



Rescue Me

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

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Dedication

For Shonna Brannon who spent the last few days of her pregnancy reading this manuscript. Thank you. You're a great friend and critique partner!

Chapter One

"Come on, Pixie. Go, go, go! You can do it!"

Jamie Roberts scrambled up the steep slope behind his Irish wolfhound, racing her to the top of Parker's Ridge. Droplets of sweat trickled down his face as he grabbed any handhold of rock or shrub he could find. The sun beat down hot and hard on his bare shoulders, the air thick with midsummer humidity. Even in the heavily wooded northern Wisconsin wilderness, there was no escape from the heat.

Pixie let out a series of triumphant barks when she reached the top just seconds before Jamie. With a laugh, he collapsed onto the forest floor.

"You only won..." He gasped for breath and swiped his arm over his forehead. "...because I'm carrying all the weight." He unbuckled his hiking pack and slipped it off his shoulders.

Pixie sat down beside him and cocked her head to the side. Her doggy grin was wide as she panted, and she let out the smallest of whines, letting him know she needed a drink.

"Yeah, yeah, babe. It's coming." He pulled out her small tin water dish and unhooked the canteen from the bottom of the pack. "Here you go."

As Pixie lapped up her refreshment, he tipped the jug back and took a couple of deep swallows. Then he lay back, using the pack as a pillow, and sighed deep. This was the life. The sky was crystal clear, so bright it hurt his eyes to stare at it. The trees were lush and green, the scent of pine sap and crushed leaves pungent. Too bad he only got to do

this two weeks a year.

Pixie flopped down on her side next to him and propped her big head on his stomach. She looked up at him with her big, brown eyes, her brow puckering as if in a frown.

"I know you're still upset with me," he said as he scratched behind her ear.

The dog leaned into his hand and groaned, but she never took that all-knowing gaze off him.

"Can't you be happy being the only woman in my life?"

She huffed out a breath and, if she were able, he was fairly sure she would've just rolled her eyes.

"Okay, okay. So I finally found a woman who loved you, but you're not the one who has to share her bed, okay?"

Pixie yawned, her breath hot against his bare stomach. It wasn't as if he hadn't had this conversation before with her.

"Look, babe. Brenda was right. I don't have a heart. Okay? I'm a one-woman guy, and you're it. So you're just gonna have to get used to it." He shook his head at his faithful companion, his partner. They'd been working together for three years, and he didn't know what he'd do without her. When the rest of the world weighed him down, Pixie was there with her unwavering, silent support. No matter the tragedies they saw on search and rescue missions, she always had a way of bringing out the best.

"I'm too old to find a woman," he told his dog, voicing the thoughts that had plagued him since his live-in girlfriend had walked out three weeks ago. "I didn't love her, and I wasn't going to lie to her just because she wanted to hear the words." At forty-five years old, he figured Brenda had been his last chance for everlasting...whatever. But when it came down to it, the words had stuck in his throat, and she'd packed up and moved out the same day.

Pixie rolled onto her back so he could get better access to her chest for a good, hard scratch.

"We're okay on our own." Of course, he was. If Brenda had still been around, she would have wanted to spend his two-week holiday at a

thousand-dollar-a-night spa on some South Seas island. "You wouldn't have liked that," he muttered to Pixie, even though he was the one who would have despised the wasted vacation.

* * * * *

"I'm going to kill him. Slowly. Painfully. Evisceration with a butter knife."

Carla Benevito yelped as her already sore left ankle twisted on the slippery rocks, and she went down hard on her right hip, right into the stream.

"Chinese water torture," she whispered through a tight throat. Oh, God, how was she ever going to get home?

Stop it. Stop it. She sucked in a breath, shoved her tears deep down so they couldn't get out, and let the cool water ease her aches. Part of her wanted to lay back and just float away. Forget the fact she was out here in the middle of God only knew where, starving and in pain.

She would not give up. If she gave up and died, how would she ever punish her lousy, good-for-nothing, jackass of an ex-boyfriend? Hmm? If she died, he was off the hook. *Not going to happen.*

For just a minute, she leaned back into the water, letting the cool glide ease the sunburn on her shoulders and arms. She splashed her face and dunked her head. How she wanted to stay right here.

Get up. Get going.

Her will to survive outweighed her misery...slightly...and she pushed up to her knees. Using a small boulder, she rose to her feet, her soaked cotton shorts clingy and clammy.

"Argh!" She fisted her hands and fought the tears of pain when she put weight on her left foot. "Damn you, Jeffery. Damn you to hell and back again. You are so dead. I'm going to sue your ass."

A harsh bark of a laugh slipped out of her. As if he had anything. God, she needed to find a man with money next time. At least then she'd have incentive to sue if she got left in the woods again.

The next time? She was thirty-nine and five-sixths with forty

looming large and daunting in front of her. There would be no next time. "Face the facts, Lala," she said, using the nickname her baby brother had given her over three decades earlier, "You're a middle-aged spinster. There is no Mister Right out there. He probably passed you in the hall on your way up the corporate ladder."

Girding her courage to take the pain, she clenched her teeth and hobbled a few steps away from the stream, up a short embankment to a fairly flat, almost grassy spot in the shade of a massive tree. Collapsing right there looked better and better. What did she have to go back to?

An empty apartment she'd paid too much for? A job that worked her seventy hours a week?

"God damn it, Lala, stop feeling sorry for yourself. Life sucks and Jeff's a prick, but life does go on. You just have to get your tired, sore ass out of these fucking woods, and you'll be fine!"

Right. She took a step and almost fell down. Her burned shoulder struck the rough bark of the tree, tearing a cry from her, but at least she stayed upright.

"I hate him. I hate him. I *hate* him. Bamboo under the fingernails. No. Toenails."

With a vision of Jeffery suffering endless horrors at the hands of men trained in torture tactics, she shoved away from the tree and took a step. Pain shot up her left leg from her ankle to her knee, but she didn't fall.

"Keep going," she urged herself. "Just keep going. Follow the stream, which will turn into a river, which will lead you to civilization."

Her stomach cramped. "Oh, God, I'm hungry."

The ground was more even along this stretch, and she hobbled her way downstream, determined to keep going. To get back to Chicago, hunt Jeffery down, and make him pay.

The guillotine? No. Too quick. Slow torture. Very slow. Whatever she decided to do to him, she'd make it last as long as her *camping trip* lasted out here.

Oh, shit. No. No, no, no. The sun was setting, she realized, as the shadows grew darker and she had to strain to see the bumps and dips in

the ground. Not another night out here alone. Last night, with all the sounds of creepy crawlies and things she was sure were bigger than her, she sat in the semi shelter between massive tree roots waiting to be eaten. But she'd survived with only a bunch of mosquito bites.

She tripped and went down hard on hands and knees. Her cheek slammed into the solid ground covered by prickly pine needles, and she saw stars.

"Fuck it," she cried as pain radiated throughout her entire body. A deep sob tore from her soul, and she couldn't keep it in. Not anymore. She had no idea how she'd get home. Jeffery might have killed her when he drove off in a temper, leaving her alone. She didn't know where she was, and she had no idea how far the nearest bit of civilization might be. The stream she'd been following all day might not even lead anywhere.

Hunger made her stomach and head hurt. The sun had broiled her skin. And for all she knew, her ankle was broken.

Sucking in a breath, trying to get her tears under control, she flopped over onto her back. She lifted the hem of her tank top and swiped her eyes. Carla Benevito did not cry. Ever. Tough as nails. Ice in her veins. Could take on a room of sharks and come out unscathed.

But she wasn't in a corporate boardroom right now; she was in the middle of the wilderness. Alone. And scared shitless.

Blinking up through the trees, her fear only multiplied as she realized how dark blue the sky had grown. Nighttime had arrived. She shoved herself up to a sitting position and looked at her leg. Her ankle was swollen but didn't look discolored—not that she could see much in the dim light.

With a heavy sigh, she rolled onto her knees and prepared to lever herself to her feet. She reached for the tree trunk—the same one whose root she'd tripped over—and saw a rope dangling...

She frowned and followed the white nylon cord up to a knot about five feet up. From there... *"Oh. Yes!"* Two canvas packs hung from a high limb of the tree.

"Food." She clambered to her feet, ignoring the fiery pain shooting up her leg, and pulled the slipknot. The rope jerked from her fingers, and

the bags thudded to the ground.

With a whimper, she collapsed next to them, lifted the biggest one, and ripped open the zipper. Underwear, socks... She threw the clothes on the ground. "Oh, shit." Her blood froze when she pulled out a...handgun. She'd never actually held one before, and this sure didn't look like they did in the movies, but the overall shape couldn't be mistaken.

She licked her lips and stared at it for a long moment, but then her stomach cramped again, and she set it aside and dug back into the bag. A first aid kit. She set it down, hoping it held an Ace bandage for her ankle. A small bag of wooden matches, string, sewing kit, and some other strange stuff she didn't give a shit about right now, but she'd have fire tonight. *Yaaa.*

A big, heavy knife, a tin cup and plate—where the hell was the food for it? Shoving the almost empty bag off her lap, she grabbed the other one and found the zipper.

Yes. *Yes!* Right there on top, a Ziploc bag of... Well, it looked kind of gross. She opened it and sniffed. Chicken? Rice? She reached in, grabbed a handful, and shoved it in her mouth. *Oh. Yes.* Food. Nothing had ever tasted so good. It could use some salt and pepper, but it was cooked, and it was edible, and ohh. *Thank you. Thank you whoever left this here.*

A low growl from her left had her freezing, her fourth handful of rice halfway to her mouth. *Shit. Shit.* She didn't want to get eaten now. She'd just found a hope of surviving. *Go away. Go away. I'm not food.*

"Is there a reason you're eating Pixie's dinner?"

Carla whipped her head around to see a giant looming over her. With a giant beast at his side. Oh, God, it was worse than she thought. She'd fallen down a rabbit hole somewhere. Were there giants in *Alice in Wonderland*?

A giggle bubbled out of her as terror held her still. *Who cares?*

The gray beast moved toward her. Carla screamed, dropped the food, and dove for the handgun she'd dropped on the ground just minutes earlier.

The animal stopped and reared back, its teeth showing as it snarled

at her.

“Don’t let it come any closer,” she said, pointing the gun at the fanged fur ball, afraid to take her eyes off it.

A deep, rumbling laugh caught her off guard. Heart in her throat, unable to figure out what the giant could possibly find funny, she glanced at him.

He dropped a smaller pack—one that matched the two she’d rummaged through—onto the ground. “The *flare gun* is not loaded, and she’s only ticked off because you’re eating her supper.”

His smile was very white against his deeply tanned skin, but the night had set in, and she couldn’t see much of his features. His biceps were humongous, as thick as her thigh. His abdomen was rippled with six-pack temptation, and...*wow*. She’d never seen the perfect male specimen...until now.

Chapter Two

The medic in him zeroed in on the severe sunburn making her cheeks and shoulders glow in the dim, evening light. Her lips were chapped and peeling, and he assumed the dark smudges on her legs were bruises. The man in him couldn't help but notice her soft curves, ample breasts, big, dark, almond-shaped eyes, and a mane of wild, wavy, jet-black hair. She was sexy as hell, but probably in a shitload of pain.

Pixie emitted another low, rumbling growl.

"Women," he muttered. They got riled over the oddest things. "Pix, get your food," he said, mostly to see what the woman would do when the hundred-thirty-pound wolfhound approached her.

Pixie lowered her head, her ears forward, as she approached the woman seated on the ground. The pack was still on the woman's lap, the plastic bag of Pixie's food sticking out.

"D-don't," the woman said, seemingly frozen with fear as she sat stock still and stared wide-eyed when Pixie approached her. The flare gun pointed at his dog.

"She's harmless," he said. "And that gun isn't going to do anything unless you hit her with it, and if you do... Well, no one hits my baby."

Her gaze jerked back to him. "Baby? And you're Paul Bunyan, aren't you?"

He chuckled. At six-five, he was rather tall, but he was definitely no mythical lumberjack.

Pixie finally made it to the woman's side. When she stuck her nose

in the woman's face, he thought the poor lady was going to asphyxiate from holding her breath. But then Pixie blew out a snort, turned her head, and gently picked up her bag of food.

The woman gasped in a breath and scrubbed her hand down her face. Jamie grinned. Test number one passed. The dog didn't think she was a real threat. What the hell was she doing all the way out here, obviously alone? Eating dog food as if it were as delicious as anything she'd ever had? She'd talk when she was ready, and he probably shouldn't torment her anymore.

But the guy in him who had four younger sisters liked to come out and torment once in a while. God, he missed them. He should give them a call when he got home. He hadn't talked to them in ages.

"If you would've dug a bit deeper in the pack," he said as he gathered up fallen needles and twigs for tinder for a fire, "you'd have found some protein bars. Why don't you help yourself, and I'll get a fire started."

Pixie ate her food out of the bag with a delicacy that never ceased to amaze him. The queen of England didn't have as much courtesy as his big baby. He gave her a pat on the head as he passed her, and she rewarded him with a quick lick on the forearm.

The woman rummaged through the bag, and then he heard the tearing of the foil wrapper on a protein bar.

"Oh, God, this is good," she mumbled with her mouth full. "Thank you. I haven't eaten in..." Her voice trailed off as she took another bite.

He took his gathered twigs to the small pit he'd built a week ago and set up to start a fire. Tonight would be rabbit. Pixie caught him one earlier, but the poor dog wasn't going to get much of her hunt, since he now had another human mouth to feed.

"How long?" he asked, wondering if the woman would talk. She wasn't acting quite...normal...for someone who'd been out in the woods a while alone. Most of the time they went running into his arms—if they were able—and blabbered on about their traumatic situation.

"Two days, one night," the woman said. "And...the dog food would have sufficed."

She was remarkably calm, and he wondered if she were exaggerating. Sure, she looked a little worse for wear, but... She sure as hell wasn't dressed for thirty-six hours in the woods. Canvas tennis shoes that would give zero support. Barefoot inside those shoes, which most likely meant blisters. Tank top and khaki shorts. And from what he could see, that was all she had. No pack, no water—not that there wasn't a stream nearby, and she'd probably been following it in order to have stumbled across his campsite...

He struck a wooden match he'd pulled from his pocket and lit the tinder. As fire crackled and ate at the twigs, he carefully added a few bigger sticks.

"I'm...um...sorry about the gun thing. You and your dog startled me."

He glanced in her direction but couldn't see her outside the ring of the firelight. "That's okay. I'm Jamie Roberts, by the way."

"Carla Benevito. And I'm so glad I found you. Or you found me. Anyway. Could you please take me back to some kind of civilization?"

"Ah. No." He stacked on a few larger pieces of wood. "My ride's not returning for four more days."

Silence, except for the crackling of the fire as it licked over the dry tinder, and the crickets chirping nearby.

"I'll pay you. I have money. Well, not on me. At home. I'll pay you for your time and inconvenience."

The corner of his mouth kicked up in a grin. "Sorry, Ms. Benevito, no can do. We're forty miles from the nearest town. So unless you want to start hiking now, you're stuck here until my ride arrives on Friday."

A few days with a beautiful woman wasn't too much of a hardship on him—especially since she wasn't panicking, and she didn't seem all that upset. Her voice was low and cultured, no hint of real distress since Pixie walked away from her.

"Fuck."

The single whispered word caught him off guard, spoken in such a cultured way as to be hilarious. He bit the inside of his cheek and rose to his feet to retrieve the rabbit from his pack.

"I'm sorry," he said when he had the humor under control. "It must be an inconvenience and all, but I'm a pretty good guy. I'll keep you fed, and I've got some lotion that'll help your sunburn." And some ibuprofen. Since she hadn't moved from her spot, he wondered if she were shy, embarrassed, or had some other injury that prevented her from moving toward the fire—as a normal person would do. With the sun setting, the air cooled rapidly and, in an hour, it'd be downright chilly.

"I'm sure you're a good guy," she said, her tone soft. "I just have..." She sighed. "Know any really painful forms of torture?"

Bending over to pick up his pack, he jerked upright and stared through the darkness at her. "Excuse me?"

White teeth flashed with a grin. "Sorry. Not to use against you, of course. You fed me." Her voice dropped to a soft murmur when she said, "And you're as big as a tank, anyway."

"I thought I was Paul Bunyan." He pulled the skinned and cleaned rabbit from his pack and slipped it out of the plastic bag he'd wrapped it in.

"Is that a rabbit?" Carla asked.

"Uh huh. Dinner."

"I love rabbit—I've just never seen one...that way."

Ahh, he got it now. City girl. Which, again, didn't explain why she wasn't in worse shape for being alone in the woods with a strange man and his beast.

"It'll barbeque up nicely," he said as he slipped it onto the spit he'd constructed and then placed it over the fire, high enough to stay out of the flames, low enough to get the best part of the heat. He preferred to wrap it in leaves and put it next to the coals, but that took longer, and he figured Carla needed some real sustenance soon.

"Have you been drinking water?" he asked, keeping his voice casual.

"Yeah. From the stream. Though I'm not sure how healthy that is."

He refrained from telling her there could be microbes that could make her sick. It wouldn't be pleasant to deal with, but it wouldn't kill her. Diarrhea and a fever, which probably wouldn't even show up until

she got home.

After checking to make sure the spit wouldn't fall, he went to his pack, pulled off the canteen, and took it to her. "Here. It's purified."

She took the jug and unscrewed the lid. "Thanks." She'd moved the pack off her lap and held the crumpled wrapper in her hand.

"You want to move over to the fire?"

"Um. Yeah. But I'm going to...need some help. I twisted my ankle."

She sounded rather put out about injuring herself. He kept waiting for the tears or the panic. Maybe she was in shock? Without thinking, he bent and lifted her.

She yelped and wound her arms around him, catching him in the side of the head with the plastic canteen in the process. She smelled somewhere between warm woman with a hint of coconut...and wet dog. Not an unpleasant scent, he had to admit.

He set her on the ground close to the fire. "Mind if I look at your ankle?"

She frowned at him as he bent over her.

"I have some medical training."

"First aid?"

He shrugged and propped his hands on his knees. "Among other things." Such as an EMT III, first responder, and had gone through paramedic training. But he liked her skepticism. He liked that she wasn't falling all over him and crying about the lot that had befallen her.

"Okay. I think it's just sprained, though. If you have a tensor bandage, that'd probably help."

Her eyes were as dark as the night, shining with intelligence and total calm. He would take her for someone who didn't ever lose control easily.

He winked. "That I have." He went back to his packs—which he'd need to repack thanks to his visitor—and grabbed the first aid kit. He rotated the rabbit on the spit and then knelt down at her feet. "So, what brings you to my neck of the woods? I've been coming out here for ten years, and you're the first person I've ever happened across." He carefully pulled off her shoes.

"An asshole named Jeff," she muttered. Then she sucked in her breath through her teeth when he gently probed her left ankle.

"It's a little swollen. Who's Jeff?"

"Um. If you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about him right now. It's a rather sore subject."

He raised his eyebrow, but responded with a nod. Another oddity. Most women wanted to yammer about their sore subjects. He pulled the Ace bandage from the first aid kit. "How about something simpler, like where you're from?"

"Chicago. You?"

They might have been at a cocktail party for as cordial as she sounded. It made him grin, and it made him admire her. "Cooper Valley."

"I've never heard of it," she said with a slight shake of her head, which made her long, black hair swoosh against her shoulders and shine in the firelight.

"It's a little place between Eau Claire and Wausau." He finished wrapping the bandage and used the tooth hooks to anchor the end in place. "That feel okay?" he asked as he tested the tightness.

She nodded. "Yes. It feels better already. Thank you."

"Always ready to help a damsel in distress."

She chuckled. "Somehow...I can believe that."

When he looked up from closing the first aid box and his eyes met hers, a spark of heat ignited deep within him at the look of open admiration she gave.

Oh, no. Not good. They were in the middle of nowhere. Sexual attraction was not allowed. He never let himself feel anything for the women he rescued. Professionalism was one thing he never, ever shirked.

Then again, he hadn't exactly rescued her. She'd done that herself. And with her self-assuredness and calm demeanor, she probably would have survived on her own and gotten out of the woods just fine, as long as she followed the stream and didn't wander into the forest.

Her tongue flicked out and licked her peeling lips. The action shouldn't have been sexy, but he felt that slow slide of her tongue along his cock. He cleared his throat. "You should drink some more water. I

think you're dehydrated."

She nodded and picked up the canteen from beside her.

"I'm going to check the meat." And move to the other side of the fire where he wasn't tempted to lean over and lick those lips for her. Whoa. It wasn't as if he'd been long without a woman. The argument with Brenda happened just three weeks ago after they'd had sex. A guy his age... Good lord, he had a boner, and it got worse every time he blinked and the vision of that silky pink tongue flicked through his mind. He adjusted his shorts for better comfort and in an attempt to hide it some as he stood with his back to the fire across from Carla.

"Um. Um. Uh. Jamie?"

He turned at her worried tone to see Pixie stalking her. He grinned. "She's playing. Trust me, she's harmless. A big pussy cat."

Carla shook her head, her gaze fixed on Pixie as the dog inched closer, crouched in pounce mode.

"Pix. Leave her alone."

Pixie flicked her gaze his way, and he shook his head. She let out a grunt and flopped down next to Carla, her big head resting on her paws just inches from the woman. Carla leaned away, nearly tumbling to the side, and he laughed.

"What *is* it?" Carla asked.

"What is it?" He laughed harder. "My dog."

"No. Really. What *is* it?"

Pixie stood up and loomed over Carla. The poor woman yelped and cowered in fear as if she thought the dog would eat her. And then Pixie licked the woman's face from chin to forehead and gave her one of her patented doggie grins.

Obviously, he wasn't the only one impressed with Ms. Benevito. He just about collapsed with laughter.

Chapter Three

Carla could not sleep. The sunburn kept her skin at the temperature of broil. And between the hard, male body on one side, and the big, bristly furred dog on her other, she didn't think slumber would ever take over, even though she was exhausted.

The pills Jamie had given her with supper had helped alleviate the pain in her ankle, and the aloe gel he'd rubbed into her shoulders helped the burn.

But, oh, good Lord, when he'd touched her to rub in that stuff... She hurt all over and should not be thinking this way, but she wanted him. Wanted to roll over and straddle those narrow hips, plant her hands against his incredible pecs, and ride him in a way she'd never ridden a man before.

He was big, and strong, and gentle and...and he'd cooked her supper. She was even starting to like the beast he called a dog. He made her laugh. It had been a long time since anyone teased her. Not since her brother died nearly ten years earlier.

His dog even seemed to tease her, seemingly finding it hilarious that it scared the hell out of her.

This man she happened upon in the middle of nowhere treated her better than Jeff ever had, and they'd been together for three years. This man shared his food with a stranger because Jeff had abandoned her out here.

Was Jeff even looking for her? Called out search and rescue? She

seriously doubted it. What a total fool she'd been.

Jamie rolled onto his side and threw a heavy arm over her middle. She gasped at the electrical wave of lust that coursed through her at the innocent touch. This was definitely not the time for her libido to kick in. Jeff accused her of being an ice queen, said it took too much effort to get her warmed up. She was warm now. Sizzling hot. And it had nothing to do with her sunburn, either.

She wanted to turn into Jamie and bury her face against his chest. He smelled so good. Masculine. He'd bathed in the stream before bed, and his scent was fresh and piney. Like the woods themselves.

Up close he was nothing short of gorgeous. His eyes were dark, dark green, his skin smooth and deeply tan. She couldn't figure out his nationality, but she'd bet there was some Native American in him. Maybe East Asian. Whatever it was...

She sighed and tried to shut off her brain.

Pixie snored. Loudly. Right in her ear.

Carla reached out and poked the animal in the side. Pixie raised her head and, though Carla couldn't see her eyes in the dark confines of the too-small tent, she'd bet the dog glared at her.

At her movement, Jamie's arm curled around her, his hand splaying wide on her side, sucking all breath from her. Oh, Lord, she'd never survive the night. Why couldn't he have had his hand in a more productive spot? Over her breast. Between her legs where her pussy throbbed.

She gritted her teeth and prayed for sleep. It would be the only escape from the innocent, though sensual, torture Jamie wreaked on her body.

The arm around her tightened, and he pulled her against him, almost under him, and she felt his erection. She couldn't miss the solid length as it pressed against her hip. She whimpered but took the opportunity to lay her cheek against his skin. He felt so cool compared to the heat radiating from within her body.

She was too old to have these urges. At almost forty, she shouldn't get turned on just because she'd been forced to share a close space with a

sexy man.

A man whom she'd caught giving her *the* look a couple of times. The look that every woman knew, understood, and couldn't say no to, especially after said man has just pampered the hell out of her. Cooked her dinner. Cared for her wounds.

His erection was simply a physiological reaction. He was asleep and not even aware.

That thought didn't keep her from wanting to reach down, slip her hands into his boxers—the only bit of clothing he wore—and wrap her fingers around him.

He moved again, bringing her even closer, tighter, against him. She used the opportunity to turn slightly so she lay flush, front-to-front, with him. She groaned and buried her face against his chest, the light dusting of springy black hair tickling her nose. As her breasts pressed against him, her nipples tightened to a point of pain.

"Jamie," she whispered. She needed him awake to either put a stop to this torture, or finish it until relief followed. It wouldn't take much. A few touches of his fingers would do it. Hell, a few touches of her own would do it right now.

His hand slid up under her shirt, his massive palm splayed open on her back. His hips thrust once, not hard but enough to press his cock against her abdomen. He was so huge, and she wanted all of it inside her right *now*.

"Jamie," she whispered again as she wrapped an arm around his waist and nudged his penis with her body, hoping to jar him awake.

His arm just tightened around her, his hand pulling her closer to him. But there was no missing the deepening of his breaths. Then his hand slid down her back, under the waistband of her shorts, cupped her butt cheek, and squeezed.

She moaned. Yes. Oh, Lord, it felt good. So good. His big hand, long fingers. So strong. So close to where she needed his touch. Just a little lower...a little—

Pixie whined, which made Carla freeze in the process of reaching between their bodies to touch his cock. The noise came again; a short,

high-pitched, whimpery sound.

Fuck. It was like having sex in front of a kid. She couldn't do it. Pixie was Jamie's baby. He'd said so.

The whine grew louder, and Pixie moved. When Carla turned her head, the dog stood over them, its back rubbing against the ceiling of the tent. Fear shot through her, and she wondered if Pixie were possessive of Jamie's affection. Oh, damn. A jealous dog that probably weighed as much as she did.

Pixie lowered her head, nudged Jamie's chest with her big nose, and made another whiny sound.

Jamie rolled onto his back, releasing Carla. "Hey, Pix. Gotta go out?" He sat up and unzipped the tent flap. The dog took off out the door like a shot.

Carla couldn't catch her breath. He didn't realize what had been going on? His erection didn't register with him? Sharing this tent had been a mistake. She should have stayed out by the tree or something.

Then again, he only had one sleeping bag, and the mat they lay on was much more comfortable than the bare ground. Even with the uncomfortable arousal coursing through her, she was way warmer and safer than she'd been last night all alone and scared.

"How're you feeling?" Jamie asked when he stretched out beside her again.

A tormented giggle slipped out of her. "Fine. Just fine."

He rose up on one arm; she could see his darker silhouette against the lighter color of the tent. "You sure you're okay?" A gentle hand touched her cheek, and his thumb skimmed over her lips coated in Chapstick he'd given her to use.

A whimper slipped out of her, and she leaned into his palm.

"Oh, shit," he whispered. "That wasn't a dream, was it?"

With a slow shake of her head, she rolled toward him, bringing her body flush with his once again.

"Carla..."

"I'm so turned on right now," she confessed, "I'll never get to sleep if you tell me you don't want..." She rubbed her hand over the front of his

boxers, against his semi-arousal, and his cock hardened instantly beneath her touch.

"I want," he said on a harsh breath. "God, I want. But you... We're..." He chuckled and leaned down, closer, so she could feel his breath against her lips and cheek. "This is the weirdest situation I've ever been in."

"I'm not weird." She leaned up and brushed her lips against his. "But I am horny."

"We shouldn't." He returned the light caress against her mouth, making her shiver.

She slipped her fingers into the waistband of his shorts and teased the tip of his cock until he groaned. "We should. We'll both feel better."

"You're injured and lost in the wilderness. I don't want to take advantage."

She chuckled. "If you don't, I will."

His hand slid from her cheek and lightly skimmed over her sore shoulder, which made her cringe.

"Sorry," he whispered. "It feels like your flesh is on fire." Then his gentle hand traveled down her side to her hip, where he stopped and flexed his fingers.

She nodded and circled his cock with her fingers. "Inside, too. But I want you." He was so thick, so hard. He'd feel so...*perfect* inside her.

His breath was warm, scented with coffee and mint, as it brushed over her lips. "You don't know me. I could be a psycho."

"Best looking psycho I've ever met."

"I could be married."

She jerked back and tried to see his face, but it was too dark. "You're married?" she cried. That was one thing she'd never do.

"No, I'm not. But that kind of makes my point, doesn't it?" Even as he said the words, though, he rubbed his hand over her hip and upper thigh then her side and around to her back.

"What do you do for a living?" she finally asked. She'd avoided getting into personal questions all through supper and afterwards. Stupidly, she'd assumed keeping a personal distance between them

would help her overcome her absurdly strong attraction to him.

"I work for the fire department. You?"

"CFO of an entertainment company." No way was she going to admit what industry she really worked in, not when she was practically begging for sex. That would really shed a bad light on her. She didn't want him to think she was easy or that she did this as a regular thing.

"We have no protection."

She nodded. "I just broke up from a three-year relationship, haven't been with anyone else, and take the contraceptive shots. I'm clean and won't get pregnant."

"Eighteen-month relationship breakup, celibate since, and I was tested six months ago—clean."

Who would have ever thought discussing this stuff would be arousing? She went a little lightheaded from her heavy breathing. "Why'd you break up?"

Silence. He wasn't going to tell her. Might be a turnoff to him to discuss it. But his penis, which she cradled in her hand and stroked with a slow slide of her hand, was still rock hard.

"She wanted wedding bells and children."

Carla smiled into the darkness. He wasn't looking for wedding bells. She sure as hell wasn't either, not after Jeff's abandonment. "I don't look good in white," she murmured as she leaned into him and touched her lips to his. "But I bet you could make me hear bells if you'd just—"

His mouth came down on hers, and his tongue swept inside. A cry lodged in her throat as he wound his arms around her and rose over her, his cock pressing hard and intimately against her hot, throbbing center. If only layers of cotton didn't separate them...

"You taste so fucking good," he practically growled as he moved from her lips to her chin, and down to her neck with the most arousing nibbling bites. Arching into him, rubbing herself against him as best she could, she silently begged him to hurry.

"Arms up," he commanded, his voice rough as he tugged her tank top up.

She did as told, and he swept the shirt over her head. And then his

hot, wet mouth closed over one tightened nipple, and she cried out, pressing into him. Her pussy clenched with each hard draw on her breast. He moved to the other with a satisfied grunt, all the while shaping and molding her breasts with his big, callused hands, the roughness giving her a thrill she'd never felt before. No corporate lackey, this man. Oh, no. Rough and tumble outdoorsman. A firefighter. She shivered. How wonderfully blue collar. How *naughty*.

"Wish I could see you," he murmured then flicked his tongue over her, making her suck in her breath.

"No," she said on a breathy laugh. "My tan lines are totally fucked up."

He chuckled. "You sure you don't hurt too bad for this?"

As he nuzzled the side of her breast, his big palms making her feel small and delicate—something that had never happened before—she shook her head. "Don't stop now. Don't you dare stop."

He shifted to her side, so he only half covered her, and slid one hand down her belly to her waistband. He flicked the button, and the zipper rasped loud in the small space of the tent. The only other sound was their heavy breathing, in unison, as if they'd already become one.

"She wears satin in the wilderness," he muttered as he slipped his fingers into her panties.

"I didn't know I'd be stuck here for a week."

"It's sexy."

"*Argh!*" She lifted her hips as his long, thick finger slid between her swollen pussy lips and stroked her clit.

"That's sexy, too. Damn, you're wet."

"Yesss," she hissed. "Just watching you make me dinner made me wet. Now would you please fuck me and put me out of my misery?"

"I love a woman who knows what she wants." He latched on to her nipple with a hard suction of his mouth as his fingers delved into her slick core. When his thumb flicked over her clit as he delved deep, she gripped his shoulders and pressed against him with a groan. She was so close... So close...

He switched to her other breast and scraped his thumbnail lightly

over her tight bundle of nerves, and she cried out her release, thrusting her hips against his hand in a frantic need for more and more.

“Damn, I wish I could see you,” he murmured in her ear, his breath hot and raspy against her dampened flesh. “There’s nothing sexier than watching a woman come.”

“I’m not done,” she said as she gasped in a deep lungful of air. “And neither are you.” She shoved his shorts over his ass and dug her nails into his hard, resilient flesh.

“Holy shit, woman, now you’re asking for it.”

Chapter Four

Even as Jamie swirled his tongue in her mouth and pressed his raging hard-on against her soft, lush body, he knew he shouldn't. He couldn't draw a line between his job and this woman. She was a rescue to him.

Men and women alike sometimes became ultra-sexual after a harrowing experience. Some of the hottest, dirtiest sex he'd ever had came within hours of an especially risky rescue. But never with anyone he saved. What if Carla were still dealing with the aftereffects of whatever she'd been through? He understood needing someone—the physical contact and sexual release—to prove oneself still alive.

Ripping his mouth from hers, he rested his forehead against hers. "This still doesn't seem right, Carla."

She arched against him and dug her nails into his ass, making him groan. "Feels pretty damn right to me."

He swallowed back a curse as he panted. "I can't take advantage of you. You're injured. You're not thinking straight."

Tilting her head, she grazed her lips against his cheek. "You're very sweet, and you're not taking advantage. My thinking is fine."

She sounded as if she knew what she was doing. And God knew he'd never been so ready to sink into a woman in his life. He almost had to laugh. Brenda, a highly sexed twenty-seven-year-old, had made fun of him for his lack of libido. She was ready for sex 24/7, and he usually took a bit to warm up and get going. Look at him now. One touch from curvy,

soft, *mature* Carla turned him on harder than he'd been in years. So much for thinking he was over the hill. And what the hell had he been doing with a twenty-something? This was so much better.

Carla sighed and eased her hands from his butt. "If you don't want to—"

He leaned down and sank his tongue into her mouth, shutting off her words. For better or worse, he was going to. He'd deal with the consequences tomorrow. She wasn't looking for commitment, and that was great. Two mature adults alone in the woods having some hot, sweaty sex. Definitely more than he'd expected from a camping trip with his dog.

Moaning into his mouth, she bucked against him, and her nails scored over his shoulder blades. Shit, she was hot. He broke the kiss and shoved her shorts and silky panties down her legs. Her thighs were smooth and soft. Definitely not the same toned, honed and chiseled body Brenda had, but so much better. Real. Delicate.

Carla's hands roamed over his chest, his stomach, up to his shoulders and then into his hair. "You have got to be," she said as she nibbled on his earlobe, "the sexiest man I've ever met." A soft, throaty laugh came out of her, the puff of air sending sparks of lust down his spine. "And I've met a hell of a lot of sexy men."

He did not want to hear about her other men, so he turned his head, captured her lips with his, and nestled between the sweet cushion of her thighs, the tip of his cock teasing her damp curls.

"Yes," she whispered as he nudged her heated center, her pussy slick and hot.

He couldn't agree more. *Yes*. Definitely yes. He wished he could see her, look into her eyes as he sank into her but, in the darkness, he could barely see at all.

Her legs came up, wrapped around his lower back, then she thrust her hips up, and he plunged into her. Her silky core contracted around his cock, wringing a groan of pure ecstasy from him.

"More," she said on a moan as he drew back, and then she cried out as he shoved back in, going balls deep into her.

She was hotter, wetter, tighter than any woman he'd been with in ages, and he wasn't sure how long he'd last. Gritting his teeth, he set a hard, steady pace as he gathered her to him, wrapping his arms up under her, arching her back so he could bring his head down to her chest and suck one fat nipple between his lips.

"Harder," she begged as she speared her hands into his hair and brought her legs up even higher, spreading herself wide to take every millimeter he had to give.

He sucked her breast and pummeled into her, giving her his all and taking every bit she gave.

Her muscles tensed, her cunt squeezed his cock with each stroke like a fist, and then she screamed, nearly deafening him as her legs tightened so hard around him he thought she might break his back.

With two more strokes, he let himself go with a growl, pressing deep, reveling in the way her body milked his cock, sucking every last drop from him. The world spun, and stars exploded behind his eyes. He thought he was having a stroke.

"Oh, Christ," he gasped as he collapsed next to her, barely able to suck in a gulp of air.

She reached out, bumping his chest with her arm, and then rested her hand on his abdomen. "That was...the best...ever."

He couldn't agree more. It had been better than...anyone he could remember. And it was with a woman he'd just met and knew virtually nothing about. He didn't do anonymous sex. He would have grinned if his facial muscles still worked. Maybe anonymous sex wasn't such a bad thing.

"G'night, Jamie." He heard her yawn. "I think I can sleep now." Within three heartbeats, her breathing evened out.

A whine from outside let him know Pixie wasn't very happy with him. He sat up and pulled back the door flap. "Come on," he whispered.

Pixie came in, plopped down beside him, then shoved against him until he rolled up onto his side so he took up less room. Spoiled brat. But it gave him an excuse to snuggle next to Carla, to wrap his arms around her and pull her against his chest.

She murmured something unintelligible in her sleep and cuddled against him. Her thigh nudged his balls, making him suck in his breath and wonder if he'd get another boner so soon. The heavy weight of her breasts pressed against his chest, and he couldn't help but reach down and cup her sweet ass. She moaned and nudged him again, innocently, yet he heated.

Damn. And he'd thought getting a young thing like Brenda had been a coup. He definitely needed to rethink the whole dating mature women thing. He figured Carla was around forty, and she was the hottest piece of ass he'd had...ever.

* * * * *

"Carla. Pixie. Time to get up. Breakfast's ready."

Carla opened her eyes and jerked back from the furry monster face next to her, nearly yelping when pain shot through her shoulders. It only took a moment for her to realize the monster was Pixie. The pain, on the other hand...

Pixie raised her massive head and stared at her as Carla rolled onto her back, trying not to cry out at the agony. If she thought she'd hurt last night, she'd been very mistaken. Every heartbeat thrummed just beneath her skin, pulsing needles of pain through her arms, shoulders, chest, and even the top of her thighs. Her face. Oh, Lord, even her cheeks hurt. She was going to die of skin cancer, and it'd all be Jeff's fault. She was going to *kill* him.

"Helll-ooo? Ladies. Breakfast? You coming out?"

She glanced at Pixie who lay there next to her, staring at her. "He's talking to you, too," she said to the dog.

Pixie made a strange snorting sound then reached out with her nose and nudged Carla's bare shoulder.

She cringed, but the cold, wet nose didn't feel horrible. "Don't, please."

Pixie laid her head on her paws and, if Carla didn't know better, she'd think she saw the dog's eyebrows wrinkle as if she were worried.

"Great," Carla said as she struggled to sit up. "Now I'm thinking a dog is worried about me." The movement made her heartbeat speed a bit, which made the pain worse. She closed her eyes and took a few deep, slow breaths.

"Castration," she said to Pixie. "With a dull knife and no anesthesia. That's what he's going to get."

Pixie raised her head, and her tongue lolled out. Now she looked as if she were grinning.

"You're kinda creepy, you know that?" She searched around the tent until she found her tank top and very slowly and carefully, trying not to touch any bit of red skin, pulled it over her head. And she was definitely red. Glowing. Neon. Probably could be used to direct air traffic.

The dog didn't seem to take offense at her criticism. She just sat there staring. Its head was nearly twice the size of hers, and its bristly, blue-gray fur was shaggy with specks of white here and there. Why anyone would want such a massively big, homely dog was beyond her. If she were the type to own a dog—which she'd never really considered since she didn't spend much time at home—it would be something small and sweet. Like a cocker spaniel. Not one the size of a pony.

"Carla. Pixie. Are you getting up?" The zipper on the tent flap ripped open, and Jamie stuck in his head.

Oh, dear Lord. He was gorgeous. In full daylight, he was even yummier than last night by firelight. His features were chiseled, his eyes so intense she had to press her thighs together to stop the ache in her groin that had nothing to do with sunburn.

"Holy shit, sweetheart. You're hurting, aren't you?"

She nodded and stared at the little cleft in his chin. It seemed as if it were a slight imperfection in his otherwise flawless...everything. His sun-kissed skin was the color of caramel, and she knew from touching him it was as smooth and silky as her favorite candy. And he tasted even better. His short, neatly trimmed hair—an almost military cut—was as black as night but, in the light of day, she saw the smattering of gray at the temples. His eyes, so dark green they matched the color of pine needles, showed wisdom. The creased lines fanning from those eyes were

testament to his maturity.

Her mouth watered and, if she wasn't afraid to move, she'd pull him back into the tent and fuck his brains out all day. Lord, what he did to her.

"Carla? Are you okay?" He crawled partway into the tent and reached for her hand. His fingers were long and callused, his palms huge. He turned her hand over in his and lightly pressed on her skin. The red turned white for an instant.

"I'm...fine," she managed, though having him touch her made her anything but fine.

"You're dehydrated." Reaching over to the side of the tent, he found her shorts and handed them to her. "Come on out of the tent. I'll get some cool compresses for your shoulders, and ibuprofen will hopefully bring down some of the swelling. Are your muscles aching, or is it just your skin?"

"Uhm. Well." She made a face, but even that hurt when her frown pulled her tight, burned skin.

He chuckled. "A worse ache than from stumbling through the forest."

"I...don't think so. Why?"

"What about the chills? Have you had any?"

"No. I'm too warm."

He nodded and looked relieved. "Good. What about fatigue? Do you want to go back to sleep? Feeling lethargic?"

"I'm just plain tired," she said slowly. "But I don't think I feel anything that's not normal for...what I've been through the last couple of days."

"Good. Just a sunburn then." He grinned and winked.

She nearly swooned. He was way too handsome. On top of everything, he had perfectly straight, white teeth. Too bad he wore a shirt this morning that covered up his glorious chest and washboard abs. Though, the muscle shirt did display his more than impressive biceps, along with a Marine Corps insignia tattoo on his right shoulder.

"You're in the Marines."

He shook his head and glanced at his tattoo. "A long time ago." He backed out of the tent. "Come on, Pix. Give the lady some privacy."

Pixie stood up, seeming to be careful not to step on her as the humongous dog turned around and headed out the tent flap after her master.

Carla pushed the sleeping bag off her legs. Yikes. She had the most ridiculous tan lines cutting across mid thigh. Good thing she didn't normally bare her body anywhere. Once this burn turned to a tan, she'd be stuck with it until midwinter.

As carefully as possible, with as little movement as she could manage, she wiggled her way into her shorts and then scooted to the open tent flap. She wondered where her underwear had gone. Hell, she'd worry about it later. Right now she just wanted whatever drugs Jamie could give her.

Rolling to her knees, she backed out of the tent, imagining a beeping sound indicating wide load moving. What could she do? She went to the gym three times a week and put in an obligatory hour of treadmill and nautical machines each visit. She wasn't in too bad of shape for a forty-year-old. She almost laughed. Jamie hadn't seemed to mind her more than ample pieces and parts last night.

Big, gentle hands closed around her waist and lifted her to her feet with ease. When she turned around, she found Jamie grinning down at her. Damn, he was huge. A six-and-a-half-foot-tall wall of muscle. She wasn't short by any means. At five-ten, and most of the time wearing two-to three-inch heels to work, she almost always towered over men. Not this one. Never this one.

"Are you sure you're feeling okay? You seem a bit...dazed. If you have some other health issues, you've got to tell me. I'm worried about you."

Be still my battered heart. He was worried about her. She couldn't remember the last time *anyone* had shown concern for her well-being. "I'm fine. Really." She managed a smile when all she wanted was for him to lean down and kiss her. To wrap his arms around her and hold her against all his lovely, bulging muscles.

Raising his hand, he touched the side of her neck. She closed her eyes and leaned into the gentle caress, until she realized he was checking the reaction of the burn again. Then she wanted to roll her eyes at herself. He was worried about her health. He hadn't even bid her a good morning, let alone kissed her.

Romantic notions did not belong here. One night of awesome sex and a couple of mind-blowing orgasms did not make a...well, anything. Just two people physically attracted to each other sleeping together in a very small space.

Shit happens. Seemed to happen quite a bit to her lately.

Chapter Four

Jamie moved away from Carla out of self-preservation. His protective instincts were zinging all over the place, combined with another hard-on brought on simply from watching that sweet ass back out of the tent. He wanted to coddle her and fuck her. Take care of her and push her to her knees to take his cock in her mouth and suck him off.

He was hopeless.

He went to his clothing pack and pulled out a cotton T-shirt. "If you need some privacy," he said, pulling a roll of biodegradable toilet paper from his pack, "head a few yards that way. The tree will hide you." He pointed behind the tent then handed her the TP after she slid her shoes on.

She slowly nodded, turned, and shuffled away. Even the back of her thighs were bright pink. Christ, she must be in pain. Which should have been enough to keep his hormones at bay, but it wasn't.

The way she'd responded to him last night. Coming with just a few flicks of his fingers. Clinging to him. Her sighs; her cries of ecstasy.

He grinned as he dipped the T-shirt in the creek. Brenda had never responded that well, that...honestly. And when he'd awakened with Carla tucked up against him, bare body to bare body, he'd wanted nothing so much as to move over her, spread her legs, and wake her up from the inside out.

But along with the expanses of soft flesh, the heat radiating off her sunburn was what stopped him from taking everything he wanted. When

he moved away from her, she'd whimpered in her sleep. As much as he wanted to believe it had been a sound of disappointment for losing contact with his body, he worried it had been a sound of pain.

Back at the tent, he dug into his pack again and brought out the bottle of ibuprofen he always kept with him. As middle age set in, so did the aches and pains of getting older. Didn't seem to matter how much he tried to stay in shape, one pulled muscle seemed to take longer and longer to mend with each passing year.

"Besides the sunburn, twisted ankle and hunger, the worst part of being out here is pissing in the woods."

Jamie chuckled, took the roll of TP from her, and tossed it back in the pack. "Sorry. Not much I can do about that. How's the ankle?"

"Not so bad today. Just a little stiff."

She was a real trooper. How many women in her position would be so calm? None he personally knew. Even his sisters—who grew up going on family camping trips—would have been a blubbering mess of tears if they'd gotten to the point Carla had last night.

"Have a seat," he said, gesturing to his camp stool. "You like fish?"

She carefully lowered herself to the seat with a wince, obviously in more pain than she wanted to let on.

"Fish is fine. I'm not a picky eater." Her lips pressed tight, and she sat very still, as if any motion at all hurt her.

Taking the wet T-shirt, he went behind her. "Here. I'm going to put this over your shoulders."

She sucked in a breath as he carefully laid it over her, draping it down her biceps. He didn't know if her reaction was from the cold or the simple contact of anything touching her flesh.

"Damn, sweetheart, I'm sorry." He rounded in front of her, pulled the pills from his pocket, and poured two from the bottle. "Here. Take these." He handed her the canteen. "And you need to drink as much water today as you can. I sterilized two containers this morning. It's still warm, but..." He shrugged. There wasn't a whole lot he could do for her.

"Thank you," she said after she swallowed the pills and took a long swig from the water container. "I'm sorry I've ruined your...vacation."

That made him smile. "Not ruined. Just changed a bit."

Her hair was wild this morning, sticking out this way and that. But what kept drawing his gaze was her fat nipples poking against the front of her tank top. She'd tasted so good last night. A little salty. A lot womanly. What he wanted was to fall to his knees in front of her and help her forget her pain through bringing her pleasure.

Instead, he grabbed the one tin plate he'd brought on the trip, scooped the roasted trout from the rock next to the fire, and laid his fork next to the fish. He added the tin mug of blackberries he'd picked that morning to the side of the plate. "Here, sweets. If you need more food, I'll get you another protein bar."

She took the plate from him with a smile. "Wow. This smells great." Picking up one of the fat, juicy berries, she popped it into her mouth, closed her eyes, and moaned as she slowly chewed. "Don't get anything this fresh in the city. That's for sure."

"Won't get any fresher fish, either, unless you want it raw next time." He grinned as he tidied up the camp, repacking his packs and banking the fire to let it burn out.

The appreciative sounds Carla made as she ate made him feel as if he'd done something special. He'd picked some berries and caught a couple of trout. No big deal.

"Jeff spent a full day trying to catch just one fish," she said after a while. "He couldn't."

He sat down on the ground near her, stretched out his legs, then leaned back on one of the packs, using it as a pillow. "Oh?" he asked with nonchalance, afraid she'd stop talking if he showed too much interest. Last night she'd refused to talk about anything personal.

She took another bite of the trout. "Twelve hours he stood on the edge of the stream with that stupid fly rod. When I finally gave up and cooked up the steaks we'd brought, he..." She swallowed and threw him a self-deprecating smile that was filled with a sadness he was sure she didn't want him to notice. "Sorry. You don't want to hear about this shit."

"Actually, I do, if it's going to explain how you wound up being out here all alone without any food or water."

She licked her dry lips, and he lifted the canteen from the ground and handed it to her.

"Thanks," she murmured before she took a long drink.

She finished off her fish in silence and then slowly ate the berries, one by one. When she had nothing left to occupy her mouth, and he'd taken the plate from her and set it aside, she sighed. "Okay. Fine." She met his gaze head on. "I wasn't ready to write off three years of my life, even though I'd known it was over for months."

He slowly nodded, knowing how she'd felt. He'd kept Brenda around for quite a while, even though he knew they were on a disaster course to nowhere.

"He'd been bugging me since we got together about taking a camping trip up here." With a sigh, and tipping her head back to look up at the canopy of pine bows overhead, she said, "I'm not exactly the...outdoorsy type." She gave an inelegant snort that made him bite his cheek to keep from grinning. "A barbeque in my friends' backyard is the closest to nature I usually get."

"So, in your last-ditch effort, you agreed to the trip." He got up and carefully turned over the T-shirt draped over her shoulders, bringing the cool side against her skin, then resumed his seat so he could gaze up at her.

God, she was gorgeous. Chapped lips, glowing red skin, tangled hair and all. It was her eyes, he realized. Big, and as dark as fresh-ground coffee. Luminous with hidden secrets she'd probably never share with him—but he kind of liked that. Made her a mystery. A secret he could keep for himself and bring out and contemplate when he needed to lose himself in warm, sweet memories. When life gave him too many bumps and bruises.

"Yep. Last-ditch effort. And I'm the one who got ditched."

He frowned.

"He yelled at me about the steaks, and I lost it. Stupid, I know, but I'd had it. For the last six months he'd been jobless, mooching off me, sitting around my apartment eating my food and playing video games."

Her eyes flashed, and there was no mistaking the anger she

probably kept in check more than she let it out.

"*Video games.*" She raised a shaking hand and rubbed her forehead, but then cringed. "Okay, so he was younger than me. Too young, I guess. But he was working for a big firm in middle management when I met him. I thought he had..."

"Potential," Jamie said as he sat up and laid his hand over her knee. Her frustration fairly radiated off her along with the heat from her burn. "It's okay. I've made my fair share of mistakes with young'ns of the opposite sex."

Carla chuckled. "Yeah. Well. When your lover of three years looks you in the face and tells you you're sounding like his mother..." She laughed again. "I was so furious I walked off to cool down." Shaking her head, she sighed. "When I came back an hour later, he was gone, his Jeep was gone, and so was all the food, my purse, my clothes. Everything."

Her shoulders drooped in what looked to him to be dejection as she stared down at his hand lying on her knee. "I stayed there all night, waiting for him to return. By noon yesterday, I realized he wasn't coming back, and if I wanted to..." She laid her hand over his. "I really think if I hadn't stumbled onto your campsite, I probably would have died out here...eventually."

He couldn't argue the fact. Many people, even ones as strong and determined as Carla seemed, often succumbed to the hopelessness of their situations. Being alone in the forest—a place as foreign to her as anything could be—often became too much to bear. "You were doing the right thing by following the stream. It would have led you to a house about ten miles down."

She sucked in a deep breath and forced a smile that was as fake as a three-dollar bill. "Well. Anyway. Until I make it back to Chicago, I'm coming up with every way in which to pay him back for what he did. I'm liking the whole castration-with-a-dull-knife bit I came up with this morning."

She joked to cover her pain. Again, his admiration for her grew. What a strong woman, never letting her emotions overtake her. Keeping her chin up even when life smacked her in the face. He smiled up at her,

turned his hand under hers, and squeezed her fingers. "You're fine now. And we'll get you back to Chicago by the end of the week."

He'd love to get his hands on this Jeff guy. Wring his damn neck. Beat him to a pulp. "You could press charges against him."

She nodded. "I know. I thought about it." She shrugged and gave another half smile. "But I think it would be best just to forget the whole thing. It's my own fault for...for getting involved with, and staying involved with, a child."

He raised his eyebrows. "How young was he?"

She chuckled. "Thirty-two."

Nodding, Jamie thought about what he'd been like at thirty. Definitely not ready to settle down, and nowhere near mature enough for a professional woman who had several years on him. He spent most of the year he was thirty in Iraq during Desert Storm. That year had changed him but, without having experienced the tragedies he'd seen, he probably wouldn't have grown up quite so fast.

"My girlfriend, Brenda, she was only twenty-seven." He shrugged. "The other guys my age at the firehouse were all envious."

Carla's laugh was sweet—a little husky, a bit musical. "My best friend was jealous I had a younger man, too. Then again, she's been married for ten years and has three kids. I think she's jealous of anyone who doesn't have to cook meals, carpool and change diapers."

Her gaze drifted away toward the tent, up to the treetops, then back to him, her smile fading from her full lips. She didn't say anything more, but he got the impression—or perhaps it was his own longings he saw reflected in her eyes—that she might be a little jealous of her friend.

His buddy, Steve, from the fire hall got married recently, and he knew that pang of envy. He'd like a woman to come home to every night. The same woman. For the briefest of moments, he'd thought Brenda... Naw, who was he trying to kid? He'd always known he and Brenda wouldn't last. It'd been a brief affair that turned into a bit more, but he'd always known it had no future.

For a future, he needed a woman like Carla here. Calm, determined. She had backbone. Brenda cried if she broke a manicured

nail.

"So," she said, pulling her hand from his and then lifting the damp T-shirt from her shoulders. "What is it you do out here all day? Hunt and forage? What's for dinner?"

Jamie laughed and pushed to his feet. "Dinner is whatever Pixie catches for us."

Her eyebrows rose in surprise.

"Yeah. She caught the rabbit. And since we've been here, we've had rabbit almost every night, but we did have a couple of grouse, too. Irish wolfhounds were originally bred to be hunters, and she takes her job seriously." He pulled the aloe gel from his pack and moved behind her. "I'm going to rub this in now, and it might hurt, but I'll be as gentle as possible."

She stiffened when he touched her, but let out a slow breath and relaxed. He kept his touch as light as he could as he put a thick coat of the goop over her shoulders and arms, then rounded to her front and did her cheeks and forehead.

Scrunching her nose, she made a face. "That feels gross. Where's the beast, anyway? I haven't seen her since I came out of the tent."

"She's off scouting. Running off her morning energy." With a chuckle, he leaned down and rubbed the gel on her thighs. "As for what I do all day... I'm making a video on wilderness survival."

"Oh?"

"A pet project. Nothing major." He shrugged and capped the bottle then tossed it in the pack. "Just something I'd like to get into schools eventually. I think kids should learn basic outdoor survival from an early age. You don't know how many— Anyway. How about I haul the mattress out here, and you can rest under the trees in the shade while Pixie and I are off exploring."

She tipped her head as she watched him move around the camp, and he tried to avoid her eyes. "What were you going to say? How many what?"

He shook his head and pulled the sleeping pad from inside the tent. "Nothing. Like I said; just a pet project." Thinking about the number of

children who went missing every year, and how so many search and rescues turned into search and recoveries... Well, he was on vacation. Only happy thoughts. Thoughts of his job needed to be kept at bay until he had to face them.

Chapter Five

Carla was in a very pleasant place somewhere between sleep and awake. The gentle sounds of the forest—the breeze floating through pine bows and birch leaves. Birds twittered, and the soothing music of the stream bubbled over the rocky bottom of the creek bed.

She'd bathed in the cool waters of the stream, and the pain of her sunburn had subsided to a dull ache rather than a piercing fire. The book—a Tom Clancy thriller—Jamie had given her had been entertaining, but she didn't want to read it all in one day. She needed to save some for tomorrow.

Ah, Jamie. Now there was a man she could fantasize about for many years to come. A real-life dream-come-true. *Bigger* than life. Masculine as they come. He picked her up and carried her as if she weighed nothing—which damn well was not the case. A man whose beast catches him dinner. He was the epitome of what every woman wants in a lover. And oh, how he'd loved her last night.

With a lazy smile, she adjusted the arm her cheek rested upon. Her nipples tightened with thoughts of Jamie's hands on her. A pleasant ache settled between her legs. He'd awakened the dormant sexuality she'd once enjoyed many years ago. When she still felt she had life to look forward to.

Now... She sighed and then breathed in the warm air scented with sap and...*clean*...clean everything. For the past five years, life held little joy for her. She'd reached the top of the food chain at her job, was pleasantly

wealthy, and really had nowhere to go. Something needed to change, didn't it? Before she woke up another ten years down the road and realized life really had passed her by.

But what? She was too old to start a family. Too jaded to still search for the love of her life. Too comfortable in her job to start over somewhere new. Too...scared to change. Maybe this was her lot in life. Perhaps she'd reached her goal, and all that was left was to ride it out until retirement. The sex industry was growing exponentially every year. She'd never be out of a job, no matter what the conservatives thought.

Stop thinking about it. She was supposed to be on vacation. Hadn't Jeff complained she never let go of her worries? Could never relax and have fun. Live in the moment for just a little while.

With a soft sigh, she let it go. She was here in the wilderness with a beautiful man to take care of her. Experience the moment. Now. She breathed deep and let her worries float away. With Jamie's damp T-shirt over her shoulders, she felt pleasantly cool. Exceptionally relaxed.

"And here we have the elusive wood nymph," Jamie said in a low voice in a horrible rendition of Jacques Cousteau. "She sneaks into your camp, eats your dog food, and then...puts on your clothes?"

Carla giggled, but didn't open her eyes. After a relaxing bath in the stream, she'd pulled on a pair of his shorts from his bag and washed her own clothes.

"Oh. And I see," he said as he moved closer, "she must be part mermaid since her top half is naked and her hair is damp. I have made a new discovery. I shall have to use her for research."

Carla opened her eyes to see him standing close. Very close. She leaned up on her side to look up into his face, to see him holding his little digital video camera. With a yelp, she snatched his shirt from her shoulders and held it over her breasts.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded as her face heated with embarrassment. Being naked in front of a man she'd already slept with was one thing. Baring it all for a camera—no way!

Pixie let out one sharp bark, drawing her attention to the dog that sat at Jamie's side, tongue hanging out, and that eerie grin on her face.

"Mind your own business, fur ball." She looked back up at Jamie, who'd lowered the camera and grinned.

"Hi, sweetheart." He plopped down on the sleeping mat next to her. "You're looking better." He waggled his eyebrows and made her laugh.

"I'm feeling better." She eyed the camera in his hand until he set it aside. "You will delete that."

"Of course." In a move so quick she didn't see it coming, he grabbed the T-shirt she held over her chest and jerked it from her grasp.

She gasped and grabbed for it, but he tossed it behind him.

"I like you better this way." He closed one hand over her bare breast and leaned into her, capturing her mouth in a kiss that stole her breath and made her ache. He coaxed her lips apart with his tongue and swept it inside. "Oh, God," he said on a breath that brushed her cheek as he nuzzled her lips. "I've thought about this all day. The only thing that kept me away was knowing how much pain you were in. I didn't want to hurt you."

Her heart softened, and she wound her arms around his neck, pulling him down over her. "You won't hurt me. I've been thinking about you, too. I want you."

Pixie whined, and Carla froze.

"What?" he asked, rising up on an elbow, searching her eyes.

"The dog. I can't do it in front of the dog."

That gorgeous grin spread over his face, crinkling his eyes and flashing his perfect teeth. "Pixie, go play," he said, not raising his voice even a bit.

Carla glanced past his shoulder to see Pixie sprint off into the bushes. "Aren't you afraid she'll get hurt? Some wild animal will think she's dinner?"

With a shake of his head, he ran his fingers over her cheek then across her bottom lip, making her shiver. "She's as big as any animal out here except a bear. And she'd know to run if one of those came at her."

Carla frowned. "A bear? There're bears out here?" She'd spent the night all alone with bears nearby?

He nodded. "Uh huh. And wolves, and coyotes. Badgers, raccoons, opossums, sku—"

"Stop it, please," she said as her heartbeat sped. "I know they're here, but I'd rather not think about it."

His grin eased into a warm smile. "You're safe from all that stuff with me around. I'll protect you. Pixie will protect you."

"Pixie?"

He nodded. "Two years ago, she went head to head with a badger over me. They're mean little suckers. Pix wound up with a couple sizable scars from that one."

"Why did you name something so big and ugly Pixie?"

His smile vanished, and his brow crinkled into a frown. "She's not ugly."

"Uh. Yeah, she is. I don't think you see it because you've lived with her so long. Kind of like the scary uncle whose missing three fingers, but he's only scary to those who don't know him."

Jamie laughed, eased back down over her, and wrapped one arm around her. "She was the runt of the litter. This cute little bundle of fur. The name fit then." He brushed his lips over hers. "Now, do you want to talk about the dog, or do you want to have sex?"

Laughing, she ran her fingers through his short black hair and looked into eyes that seemed to see her soul. She should be frightened of his intensity, but something about it freed her to be herself. She imagined, if she ever lied to this man, somehow he'd know.

"I want sex."

"Mmm. Yeah. Say it again." He nipped the side of her neck then moved down to her chest, licking and suckling her skin.

"Sex. I want it. I want you..." The last word turned into a moan as his warm, damp lips closed over one nipple. He swirled his tongue around the peak as it hardened. His other hand closed over her neglected breast, and she arched into his touch. No man had ever touched her the way Jamie did. With tenderness, yet passion and demand. Demanding her response without a single word.

He traveled down her body, his hands roaming over her breasts,

her waist, her sides. When he laid a tender, sensual kiss on her stomach just beneath her belly button, she sighed and rested her hands on his shoulders.

He raised his head and looked up at her. "You're beautiful."

A smile curved her lips. An obnoxious retort about clean hair and her sunburn fading a bit was on the tip of her tongue, but she literally bit it back. She didn't want to turn this into a joke. His forest-green eyes were too serious, too filled with gentleness.

"Thank you," she whispered. "I think you're beautiful, too."

The right side of his lips kicked up onto a smile that made her heart speed. Good Lord, if she were the type, she could read so much into that look. Too much. Everything she'd ever wanted.

But then he broke the gaze and dipped his head, nuzzling her belly as he tugged her shorts down her thighs. His warm breath puffed over her curls, teasing her pussy, and she clenched without conscious thought, prolonging the titillating sensations lightly pulsing through her core.

With big, gentle hands, he spread her thighs then brought them up over his shoulders. Her breathing deepened in anticipation as he positioned her just how he wanted her. And then he touched her. Tender fingers spreading her, teasing her. She whimpered and did her best not to wiggle in frustration at his slow pace.

Then he blew on her heated flesh, and every muscle in her body tightened. She pressed her hands on his head, silently begging him to do it.

His soft chuckle seemed to travel through her, making her worse off. "Impatient, are you?" he asked as he lightly—way too lightly—ran one finger over her damp folds.

She bucked under his touch. "Damn it, Jamie, don't torture me."

"Oh, but it's so much fun." He teased her with that single finger, dipping it inside, then pulling it out and skimming it over her clit. "You're so fucking responsive to me. I can see you pulsing, feel it with each...little...touch."

"*Argh.*" She lifted her hips as the orgasm built inside her. With every flick of his finger over the tight bundle of nerves, it grew closer.

"Oh, yeah. Just like that." And then, in one swift move that had her gasping, he plunged two fingers deep into her and captured her clit between his lips, drawing on her hard.

She screamed as the sensations exploded inside her, shooting to her fingers and toes, making her tingle, turning her hot and cold inside and out.

Before the pulses even lessened, Jamie was over her, in her, pounding her so hard she couldn't catch her breath. He gathered her tight against his chest and fucked her so completely a second wave of ecstasy rolled over her, then a third before the first even dissipated. She cried into his shoulder, clinging to him. Sobbing with the overwhelming pleasure cascading through her.

He grunted with each thrust, his breaths hot against her neck. He held her so tight, and she locked her ankles behind his back. She never wanted to let him go. Not ever.

Reaching beneath her with one hand, he cupped her ass and tilted her pelvis just so. Her entire body—every single muscle—clenched down hard. She didn't have enough energy left to cry out, all that escaped was a whimper as she held on for dear life and rode out the almost painful pleasure overtaking her.

And then his mouth clamped over hers, his tongue spearing between her lips, and she swallowed his growl as he tensed. He came with a long, low groan, and three hard pistons of his hips. She gasped as yet another wave of heat and tingles rushed over her and through her.

He collapsed beside her, one hand splayed over her belly, and they spent a few long minutes trying to catch their breaths.

Carla closed her eyes, willing her heart to settle.

"Fuck, I'm sorry," Jamie said between puffs of air. "I'm sorry."

She frowned, but her brain wasn't working enough to formulate words yet.

"I didn't mean... Oh, God. You're just..." His strong arms closed around her, pulling her against his chest. "I've never been so rough with a woman." His hand coasted over her hair, down her back. "I'm sorry."

"Shh," she said against his chest then grinned. "Trust me..." Her

words came out a little slurred, and she was about to fall asleep in the sweet confines of his safe embrace. "You have nothing to apologize for." She giggled. "That was the kind of fucking women fantasize about their whole lives but never actually...experience."

His strong heartbeat lulled her. She wished he wasn't wearing his shirt so she could feel his skin. He'd barely shoved his shorts out of the way, she realized when she adjusted slightly against him.

"Wow," she whispered. "Nothing will ever...live up to what...you just did...to me..."

Chapter Six

Jamie lay still, holding Carla close, his heart still thudding too hard, and his emotions running riot. His hand shook as he smoothed it over her crown, down through her damp hair, loving the way the ends curled around his fingers.

He'd never lost control that way before. She tasted of everything good. Pure. Feeling her body react to him, hearing her cries of the ecstasy he gave her, had been almost too much to bear. When she'd come, her inner muscles tightening around his fingers like a fist, and he'd tasted her sweet release...

What the fuck was the matter with him? Why was he acting like some sappy, love-struck moron?

He sighed and closed his eyes, buried his face in her hair, and breathed her in. She smelled like his soap, which made him grin. There was absolutely no reason for him to feel this attachment to her. He'd known her less than a day. Great sex did not a relationship make. And this time, unlike last night, he had no way to justify her reaction to him. She wasn't under duress. When he'd come back to camp to find her half naked and relaxed, after spending all day thinking about her sweet, curvy body and sensual cries, his hormonal instincts took over, and all he could do was pounce.

That she accepted him with open arms and a plea to have sex with her...

Good God, he didn't want to let her go at the end of the week. He

wanted to see where a relationship could go with her. If they even had a chance.

With a shake of his head, he realized how stupid that thought was. She was going back to her high-paying job in the city, and he was going back to Cooper Valley, the fire department, and then off to the next search and rescue mission they needed him for. Those two worlds were too far apart. He'd done the long-distance thing once, with horrible results. And, well, what would a CFO of an entertainment company want with a blue-collar worker like himself? She probably had a big house in an expensive neighborhood and hired people to keep her prize-winning roses blooming.

Jamie mowed the lawn of his two-bedroom cottage. He did all his own repairs on the place, too, or paid one of his buddies who had the skill with a pizza and a couple of beers if the need arose. He was as far away from high society as they came.

So, Carla wanted hot sex? He grinned. Okay then. He'd give it to her. Apparently his sex drive hadn't reached middle age yet—which Brenda had claimed on more than one occasion when he hadn't been in the mood to fuck her. He'd just needed the right woman to bring it out to play. He wouldn't soon forget Carla, and he hoped maybe he'd turned her nightmarish camping trip into something she'd think back on with a few fond memories.

He skimmed his thumb over her cheek then kissed the top of her head. That Jeff asshole was an idiot. A dead idiot if they ever crossed paths.

* * * * *

Carla lay on her side, watching Jamie tend to the two rabbits spitted over the fire. Pixie sprawled next to her, and she petted the dog's head. The beast was growing on her. She was very sweet, and who could think bad thoughts about the one who brought dinner back to camp?

"Why two?" she asked.

Jamie glanced at Pixie. "She didn't like being relegated to kibble

last night. She figures if she catches it, she should get some."

Carla grinned. Sweet and temperamental. Pixie really wasn't a bad sort at all.

Jamie moved with a fluid grace that amazed her. For being such a big, bulky man, he had the motions of a dancer. His thick thighs were luscious when he squatted next to the fire to add kindling. And that chest was absolutely to die for.

"So," she said, trying to make conversation. Ever since waking up after a deep nap in his arms, he'd been too quiet. As if something—possibly her and the sex they'd had?—was obviously bothering him.

"So?" He stood up and swiped his hands on the seat of his shorts.

"You said you were in the Marines a long time ago." She propped her head on her hand. "How long?"

Settling his hands on his lean hips, he stared at her over the fire, and she got the impression his military career wasn't something he cared to talk about.

"Sorry. Never mind. I'm being nosy." She sighed. "Though, since I spilled my guts this morning, I figure you owe me...something personal."

With a shake of his head and a little chuckle, he came around the fire and sat down on the other side of Pixie. "Okay. I joined the Marines right out of college and stayed in for six years, until just after Desert Storm."

She licked her lips. That explained his reluctance to talk about it. Probably bad memories of Iraq. Her brother had been a scout pilot during Desert Shield and Desert Storm. He hadn't talked about it much after he got back.

She reached across the dog and touched his forearm. "We won't talk about that then. How about telling me about your breakup with...what was her name?"

"Brenda," he said on a sigh then grinned and winked. "See, this is the problem with being left alone with a woman too long. They want to bring up all the bad stuff in your life and talk about it."

"Tell me something good then." She didn't care what they talked about; she just wanted to talk. Wanted to get to know him better. Never in

her life had she had the kind of sex they had without knowing the guy first. It was odd that she'd let herself go the way she had, body and soul, and barely knew more than his name.

He reached over, turned the rabbits, then lay on his side facing her with the dog between them. "Okay. Something good. Well, I have four younger sisters who are all married and have a bushel of kids between them." He smiled. "I get to spoil them when I see them—the kids, not my sisters. As moms, they don't like it when Uncle Jamie comes to town." He chuckled and dug his fingers through Pixie's coarse fur to scratch her neck.

"Let me guess. Very loud, battery-operated toys?"

He nodded. "How'd you know? You have nieces or nephews?"

"No. I do that to my best friend once in a while, though, and she threatens to never speak to me again."

Jamie nodded. "Yep. Parents don't seem to see the humor in it."

"You want kids?" As soon as the question popped out, she closed her eyes and groaned. "Sorry. Never mind. Probably way too personal."

"You want kids?" he asked in return.

"I'm almost forty," she said on a sigh. "I gave up the thought of kids a while ago. Besides, I don't think I'm really parent material. If I can't even devote enough time to a relationship with a man..."

"You work pretty long hours?"

She nodded. If she had him to come home to, though, she wouldn't work so much. "Are we being honest here?"

He shrugged and nodded. She didn't know what that was supposed to mean.

"Well, frankly, I tend to stay at work to avoid...other problems."

"Like a jobless guy sitting in your house playing video games?"

"Yeah. I'm not one for confrontation in my home, and so I avoided it for months and months. Put me in a boardroom with a bunch of businessmen, and I'm queen of the world. Stick me in a room one on one, and I turn into a jelly fish."

"A jelly fish?"

She laughed. "Yeah. Totally spineless."

Jamie shook his head. "I don't believe it. You pulled a flare gun on me."

"I pulled it on your dog because I thought she was going to eat me, and I had no idea it was a flare gun. It had a barrel and a trigger."

"No. I don't want kids."

His bold statement, amongst her chuckles, caught her off guard, and she fell silent.

"In my line of work, I've seen too much of what the loss of a child can do to parents. Sometimes they never recover, their marriages break up, they want to give up on life." His gaze shifted to Pixie as he massaged her ear. "I have a hard enough time when a pet dies on me. I never want to deal with the loss of a child."

Silence fell over them with only the sound of the crackling fire and the chirping of crickets. She wanted to ask if that were why he was single. Was that why he couldn't commit to Brenda? Lord, she never would have guessed the gentle heart inside this mountain of a man.

He finally looked back up at her, opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it.

"I guess you've seen a lot of bad stuff as a fireman, hm?"

He nodded. "I also work with search and rescue—the K-9 emergency response. Pixie here is my partner. I'm an instructor, and I'm on call 24/7. Doesn't make for a great relationship. Sometimes I'm gone for days or weeks at a time."

She ignored that he was telling her he was bad relationship material. She already knew she was, so there wasn't a need for him to go on about it. They had no future. She knew that. It was here and now, and that was all.

"Search and rescue?" She rolled her eyes. "Well, I guess I lucked out stumbling across you, then, didn't I? And I'd wondered if they'd come after me."

A small smile flicked over his lips. "We always like it when the missing person finds us instead of the other way around."

"Why didn't you tell me that to start with?"

He shrugged. "No reason in particular."

She raised an eyebrow. "I don't believe you."

"Okay. Honestly?"

She nodded.

"I didn't want you to know because some women... Well, you were so independent, brave, and determined, I didn't want you to turn into a blubbering baby and expect me to save the day. I'm on vacation after all."

A bubbling laugh burst out of her. If he'd shown up just fifteen minutes earlier as she'd lain on the ground crying her heart out, wondering if she were going to die, he would have known she wasn't that determined.

"Well, Mr. Roberts. For your information..." She shook her head. "I cried before you showed up, and the only reason I wasn't crying when you came back to camp was because I'd found food—dog food, but food nonetheless. And you did save the day." Raising her hand from Pixie's back, she laid it against Jamie's neck, skimming her thumb over his strong, steady pulse. "But no, I've never been one to expect anything from anyone. Until meeting you, I've never been pampered."

He snorted. "Pampered? Having to shit in the woods is pampered? I come out here to get away from civilization and softness."

"No you don't." She dropped her hand to his chest. "If you wanted away from softness, to play big, bad, mountain man, you wouldn't have a pad to sleep on, a tent to sleep in, and you sure wouldn't have brought protein bars and snack food. I think you come out here to regroup."

He stared at her but didn't say anything. Didn't even blink.

She swallowed hard, sure she'd hit the nail on the head with her summation. "You need time away from everyone and everything else in your life, don't you? This is where you come where no one demands anything of you." His gaze didn't waver. "And then I came along and spoiled your solitude." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm so sorry."

"Move, Pix."

The dog jumped to her feet and bounded out of the way just as Jamie surged forward, wrapped his arms around her, and pressed his lips to hers. "Don't be sorry," he said against her mouth. "Don't ever be sorry." He skimmed his tongue along her bottom lip. "You're the most

amazing thing to happen to me in a really long time.”

When he swept his tongue into her mouth, she moaned and clung to his shoulders. He was the most incredible thing to happen to her, too. She didn’t know how she was going to go back to Chicago and never see him again. He lit her body on fire and warmed her soul. His tenderness spoke to her heart, even as his body called to her passion.

He pulled back, his breaths heavy against her cheek. “The rabbit. I’m going to burn it.”

She laughed. Part of her couldn’t care less about it, but it was dinner, and she was hungry. In slow degrees, she released her hold around his neck and slid her hands over his shoulders. “Don’t burn dinner,” she whispered even as he nuzzled her neck, making her tingle and yearn for more touches. More of his incredible body.

“Don’t burn dinner,” he murmured. “God, I want you again.” He raised his head and met her eyes. “The reason Brenda and I broke up is because I wouldn’t tell her I loved her, because I didn’t, and I don’t ever lie to the person I’m in a relationship with. And secondly...” He pushed up to his knees so he hovered over her, his gaze dark and intense. “She never came close to doing to me what one look from you does.”

With that declaration, he got to his feet to attend to dinner.

Stunned speechless, she lay there watching him. Pixie came back and flopped down beside her with a groan, and then rested her massive head on Carla’s stomach.

So, what she was feeling—experiencing—wasn’t all one sided. Jamie felt it, too. Though she kept the thought to herself, she could definitely admit that Jeff never made her shatter the way Jamie did. Hell, Jeff was a clumsy oaf in the sack compared to Jamie’s talented skill.

“I’m going to go down to the stream and wash up, then I’ll put on the instant rice, and we can eat in a few minutes.”

She nodded but remained mute. Even though she knew what was in her heart, she couldn’t believe it. No way in hell could she be so attached to a man she’d known for only twenty-four hours.

Impossible.

Improbable.

It had to be because she was alone in the woods with him. What woman wouldn't swoon at his lovely tenderness and sexual demand? What woman wouldn't wish to keep such a fine specimen of male for herself?

She wasn't a dreamer. This affair would end when his ride returned and took them back to civilization. They both had lives—very different lives from each other—to get back to. Hell, she couldn't even admit to him that she helped run a company specializing in porn movies and sex toys.

With a sigh, she sat up, disturbing Pixie into a groan. "Get over it, you big baby. At least you get to go home with him when this is over."

Chapter Seven

"Here. Try this."

Carla made a cute scrunched-nose face at Jamie and then looked back at the array of greens and flowers in his cupped palms. "Try it?"

He nodded. "It's all edible. The clover is sweet and a little peppery; you'll like it. If you're ever lost in the woods again, you'll know what you can eat to survive."

"Um. Yeah. Okay. That's nice to know, but you just fed me two trout. I'm full. Besides, I'm never going into the woods again unless I'm with you, and you can feed me."

He chuckled, but inside his heart jumped. Did that mean she wanted to...spend more time with him? Go camping with him again? Unable to resist, he leaned in and gave her a quick, hard kiss. When she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against him, he dropped the greens and pulled her hard against his chest, molding her body to fit against his and press in all the right spots.

"I thought you had some more filming you wanted to do," she murmured as she skimmed warm, damp kisses along his jaw.

He nodded. "I did that when I was picking the salad you refused to eat."

She chuckled. "It was a very pretty salad. I'd put it in a bowl on my desk and look at it all day. You should consider a career in floral design."

"Smartass." He ran his hands down her sides, over her hips, then pinched her butt.

With a yelp and a laugh, she pushed away from him.
Pixie, lying in the short grass a few feet away, woofed.
“You pinched me!” She rubbed her butt.

He nodded and stalked toward her. Her sparkling eyes, wild hair, peeling nose... He couldn't get enough of her. She was adorable. Beautiful. They'd made love several times since dinner the night before, and still he wanted her. Needed her.

Backing up, she held out her hand to stay him, but she laughed. All morning they'd spent traipsing around the nearby woods while he looked for edible vegetation to document. The hike had been easy, and her ankle seemed to have healed well, but still her enthusiasm surprised him. When she wanted to come with him instead of staying in camp relaxing, he'd been surprised and more than a little pleased.

“You told me to be a florist.”

She giggled and backed into a tree trunk. “You picked such pretty flowers.”

He grabbed for her, but she ducked around the tree with a sweet, musical laugh.

Pixie bounded up with a couple of sharp barks, her tail wagging so hard it shook her body.

“Pixie! Save me!” Carla yelled as he chased her around the tree, halfheartedly grabbing at her.

With a loud woof, Pixie pounced on Carla, knocking her down and pinning her.

Carla yelped and laughed, and wrapped her arms around the dog, while Jamie laughed so hard his side hurt.

“She's a rescue dog, not an attack dog,” he said as he collapsed on the ground next to his girls and patted Pixie's head.

“Move, Pixie,” Carla said through her laughter.

Pixie's tongue lolled out, and she gave her doggie grin, her big paws pinning Carla's shoulders to the ground.

“Get her off me,” Carla said with a groan as she shoved at Pixie. “I can't breathe.”

“Move, Pix,” Jamie said, and the dog bounded out of the way.

Carla's bottom lip puffed out in a pout. "Hey, why didn't she go when I told her to?"

He moved over her and captured that bottom lip between his teeth then suckled it. God, she was sweet. All honey and warmth. When she sighed, he sank his tongue into her mouth and lowered himself onto her, feeling all her soft hills and valleys. She spread her legs, and he nestled between, pressing his hard-on against her.

"Jamie," she said on a soft sigh when he moved to her neck with nibbling kisses.

"Hmm?"

"Why didn't she move for me?"

He chuckled. "I'm kissing you here, extremely turned on," he said then raised his head and smiled down at her, "and you want to talk about the dog?"

Her smile was so big and so bright he thought it could rival the sun. "You've been kissing on me for hours," she said with a sigh and a feigned look of boredom. "I want to know why the dog won't listen to me."

"She's trained not to." He kissed the tip of her nose then brushed his lips over her cheekbone. "She'll only take direction from me."

Her face scrunched into a disgruntled frown. "Why?"

He chuckled and moved to her side so he didn't squash her, and he figured she wanted to talk, not play. Looking in her eyes, all he could do was smile. For the first time ever in his life—or at least since being dumped by his college sweetheart right before he was sent to Iraq—he could imagine looking at someone every day for the rest of his life.

She poked him in the shoulder. "Do you plan on answering?"

With a sigh, he propped his head on his fist. "Because of the specialized work we do with search and rescue and search and recovery, she has a lot to remember. She's highly trained. Having her listen to just anyone's commands—which could confuse her if the other person didn't say the command just so—is not what she needs. And you did use the command incorrectly."

She frowned. "Move, Pixie?"

He nodded and grinned. "The official command is 'move, Pix,' not Pixie."

She sighed. "Okay. But she comes when I call her."

Running his fingers over her cheek, glad that her sunburn had faded, he laughed. "She knows she's going to get some lovin'. I don't know anyone who wouldn't come..." He waggled his eyebrows for emphasis. "...when you called."

Carla rolled her eyes and groaned. "You're so bad."

He cupped her breast through the T-shirt he'd given her to wear and flicked his thumb over her nipple, pleased when it hardened and her eyelids fluttered. "You like me bad, don't you?"

A slow smile flickered over her lips, and she nodded. "Yeah. I kinda do." She chuckled. "You know... Jeff told me I was getting too old because my body didn't respond very fast sexually." She groaned and arched into his hand as he kneaded her full, soft breast. "He obviously didn't know what he was doing."

"I don't think Brenda knew what she was doing either." He switched to her other breast, her body's response so swift, she sucked in a breath and bit her bottom lip. He grinned. "There were times with her I..." Well, that was admitting a bit too much, wasn't it?

Carla reached up with one hand and laid it against his cheek. "You obviously don't have a problem. I've had more sex in the past two days than I've had in the last six months."

The grin couldn't be stopped because he was the same way. He couldn't get enough of her. He'd never have enough. He nudged her hip with his cock, and she laughed.

"Then again," she said as she pushed him over on his back in the grass and rose up over him. "If you play with it too much, it might break." She shoved to her feet and danced away with a giggle before he could get up.

He shook his head and sat up. "You naughty girl."

Her laughter was musical and beautiful. "And you like me that way." She stuck her tongue out. "Now. I was wondering... How come it's okay for your dog to hunt for dinner for us when humans can't do that in

a national park?"

Grabbing his camera from the grass, he climbed to his feet and held his hand out to her. "Come on, let's head back to camp. I figure you don't really want to be around when Pixie catches said dinner."

She made a face and shook her head as she took his hand. "Nope. I'm not the type to want to see my food while it's still running around. I'm very fond of pre-packaged meat and grocery stores."

"There's always salad."

"Your floral arrangements? That's a side dish."

He laughed and tugged her close so he could put his arm around her. "It could have saved your life if I hadn't come along."

She made a *pfft* sound. "I found you, remember? That's how good I am."

They walked along in silence for a while. "We're not in the national park," he finally said, remembering her question. She did know how to fry his brain. Especially when he still sported a sizable erection and her lovely body rubbed against his with every gentle sway of her hips.

She glanced up at him with a frown. "We're not?"

He shook his head and nabbed a quick kiss. "Nope. It's about four miles that way." He pointed east.

"Shit," she whispered. "I was really lost. Jeff drove us quite a ways into the national park."

"Why didn't you follow the road out instead of heading downstream?"

"There was no road. He had a four-by-four Jeep. We came cross-country."

"Through a national park?" It was Jamie's turn to roll his eyes. "He's a moron. Motor vehicles are only supposed to be on designated roads through the park. He could get fined up the ying-yang for that. What the hell would he have done if he got stuck? There's no cell service out here."

Carla's shoulders drooped, and she pulled away from him.

"Hey." He reached for her hand.

She stopped walking and turned toward him. "Do you know how

stupid I feel? I didn't know it was illegal to drive into the park off road. I don't know anything, and you're right. I didn't have a clue I could eat flowers and leaves. I would have died if you weren't out here."

He wanted to kick himself for upsetting her. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her against him and rested his chin on the top of her head. "Shh. It's not your fault. I didn't mean it that way. Your idiot ex-boyfriend is the only one to blame."

"I didn't want to be out here with him or anyone else. I'm a city girl, and I like it that way. If I get hungry or thirsty, there's at a minimum of one restaurant every block. Do you know how scared I was?" She squeezed him and buried her face against his chest. "You told me I was determined and brave, but I wasn't. I thought I was going to die. The only thing that kept me going was because I wanted to get back home and kill the jerk who left me here."

She didn't want to be here with anyone...

He couldn't get seriously involved with someone who didn't share any of his interests. The outdoors was his major interest. On weekends he went hiking by the lake he lived near. He skied in the winter, hiked, canoed and sometimes bicycled in the summer. She wanted her big city with restaurants every block.

He skimmed his hand over her head and tangled his fingers in her hair. He had to let her go. This truly was just a quick vacation tryst.

It surprised him how much the thought disturbed him.

"When a person is under duress, as you were the day you stumbled into my camp, they use whatever means available to them to keep going. Revenge was your impetus. There's nothing wrong with that, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with admitting you were frightened."

She leaned back and looked up at him. "You're awfully nice for being a giant. I thought they ate normal people."

He chuckled around his disappointment and laid a soft kiss on her lips. "You're something else, Carla Benevito." He'd have to take what he could, while he could. Stepping away from her tempting body, he picked up her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "Come on. Let's get you back to camp so Pix and I can get dinner."

Pixie came loping up at the sound of her name, and Carla patted the dog's head. Pixie liked her, and he thought the dog was even growing on her. Brenda had been the first woman he'd dated who actually liked Pixie—another reason he'd kept her around so long. Pixie liked women, and she wasn't around many. They didn't have any women on the Cooper Valley Fire Department roster.

Shit, he felt like a guy looking for a mother to his child. He shook his head and kept his mouth shut as they slowly made their way back to camp.

How the hell had he let his emotions get in the way with Carla? He'd lived with Brenda for over a year and never had this attachment to her. When she packed up her stuff and left, the most he felt was a mild disappointment. He hated sleeping alone. And then he broke a cardinal rule in his house and started letting Pixie on the bed. Just to have a body next to him...breathing to listen to. What a pathetic bastard he'd become.

He feared when Carla left, it just might hurt like a bitch.

As they walked into camp, Carla said, "I didn't mean to get all weird back there. I'm really not an emotional type. I'm never emotional." She let go of his hand and sat down on the stump by the cold fire pit. "I think I'm a little tired."

What did he say to that? She had every right to be emotional. She was out of her element. She probably felt the same way he'd feel if he were stuck in traffic in downtown Chicago with no way out. Suffocated and edgy.

"It's okay." He went to her and kissed the top of her head. "Finish your book so you can tell me how it ends."

She chuckled, but it sounded forced. "I can start the fire if you want, while you're gone. Since you showed me how."

"That'd be good." He wanted to tip up her face and kiss her, but she seemed to be avoiding his gaze. "Be back in a bit." Turning away, he signaled to Pixie and headed off into the thick of the forest.

Chapter Eight

"You win some, you lose some," Jamie said as he took the empty plate from Carla.

She laughed, but she hadn't minded the dinner of rice and cooked wild greens, no matter that she'd joked about Jamie not living up to expectations in the kitchen. Pixie had come up empty on the hunt tonight.

"And I told you, you weren't trying to rough it too hard—onion powder and pepper? Not exactly found in the wilds of Wisconsin." She winked at him then laughed when the color in his cheeks darkened with a slight blush.

"Actually, there is a plant that tastes more like pepper than clover."

She shrugged. "You didn't find any though, did you?"

Pixie flopped down on the ground next to her and groaned, looking unhappy about having to eat her kibble tonight. She scratched the dejected dog's ears.

"You really are a smartass, you know that?" He rinsed the plate in the small basin of warm water then dried it with a hand towel. "Be thankful I don't use you for a training exercise and make you forage your own food. I could use you as a test subject for my video."

She laughed. "I'd just eat the berries. There are plenty of those. Only reason I didn't find them before I found you is because they were hiding."

"In plain sight." He rounded the fire, dug through his pack until he got the towel and bar of soap, and then held out his hand to her. "Come

on. Let's go take a bath before the sun goes down completely and it gets cold. Stay, Pix."

She took his hand, and they walked a hundred yards downstream where a slow-moving eddy had formed behind a boulder. The water was chest-deep there, and it was the perfect place to wash. Jamie laid the soap on a flat rock near the water and untied his hiking boots. She pulled the borrowed T-shirt over her head and dropped her shorts, toeing off her tennis shoes at the same time.

"Last one in's a rotten egg," she said as she took the three steps to the edge of the water and jumped in. She'd found out the night before it was much better to dive in and get it over with than to try to do it slowly—the water was on the chilly side. She came up gasping for breath, but the chill left when thick, strong arms wrapped around her and pulled her tight against an even thicker, stronger chest. She shivered for another reason entirely.

"Rotten egg, huh?" Jamie said with mock outrage. "Rotten egg?"

She laughed and wound her arms and legs around him. There was no mistaking his body's reaction to her, and she reveled in it. His cock pressed against her mound, growing thick and long as she teasingly rubbed herself along his length.

With a groan, he captured her lips and thrust his tongue into her mouth. His big, warm hands closed over the cool flesh of her butt, making her throb. Hell, she'd been hot for him since that afternoon when they'd been on the hike. She'd just needed a break—time to think. She couldn't think when he was touching her. She didn't want to.

"Jamie," she whispered when he skimmed his teeth along the tendon in her neck.

"Hmm?" His voice was a low rumble she felt inside of her.

Tightening her legs around him, she teased his cock with her pussy, rubbing herself against him, prolonging the sensations before she let him inside. She wanted to tell him how she felt about him. What he did to her. That she'd gladly spend the next forty years out here in the woods with him. But the words wouldn't come.

She'd disappointed him that afternoon, so how could she ever

expect reciprocal declarations of emotions? She wouldn't eat his raw weeds he'd picked for her. They *had* looked more like a floral arrangement than food.

"What is it?" He kissed a path down her neck, over her shoulder, then lifted her slightly and nipped the upper swell of her breast.

She dropped her head back and lifted up, using his shoulders for leverage, so he could have access to her nipple. His tongue swirled around her hardened, ultra-sensitive peak, and her whole body tightened in response. One of his hands slid between her thighs, and he lightly tugged her pubic hair.

Shuddering, she clung to his shoulders. One touch was all it took from him. One perfect touch. "Yes!" she cried when he glided two long fingers into her core as he drew her nipple with an almost painfully hard suck. She felt the pull of need all the way to her heart.

A hot tear trickled down her cool cheek. Her heart. Her heart couldn't be so tender. Not after all this time.

He moved to her other breast, drawing it deep into his hot, sensual mouth. At the same time, he withdrew his fingers and guided his cock into her in one smooth glide that seated him all the way. He groaned and lifted his head, looking her directly in the eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he said, his voice husky.

She swallowed back her sorrow and forced a smile. They had right now. There couldn't be love between them, but she'd never forget, for as long as she lived, the look in his eyes right this second. She could almost fool herself into believing he did love her. The knowledge that no other man had looked at her the way Jamie did, that no man ever would, was okay. She knew a part of her would always belong to him, even if she never saw him again. They had only two days left. She must make the most of it.

She touched his cheek, skimmed her thumb over the deep cleft in his chin—his only imperfection. "You're beautiful, too."

A small smile tipped his lips, and then he leaned down and skimmed his tongue along her bottom lip. Her pussy clenched in response, wringing a moan from him. She grinned and tightened her

muscles again.

"Fuck," he whispered against her lips. "You're so damn sexy."

A forty-year-old desk jockey...sexy? She thrust her hips then drew away slightly. Only for him did she feel sexy.

He grabbed her ass and slammed in hard. Her breath caught, and the fire of ecstasy lit deep within her. Her fingers and toes tingled.

"Ohh..."

"I want to hear you scream again," he murmured against her lips. "Like you did this morning."

"Then do me hard."

In a move that made the world spin, he turned and pressed her back against the smooth, cold, unforgiving boulder. His body pressed into her with so much force she felt trapped, yet incredibly safe. He bit her neck and thrust so hard she yelped from the pleasure pain, yet her body reacted only to the gratification of his cock embedded inside her, his hands kneading her butt, his teeth nibbling, his lips sucking her flesh.

"More," she gasped.

He pistoned into her, and all she could do was cling to his shoulders, crying out with each deep, delicious thrust as the pressure inside her grew almost too intense. She buried her face against his shoulder and held on, arms and legs tight around him.

Don't let me go. Don't let me go. Not ever.

The words circled in her mind, but she kept them locked inside. Locked in her heart where she knew Jamie would always be. Even though she couldn't keep him.

He slipped his hand between their bodies and pinched her clit.

She screamed as every muscle in her body tightened. The orgasm shot through her with the intensity of lightening.

"That's it, sweetheart. That's it," he panted in her ear as he kept thrusting, kept pounding into her.

Another wave of rapture rolled over her, and she whimpered.

With one final thrust, he shouted. His body tensed, his grip around her tightening until he squeezed the breath from her.

"Oh, God," he groaned as he leaned into her, pressing his forehead

against hers. Their hearts beat against each other in a hard cadence, and their breaths mingled in hot puffs.

“Uh huh,” was all she could manage in response.

He shifted slightly so he wasn’t squishing her. “You make me lose my head.” His hand scooted up her back as he moved them away from the boulder. “Did I hurt you?”

She shook her head and relaxed against him as he lowered them neck-deep into the water, his slowly softening cock still inside her. Closing her eyes, she let herself float weightlessly. Her body was warm and slick where they touched, cool—almost chilled—where the water caressed her flesh.

Jamie sighed in her ear and cupped the back of her head in an action so tender she almost burst into tears.

What the hell was wrong with her? She never cried. Never. Today she’d done little but keep herself from breaking out in heart-wrenching sobs and begging Jamie to never let her go. Every time he touched her, held her, kissed her, she wanted to cling to him like a leech and never let him out of her sight.

“I must say...” His voice rumbled from his chest, deep, low, raspy. “This has been the best vacation I’ve had in ages.”

Nodding against his shoulder, she whispered, “Mine, too.” She didn’t bother to tell him she couldn’t even remember the last vacation she’d taken that didn’t involve business of some sort. Last fall she sat on a California beach for a few hours between meetings.

“I was wondering—”

Pixie burst out in a staccato of rapid barks that sounded different from anything she’d heard before. Jamie moved them to the bank, made sure she was steady on her feet, then pulled himself out of the water.

Good Lord! What a body. All tan and glistening in the dusky evening light, water droplets gliding down his back, over an ass better than anything she’d ever imagined.

“Fuck. Fuck. *Fuck!*” Jamie grabbed his shorts off the ground and jerked them over his wet thighs. “Stay in the water a bit, sweetheart.”

She frowned up at him, tearing her gaze away from his glorious

body, but he was already striding away. Pixie was still yapping up a storm. What if there was a bear in camp? Was she safe in the water? Did bears swim? Is that why he wanted her to stay here? What the hell was he going to do to fight off a bear?" She pushed away from the bank and rounded the boulder so she could see into camp. Jamie was scrounging through his pack. Maybe he had bear repellent? Pixie was really going insane, jumping around in a circle, staring up at the sky.

Then she heard it. The distinctive *whop, whop, whop* of a helicopter as it got closer. Jamie's ride had come early? Why? No! She swam back to the bank, levered herself up onto the marshy edge, and jerked Jamie's T-shirt over her head just as a white and orange helicopter came in low over the trees.

She yelped and ducked, but it kept going and disappeared over the treetops, but she could still hear it.

She pulled on her shorts, slipped into her shoes, grabbed Jamie's clothes and towel and jogged into camp.

"Quiet, Pix," Jamie snapped as he lifted a black radio—the kinds cops used—and turned a knob on top.

Pixie dropped to her butt, shut her mouth, but her tail wagged furiously.

The radio crackled, and the helicopter appeared over the stream, just above the treetops, and hovered in place. Carla could see a man inside waving. And grinning.

"Good to see you, Jamie," crackled over the radio. "You were alone when I dropped you off out here. Would that happen to be Carla Benevito with you?"

Carla gasped. "How's he know my name?"

"That's Terry. He's obviously been called in to find you. He's the head chopper pilot for our regional SAR department."

Which meant Jeff *had* sent people to look for her.

"This is Carla," Jamie said into the radio. "How long you been lookin'?"

"Since about eleven a.m. I flew over her last known location and been quartering the area all afternoon. Since it's getting dark, I dropped

off the crew and decided to come get you and Pixie to join the search. Guess you already found her."

Pixie woofed.

"Quiet, Pix," Jamie said again.

Carla dropped down on the stump by the fire. They'd come to get her. It was time to go.

"We'll meet you in the clearing in a half hour," Jamie said.

"Ten-four. See you then." The helicopter rose up and then zoomed out of sight over the trees.

"Time to go, sweetheart. They can't go back empty handed since you've been located."

She swallowed hard. She didn't want to go back. Two more days. That's what he told her that morning. Terry—who'd been his ride up here—wasn't supposed to show up for *two more days*.

"Yeah," she said softly as she stood up. She wasn't a crybaby, and she wouldn't beg him for longer. If she had to go, she had to go. At least they'd have the ride back to—wherever. She'd never been in a helicopter before.

Jamie dug into his pack and pulled out the bug repellent. "Come here. Can't hike through the woods after dark without this on. You'll get eaten alive." He took her hand, pulled her away from the fire, and sprayed down her arms and legs. The cold mist brought out goose bumps. She wondered how he was going to pack all his stuff up in a half hour.

He sprayed himself down, pulled on a shirt and socks, then laced on his hiking boots. He dumped the leftover dishwater over the fire to put it out. "Come on," he said again as he grabbed his small daypack and reached for her hand. "Terry's on the clock."

Her heart lodged in her throat. He wasn't going to go with her. He was coming back here without her tonight.

Pixie crashed through the woods in front of them as they followed a faint deer trail they'd walked earlier that day. She realized they were going to the clearing where Jamie had picked clover for that salad.

Chapter Nine

Say something, damn it!

Jamie gripped Carla's hand tight as he led her through the dark forest toward the clearing where he was scheduled to meet Terry in two days' time.

All he wanted was one word from Carla she didn't want to leave. One word to say she wanted to see him again. Just before Pixie started barking, he'd been trying to find the words to ask her if he could see her sometime once they got back to their everyday lives. Chicago wasn't that far from Cooper Valley—just a five-hour drive. He could take a weekend off and go down to see her. To see if what they had out here could survive the real world.

But she didn't say a word. Not one. She'd be happy to get back. She hated it out here. All they had between them was hot sex and a little fun. They were too different.

As the clearing came into view through the trees, and Terry's SAR helicopter shone in the dusky light, he stopped while still within the shelter of the trees, pulled Carla into his arms, and captured her lips with his.

She melted into him, and he sank his tongue into her mouth, tasting her for the very last time. When he broke the kiss, they both panted. He cupped her cheek and gazed into her dark eyes, silently begging her to say something.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Forcing a smile he was nowhere near feeling, he nodded. "My pleasure, ma'am."

She chuckled and threw her arms around his shoulders. Squeezing him tight in a hug he'd remember for the rest of his life, she whispered. "I'll never forget you." Then she pulled away from him and headed into the clearing, toward her rescue. Leaving him forever.

Carla wasn't sure how she made it those last few hundred feet to the helicopter. She sure didn't know how she carried on a brief conversation with Jamie's friend, Terry. And she had no earthly clue how she sat in that seat, let Jamie put bulky headphones over her head so she could hear Terry talk to her from the pilot seat, and then let him help buckle her in.

When his big hand closed over her knee in a gesture she'd come to love, she had to bite her cheek and force a smile to keep in the tears. Pixie jumped up into the helicopter, licked her chin, and whined.

"Come, Pix," Jamie said, pointing to the ground.

Pixie whined again, and Carla almost lost it.

"Come, Pix," he said with more force.

The dog jumped to the ground, but gave her that worried look with the puckered brows.

With one last tender touch to her cheek, Jamie backed away, shut the door, and then gave Terry a thumbs-up signal.

"You all set back there?" Terry asked through the headphones.

Carla had to clear the tightness from her throat before she could give a rough, "Yeah."

The engine revved, and then they were lifting off the ground. She wanted to jump out the door, run away from Terry. When she looked out the window and saw Jamie and Pixie standing at the edge of the forest looking up at her, she did lose it. With deep sobs ripped from her soul, she leaned forward and buried her face in her hands.

"Carla? You okay back there?" Terry asked.

She couldn't answer. Could only shake her head. She wasn't sure she'd ever be okay again.

* * * * *

A thick layer of gray clouds hung over Chicago. From the conference room of Van Guard Studios on the twenty-seventh floor, the city seemed far away. As if Carla were floating above everything. The way she had four weeks ago when a helicopter took her away from Jamie.

Disconnected. Disjointed. More lost than she had been that first day in the forest.

The Chicago River below looked brackish in the monochrome world. Not like the crystal-clear stream she and Jamie had bathed in, made love in. The steel and glass buildings seemed to close in around her, suffocating her. The sparse trees, stuck in planters here and there along the sidewalks, and the manicured floral baskets, did nothing for her. She missed the smell of pine sap. Of fresh blackberries. Of dead leaves and burning wood.

She missed the scent of wet dog fur and Jamie's masculine scent. She missed his arms around her, his deep voice in her ear. She missed...laughing.

"Carla? What do you think?"

She jerked her gaze from the floor-to-ceiling window and looked to the CEO of the company. Richard Reardon had been her boss for eight years—ever since she stepped into the position of CFO.

"I'm sorry, Richard. I missed something."

He frowned. He was a couple of years younger than herself, and normally easy going. Lately, he'd been frowning a lot. Especially when she couldn't keep her mind on the conversation at hand.

He waved his hand over the items lined up on the conference table. "I asked what you thought. As a woman."

Nice that he noticed once in a while that she wasn't just one of the guys. She visually inspected each item. Dildos, vibrators, clitoral stimulators, butt plugs. They all started to look alike after a while. Hell, after ten years with the company, everything looked the same. The sex toys they sold, the movies they produced, the porn stars in those movies. If you saw one, you saw them all.

Heaving a sigh, she stood up, knowing what he wanted. They went through this a few times a year when it was time for an inventory changeover and new sex-toy companies wanted Van Guard to back their items. "That one," she said, pointing to a fourteen-inch latex dong, "will only sell as a novelty item. No woman would let that thing near her twat. The next three look fine. Typical vibrators. Women like pretty colors."

She forced a smile for the other three men in the room—the marketing department heads. "The eggs... One's as good as the next, I suppose, as long as they have good vibrations and controls so the speed can be adjusted. As for the dildos..." She shrugged. "If it looks like a dick and feels like a dick, it's good."

She reached over and grabbed one of the latex dildos and squeezed the tip, then shrugged. "Feels a bit soft to me."

Richard chuckled, and one of the marketing trio blushed. She rolled her eyes and sat back down, smoothing her skirt over her thighs. Shouldn't work in this industry if talking fake dongs embarrassed him.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Richard said as he scribbled some notes in a file. "You can take the products and see what kind of packaging you can come up with. I'd like to see layouts within the week."

The trio put the toys in a cardboard box then left the room.

"Want to tell me what's going on with you?" Richard asked after he closed his file.

Once again, she pulled her gaze away from the window. When she looked at him, he was leaning back in his chair. Being CEO of a company that sold sex, he wasn't the typical stuffy suit and tie man. He wore faded jeans and a button-down shirt open at the collar and the sleeves rolled back. He used to make fun of her for wearing her business suits every day.

"You've been out of it since you got back from your camping trip. Did something happen?"

They'd never been close friends. In fact, they knew very little about each other at all. She didn't get emotionally entangled with her co-workers, so she maintained a distance from everyone. Hell, she maintained a gaping chasm between herself and *everybody*. Other than her friend, Susan, who now lived in the burbs with her husband and three

kids so she barely saw her anymore, the only person she'd really let in was Jamie.

Ever since her parents and brother died a decade ago, she'd closed down. She didn't even know why Jeff had stuck around as long as he had. He should've driven her out to the woods and left her ages earlier.

"Yeah," she said finally as she leaned forward, propping her arms on the table. "Something big happened."

Richard's black eyebrows shot up, nearly disappearing in the bushy hair hanging over his forehead. The man had always reminded her of a poodle in need of a haircut. "Oh? Did Jeff finally propose?" He glanced at her left hand.

She frowned, surprised Richard even knew her ex-boyfriend's name. "Ah, no. We broke up." She hadn't told anyone at work what happened. How embarrassing to be abandoned out in the forest like an unwanted house pet.

With a sigh, she leaned back and rubbed her fingers over her forehead. She'd been thinking about this for weeks, wondering if it was the right move. She still didn't know if it was the correct thing to do, but she had to *do* something. She couldn't stay at Van Guard. The job bored her to death—had for years—and she really hated working in the industry.

But now she'd had a small taste of what *life* could be like. Not within the confines of a glass and steel city, but out in the country. Dreams of a little house in the middle of nowhere had started seeping in. Ideas of what she could do if she left Chicago. She had more money than she knew what to do with—thanks to her ten years at Van Guard. She could retire and veg away the next forty or fifty years of her life if she so chose.

She wanted to get a dog. A big, ugly dog like Pixie.

Lord, how bad off was she when she missed that beast?

"So..." Richard dipped his head to look into her face. "What happened?"

With a quick flick of her tongue to moisten her lips, she sat up straight. "Richard. I need to leave Van Guard." A quick sigh slipped out after her declaration, as if a massive weight lifted from her chest.

"What? No. You can't. We need you. What the hell happened to you? I knew you weren't cut out for the great outdoors. It fucked up your head." He came out of his chair and paced the length of the conference table.

"I'm retiring," she said with a small smile. "I'm going to buy a cottage in the country and get a dog." Her grin grew. "And there's a man..." That weight lifted even further. "I met someone, and I need to find him and see if he thinks we might have a future together." She stood up, her body zinging with adrenaline, with hope. "And I can't do that here in Chicago." Shaking her head, she laughed. "I have to go."

"Wait!" Richard rounded the table and grasped her arm. "You're really going? You're leaving Van Guard? You're leaving *me*?"

She reached up and laid her palm against his cheek. She couldn't remember ever touching him other than a handshake when he hired her—a couple of years before the company went public and turned her into a very wealthy woman.

"Yeah, Richard. I'm leaving. I have to."

His shoulders slumped, and he wrapped his hand around hers and held it against his cheek. "Damn."

She chuckled. "You'll be fine. The company will be fine. And I'll help you find my replacement. Sheridan from accounting—she's got some talent. I bet she'd be great, if she wants the position."

He squeezed her hand before stepping back. "Okay."

"All right. I'm taking a week off, starting right now. That okay with you?"

He chuckled. "Two weeks off in two months. That's a record for you. You know you have about six months of annual leave accrued, don't you?"

She shrugged. "I haven't done myself any favors working my butt into the ground. Things are going to change for me." That smile took over again, invading her entire body with a sense of lightness. "I have to go. I'll have my cell if any emergencies arise."

He gave a quick nod, and she turned away. "Good luck," he called as she walked out the door.

She might need it. She had no idea how Jamie would react to her showing up on his doorstep unannounced. *Again.*

* * * * *

"Good rescue today, Jamie," Steve Sheldon, Jamie's lieutenant at the Cooper Valley Fire Department, said as he sidled up to the bar next to him and clapped him on the shoulder. "Damn good rescue."

Jamie nodded. "Thanks." It *had* been a good rescue. Three boys disappeared on a hiking trip three days ago. He and Pixie had located them early in the afternoon. The teens were tired and dehydrated, but they were alive and would be just fine after some rest. Luckily, they'd known enough basic survival skills to make it.

Steve ordered himself a beer. "You okay, buddy?"

He nodded again. "Fine." He took a sip of his scotch. Nothing had been fine since his vacation. Nothing had felt right. Work was a drag, and he hated going home. There were nights he and Pixie stayed down by the lake until all hours of the morning just so he wouldn't have to face his empty house.

"Don't seem fine. You've been off since you got back from your vacation. Somethin' happen out there? Somethin' with that woman you rescued?"

Jamie shook his head. If anyone knew him well enough to figure it out, it would be Steve. They'd worked together for more years than he cared to count. Though they didn't hang out much anymore because he was working search and rescue and didn't have time to do the normal rotations at the fire hall, he still considered Steve his best friend.

Steve turned his head and gave him a look filled with question.

"Yeah. It has to do with Carla." God, it hurt to even say her name. For a month, he'd tried everything he could to get her out of his head. Threw himself into work, went out on dates—what disasters those had been when all he wanted was to be with Carla.

"Carla, huh?"

"Carla Benevito. She lives in Chicago, which is why I shouldn't be

thinking about her in the first place. I sure ain't movin' to Chicago." He thumped his glass onto the bar. "Damn it, Steve. I only spent two days with the woman, and now she won't get out of my head."

A small grin flickered over Steve's mouth before he cleared his throat and turned back to his beer.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"What?" Steve asked innocently then took a swig from his bottle.

"That..." He pointed at Steve's face. "...stupid grin."

With a shrug, Steve chuckled. "Sounds to me like someone's finally fallen in love."

Jamie scoffed at that. No way. He'd been looking for and never finding love for ages. "I only spent two days with her. It can't be love. It was just some amazing sex that's fucked up my head."

Steve laughed. "Know how long it took me to fall for Gracie?" He held up his index finger. "By the time our first night together was over, I was hooked—even if I wasn't ready to admit it to myself, let alone her."

"No way, man. You knew her for a long time. She lived next door."

"Oh, see..." He grinned. "There is a difference. I *lusted* after her for months. But it only took one day to fall in love."

He shook his head in denial. Just another week or two and he'd be back to normal. Carla would eventually fade from his mind. He just needed time. It was lust, plain and simple. She'd been great in bed. Besides, she'd left without so much as a backward glance. Hadn't even waved to him from the chopper window. Just turned away. No fucking way he should be moping around this way over her.

"Won't work," Steve said.

"What won't work?"

"Pretending she doesn't exist."

"Really. So, almighty love god, what do you think I should do?"

Steve laughed and slugged his shoulder. "Take a couple days off. Go down to Chicago and see her. What can it hurt?"

"I used up my two weeks' leave already." And it wasn't as if he hadn't contemplated doing just that. He was terrified she'd slam the door in his face. Big, bad Jamie Roberts was afraid of getting his heart broken.

He was *not* about to admit *that* to his buddy.

"Sounds like you're trying to find excuses not to do it."

Jamie shrugged. He *was* making excuses. But he wasn't about to go chasing after a woman. He knew how it felt to be the pursued when feelings weren't mutual—take Brenda for an example. He wasn't about to make Carla uncomfortable by going after her. She'd been through enough. Besides, for all he knew, she wasn't over the asshole yet. He might have just been the rebound fuck. Or maybe she even got back together with the prick.

There were too many possibilities.

"Never took you for a coward."

Jamie jerked back and narrowed his eyes on Steve. "Excuse me?"

Steve shrugged. "At your age, I'd figure you had enough guts to try anything. I mean, you do extreme sports, jump out of planes, rappel down cliffs, even bungee jumped just to prove you could. I can't think of much you haven't done. But you're afraid to go see a woman you've fallen in love with." He clicked his tongue. "Such a shame."

Suppressing the urge to punch his buddy in the face, Jamie drained the last of his watered-down drink and stood up. "I'm going home."

"To lick your wounds, most likely."

It was more than obvious Steve was trying to goad him, and it was working. He dropped his voice. "She said she didn't want a relationship. I am not going to go chasing after her. Don't you have a wife to go home to?" He turned on his heel and strode for the door of Darby's Pub.

"She's at a teacher's conference in Madison overnight. No reason to go home," Steve called to his back, not bothering to disguise his forlornness over his missing wife.

Pixie greeted him with a small woof when he opened the door to his pickup. He ruffled her fur as he climbed in and shut the door. "Hey, babe. Miss me?"

Steve was so damn lucky. Gracie was a beautiful woman inside and out. She hung out with the guys from the fire hall without complaint, fitting in as if she'd always been there. It was obvious how much she loved Steve, and how much Steve adored her.

Rescue Me by Anna Leigh Keaton

The ride home was short, and he waited by the front door while Pixie watered the hedge. The sun had just set, and the sky was dark with clouds. A good night to find a mindless action flick on cable and zone out.

“Come, Pix,” he said as he unlocked the door and let her in. He wondered if Pixie missed Carla as much as he did.

Chapter Ten

Carla walked into the dimly lit Darby's Pub and glanced around, feeling much overdressed. She hadn't bothered changing before she headed to Cooper Valley—a five-hour drive from Chicago. There were no more than twenty people scattered around the pub, most dressed in jeans and T-shirts of one form or another.

One thing was obvious. Jamie wasn't here. She'd gone to the Cooper Valley Fire Department first, to see if he were there, and a handsome, twenty-something firefighter had said he was probably here.

She approached the old-fashioned looking bar and signaled to the middle-aged bartender.

"What can I get for ya?" the rotund man asked.

"I'm looking for Jamie Roberts. I was told I might be able to find him here."

The bartender nodded and wiped his hands on a white towel tucked into his waistband. "Left about fifteen minutes ago."

A tall, leanly muscled man stood up from the other end of the bar and came toward her. She'd place him a little over thirty years old, and he wore a Cooper Valley Fire Department navy blue T-shirt—the same as the firefighter she'd talked to at the firehouse.

"You're looking for Jamie?" the man asked as he stopped near her. He was a handsome devil. Medium brown hair, brilliant blue eyes, chiseled features. Good Lord, the fire department sure had some lookers in this little town.

Holding out her hand to him, she nodded. "Carla Benevito."

"Steve Sheldon." He shook her hand as a mischievous grin tipped his lips. "I work with Jamie."

"Could you..." She sighed and folded her hands together. One on one, she was such a blathering buffoon, and her wrecked nerves didn't help any. "I need to find him."

Mr. Sheldon raised an eyebrow and folded his arms over his wide chest. "Mind telling me why?"

She nodded. "I do mind, actually. It's very personal. I promise I'm not some psycho stalker or anything, I just really need to...see him." And find out whether she was a complete fool or not. Oh, Lord, this had been a mistake. He wasn't going to want to see her. If he had, he could have found her already. They'd only spent two days together, and that time wasn't by choice.

He'd been kind in caring for her. Sexual attraction aside, what was there?

Nothing she could think of. Everything. Everything she ever wanted in a man. She bit her lip. She should get back into her car and return to Chicago. She was no good at relationships—would eventually ruin anything that might be there between them.

Forcing a smile, she said, "I'm sorry. I think I made a mistake. Nice meeting you, Mr. Sheldon." She turned to leave, to go back to Chicago and rethink this whole thing. Glancing at her watch to see what time it would be when she got home, she yelped when someone gripped her arm.

"Sorry," Mr. Sheldon said when she spun to face him, her purse slipping from her shoulder. "He lives at 980 Wedgwood Way. Down by the lake."

Her heart thudded in her throat.

"Take Main Street about four miles and turn left on Parker. Another couple miles, and you'll run into Wedgwood. Turn Right. Wedgwood runs all the way around the lake. His cottage is about quarter of the way to the other side. His fire engine red pickup with K-9 Emergency Response emblazoned on the side panels should be out front."

"Th-thank you, Mr. Sheldon."

He grinned and shook his head. "Call me Steve."

"Thank you," she said again. Giving a nod, she turned away, her hands shaking so hard she feared she wouldn't be able to open the door. When she got to the car, she heard footsteps behind her and turned around to see Steve coming down the sidewalk toward her.

"One more thing, Ms. Benevito," he said as he stopped on the sidewalk on the other side of the car from her and shoved his hands into his pockets. "If he tells you he's not interested...he's lying."

She frowned at him and fumbled the key in the lock. Steve grinned and, once again, she couldn't help but notice how handsome he was.

"I don't think he's thought of much else but you since he got back from his vacation." With that, he winked at her and then turned and walked down the sidewalk toward the parking lot.

Carla's throat went dry, and she had a hard time swallowing. Could it be true? Really true? Jamie had been thinking about her?

She scooted into her car and shut the door. Since she'd come this far, she might as well finish it. Go see him. If she ran away now, she wouldn't be anything more than a coward. And she might be walking away from...something.

Something she'd spent the drive here trying to convince herself wasn't real.

She started the car and checked for traffic. Jamie had called her brave and determined when they were out in the forest. She couldn't go crawling away now.

* * * * *

Jamie sprawled on the couch, his legs over Pixie's back, a beer in his hand, as he hit Play on the remote. He didn't know how many times he'd watched this tape since he got home, but he couldn't help himself. It was all he had of Carla. He should have filmed her more.

"Oh. And I see," he said in a horrible imitation of Jacques Cousteau, "she must be part mermaid since her top half is naked and her hair is damp. I have made a new discovery. I shall have to use her for research."

She was so gorgeous as her eyelids fluttered open. She leaned up on her side, her luscious breasts bare, her fat, dark nipples puckered. And then she yelped, grabbed his shirt from around her shoulders, and held it over her breasts, hiding herself from the camera.

"What do you think you're doing?" she demanded as her face turned even redder than her sunburn.

Pixie let out one sharp bark, which drew her attention to the dog that sat at his side, tongue hanging out and tail thumping in silent laughter.

"Mind your own business, fur ball." She looked back up at Jamie, and he shut off the camera.

Pixie whined from the opposite end of the sofa and looked at him.

"I know, babe. I miss her voice, too. Her laughter." And her body. God, did he miss that soft, giving body. He doubted he'd ever find another woman who satisfied him the way she had—both physically and emotionally.

Why the hell was he sitting around here mooning over her? He should just call her and get it over with. Find out if she really left the asshole. Ask her if...if she wanted to see him. What did he have to lose through a phone call?

He grabbed the cordless phone off the coffee table. Maybe her number wasn't listed. He didn't know what company she worked for, and there were a bunch of entertainment companies in Chicago.

Terry probably had her information on file...

He dropped his head back and squeezed his eyes shut. If he didn't contact her, his memories of the couple of days with her could remain perfect. If he called and she shot him down... His memories of her would still be the best of his life.

Pixie woofed and jostled his legs as she stepped off the couch and went to the door.

"Gotta go out?" he asked as he shoved himself up. "We just got home. Why didn't you take care of business while you were out there?" He retrieved a plastic poop bag from under the kitchen sink, then shoved his feet into his slippers he kept by the door for such occasions.

Pixie woofed again and jumped up and down like a puppy,

whining as if she were about to spring a leak.

"Chill out, babe." He grabbed the doorknob and jerked open the door.

Pixie yapped like a puppy and jumped on the person standing on the stoop, knocking her off the step and down. The woman yelped when she hit the concrete walkway.

"*Pixie! Off!*" Jamie grabbed the dog by the collar and hauled her away. Then he turned to lend the well-dressed woman a hand.

She'd sat up and cradled her arm against her chest. Her head down turned, she murmured, "Shit, shit, shit, shit." A severe granny bun held black hair back and, in the dim light, he could see her nylons had ripped and her knee was bleeding.

"What's got into you?" he demanded of Pixie who crouched low, whining in remorse. He squatted in front of the woman and reached for her arm to check her injury. "I'm sorry, ma'am. Are you hurt badly?"

The woman turned her face up to him, and dark, luminous eyes filled with shimmering tears met his. Eyes he'd know anywhere. His heart stalled, and he dropped to his knees. "Carla..."

She sniffled and swiped her other hand over her cheek. "I think it's broken."

He shook his head and cupped her cheek in his palm, swiping away another tear with his thumb. "No, sweetheart. Now that you're here, everything's okay."

A soft laugh bubbled out of her, even as another tear streaked down her cheek. "My arm. I think it's broken."

"Shit." He scooped her up. "Shit." He carried her down the walkway to the truck then realized he didn't have the keys. "Shit." Turning with her in his arms, he headed back to the house to get the keys so he could take her to the hospital, and almost tripped over Pixie. "*Fuck!*"

Carla laughed again, and Pixie whined.

"Jamie," she said in that soft, soothing voice he never thought he'd hear in person again. "My arm hurts, not my legs. I can walk."

When he looked down into her dark eyes, seeing the woman he'd fantasized about for weeks, he knew, in that moment, he'd never let her

go again.

He dipped his head and pressed his lips against hers. She sighed and wrapped her uninjured arm around his neck. Sweeping his tongue into her mouth, he captured her moan of pleasure.

She'd come to him. She'd found him again. He ripped his mouth from hers and looked into her eyes. "Why are you here?" he asked, praying she gave the answer he needed to hear.

She licked her lips, and her gaze moved over his face. Then a slow, teasing smile spread over her full, sensual lips. "Well, I knew your sense of duty wouldn't let an injured woman walk away."

He glanced down at her arm still cradled against her chest. Her wrist had begun to swell. "Shit, sweetheart." He carefully set her on her feet. "Stay here. Let me grab the keys, and I'll take you to the ER. Fuck, I'm sorry." Her touched her cheek before he moved around her and jogged up the walkway to the house.

Carla sagged against the side of the truck and closed her eyes. Her arm hurt like hell, as did her scraped knee and palm she'd landed on. But that hadn't been what she'd meant by being injured. He didn't understand. She'd bungled it. Screwed up everything. So much for being so seductive he couldn't turn her away. She winds up on her ass on his walkway probably with a broken bone.

Ugh. Her stomach turned over with a bit of nausea. The same feeling she'd experienced when she was seventeen and broke her ankle when she twisted it walking down stairs in five-inch stilettos.

Pixie whined and nudged Carla's thigh with her nose.

"Oh, you big fur ball," she said as she reached down with her good hand and scratched Pixie's ear. "I know you didn't mean it. It's okay. At least it kept Jamie from telling me to go away."

"Why the hell would I tell you to go away?" Jamie asked as he shut the door to the cottage. He came toward her, a ring of keys jangling in his fingers. In his other hand he carried a squishy ice pack

She opened her mouth to say something—anything—even though her brain had gone blank. He looked better than she remembered.

"Can you hold this on your arm to slow the swelling?" He laid the

icepack over her wrist.

He smelled better than she remembered. And when he held her in his arms, she felt as if she'd come home.

"I love you," she blurted out.

He stopped just inches from her, and she held her breath. This was it. This was when the truth would come out. He wouldn't lie to her. He didn't believe in lies in relationships.

Raising his hand, he laid his big, callused palm against her cheek, caressed her bottom lip with his thumb—an action so simple, yet it meant everything to her. She shut her eyes and leaned into the tender touch. She'd missed him so badly, she wondered now how she'd survived a month without him.

"Get in the truck, sweetheart. We need to get you to the hospital."

She opened her eyes in surprise and nearly cried out at the pain in her heart when he turned away and unlocked the passenger side of his truck.

Pixie jumped in when he opened the door.

Carla couldn't move. He didn't love her. Oh, Lord, it hurt.

"Come on, Carla. We've got to get you to the hospital before it swells anymore or they won't be able to x-ray it."

Her chin quivered. "No." She wasn't going to go anywhere with him if... *Fucking fool!* She stepped back from him and dug into her suit jacket pocket for her keys. She was such a imbecile. Why would he love her? A stupid city girl who had nothing to offer someone as wonderful as him.

"No? Carla, sweetie, come on." He moved toward her, but she held up her hand to stop him.

"I'll drive myself," she said, proud she was able to keep her voice steady. "Don't worry about it. I'm not your responsibility." She turned away before the first tear fell, running down the driveway to her car.

Big, rough hands grabbed her around the waist and pinned her back against a rock-hard chest. "God damn it, Carla," he breathed in her ear. "I love you, too. Don't be in idiot."

A sob broke free, and she sagged against him.

He turned her in his arms and held her against his chest, his hand cupping the back of her head in the tender embrace she'd missed with all her heart.

"Shh, sweetheart. Shh. I love you. I love you. Don't leave."

She sucked in a shuddery breath. "You didn't say it... I thought..."

He chuckled, and it was the sweetest sound she'd ever heard.

Lifting her chin with the edge of his finger, he smiled down at her, his gorgeous, forest-green eyes dancing with humor.

"I haven't said it to a woman in over fifteen years. It just stuck in my throat for a minute."

Her lips trembled as warmth spread through her.

"I love you, Carla. I've been miserable without you." He smoothed back a few loose strands of hair at her temple, his gaze roving over her face. "I don't think this is going to be easy, but I want to try."

She nodded. "I'm...not a city girl anymore." The warmth grew, and a smile tugged her lips. "I gave my notice at my job today, and I was thinking about getting a little house in the country." She glanced to the side, to his pretty log cottage. "I kinda like that one right there."

"Yeah?"

She nodded. "And a dog. I wouldn't mind a big, ugly dog."

"I know one who needs a mom."

A laugh burst out as another wave of tears flooded her eyes. "Do we have a chance?" she whispered. "I'll try to be a good country girl."

He leaned down and pressed his lips to hers. "We'll only lose if we don't try."

Carla sighed as he kissed her lips with passionate tenderness. Her body flared with the flame only his touch had ever ignited in her. Her hero. The man who'd rescued her from the wilds of Northern Wisconsin—the man who rescued her soul.

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor and, while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar....

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can reach her at anna@annaleighkeaton.com or visit her Web site at www.annaleighkeaton.com for all her upcoming and previously published works, and meet her alter ego at www.leannekarella.com.