good. Then, he penetrated the swollen lips of her now glistening pussy with a lube-slippery finger.

When she turned away, he pulled her chin back. “Look at me.”

She did, mocking him with those cat-green eyes of hers.

Christ, and she’d called him tough! She was tougher than most of the cops he knew, and that was saying a mouthful.

His fingers dropped away from her chin and he palmed her bottom to hold her steady. “Admit you like me. That you like being with me. Not just the fucking, but everything else. Admit we have a connection. That you feel it, too.”

“I’ll admit nothing of the kind. But feel free to work out your pipedream on me.”

That last gibe got him where he lived. He used to believe in death do us part, romance, soul partners, and all of the rest of the beauty of love, but since taking the P.I. gig, his opinions had radically changed. Then, after meeting her, his opinion had undergone another transformation. Strange, her effect on him, but there it was, the lady had made a believer out of him again

Now, if he could only get her to believe, too.

He pushed another lubed finger in, and she pursed her lips together, fighting him, but not the sensation. At the addition of a third digit, she was squirming. “Haven’t you tortured me enough for one evening?”

If he thought that, he really would’ve thrown in the towel.

“Shh. Stop it with the cynicism. Your unhooded clit is right there out in the open, peeking out at me. It has yet to retreat. You need to come again, Terry.” He applied his thumb to the top of her sex. “Go on, Terry. Let go.”

“I can’t, not unless you get yours, too. You need to get *something* out of this.”

"You. What I need to get out of this is you. I'm falling in love with you, Terry. I gotta be honest here -- I don't have much to offer you. Not now. But, I swear, I'll work my ass off to make sure that situation changes."

Her lips trembled. "Fist me."

What? What had she said?

But he knew what she had said, and his belly roiled in protest.

Great. Just great! What a pisser. After offering up his love, she'd asked for a fist instead. Looked like it was gonna be one helluva long, dark night.

If, at the end, he could get her to see the light, it would be worth it. No amount of skank would turn him off. She was the shining prize, and he was winning her, no matter what it took, no matter what barriers she threw in the way, even if he had to go through hell. He'd been there before and he knew the way out.

Faith in a better tomorrow was the way out.

"All five knuckles?" he asked.

Her watery eyes accused him of something, and he didn't know what, as a tear rolled down her cheek, and fell on her tit. Her nipple, red and enlarged, caught the next drop. "The whole hand," she said, her pointed chin quivering.

"Can you take my whole hand, Terry?"

"I'm no virgin." She smiled tauntingly through the tears. "I've had a few fuck partners."

He let go a sigh for his past. "Haven't we all."

Thick fingers made for an uncomfortable fit, so he held them together as he pushed them into her slit. "Did you go home with any of these fuck partners?"

"No!"

Her adamant tone told him all he needed to know. "So, you never went home with Bill? Never slept all night in a bed with him. Never woke up with him in the morning --"

"I told you -- I don't kiss and tell. And discussing your boss with you is highly improper."

Improper. Naked on his bed, and she'd just asked a guy with a hand the size of a ham to fist her, and she was talking improper?

Dan thought, maybe, they had gone past the point of talking etiquette here.

He bit his tongue against a reply that would point that small contradiction out to her. "With these past fuck partners -- it was just the sex?"

She bared her teeth. "Yes," she hissed as his hand disappeared, inch by inch inside her.

Her pussy was tight, tight, tight. Warm, warm, warm. Wet, wet, wet. Slick as silk. He was feeling so many different things, and some of those things startled him, made him look deeper inside himself, because he was liking this. Was liking fisting her. Was liking owning

her. What did all that *liking* say about him? About what they were doing? More importantly, why did *she* want this done?

Not as a means to declare her trust in him, that was for damn sure.

She arched her throat, raised her jaw, shot him a look to kill, and he had a partial answer: She was wanting this, what they were doing, to be just about the sex with them too, as it had been with her past fuck partners.

But it wasn't. The sex was more. She knew it, too. And that was why she was fighting him tooth and nail.

Hope was a wondrous thing. Hope filled him as he reached for her tit, squeezed the hard end between two fingers. "You're spending the night with me, Terry. You're sleeping in my bed, in my arms, all night long. And I just want you to know, that's a first for me, too."

"Oh-oh-oh," she moaned, and widened her thighs so he could get at her better. "Yes-yes-yes," she rasped, as his hand lodged itself inside her.

He bent his wide-knuckled fingers, one at a time, until he had made a fist.

He pumped his hand.

Tears rolling down her face, past the point of no return, she jerked, her bottom moving to the beat of his ramming fist.

Terry. Beautiful Terry. Trying so hard to push him away, and on the cusp of coming, on the cusp of screaming, on the cusp of letting him into more than only her cunt.

"That's enough," she choked out.

Refusing to force what she wouldn't freely give, he withdrew his hand. "Enough for now or enough forever?"

"For now."

No false modesty, no nod and a wink to first time shyness, she made no effort to close up her legs, but remained open as his gaze went to her split thighs, to the swollen notch from where his hand had just withdrawn. Her pubic hair had darkened, from the lube, from her own slick cream. At the sight, his cock knocked painfully against his fly.

No way to hide his bulging hard-on, she saw the giveaway to his state of mind. "Let me blow you. Or, if you'd like, I can give you hand job."

Tension tightened his jaw. He had just told her he was falling in love with her -- did she think that statement meant nothing to him?

"No, thank you." They waged a spiritual battle, and she would not reduce his fight for her love into a cum shot.

"Well, don't say I didn't offer." The little tart stretched her arms over her head. "If I may -- and if you'll excuse me -- I'd like to take a bath now."

"I'm not leaving you alone, not for a second. You want a bath, I'm coming with you." There! He drew his line in the sand.

“But you must have something else, something more important, to do --”

“Nope. Nothin’ more important than this, than you.” He held out his hand. “Come along with me.”

Without argument, she put her hand in his, and he took her along to the bathroom.

She walked carefully, gingerly, her legs held unnaturally far apart. Regardless of how many fuck partners who had gone before him, he had a big fist. The lady was hurting.

He waited while she peed, her expression giving no hint to her discomfort, and then he helped her inside the tub.

“I haven’t had a bath in years, only showers,” she said and lowered her hips.

He turned on the tap. “Move in with me and you can take a bath every day, twice a day if you want.”

Terry closed up her legs tighter than a drum.

So, his offer had struck a nerve.

Moving in with him. Something else they’d have to work through, he guessed. “Keep your legs open.”

“Fine.” Not only did she hike her knees apart, she raised both legs and flung her feet over the sides. “Can you see my pussy okay now?”

The woman was whipping his ass but good. And he was supposed to be the one on top here?

As the tub filled, he knelt on the tile floor. Dipping a hand in the water, he then took the bar of soap and lathered up. “I’ll be gentle.”

She raised a brow. “Do, and you’ll disappoint me.”

“I can’t have that,” he said, accepting the challenge. She was not making this easy for him or herself.

He washed her pussy thoroughly. No consideration given to her swollen folds, he slipped his fingers into the slit. Repeatedly. She made no attempt to stop him, but various expressions shifted across her features, from pleasure to annoyed to pained, depending on how deeply he stroked.

She started to writhe, her features tightening. Just as she reached the summit, he withdrew his fingers.

“Later,” he said.

Her fists slapped the water. “You can’t do that! You can’t just leave me hanging like that.”

“Just did.”

Done there, and ignoring her pissed off look, he soaped her inner thighs and down her legs. Lifting one foot off the white porcelain edge and then the other, he washed between

her toes. Her upper body came next, his soapy hands working over her bath-warmed flesh. He must've spent too long on her tits, because her nipples, already elongated, sharpened.

"Please, Daniel --"

"Later," he said.

His attentions moved lower again. To her ass.

He moved his palm over and under, and in between, his finger slipping into the crack. He wiggled his brows as he investigated the hole.

"Everything is on the table, Daniel."

Except her heart. Except her mind. Except her spirit. Those she kept protected with a reinforced concrete barrier. "Good to know." He playfully fingered the opening, and then moved on to rinsing off the soap bubbles. "Time to dry you now." He pulled the plug, reached for the towel. "Stand."

Water sluiced off her and circled the tub before draining. He couldn't help but think she was hoping he'd disappear from her life with the same minimum of fuss. She didn't know him at all.

An old cracked jar held a collection of combs and brushes in all different shapes and sizes. He picked out one with teeth spread wide apart. "The breeze at Castle Island gave you some knots. I'll be careful."

She smirked. "Don't hold back on my account, Murphy."

Chuckling, he moved in behind her, straightening out the worst of the twisted strands with his fingers so as not to tug her scalp in advance of running the comb through the reddish brown tangle.

She stood naked in front of him, her back snug to the front of his jeans. And just as he figured would happen, her hips started to gyrate. Terry would accept sex from him but nothing else, like his love, for instance.

Pushing her way, he smacked her ass. "I dislike forwardness, young lady. You get it when I give it to you."

"Fine. Be that way. I can always masturbate." Her hand snaked down her belly to her thighs.

He caught her palm before she had chance to undo the frustration he'd begun. Any pleasure that came to her tonight was coming with strings attached, namely him. "No masturbating."

She laughed. "Oh, yeah? Just try and stop me."

Like flash lightning, he ripped two narrow strips from the towel. Yanking her arms behind her back, he tied and knotted her wrists together. "There. Consider yourself stopped. Nice to know my police training is coming in handy for something."

"You'd never leave me twitching like this. You're just not cruel enough to ignore a woman in need."

"That's where you're wrong. You're not just *a* woman to me. You're *my* woman. And I intend to make you see that." He picked up an antique wooden brush, the handle carved of walnut, a handsome and unused souvenir his mother had brought with her when she'd emigrated from Ireland as a young girl. He would use the brush now, but not for a hundred strokes on Terry's beautiful hair.

Holding on to the end of the makeshift restraint, the walnut handled brush taking up residence under his armpit, he pulled Terry behind him back into the bedroom. "Now, where shall I tie you?"

She surveyed the nearly empty room. "Geez, not very many choices."

"The bed it is," he said jovially, taking no offense at her observation. The furniture was gone, sold to pay off a portion of his debts, not enough by a long shot.

The clock was ticking. It was either repayment or get his kneecaps batted out from under him. And since Forrester was his only source of revenue, looked like it was gonna be bye-bye genuflecting for the foreseeable future.

"Let's do anal next," the poet laureate said dreamily, her romantic phraseology spilling over him like one-hundred proof acid.

"You just won't give in, will you?"

"Nope. How about you?"

"No. But I'm putting my foot down if your deviant tastes include barnyard animals." He pursed his lips. "Fleas."

The towel restraint had plenty of give. After tying Terry to the bedpost, her arms behind her back, he still had enough slack to push her face down into the coverlet.

So much for sweet lovemaking.

He reached for the tube, lubed her pussy again, and began inserting the handle of the brush between her conveniently separated legs.

Thirty seconds in, she was thrashing, wildly. Pain. Pleasure. Something else, too. Something that went past the physical. "Wh-where did you get the brush, Daniel?"

"Ireland." Her agitation gave him additional hope; it was the first true emotion she'd shown. "Call it what you want, but I'm not quitting, Terry. Even if you tell me to, I'm not quitting."

He gave her another smooth stroke with the brush handle, and then got himself out.

After lubing his dick and her, he sank into her buttocks.

"Yes, yes, yes," she moaned. "Fuck my ass. Fuck me good and hard."

"Go easy on me, Terry. I'm an anal virgin."

She was so tight! And yet she took him all in, drew him in, her body siphoning off his juices, drying him out before he'd even begun. Quaking at the wonder and excitement and madness of being inside her ass, of owning her, totally owning her, completely owning her, he began to move.

His pride a thing of the past, his love for her burning bright, he gave her everything he had, pumping his life force into her ass, nothing held back, as she screamed, "Oh -- oh -- oh, Daniel, Daniel, Daniel. Oh --" and came.

Chapter Eighteen

Anal virgin indeed!

Terry snorted to herself. Daniel had enjoyed their little foray into decadence. And as for her, his grunts and groans and gasps for air had added to her own enjoyment.

"Thank you, my love," he whispered into the crook of her shoulder. After untying her arms and legs, he kissed the breath-moistened spot and then hugged her close in a spooning position.

"You're welcome." She twittered aloud at the hilarity of their politeness. They had just engaged in a raunchy bout of anal, and now they were as mannered as a lord and lady. Daniel, straight arrow, sexually conservative, parochial Daniel, had taken to edgy sex like a duck to water. He was turning out to be both a caring and adventurous lover.

And, after this one time, she'd never be with him again.

The regret was difficult to bear.

He slung a powerful arm around her shoulders. "Sleep now. Poor darlin', I wore you out."

Both physically and emotionally, he'd wrung her dry. Exhaustion overcame her and she yawned.

Daniel snuggled closer, if that were possible -- as it was, they very nearly wore the same skin. "Sleep now."

His commanding tone made her feel cherished, and her eyes drifted obediently closed.

* * * * *

Afternoon sun was streaming in the bedroom window when Terry reopened her eyes.

A fully dressed Daniel stood, as if on guard, beside the bed. Just standing there. Staring at her. Watching her. As if she were a rare gem. Already bleeding, her veins gushed red all over again. How would she survive without him in her life?

"I made breakfast," he said.

Her nose wrinkled. Outwardly, she made nothing of the jarring sensation that, for the first time in her life, someone cared that she ate breakfast. "Never touch the meal. I'm a coffee only person." She checked the clock on the floor beside the bed. "And, at any rate, it's almost four p.m.. We slept the day away."

He grinned. "That's what comes of falling into bed at eight a.m.."

"After a night of randy sex," she said, completing the thought on both their minds.

"There's that, too. But regardless of the hour, it's still breakfast, and you're chowing down a big bowl of steaming hot oatmeal with cream and honey."

"Oh, yuck! If that glop is supposed to be an inducement to pry me out of this lovely warm cocoon, you'll need to work harder. I'm not vacating this bed 'til dinner."

Boneless with sexual satiation, she furrowed deeper into the comfy mattress and threw the covers over her head. "Go away!"

"Never."

Her sleepy eyes misting, she popped her head back up. How could she not love a man who absolutely wore his heart on his sleeve? "Oh, Daniel --"

"It's uncut oatmeal. McCann's, right from the old country. Ireland."

The hairbrush dildo had come from Ireland. Now he was talking Irish oatmeal. Only a fool could overlook the common theme.

He said they had a connection, and she was beginning to agree.

Shivering, she sat up amidst the pile of fluffy pillows. Everything happened for a reason in her life. The reason might initially escape her, but nothing in her life happened arbitrarily.

"You need food in your belly. Something bland and fortifying, like oatmeal." He pulled a knitted wool sweater over her head.

An Irish Fisherman's sweater.

Too coincidental. All of this was too coincidental.

He dressed her as he would a child, tunneling her arms down into the cable knit sleeves, draping her hair over the neckline. "Is this the sweater your mother made for you," she asked, her fingers searching the rows.

"Yep. I tried it on this morning but the sweater didn't fit. It's yours."

She stroked the weave. "Oh, I couldn't. The sweater means a lot to you, I could tell when you spoke of it that first time."

"And now the sweater is yours. I've outgrown it, and my mother would've wanted you to have it."

“Could you tell me something about your mother? I mean,” she said, her hand stroking the knitter’s close stitches, “she was born here, in Southie, right?”

“No. My mother was born in Ireland. As was my father. I’m first generation. Though, there’s no one more Irish than someone born away from the Old Sod. Irish Americans carry an abiding love for the country of their ancestors.”

“Where in Ireland were your parents born?”

His eyes danced a damn Irish jig. “I think I’ve just found a way to get you to the table.” He yanked her out of bed. “Come quietly, like a good girl, and I’ll tell you more as I feed you your bowl of porridge.”

Her fingers moving along the hem of the bulky sweater, which fell mid-thigh, she made a disgusted face. “And why would you need to feed me?”

He held up the restraints of the night before. “Because, silly, with your wrists tied behind your back, you won’t be able to feed yourself.”

“Daniel, the BDSM -- that was fun last night. But this is this morning.”

He quirked a brow at her. “BDSM? Maybe you were role-playing. Me, I was just behaving like my over-bearing, authoritative, dominant self.”

Even the words made her nipples peak.

Unfortunately, her interest in the sweater was also peaking.

More than peaking, actually. Something drove her to keep stroking the sweater; the compulsion grew stronger with every passing moment. Tied hands would thwart that urgency.

“Daniel,” she began reasonably, “I can feed myself. Honestly. And I promise to eat your repulsive gruel. But enough is enough. Even subs have to get back to reality --”

Before she could prevent him, he had restrained her arms once again behind her back.

She had created a monster! Frustrated beyond belief, she gnashed her teeth. Close to stamping her bare feet floor on the floor, she yelled, “This is ridiculous.”

“Maybe to you. I, on the other hand, couldn’t be more serious.” He gave her tie a yank. “Come along with me, my love.”

The sweater was gorgeous and warm, knitted from unbelievably soft, wool yarn, and she needed to stroke the stitches everywhere. But only a double-jointed contortionist could manage in the restraints. Deciding that the quicker she downed the damned cereal, the quicker he would release her from bondage, she opened her mouth like a baby bird and swallowed the vile stuff down.

He kissed her lips clean afterwards. “Sorry. No napkins.” He smiled at her, his hand, warm and callused, resting lightly on her bare knee. “Now, where were we?”

“You were about to tell me where your parents were born in Ireland.”

"They came from an enchanted place on the west coast, a fishing village by the name of Doolin. Down through the years, the village has been home to a variety of eccentrics. Legend has it that Doolin inspired Tolkien to pen *Lord of the Rings* after a visit."

"But you were born here, you said --"

"Yep, I was born right here in South Boston. My father died when I was just an infant, so I don't know his views on his homeland, and my mother rarely spoke of her early years. In fact, she never really talked about herself. Others spoke highly of her, though, and the help she had given them."

"What sort of help, Daniel?"

"Damned if I know. But there were always women visiting with her while she knitted. I suspect some even paid for her advice. I think she even supported us through the rough times when I was a kid by doling out --"

He shook his head. "I don't know what she doled out, but people listened. She always said, the women of her village, of Doolin, were blessed with a talent for advice-giving and it would be a waste not use the gift." He shrugged. "That's all she said."

Terry looked down at the big, but gentle, hand resting on her knee. That big hand had been inside her body. Dan and she had shared a night of erotic physicality. But he still knew nothing about her. And she couldn't bring herself to reveal the terror his revelation about his mother had struck in her heart.

His mother handed out the "gift" of "advice" while knitting?

That sounded more than a little familiar.

Another coincidence, or was his mother psychic, too?

Terry had come across plenty of frauds, but she had never met another genuine practitioner of psychic phenomena. Add the knitting component, and a horrible fear grabbed hold of her and wouldn't let go.

"Daniel," she said, her voice thin and strained, broaching the subject as sensitively as she could, "Your mother never had any more children after you --?"

"I told you, my father died in my infancy. She loved him 'til the day she died, and never remarried."

But a lonely widow could have an affair which resulted in a love child. Shamed by her indiscretion, the widow could have left that love child on the stairs of a church. Daniel, several years her senior and a lifelong South Boston resident, had been living with his mother in the area the year of her birth. Did that explain her connection to Daniel, the immediate familiarity she had felt toward him and which he seemed to feel toward her as well -- could it be, was it possible -- was Daniel her half-brother?

Revulsion at the idea that they might have unknowingly committed incest warred with her love. And not familial love, but the love a woman feels for a man.

There! She admitted it -- she loved Daniel Murphy, and not like a sister. And she had to know that her love for him came without the stigma of prohibition.

Please, Daniel, say more! Reveal something that will put me out of my misery. Now! Tell me something now!

Daniel said quietly, "My mother had difficulties giving birth to me. You know, my size. I weighed eleven pounds at birth. Afterwards, she couldn't have no more children."

"Are you sure? How do you know?"

He looked at her askance, but answered nonetheless. "When I was little, I had to stay with neighbors while she went into the hospital with 'women's problems.' My mother kept everything, medical records included. After her death, I found out those 'women problems' meant she'd had a hysterectomy during the hospital stay."

Relief...and lust...consumed Terry as Daniel rubbed up along her thigh.

"Any more questions, my love?"

"Just one -- did your mother ever mention if knitting was a common pastime in Doolin?"

"Matter of fact, yeah. Not in my ma's immediate family -- she was an only child, as was my father -- but there were others just like my mother, or so she said. Personally, I think my ma was one of a kind."

Overwhelmed with feelings, all she could think to say was, "I trust you, Daniel."

Daniel was caring and loving, and though she had given lip service to the concept of trust before in relation to him, now real trust poured over her.

She could trust this man with all of herself, not just her body. She could trust this man with her secret. There was so much she needed to tell him!

But not now, not while they were both in sex mode. Seriousness would spoil their playful mood.

Ah, yes, his traveling palm had disappeared under the hem of the Irish Fisherman's sweater and she couldn't wait for him to find out just how ready she was to return to bed with him.

While she waited, she observed, "You don't have much furniture in here, either, just two chairs and a table."

He batted his lashes. "I'm into the minimalist look in home décor. The bare look just *pops*, don't you think?" His warm palm retracted from her leg. Rather than lead her back to bed for another round of steamy sex, he picked up her foot.

She gasped in delight. "Dare I believe it's true -- do you have a foot fetish?"

He nuzzled her instep, placed an anklet of kisses on each foot, licked the sole from heel to sole. "A foot fetish?" He wiggled his brows lecherously. "What gave you that idea?"

"Must've been the way you ogled my high arches." She eyed the bulge in his jeans. "Or maybe it was something else."

"My love, I've had a hard-on for you since the very first, and not just for your high arches, which are sexy as all hell, but for all of you."

She melted. "Oh, Daniel --"

"And now that I've succeeded in filling your belly with wholesome nutrition, I intend to show you off to the world at large, specifically Castle Island, where I shall proceed to do incredibly unwholesome, in fact, filthy things to you." He pulled on her socks and shoes, left beside the chair. "We both need some exercise --"

She hooted. "Oh, I think we've both gotten plenty of that last night."

He narrowed his eyes. "Subs do not talk back."

She chortled. "Yes, Master."

"Much better," he said snootily. "After we take a long, refreshing walk, we'll grab dinner there." He helped her stand. "Now, where did I put that poncho of yours? It will come in handy for what I have in my dirty mind." He looked around the kitchen.

"But, Daniel, first I need to dress." She was naked under the sweater!

"That sweater is heavy and you'll be plenty warm enough with the poncho and myself wrapped around you. And please refrain from questioning me further. As my love slave, your welfare is always uppermost in my mind."

After retrieving the poncho -- he must've forgotten he'd hung it over the back of his chair in readiness and she'd had to point it out -- he pulled the cover-up over her head. "Daniel, I really do think you're carrying this edgy crap too far."

"Oh! I see. Now that I want to explore certain sexual behaviors, suddenly they're crap." He clucked his tongue. "You don't want to try on exhibitionism, maybe public sex, you don't want to do nothin', just say so --"

She drew in a choppy breath. Already her thighs were slippery with excitement. He was plying her with titillation and the ploy was working. "The suggestion merely surprised me. Exhibitionism. Public sex. My, my, my, but you've certainly exceeded my every expectation."

"You're about to see a whole different side of me, my love." He winked. "Deviant is my middle name." He cocked his jaw. "Or, was that Pervert?" He shrugged. "Well, no matter."

At Castle Island, after a long stroll followed by a longer dinner, during which he fed her finger food by hand, Daniel took her up the grassy hill again, this time to a sheltered corner of the fort. The sun had gone down over Boston Harbor hours before, and in the darkness, with her hands still tied at the small of her back, Daniel held her close, the back of her wool poncho sealed to his chest.

"So I don't keel over with a heart attack, we'll start off slow," he said. Reaching under the billowing edges of the poncho, he cupped her bare breast under the sweater.

She faced the water, the views of the Boston skyline picturesque. "I suppose, getting arrested would ruin the thrill."

"No danger there -- I know all the cops on this beat. And I doubt many people will notice. One or two maybe, but they'll probably be doing the same thing up here, lovers making out in the dark."

Scandalous. Decadent. Her arousal spiked out of bounds when he pushed the poncho and sweater up around her neck and worked her nipples in the open air, where any walkers might see.

A scream rose up inside her. Turning her slightly, he caught her cries in his mouth in a kiss that both devastated and elated. Weird. There it was again, the contrasting and conflicting aura of Daniel Murphy.

No time to think, no time to analyze the warring energy that circled this man, not with his tongue lodged in her mouth and his hand moving lower, over the naked skin of her belly lower, she shuddered in pre-climactic tension.

He broke the kiss to say, "Open your legs."

Everything with Daniel was foreplay, but they hadn't had actual sex for hours and she was dying for him. She wasn't wearing panties and, as her thighs separated, his hand was there, right there, the palm cradling her weeping pussy.

"You're wet."

"Yes," she sighed, hiding nothing. She didn't want to hide anything from Daniel anymore.

Heedless of who might see, she shamelessly pushed her pelvis forward, easing the digital penetration.

He separated the folds of her pussy. "Life will be complicated for a while," he whispered, a long and thick finger pushing up inside her. "And I hope you'll understand why I did what I did. But you'll see, Terry, everything will work out fine in the end."

"Yesyesyes," she groaned, riding the three fingers now up inside her. After a while, the pressure grew, the heat became a wildfire, and unable to stand the apartness, she begged, "Please come inside me."

"Not here." He removed his touch from her body, untied her hands. "Enough with the experimentation, enough with the gimmicks, enough with all the games. I want real with you. Let's go home."

He had said real and home and her all in the same breath, as if they belonged together. But she wasn't being real with him and she could never accept she belonged with him, particularly not in his home, until she revealed the truth about herself.

Strung out on need, she panted, "No. Take me back to the shop."

She needed sex now! She needed him inside her *now!* But more than she wanted sex, she wanted their life together to start off honestly. For that, they would need to build on a foundation of truth. And with her knitting surrounding them, she would tell him the truth, that she was psychic. She had never told anyone about her ability, but it was only fitting to tell Daniel.

The man she loved.

Chapter Nineteen

Terry unlocked her shop and they fell through the door kissing, their hands all over each other. He threw off his clothes, she threw off hers, and then they jumped back into each other's arms, walking crab-style together to the back of the shop, to her bedroom.

The truth could wait a little longer. She'd make her confession *after* she'd had her way with Daniel.

She slapped his ass, and then pushed him backwards on the bed.

He laughed as he bounced. "And you call yourself a submissive." He snorted. "What you are is a woman of contradictions. Don't tie me up the first time, 'kay? Not even a pair of those fluffy velvet cuffs. I'll bite through my own wrist to get a feel of your big, luscious tits."

She giggled. "Agreed. No restraints." She climbed over him, her legs bracketing his hips.

"Dom. Sub. Switch. Outfield. Take any damn position you want." Reaching up his muscled arms, he gently cupped her face in both hands. "As long as you never hold back on me again," he said as seriously as she'd ever heard him speak. "Be yourself. That's all I ask."

"I won't hold back with you ever again, Daniel. I promise. "

His voice roughened, the gruffness curling her toes. "I love you."

Her eyes tearing up, she nodded, but didn't repeat the words to him. Not until she made a full accounting to him of what being herself meant. He might very well decide he had bitten off more than he could chew after learning what he was up against with her.

Sex was one thing, but a man as true-blue as Daniel would see her pronouncement of love as a responsibility, something that would tie her to him as surely as any BDSM restraints. She couldn't do that to Daniel. After she told him her secret, she wanted him to know he was free to escape.

His arms fell back onto the bed cover. "Do with me as you will," he cried in a falsetto, his inherent playfulness vanquishing the former seriousness.

She licked her lips, her gaze raking his lovely thick cock. "Thank you. I shall." She rose above him, and then lowered herself onto the bulbous head, down, down, down, taking him all in, every studly inch.

"Christ," he groaned, and laughed, and groaned again, as she began to move up and push down on his length, taking him gently as he had taken her.

But then his wicked palms found her bottom, his fingers digging into her flesh, and she forgot gentleness and began to fuck him hard. When she knew he was about to come, she toppled over onto her back. "Give me a pearl necklace to wear, Daniel." She held her full breasts together.

He crawled over her, slid his cock into her plumped cleavage, and exploded, his ejaculated cum ringing her neck in translucence. Then, he rolled off her to his side, his face relaxed, his expression prideful, his eyes darkening when she fingered the ejaculate and painted both areolas in cum.

"Christ," he growled. He palmed her belly, his fingers clenched in her pubic hair. Forcefully, he moved his hand downward, until he had covered her slit. He rubbed his knuckles back and forth, and into her. His touch was not gentle. "Your cunt is mine. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Daniel." Her breathing hitched. "My cunt is yours," she panted.

"Bend up your knees."

When she had, just as forcefully, a digit entered her buttocks. "Your ass is mine. All mine. Got it? You don't give this to any other man, ever again."

"I got it, Daniel," she wheezed.

He continued to own her with his big hand, with his large fingers, his possession of her pussy and bottom explicitly erotic. When he pinched her clit, she wailed and screamed, the climax hitting her like a meteor shower of light.

Splayed and vulnerable, she gave herself over to him, nothing held back, while he pushed her repeatedly over the edge. Writhing, pained, one climax slamming into another, she whimpered as his big hands moved between her legs. And then even whimpering became too much. "I can't, I can't, I can't. No more. I can't." She looked down at her flushed nudity, at the slick of cum rolling down her chest to her belly. "There's nothing left."

"You're holding out on me. Don't ever hold back with me. Over on your belly, ass in the air."

"Oh, please, Daniel, no. It's too much. I've climaxed too many times. Don't make me come again."

"I want into your ass deep, and you're gonna give it me. Now roll."

"Ple --"

He rolled her. Prone, a palm on the top of her head pressing her down, he lay on top of her. "Tell me," he said breathing harshly into her ear. "Say my name and tell me."

"I want you, Daniel Murphy."

"How do you want me?"

"Do me good, do me hard, don't stop. Please, Daniel, fuck my ass --"

He drove between her buttocks and she screamed again, the pleasure more than she could stand. But she did stand it, she climaxed, once, and then again.

"Get up all fours."

She did, limp and wasted, her neck bent, she crawled up on hands and knees.

He smoothed his hand over her bottom. "Got a butt plug?"

She nodded.

"Where?"

"Middle dresser drawer."

He left her to get it. Upon his return, he pushed the wooden plug into position. "For the rest of tonight, you wear it."

"You're staying?"

"I'm staying. But I want you to know, that I'll want it again, the same way. Just so you understand how it is," he said, and kissed her cheek. "Now get some sleep."

Totally exhausted, she collapsed face down on the bed.

She didn't know how many hours she slept, but she awakened to the bedroom lamp shining in her eyes. She was on her back, and Daniel was pushing her knees up toward her chin. The plug came out and Daniel came in.

As he anally penetrated her, she clawed at the sheets and then clawed at him. She didn't know how long he did her, but the intercourse seemed to go on forever. One climax, two, and Daniel kept pumping, until he collapsed.

Laying limp and still, she recovered her gasping breath. When her racing heart slowed, she said, "We need to talk, Daniel."

The moment of truth could wait no longer.

He immediately sat up against the headboard. "Sounds ominous."

She didn't want to trivialize their conversation, but neither did she want him to worry. "I need to tell you a few details about me." She looked down at her nudity. "I'll just throw on a robe first."

Leaving the bed, she raced for the bathroom and closed the door.

"Take as long as you need, my love, I'm not going nowhere."

Evidently, she didn't take nearly long enough.

Or, at least, not as long as Daniel supposed she would take.

As a person who lived a dual life, she had learned to slip in and out of places, virtually unnoticed. Though she wasn't a cat thief, she could move soundlessly. Her anonymity depended on secrecy, on stealth. Why something had compelled her to make no noise then, she couldn't know. But at any rate, obviously, her quiet exit from the bathroom had taken Daniel by surprise.

She was surprised, too. At least at first. As she stood framed within the doorway, she couldn't quite figure out what he was doing. Why on earth was he reaching to the shelf above the bed?

And then she saw him remove something tiny from the shelf, a device so small it fit in the palm of his big hand. Gripped within his thick fingers, the camera hardly looked large enough to take pictures. His movements smooth and economical, *graceful*, despite his size, he placed the camera in the pocket of his jacket, which she noted detachedly, now lay on top of her coverlet, rather than on the floor of her knitting shop.

"What are you doing, Daniel?" she asked, though she already knew.

He whipped around to face her. "It's not what you think, Terry."

Her raised brows told him otherwise.

"Let me explain," he pleaded.

"What's to explain? You bugged my bedroom. Was the tape for your own personal use, or did you plan on selling the film to a porno site on the 'net?'"

His shoulders slumped. "I would never do something as low as that."

"So -- how low would you sink?"

"Not that low."

She gestured to the bed. "Place the equipment there, please."

He delivered a pocket of cameras onto the coverlet. "Is that all of it?" She paused. "I'll find them, I assure you, if there are more. So, you might as well hand them over now."

He went to a picture on the other wall, the one opposite the bed, and pushed aside a cheap painting she'd bought at a flea market to dress up her room. The frame had been slightly askew, and she saw why.

He handed over the bugging device. "That's it. The last one." His voice seemed to tear from his throat. "I'm so sorry, Terry."

She drew herself up. "After you leave, I plan on scouring this room of any reminder of you. You make me feel dirty, Daniel Murphy. You make my flesh crawl."

"I want you to know -- I've already destroyed the only existing tape of you."

"Which one was that?"

He examined his feet. "The one of you masturbating."

"That night the snow truck went into a skid?"

"Yes."

"I see. So you had the cameras on me right from the beginning." She felt her chin tremble, and she couldn't hide the upset. "And what about tonight? What about what just happened in this room?"

"The cameras weren't turned on. I disabled them last night while you slept at my place. The console was in the car. All it took was a flip of a switch."

And then she broke down. "Why," she wailed, tears coursing down her face. "Why would you do this to me?"

"For the money. I needed the money. A private sale. I'm not at liberty to divulge the name of my client. Ethics," he mumbled.

She threw back her head and laughed hysterically. "Ethics. Who are you?"

"A private detective."

"Someone is investigating me?"

"Yes."

She didn't bother to ask why. She knew why. Someone had found her out. Someone suspected she was a psychic. Someone wanted to use her for their own personal gain. How she wished this could have been as simple as a blue movie!

She had to leave. Right now. Tonight. Assume a new identity and start over some place else. "Go," she waved a hand at him. "Just go."

"Terry -- wait --"

"No," she shrieked, "You've done me enough harm already. Go!"

"As soon as I take care of business, I'll return and we can straighten out this mess." He washed a hand over his face. "Know this -- I was never gonna follow through on the job. I had every intention of pulling the plug on the case tonight, of telling you all about myself. I had already disconnected the equipment. I got nothing on you, Terry. Please believe me. I was only removing the cameras so as not to horrify you. That's all." He shook his head. "Surveillance cameras are ugly, you know? And what we had was beautiful. And pure. I'm not real good with words, but you mean everything to me. I love you. I swear it's true."

She heard Dan get into his clothes in the shop, heard the tinkling bell as he left, but nothing truly registered except her own need to leave. True, she'd never admitted anything to him as far as her psychic abilities went, but she had revealed other relevant details about herself to him.

Daniel Murphy was a liar and an all-around bastard, and he was smart. It wouldn't take him long, not after looking at her in his damn surveillance tape, to piece her secret together.

She'd made the phone call to the soldier's grandmother in her bedroom, the psychic message had come to her while standing beside the bed as she stroked a knitted afghan. She often spoke aloud during the interpretation, but softly, under her breath. Could her whispered self-talk be heard? Had Dan scrutinized, analyzed, eavesdropped upon that phone call?

What was she going to do? Where would her anonymity be when Dan sold her secret to his client?

Buried deep in the closet were two large duffle bags she kept on hand for this very eventuality. She would take only the necessities, call a cab, and then leave. Tell no one. Go someplace new. Winter was over, very few knitted stock items remained in the shop, and those that did, she would stuff into the bags along with a change of clothes and her supplies. The yarn and everything else she'd just have to forfeit. Nothing was more important than her personal freedom. Though she lived from week to week, she did have savings, a nest egg she'd put aside for emergencies.

This was an emergency.

Two hours later, after bathing and dressing and lining one of the two bags with clothing, Terry raced for the shop to gather together her knitted goods and supplies. She tripped over something in the dark.

The Irish Fisherman's sweater.

As Terry raised her foot to kick the gift out of the way, Dan's tormented words came back to haunt her, "I love you. I swear it's true."

Instead of sending the gift flying, she carefully retrieved the sweater from the floor. A fellow knitter had labored long and hard over the beautiful piece of workmanship and Terry respected the artistry of the finished product if not its former owner.

The whole time she'd worn the sweater her hands had been tied behind her back. Unable to stroke the stitches then, something compelled her to do so now.

A series of knots and bumps called to her. She plucked at the twisted thread.

And knew the malformed stitches were no mistake.

Esther Murphy had left a message in the row, the words as clear and definite as if she had written a letter from the grave.

Daniel was in trouble.

And Terry had to go to him.

Chapter Twenty

After leaving Terry, Dan paid a visit to the Beacon Hill residence of William Forrester III. Just as he had planned on doing two nights previously, he terminated his professional association with his client, telling him --

"You know what, Forrester, stick your fucking job and your fucking bonus, too. Oh, and here's a word to the wise -- harass Miss Walsh and I'll tell your son how you tried to screw with his life. Generally speaking, grown guys don't like it when their old fart dads meddle in their private concerns. Force my hand, and I'll give him an earful. Billy-boy is bound to be some pissed, might even ruin your relationship with him. And for what? You ain't got nothin' to show --"

Or words to that effect.

After severing the surveillance contract, Dan returned to his house to take a cold shower. The best thing that had ever happened to him was slipping away, and he needed to brace himself for what lay ahead. A cool head would help with the explanation of why he'd done what he did. Afterwards, while he still could, he'd fall to his knees and apologize for being such an all-round, total, ass-wipe.

He wouldn't plead for her forgiveness. Considering what he'd done, forgiveness was too much to expect. And no amount of extenuating circumstances could make a wrong right. But maybe, just maybe, they could move on, somehow get past his violation of her privacy...her trust. The lady had a big heart and anything was possible. But regardless of what transpired, Dan had to tell her everything.

He quickly laced up metal-tipped cop boots, stuffed a clean shirt -- the cotton flannel sticking to his wet-from-the-shower shoulders -- into never-worn jeans and rushed from the bathroom, ready to go.

He was jumped from behind as he entered his bedroom.

The Ventura brothers. Who the hell else?

A club to the back of his skull took him down. Another hit and he was out cold, taken out of commission before he could strike back.

After regaining consciousness from the TKO, Dan found himself in the dark kitchen, crumpled in a chair. Backlit in moonlight, the biggest of the loan shark siblings stood over him. In his beefy hand, the baseball bat looked no bigger than a toothpick.

How much damage could a toothpick do?

His throbbing headache said plenty.

“Got the money?” the batter asked stepping up to the plate.

A whole gaggle of birdies chirped inside his brain, but Daniel managed to say, “Fraid not, boys. Maybe next week.”

The toothpick bat came up, ready to hit a home run...

And all hell broke loose in the dark kitchen.

The thud of wood bouncing on the old linoleum floor. Someone’s guttural shout, “What the fuck?”

The batter, Dan supposed, his vision doubled and blurred. The dark. The chirping birdies. Nausea. All symptoms of a mild concussion. And then there was his fear. Piss leaking fear. He couldn’t make out, couldn’t tell, what was going on.

“Someone stabbed me!” another voice complained.

The *whoosh* of air as one of the Ventura bros retaliated.

Another sound then. Not wood. Christ, not wood. Bone. The bright snap of breaking bone. But not Dan’s bone. Not his knees. Someone else’s pain.

The victim made no sound, but he *felt* their pain.

Roaring in agony, as if it were his own bone shattering, Dan picked himself up and came out swinging. First with the chair. When the chair broke apart, he started hammering his fists, smashing loan shark faces to pulp. His big feet finished the damage. In the ensuing mayhem, someone -- the unsub? -- raced through the door abutting the kitchen.

With the Ventura brothers now rolling on the floor, Dan flicked on the light.

Something lay next to his foot on the cracked linoleum floor, something that didn’t belong there. He recognized that something without thinking twice.

Woozy, dizzy, sickened, too, he bent to retrieve the long and slender metal object.

The bloodied knitting needle still contained the warmth of Terry’s hand.

Chapter Twenty-one

The parade of customers knocking on the door played havoc with Terry's concentration. She had closed the window blinds, but still, the pounding was giving her a headache.

She took a deep breath to calm her frazzled nerves.

Hard enough to sort and count the merchandise with an arm in a cast, without having to contend with constant interruptions, too. Now, how many skeins of "Sky Blue" wool yarn was that again?

She didn't believe this. Another knock. More insistent this time.

Geez, why wouldn't anyone read the damn sign!

"We're closed for our annual inventory," she called sweetly in the direction of the door.

"For how the fuck long?"

She dropped her forehead on the counter.

Dan.

She should've known. Naturally, she hadn't.

With a sigh, she returned the remainder of the yarn to the appropriate cubby.

Useless to pretend she could continue her merchandise calculations with *him* out there.

Hoping he'd give up and go away, she said, "We're closed until further notice."

Part evasion, part truth. Even after accounting for all the supplies in stock, she was in no hurry to re-open for business. How useless was a one-armed knitter?

Good time to take a trip. Unfortunately, spontaneous adventures called for a credit card, and she didn't have one of those.

No knock this time, Dan pounded on the door. "Let me in, Terry! We gotta talk." Belatedly, he recalled his manners, adding a raggedly urgent, "Please?"

A shove against a wall had broken her arm, but the injury hadn't knocked any sense into her. Terry walked toward the door.

Why put off the confrontation? Knowing Dan, he'd only huff and puff until he blew the damn door in or the neighbors called the cops.

Daniel Murphy used to be a cop, on this very beat, and they'd never once run into each other. Another coincidence, in a series of many.

Only there were no coincidences in her life. Everything in her life had a reason.

After undoing the lock, she stood back. To the sound of brass tinkling, he entered her shop.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he bellowed. His voice threaded out to a whisper upon eying her bandaged arm. "I called around to all the hospitals and none had you listed as an in-patient. You just plain disappeared, as if you fell off the face of the planet or something. I've never been so scared." He reached for her.

Closing the door served as her excuse to step back, safe from the extension of that long muscled arm. If he touched her, she'd weaken and she mustn't weaken.

"I was around," she said. Evasion was an art form at which she excelled.

Actually, she'd been holed up inside her apartment, not answering the phone or those insistent knocks on her door. After a doctor set her arm, she hadn't had the energy to leave her bed. Lots of tears, lots of pain, that no med or plaster cast could fix.

"I don't blame you for not wanting to see me," he said, still speaking low. "But I gotta know. How are you?"

"Fine," she lied. "Absolutely fine."

"Your arm?"

"Silly me, I walked into one wall and bounced off another."

"Ventura."

"Beg your pardon?"

"The walls you walked into were the Ventura brothers. They're loan sharks."

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you mean."

He drew in an exasperated breath. "You burst into my house through the back door and ripped each Ventura brother another asshole. With your knitting needle, no less. Thereby saving my kneecaps from demolition. Why'd ya do it, Terry, huh? Those sleaze bags could've hurt you bad, worse than they did."

"What on earth are you raving on about?"

He reached into his belt, drew out a metal knitting needle. "Recognize this?"

"Can't say that I do. There must be millions of knitting needles just like that one."

"That's the weapon you used. Rather than bring you under scrutiny, I told the cops I did the deed."

"Thanks so very much," she sneered, her temper and anger, and everything else, rising. "For nothing."

"No, for everything. If you hadn't arrived when you did, I wouldn't be standing here on my own two legs right now. I was into those scum-balls big time, a loan to cover my gambling and drinking debt, and when I didn't deliver the cash, they were all set to deliver me to the ER. Instead, you're the one who got hurt. I'll never forgive myself. You saved me, Terry."

"Saved you? How could I possible have saved you? How would I possibly have known you were in trouble? What?" she spat. "Do I look like a mind-reader to you?"

"Yes."

She friggin' knew it! He was onto her!

Pack up the bags, Terry. Looks like you're on the move again.

Luckily, her passport was all up to date. She'd be taking that little adventure to Ireland after all. She'd just have to clear out her bank account. As long as she handled the situation carefully, gave him no clue as to her thoughts, her inner turmoil, she could make her escape.

But, dammit, she was hurting! Not her arm. Not physically. Emotionally. He had hurt her feelings. And in that hurt, she cried, "What more do you want from me? You bugged my shop and apartment! Isn't destroying me enough?"

"I bugged only your bedroom, and what I destroyed was the only feed that was transmitted. I never showed Forrester the tape, so you and Billy-boy are still good. But let me tell you, I don't care how much loot that smarmy prick has, he ain't right for you. Do you really want Old Man Forrester as your future father-in-law after he hired me to break up you and his son?"

"What!" she positively screeched. "Are you saying Mr. Forrester hired you to scam me into going to bed with you?"

"That's what I'm saying."

"Are you *actually* saying Mr. Forrester hired you to produce pictures of us in bed so his son would stop dating me?"

"That's what I'm actually saying."

"There was no other reason for the surveillance?" she asked incredulously.

"No."

Not her anger, not her temper, hysteria was rising now, and she started to laugh. "And here I thought you were trying to out me as a --" She waved a hand. Years of subterfuge prevented the acknowledgement. "Never mind what I thought."

Dan looked at her soulfully. "I know who you are, my love."

The endearment flipped her out. “Don’t you dare call me that!”

“So, sue me. I have poor impulse control.”

His glibness, she could deal with, but then he went deadly serious and said, “I love you, Terry. I admire you. You are my love. My only love. My forever love,” and she just couldn’t deal with that.

“You slept with me for the sake of a...a...job,” she said in absolute disgust.

“Never. I slept with you because I fell in love with you.”

“You don’t even know me. And please don’t say you do because you absolutely do not!”

“Okay. I’ll tell you this instead -- I know you distrust me. I know I have to earn your faith. I know you’re afraid. My mother lived in fear of being outed, too. She knew a discovery of her ability would land us in jeopardy, so she swore me to secrecy.”

She pretended innocence. “What was your mother’s ability?”

“Knitting,” he said promptly. “You saw that sweater she made for me.”

“Yes. But why would knitting put you and your mother in jeopardy?”

“Because some folks might not have understood. Some folks might have wanted to channel her skill. That’s your fear, too.”

Terry swayed.

Dan guided her over to the tall stool at the counter and helped her into the seat. “I would never out you, Terry,” he said solemnly. “I understand the dangers too well.”

She shook her head. “Oh, dear. This is all so weird.”

“Nice deep breaths,” he said, rubbing her uninjured shoulder.

The words spilled out. “Bill was a bloody bore. He and I never went to bed. We had no relationship. For some reason, I led him on, opportunistically and intentionally caught his attention. I’m ashamed to say, I used him.”

“To meet me.”

“Huh?”

“Think about it, Terry. Bill brought us together.”

The pieces fell together. What Dan said did make a sort of twisted sense. “What I did wasn’t right, but I wasn’t cheating on Bill. We had just started dating, I didn’t even like him. I was going to break it up that night at *Maison Pierre*.”

“Then you met me, and so you decided to wait to call it quits with Billy-boy, so you could keep seeing me. Smart move. Hold on a sec, while I gloat.”

“Don’t get a big head over this, Daniel Murphy. My lust had an ulterior motive.”

“Yeah, to save my kneecaps. But at a terrible cost to you, my love.”

“Stop calling me your friggin’ love.”

“What should I call you?”

That question stumped her. "You were all set to videotape me!" she cried indignantly.

"But I didn't. Not really." He shook his head. "Listen, I'm not defending myself or my actions. What I did was wrong. Since quitting the force, I've made a bunch of mistakes, poor choices, too. And the worst was hurting you."

She'd made lots of mistakes and poor choices herself trying to figure out who she was and how to take her place in the world; she needed to allow him the same equal opportunity to pick himself up after falling flat on his face. Unfortunately, they were a bit out of sync. Dan wore his heart on his sleeve, but for years, she'd lived behind barriers and boundaries and defenses. All these emotions were brand new to her; she needed time to adjust and adapt to both the good and bad part of feeling. She had to learn how to be open with him and to him, and not just sexually. And for that to happen, she needed time to find and discover herself.

Usually, she never asked anyone personal questions in fear that they would turn around and ask her personal questions, too. But out of the blue, she got brave and made a stab at "normal" curiosity. "Why did you leave your cop job?"

"I had a feeling something was about to come down, and I wanted no part of it. I tried to warn admin, tried to avert the situation, but when all my efforts failed, I quit the force."

"It must have been bad. You loved being a cop."

He smiled sadly at her. "Yes. What happened was a tragedy."

"Can you go back, try to work within the system, try to somehow fix what failed?"

"Now that you mention it -- I've been offered another position, a job where I might do some good. The opportunity opened up after we bagged the Ventura brothers."

"What do you mean 'we'?" Her fear returned with a vengeance. "You said, you didn't involve me --"

"Your credit is unofficial, and is just between you and me. Just like our kiss on Castle Island." From out of his pocket, he withdrew an envelope. "That's half of the finder's reward money. During my frisk, I found some hot ice on the boys. Seems there's been a rash of jewelry heists in the Boston area and, unbelievable though it might seem, the dimwitted Ventura brothers masterminded the operation. I couldn't have managed their capture without you. We make a great team. Anyway, *we* picked up a hefty reward." He winked. "There's something else inside the envelope, too. A ticket to Ireland. I think you need some space. But know this, when you return I'll be here waiting for you."

To give her hands something to do, she picked up a skein of yarn. Undoing the tangle would relax her nerves.

Then, she remembered the plaster cast. One-armed she would never be able to sort out the mess!

She started to put the skein back down.

Dan removed his jacket, dragged a stool across from her, took a seat, and held up his arms, bent at the elbow. "Wind the yarn around my hands."

With a nod, she did. "I wanted to take a trip Ireland. I was just thinking about going --"

"I know."

He *knew*?

She let that go for a moment. "But even if I agreed to accept the ticket, I can't just take off. Who'd watch the shop while I'm gone?"

"Me. I don't start the new job 'til after you return, so I can hold down the store."

In a round about way, without saying the actual words, without admitting the truth behind them, without coming right out and saying, "*Are you psychic, too?*" she aired the question on her mind, "Do you knit, Dan?"

"I told you, I tried once, but I wasn't very good. But my skill is improving. I'll never be as good as you, but I'm hoping what ability I do have, will help me with this new job as a police liaison with FBI criminal profilers."

She bit her lip. "I can help you."

"I was hoping you would, Terry. And I want to help you, too." He reached through the tangled yarn and captured her quivering chin. "I love you, Terry. We can work through this together, just as we're doing now with this knotted skein. We make a dynamite team."

They were certainly explosive together!

She sighed. All her life, she'd been groundless. Alone. And here was Dan offering her a place, a home...love.

But she had so much to tell him about herself before committing them both to a future together, before saying those three little words that meant everything, those three words that once said could never be withdrawn. Was she ready?

Dan had gotten to her, she thought resentfully. And because he had gotten to her, he had taken all her protective boundaries away --

That wasn't fair. Yes, Dan had taken something from her, but he had also given her a gift beyond compare. She *felt* something with him. She *felt* something for him. The feelings were not always sweet. Not always pleasant. Some of those feelings were painful. He had hurt her! But good or bad, those feelings were very real. And after a lifetime of fakery, of lies, she appreciated the genuineness.

The hitch was -- her powers were escalating, her strength, too. She had begun to take a proactive approach to her visions. In the name of protecting someone, she had stabbed three men! What if, in the future, she could will a vision to appear on demand rather than play the role of passive host? What if her future abilities were too much for him to handle? What if...what if...

What if Dan's feelings for her changed?

“They won’t,” he said softly, reassuringly.

Could he --

“And no, my love, I can’t read your thoughts. But I am learning to understand you. That’s what a relationship is all about, ya know. Learning about the person you love through shared experiences and stuff like that. I want those shared experiences with you. I love you, Terry. I’m gonna keep right on telling you I love you so you’ll understand how I think, too.”

As she wound the yarn around his big hands, her horrible fear lessened. “When do I leave for Doolin?”

He laughed. “You know, I had a feeling you’d ask. You leave the end of this week. I’ll drive you to Logan, and I’ll be there waiting at the airport to pick you up when you return. Will you let me do that, Terry?”

There was no point hiding her emotions from him; he’d only see right through her defenses.

Dropping the messy skein of yarn, she reached for his hand, enclosing his palm, as she had once enclosed the empty palm of a knitted glove with an old-fashioned design called “Faithful.”

Only this was a real hand, real fingers, a real promise, if yet unfulfilled. All she need do to make that promise happen, to fill the empty glove, was to have faith in love.

Nothing in her life happened accidentally. There were no coincidences. Everything meant something. Especially the knots and mistakes.

She smiled. “I’d like that very much, Daniel.”

 THE END 

Louisa Trent

I am a writer raised in a family of storytellers. My earliest and fondest memory is of my Irish Nana relating a mystical story of a man looking in a window upon a beautiful lady whose long silvery hair swept the floor as she walked. With a simple telling, my grandmother drew me into her tale. A man. A woman. A forbidden love that wouldn't die. From opening word to shivery conclusion, I lived that story with her. Many years later, I'm still awed by the spell of the fantasy world she created with only the dip and swell of her voice.

There's power in words. Hope in love stories. Joy in a happy ending. I'm proud to carry on my family's storytelling tradition.

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