

DEIRDRE O'DARE



ARMED and
AMOROUS

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...That gentle touch reverberated through every atom of her body. A shocking sizzle of sexual awareness started in her depths and spread like wildfire. How could she respond this way to a man who had kidnapped her and even now held her prisoner? It was far too soon to develop the twisted bond of a captive for the jailer. Was she so hard up for a man's touch the first one in months set her aflame?

Her breath quickened, puffing out in sharp, short bursts. Her skin tingled as if it were all shifting to meet that questing hand. Her heart hammered urgently in her chest. Sticky moisture dampened her panties as her breasts beaded and swelled, straining against the silky fabric of her bra. The worst of it was she could not respond in any meaningful way with both wrists locked in place.

A passive reaction was not her usual response. Normally, her inclination was to give as good as she got. She rolled her head restlessly on the pillow, her body starting to shudder and shift as the wandering hand finally left her face and drifted back down her torso. It paused at the swell of her breast, one finger tracing the upper edge of her bra beneath the thin fabric of her T-shirt.

When she didn't think she could stand it another minute, the hand finally cupped her breast, kneaded the flesh with a firm yet gentle rhythm, then rolled her pebbled nipple between a thumb and forefinger. Lust jolted through her like an electric

shock. She bit her lip hard to stifle the moan building in her throat, in her chest. Fear became a distant shadow as desire grabbed her...

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The Taming of Jaelle'n

To Protect and...Seduce?

Treading Dangerous Ground

ARMED AND AMOROUS

BY

DEIRDRE O'DARE

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ARMED AND AMOROUS
AN AMBER HEAT BOOK

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*To several female law enforcement officers
I have known who made sure they were not just a check mark
on someone's equal opportunity scorecard by
doing a little bit more and being a little bit better than most
of their male counterparts. You know who you are,
so I will not embarrass you with a public naming. Kudos for
being a credit to both your sex and your profession.
You are all heroines of mine!*

*Also, as ever, to my own "cop" hero who
taught me so much about how law enforcement really works
and made sure I toed the mark in being factual and
realistic when I wrote of police work. Your memory lives on in
my heart forever and is honored in my fiction.*

*Once again my heartfelt thank you to the wonderful
publishing team here at Amber Heat. You all rock, reign and
rule! I am so honored to be part of the family.
Please keep challenging me so I never run out of new goals to
strive for. I know there are many more worlds
to conquer, so upward and onward!*

CHAPTER 1

Kerry Satterfield stared at the jumble of notes, printouts, pages copied out of her old textbooks and grainy telephoto shots that littered her desk. Out of this hodge-podge, a clear portrait of the suspect in her latest top priority case was supposed to emerge. Building it was part of her job as a profiler for the FBI. Right now she was frustrated as hell because nothing was coming to her, nothing at all. The data was like a jigsaw puzzle with a dozen key pieces missing.

We've got to stop this creep. So far it doesn't look like he's killed any victims, but it's just a matter of time. Bad enough he's terrorizing young kids, worrying parents half to death, and apparently sexually abusing at least some of the boys he

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kidnaps.

For a kid who'd grown up on the wrong side of town, she'd done pretty well. Third in her class at the academy, six years in the field, and now putting her degree in psychology to work, trying to read criminal minds. Too bad her mother wasn't around to see the success her daughter has achieved—in spite of her influence.

True, after she fell ill with cancer, Kerry's mother had done a one-eighty, got religion and quit the drugs and the johns. Still, in Kerry's mind, the change came far too late. To atone for her mother's misbehavior, Kerry had had to work twice as hard and become twice as good as everyone else. Even now, she wasn't sure she'd ever pay the debt in full. She might have to die trying.

She rubbed her throbbing left temple, trying to tame the incipient migraine before it erupted into a debilitating attack. This was not a time she could afford to be down for twenty-four hours. Rummaging in her desk, she found her prescription. Dumping two pills into her hand, she gulped them with a swallow of cold coffee.

Yuck, that was nasty. She grimaced at the bitter taste and the lingering grit of grounds on her tongue. One more time she arranged the bits and pieces of information. It still wasn't enough. She needed to get out and look at the ground, see where the kidnappings had occurred, and maybe talk to a few more people who might have seen something that would break the case.

Not tonight, though. If she didn't get home and into bed

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soon, she was going to crash and burn. She shoved the papers into the least jammed drawer of her desk before she stood, stretched and left the building, one of the last to leave for the day.

Her battered Toyota sat in the parking garage across the street from the FBI's southwestern sector headquarters. As she approached, she could see there was a piece of paper on the windshield, jammed under the wiper blade on the driver's side.

I thought this place was supposed to be halfway secure. How did anyone get in here to leave junk on my car?

Kerry clicked the unlock button with one hand and grabbed the folded paper with the other, losing no time in getting into the car. She locked the doors again at once. Her years on the street had taught her caution was the better part of valor. If someone could leave this non-cyber spam, someone else could be lingering in the shadows, waiting to grab her or carjack the Toyota. They'd be crazy to take this car, though, and lucky to get out of town before it self-destructed. Her lips twisted in a wry smile at the thought of some thug chugging along in her old car. *Yeah, a wild TV-type car chase—at thirty-five MPH. Ha-ha.*

Shaking her head, she jiggled the key in the ignition and kicked the accelerator twice, then repeated the process. Finally, the motor coughed to life. She didn't think any more about the paper until she cleaned the day's junk out her purse at home a half-hour later. Although she started to toss the rumpled sheet, something made her unfold it. She needed to

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see what it said.

The block letters rambled across the page in uneven lines. It looked like a young child's scribble, but intuition insisted no child had scrawled the words. *The Shadow Son Snatcher is going to strike again soon. Come to 3265 Bellflower, and buzz apartment number two-fourteen on Friday evening to learn more. Come alone and unarmed if you want to break this case. Disobey and you will learn nothing.*

A chill of premonition waltzed down her spine. *Is this bullshit or the break I've been looking for?* There was no way to know. Right then, she made up her mind to go. She wouldn't carry openly, but she wouldn't be unarmed. That would be totally stupid, and stupid she wasn't. She wouldn't tell anyone until just before she left, though. Even then she'd merely leave a message on one key voicemail so if things went bad, someone would know where to start looking. *Sure, I'll be taking a risk, but what the hell. It won't be the first time, and if it happens to be the last, who will really care?*

The last several years she'd been too career focused to spend much time on relationships. Given that her mother had been her primary role model on how one dealt with men, she had scant reason to want to anyway. Kate Hogan had gotten little from the men in her life besides a fuck, a fix and sometimes a few dollars. If Kate had produced any other children, they'd fallen by the wayside. As far as Kerry ever knew, it was just she and Mom all those years. Now Mom was gone, which left Kerry standing alone.

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* * *

Frank Ogden hunched, twisting his shoulders, trying to relax away the tension tightening his whole body. *Damn Gary anyway.* Frank no more wanted to be here right now than he wanted to look into his mother's grave. But he had no other alternative. Gary'd made that very clear. Either Frank cooperated by getting the nosy FBI bitch off Gary's back or Stacia Ogden Steadman would die.

Frank hated the step-brother who had bullied him for twenty years. Gary was a big, hulking brute with a streak of viciousness a hundred yards wide. He liked to make people squirm, liked to smell their fear and watch them wither. Frank was no ninety-pound weakling now, but years ago he'd been a slight and somewhat sickly kid. That was when the bullying had begun. It hadn't ever ended. Gary didn't punch Frank around anymore, but still knew how to get to him. Frank's mother was one of those weak spots.

A widow once again, Stacia Steadman was in her late sixties, a gentle, little woman, almost fragile, slender and fine-boned. Max Steadman had left her enough to live on comfortably. In his gruff way, he'd been kind to her and her son, but his death had left them both vulnerable to Gary's brutality. Max had left money to Gary, too, but it wasn't enough. Gary wanted it all. Until Stacia was also dead, he couldn't have it.

Frank wanted to postpone that event as long as he could. If he had to step across the line into a shadowy area close to abetting a felon, he'd do it. Maybe he could somehow get

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word to the law later. And maybe he could protect the determined FBI agent from any real harm. He'd already told Gary he wouldn't stand to see her hurt or killed. Could he make good on that vow? And then, if things worked right, he just might be able to take Gary down. He knew enough now: the only question was when, where and how to use it so no one got hurt.

Her name was Kerry Satterfield. Such things weren't hard to find out if you knew your way around cyberspace, which Frank did. The name was vaguely familiar, but how could it be the same person? The Kerry Satterfield he'd known back in the small Arkansas town where they'd both once lived had been a skinny, ragged waif of a girl. Since her mother was labeled the town whore, the boys all figured Kerry would be easy. She wasn't, but she'd had to fight to keep her chastity.

Knowing how it felt to be bullied and hassled, Frank had stood up for her until they became friends. Then Max Steadman had been transferred. The family left and never went back. He wasn't sure why he still remembered the girl.

About then, he saw the battered blue Toyota pull into the parking lot below the second-story window from which he watched. It was the same car he'd left the note on two days ago. The tall, slender, auburn-haired woman who got out didn't look anything like the girl he recalled. It had to be someone else. She paused with her hand on the door handle, her gaze sweeping the area. Alert as a startled deer, she was clearly ready to flee or fight. She was also beautiful, not in the classic starlet and model sense, but in a strong, confident yet

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feminine way, as a lioness or a bitch wolf might be.

That's one hell of a woman. The thought came unbidden, but equally undeniable. Something quickened inside of him.

She strode across the lot to disappear into the foyer where the mailboxes and the buzzers for each apartment were. Although this part of town had seen better days, most of the apartments and homes retained a modicum of amenities, a few traces of their former class. Buzzing for admission was one of those residuals. There really wasn't much security, but it gave the illusion. Gary liked to rent places that had a hint of class, not the real low-rent slum spots. He said the law paid a lot less attention to what went on in the supposedly decent neighborhoods.

The raspy jangle of the electric bell cut through his thoughts. Frank strode across the room and then pushed the answer button. "Who is it?"

"K—Karen Stephens."

He heard her hesitation over the false name, but he already knew who she was. Pushing the other button to open the grated gate at the foot of the stairs, he spoke into the microphone. "Come on up."

He had the advantage since he'd seen her already and knew what to expect, except up close her sheer sexuality had even more impact. She was tall, about five-ten, he'd guess, close to his own six-foot height. Slim yet athletic, she still had enough curves in all the right places, but it wasn't just her body. It wasn't even her square-jawed, angular face lit by vivid hazel eyes and a mouth just a little too wide for

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perfection. Everything about her screamed woman and hinted she was a woman who could be had. No pushover, though...not cheap or easy. But if a guy knew the right buttons, she was available. Maybe she didn't even realize the signals she sent.

She hesitated on the stoop when he opened the door before she knocked. The gaze she swept over him was keen and assessing. Then she gave a slight nod. "You aren't the kidnapper. I wondered."

He stepped back to motion her in. "That's a strange assumption to make, just like that."

"The kidnapper is a larger man, bulkier, unless you wear some kind of padded suit. Anyway, the real perp is not going to invite the FBI in to interview him. You said you had information, though. You'd better not just be playing some stupid game."

He waved her to one of the two sagging chairs. She shook her head, electing to remain standing. He could see suspicion painting her face along with a trace of uncertainty. He didn't think he looked too threatening, but even tough, trained women could have their fears. They were always a little more vulnerable physically, or felt that way. Sure, men were raped, too, but a lot fewer of them than women. Well, she needn't worry. That was the last thing he'd try at this point.

Instead, he tried to look calm, non-threatening, sensible and earnest. "Yeah, I know some things. I'm willing to share some of it for—well, maybe a favor or two. Can your people provide surveillance or protective custody for a person who

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may be in serious danger?" *If I can get Mom somewhere out of harm's way for a while, my plan would go a lot easier.*

She hesitated for a moment. "It depends. Material witnesses, probably. For celebrities and such, no. They have to buy their own protection. Ordinary people on the street, not likely. Who and why?"

"I'll cover that later. Meanwhile, I have an address where the kidnapper is likely to grab his next victim. He's been watching a junior high out in one of the western suburbs. He'll probably make the next snatch next week, maybe midweek after school."

"What's his name? Or yours? How do you know so much about his plans?" Suspicion darkened her eyes to near chocolate color as tension tightened her lovely face. "How do I know you aren't shittin' me?"

It was Frank's turn to hesitate. *How much can I get away with telling her? It's all going to be on the hidden camcorder, so Gary will know everything I give her. If she learns too much, he'll kill her. But I've got to get her hooked enough to go with me.*

He let out a slow breath. "A friend of mine, roommate actually, tends bar in a little joint out near the south side *barrio*. Guy came in one night and got pretty well plowed. It was a slow night and he started talking to Roy, my friend. Bragged about how he was getting away with all this. Roy gave me a description and it pretty well matched what the news reports have said. Big guy, dark, gravelly voice."

He had her. He could see it in her face. She nodded just a

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little.

“Okay. Could I talk to your friend? Stuff like this is always better first-hand.”

Frank made a show of uncertainty. “He’s working tonight. I guess we could go out there. If he isn’t real busy maybe he could talk for a few minutes.”

The sun had slipped down behind the distant mountains while they talked. It wasn’t near dark yet, but dusk, everything softening to shades of gray. Frank saw her glance out the window where he’d stood to wait for her. A slight frown creased her forehead. He could see her thinking, considering, weighing the pros and cons. This woman was nobody’s fool. He’d have to play his hand very carefully.

Though she was clearly no dummy, he sensed she wanted to break this case in the worst way. She seemed to be driven, one who hated to admit failure or weakness. She just might be the Kerry Satterfield he had known. That girl had been spunky, determined, and so tough she’d seemed almost brittle. If it was, she’d sure grown up nice from the gawky, ragged kid he’d known, though.

Now he was torn. He’d never admitted it to her or even to himself, but *that* Kerry had been special to him. Defending and befriending her had given him some pride, a sense of purpose. In turn, that let him endure, then deal with, Gary’s bullying. From there he had grown in size, confidence and become the man he was today by dint of a long uphill struggle. He had to go through with this, but somehow he would not let Gary hurt her. Whatever it took, he’d protect her.

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“Come on. We’ll take my car. I’ll have you back here in forty minutes or so, soon as we see if Roy can talk to you.”

She almost backed off then. He could see her start to protest, probably say she’d drive and follow him, but then she shrugged. “Okay, lead on, McDuff.”

“Na...” He stopped abruptly with the phrase unspoken. What a sly trick she’d used to almost con him into giving his name. That would never do.

He gestured her out the door ahead of him. She looked back over her shoulder for an instant. The light was dim, but he’d have sworn she gave him a sassy grin, as if she knew perfectly well how close she’d come to catching him. Again, that was like the girl Kerry. Before this was over, he’d find out for sure.

* * *

There was something naggingly familiar about this guy. Kerry mulled that over as she preceded the man down the stairs, then followed him to a nondescript, dull-hued mini pickup. Gut feelings told her to take her own car, but she suspected he wouldn’t go for it. Not that the Toyota offered much protection or security, but she felt better having the independence of her own wheels.

She suppressed a sigh as she climbed into the cab. The inside was cleaner than she’d expected after looking at the mud-daubed indeterminate color of the truck’s body. She wasn’t even sure what make it was. A fairly new Mexican blanket was spread across the seat. As she shifted, she felt

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unevenness beneath the blanket, an indication the upholstery was in bad shape. She was glad she'd worn slacks instead of something dressier, even with the blanket's protection. Stiff, torn vinyl could play hell with nylons or bare legs.

"If you're for real, I appreciate what you're doing," she said, glancing across at the sharp profile of her surprising informer. "I just don't understand why."

"What this creep is doing is flat wrong. Kids should never be terrorized, abused. That's something I can't stand by and allow to go on."

He spoke with such vehemence Kerry found her doubts fading. Unless he was a hell of an actor, he had to be sincere. She'd almost think he knew about terror and abuse first-hand. *Well, a lot of us grew up through hell, didn't we?* Without really thinking about it, she let herself relax slightly. Something about this guy appealed to her at a level too deep for logic.

The tension came back with a vengeance when he drove into an alley and stopped between two rows of bleak, dilapidated buildings. Surreptitiously, she loosened her concealed handgun in its holster at the small of her back. He hadn't patted her down or made any effort to be sure she was unarmed. Maybe he figured she'd followed his orders to a "T."

He got out, heading toward the even-darker doorway in one of the buildings. Kerry slipped down from the truck to follow, tuning her senses to catch any unexpected movement in the shadows surrounding them. She really didn't want to go

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into that dark doorway. Inside, she couldn't see a damn thing, except the very faint pale blur of her guide's face as he turned back to see if she was following him.

It happened too fast to do anything. An octopus of hands came out of the dark, grabbed each of her arms, clenching like vises. Another fisted into her hair, while a foul-smelling cloth jammed against her face so hard she bit her lip. She held her breath for as long as she could, but that was a losing battle. Involuntarily, she inhaled after about forty seconds. So fast it was scary, she felt her muscles go lax as an even deeper darkness reach up to engulf her. Then nothing at all.

CHAPTER 2

When Kerry awoke, she saw darkness beyond the window just to her left through the partially drawn vertical blinds. She lay on a bed in a small neat room. Soft light shone from a lamp sitting on a chest of drawers opposite the bed. A light blanket had been thrown over her, but the room did not feel chilly. Keeping her eyes slitted as she turned her head with care, she searched for any hint to help identify where she was.

“You’re waking up. Good, I was beginning to worry. Frank said you shouldn’t be out too long.”

The voice was not that of the man in whose truck she’d ridden. It was soft, almost light, although still masculine. *Who? Where?* Fast moves made her dizzy, but she wanted to

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see the speaker. She rolled onto her side to face out into the room. Her eyes felt both blurry and gritty, but she could see someone sat in a chair, not far from the side of the bed. The bed appeared to be no bigger than a standard double.

“Where am I? Who are you?”

“I’m Roy Dunham. You’re in my apartment...well, mine and Frank’s right now. He needed a place to crash and I couldn’t tell him no. We’ve been buddies too long.”

So what was that other place? This doesn’t feel or even smell like that one. Something weird is going on here.

He hadn’t shown any of the body language of a liar nor did he hesitate in his reply. Still she was startled. “The bartender? The one that talked to the guy who might be the kidnapper?”

The man started visibly. “He told you that? Cripes. I wondered how he got you to go with him. I mean most cops are pretty wily and FBI agents—well, if one of them has a dumb attack, nobody ever finds out.”

“Why am I here? This doesn’t look like a thug’s hangout, or a place to hide kidnapped boys.”

Roy shook his head, standing to pace around the room. “I’ve said too damn much already. I wasn’t thinking clear. This whole gig’s scaring me. I don’t know what Frank’s plan is. I swear I don’t. He said it was better that I not know too much. He just told me to keep an eye on you and not let you leave, whatever I had to do. Except not to hurt you.”

“And that I was FBI?”

He didn’t respond to that.

Her eyes were beginning to clear. As he paced around,

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Kerry could see that Roy, though not a big man, was nicely built and not bad looking. Blond and fine-featured, he had the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Although he looked to be about her age, nearing thirty, there was something almost childlike about him. She wondered briefly if he might have a learning disability or some form of mental handicap, but he talked lucidly enough.

"I need to use the bathroom," she said. She would have sworn he blushed, but he nodded.

"You're going to be shaky on your feet. Let me walk you to the door." He came to the bedside and tucked his shoulder under her left arm as she rose. The floor did undulate beneath her for the first couple of steps, enough she was grateful for the support. The bathroom was right across the hall from the room she'd been in. He made sure she was almost to the commode before he backed out and closed the door.

"If you need anything, just yell. I... well, I won't be shocked. I've been a nursing assistant in hospitals, seen just about everything."

Kerry didn't reply, her mind already on other matters. She unfastened her slacks, lowered them and eased down on the seat. Something didn't feel right—too light. The holster remained clipped to her waistband, but the little handgun was gone. *Shit. So much for that idea. So where's my purse?* Her cell phone, which had an unobtrusive built-in locator beacon, was in that purse. When she got out, she'd ask.

She did her business, then washed her hands and face. Seeing a clean-looking towel on a bar by the medicine cabinet,

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she used it to dry her face before she peered into small cabinet, leaving the water running to cover any betraying sounds. There wasn't much in the cabinet—an unopened toothbrush, a bottle of aspirin, a half-dozen condoms and a safety razor without a blade. *No help there.* Shutting off the water, she opened the door and almost ran into Roy.

He caught her arm, as much to steady himself as her it seemed. She tried to look around and see some more of the apartment, but she was pretty sure it wasn't the one she'd gone to, the complex where her car was. Roy didn't let her stray or dawdle. He wasn't rough, but his grasp of her arm was firm. In her weakened state, residues of the unknown drug still dragging her reflexes, she couldn't put up much of a fight.

It felt too good to lie down again, even better to let her eyes drift shut. The urgency to find her purse faded for the moment. She'd just give whatever they had drugged her with a little more time to wear off and then...

* * *

Kerry awoke with a claustrophobic start. Solid warmth hedged her on both sides. *Wait just a friggin' minute. What's going on here? Who's in bed with me?* Her heart had leaped into a gallop with the awareness she was not alone. She could count on one hand the times she'd fallen asleep with anyone beside her in the last ten years and not use all the fingers. So why was she now in bed with not one but two people?

At first, confused disorientation had her head spinning. Then she began to remember the events leading to being here.

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When she'd dozed off, she was pretty sure Roy was sitting in the chair again and the other guy was nowhere around. Was this the only bed in the apartment? If they were living together did that mean they shared it?

Good God, I'm getting more confused by the minute. Maybe they're gay, although they haven't said so or really indicated it.

She started to lift one arm to brush the hair back from her face. She couldn't. Her wrist was linked to the arm of the body on her left with what felt like handcuffs. Her right arm was similarly trapped. The lamp on the chest was off now and light leaking through the vertical blind from somewhere outside barely lit the room.

Damn it, what are these weirdos up to? I want out of here! She'd never been comfortable being restrained. Suffering it in the dark made everything worse. A shadowy memory of being stuffed into a closet while her mother entertained male friends niggled at her mind. She'd kept that particular nightmare locked away for a long time, but all at once it was back, like a bogeyman emerging from under the bed.

She sank her teeth firmly into her lower lip to bite back the frantic whimpers wanting to squeak out from deep within. *It's okay. You haven't been hurt or raped. It's going to be okay. Come on, girl, be cool. You can do this.*

The body on her right rolled toward her. Then an arm settled across her midsection. Their linked wrists were now trapped between them. He mumbled something. The voice sounded like that of the man she'd met and made the mistake

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of riding with. None of this was making any sense. *Am I in serious trouble here or not?*

Frank. Roy had referred to his roommate as Frank. Why did that name ring a distant bell? What Frank would linger in her dimmest memories? *Frank Steadman.* He was the tall, skinny kid who'd become her champion her first two years of high school. Shutting her eyes, she tried to dredge up a mental image of the youth and then do an age progression on that face, that body. *It could be. It really could be.*

As the thought took shape, she wanted to wake him up right then and ask, but she stopped herself. *Time enough when morning comes.* At least this tangent served to take her mind off the conditions that had her edging into panic. So she was lying in bed between two men and handcuffed to them both. It wasn't like being shut into a closet at all.

She went back to the puzzle. If it was the same Frank, did he recognize her? Did that long-severed connection have anything to do with this other issue?

The slow slide of a male hand from her waist to her neck jolted Kerry sharply back to the present. *Hold on. Was that conscious and deliberate or simply a reaction to a dream and have nothing to do with me?*

Fingers twined into a curl of her hair that had slipped free of the elastic band with which she'd fastened it off her face, the strands she'd wanted to brush away. Then the same hand explored her face with the lightest of touches. She could not move, mesmerized by the sensuality of the feather-soft touch. Why did it have to feel so good?

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That gentle touch reverberated through every atom of her body. A shocking sizzle of sexual awareness started in her depths and spread like wildfire. How could she respond this way to a man who had kidnapped her and even now held her prisoner? It was far too soon to develop the twisted bond of a captive for the jailer. Was she so hard up for a man's touch the first one in months set her aflame?

Her breath quickened, puffing out in sharp, short bursts. Her skin tingled as if it were all shifting to meet that questing hand. Her heart hammered urgently in her chest. Sticky moisture dampened her panties as her breasts beaded and swelled, straining against the silky fabric of her bra. The worst of it was she could not respond in any meaningful way with both wrists locked in place.

A passive reaction was not her usual response. Normally, her inclination was to give as good as she got. She rolled her head restlessly on the pillow, her body starting to shudder and shift as the wandering hand finally left her face and drifted back down her torso. It paused at the swell of her breast, one finger tracing the upper edge of her bra beneath the thin fabric of her T-shirt.

When she didn't think she could stand it another minute, the hand finally cupped her breast, kneaded the flesh with a firm yet gentle rhythm, then rolled her pebbled nipple between a thumb and forefinger. Lust jolted through her like an electric shock. She bit her lip hard to stifle the moan building in her throat, in her chest. Fear became a distant shadow as desire grabbed her.

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I'm going to come absolutely unglued in a few more minutes. What is this guy up to?

"Still fighting to hang on to your chastity, Kerry Satterfield?"

The question was posed in a whisper, so close the exhaled breath tickled across her ear.

"What the hell are you talking about? Who are you?"

"I think you know on both counts."

"Frank, Frank Steadman. No, it can't be."

He exhaled, almost a sigh. "Yeah, it is, but I go by Ogden now...my real dad's name. Don't want to be connected to my damned stepbrother in any way I can help. By the way, he's the man you want. Don't ask me how, but I know. I'm sorry for what we did to you, but you're safe right now. As long as you aren't getting too close, Gary isn't going to worry about you for a while."

A different sort of excitement sizzled along Kerry's nerves. "Gary, your stepbrother, the one who always bullied you. He's the kidnapper?" She barely kept her voice in a matching whisper.

"Yeah. No question about it. I didn't dare go to the law yet because he's said he'd kill my mother if I didn't cooperate a hundred percent. And he would. He wants her gone anyway to get the rest of his dad's money. Max put a lot into a trust fund to keep her for the rest of her life. Gary hates that. He figured he should have it all."

A mixture of rage and pity twisted with her arousal, knotting emotions into an impossible tangle. "I need to get out

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of here and get a tail on him. Once he's put away, you can stop worrying. And he won't be terrorizing any more kids."

"No, Kerry. I agreed to get you off his case for a few days, as much to protect you as anyone else. I didn't even know it was you at first. There may be a chance later—I'm just playing this by ear right now, one day, one hour at a time."

She growled her frustration. "You knew what you were doing when you were teasing me a while ago, didn't you? So why did you stop?"

"I wasn't sure if you...well, you were in no position to resist. I started to feel guilty about it. I've wanted you forever, way back when we were in school, but I knew you weren't ready for it then. All I could do was help you fight off the other guys."

Regret bit at her for a moment. Frank had left just before she was ready to accept him as a boyfriend instead of just her protector. "Yeah, everyone thought you were crazy, protecting the village whore's daughter, who had to be one, too. Only I wasn't. I'm not a virgin anymore if you were wondering, but I'm still not easy."

"I didn't expect either virgin or easy. You must be near thirty now, right? I'll be thirty-two in September. But I know you'd never be easy. You have too much pride in yourself. It's all right, Kerry. I gained a lot by standing up for you—respect for myself and the courage to stand up to Gary and other bullies of the world. Maybe we each gave as good as we got from our friendship. I guess you won't want to trust me now after what I've pulled on you, though. I'm sorry."

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Kerry hesitated. "I don't know. I suppose you had reasons...and maybe good ones, if you're being honest. So far I haven't been hurt. Do you know where my purse is?"

"It's in a drawer of the chest, out of sight. I didn't take anything out of it. We did take your pistol. I hated to, but it had to be done. Somebody might get hurt otherwise."

She lay silent for a long moment, mulling over the whole confused situation. How could she get word to her superiors the man they wanted was named Gary Steadman? Would a name be enough to allow them to close in on him? Had someone listened to the voicemail yet and started to search for her? Too many questions and not one damned answer in the lot. Unsatisfied arousal still scratched along her nerves, leaving her twitchy and miserable.

Damn it all anyway!

"Are you...do you still really want me?" She hated the anxious tone in her voice, but there was no help for it.

"Only if you want back."

"Couldn't you feel the answer to that?"

He chuckled very softly. "I was hoping I read things right. I'm a little out of practice in seduction."

While they talked, he'd rested his hand back at her waist. Now he raised it to seek her face. In the darkness she felt more than saw him lean up and loom over her. Then his mouth found hers and she quit thinking, surrendering herself to potent new sensations. At first, the touch of his lips on hers was soft, almost tentative. Gradually the pressure deepened and with it the intensity. When she opened her mouth to gasp

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for air, his tongue found its way between her lips to explore the tender inner surfaces. Who would have guessed that skinny, geeky Frank could become an Olympic-class kisser? A giddy giggle bubbled in her throat, but was swallowed by the hot, wet kiss that went on and on.

This time he slipped his hand under her shirt. The slight abrasion of his palm on her skin had every nerve ending standing at attention. She tugged at her trapped wrists, resenting the handcuffs even more.

“What’s wrong? Didn’t you ever play any bondage games? It can be an extra thrill to be helpless. Just to let yourself be done because that’s all you can do. I won’t hurt you, Kerry, I promise. One thing I don’t dig is pain.” His voice held a teasing tone.

“What about Roy?”

“He’s not too much into women, and I expect he’ll play possum on us. I told him a little bit about the girl I used to know.”

After that, his hand found and cupped her breasts. Then he undid the clasp between the cups of her bra and teased her trembling flesh until she was nearly mindless with hunger. She arched into the pressure of his body half-covering hers. His erection, straining against the fabric of his faded jeans, nudged at her thigh and her lower abdomen until her pussy clenched with need.

She wanted to twist her fingers into the silky darkness of his hair, clamp her hands on his shoulders, slide them down his back to his taut butt and grab both cheeks, urging him over

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and into her. After the rebellious newness of the first time or two had worn off, she'd felt sex to be over-rated. Maybe it wasn't after all.

He unfastened the waist of her slacks, sliding his warm hand slowly down her belly, underneath the elastic band of her panties. His fingers wandered through the tangle of coppery curls that covered her sex. Raw fire sparkled along her nerves as his touch grew more intimate, fingers slipping into the protected valley between her labia, spreading the slick moisture that pooled there.

"Frank, please. You're killing me!"

"I bet it's been a while. I want to be sure you're ready." He slid one finger and then two into her cunt, twirled them slowly, worked them in deep, out and in again. His thumb found her clit and traced a slow circle around it, just not quite touching.

He seemed to do more with one hand than most men did with two. She could hardly believe his left hand was fettered with her right, down between their bodies. So far Roy had not moved or betrayed by the slightest sound that he was awake or aware of what was taking place right beside him.

Kerry had to wonder about that, but only briefly. She couldn't hold a thought for more than a few seconds. Her body and its demands focused all of her attention. "If you don't quit fooling around and fuck me, I'm going to explode." She hissed the words in a taut whisper as Frank finally touched her clit, tickling the pouting bud with delicate strokes.

In answer, he withdrew his hand. She heard the rasp of a

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zipper, then muffled sounds as he shoved his jeans down. Her slacks were next, barely pushed out of the way. Finally, he settled over her, holding his weight as well as he could with an arm-and-a-half. She let his movements shift her arm, locked to his, although it was awkward. Then, by holding one leg of her slacks with the opposite foot, she worked them down past her knees so she could part her legs enough to give him access.

Finally, finally.

He slid into her in a single smooth, long thrust. She bit back a groan of utter pleasure. In her entire life, nothing had ever felt so good, so right. They fit together like two halves of a whole, too long kept apart. Still trapped by her slacks, she couldn't lift her legs and lock them around his hips as she wanted to, but it didn't matter. He began a slow, powerful rhythm, in and out, creating delicious friction that had her inner muscles quivering on the verge in moments.

She arched up to meet each thrust, urging him to move faster, drive deeper, pound harder. She clenched her fists until her nails bit into her palms, every muscle drawn to an exquisite tension, every nerve shimmering in a sensory overload. The knot of pressure released abruptly in an orgasm that washed over her with the force of a powerful wave. The tremors went on and on, fading as he collapsed for a moment on her. They were almost of a size, so although she was aware of the pressure of his body on hers, she didn't feel crushed. The novel sensation of being covered was pleasurable, too.

He nuzzled against her neck, with a soft chuckle. "That was worth waiting about fifteen years for, Kerry. You're a hell

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of a woman.”

“You’re not too bad yourself, friend. If I’d known sex could be this good, I would’ve been enjoying a lot more of it. Can I have the handcuffs off now?”

Her plaintive question brought reality back with the subtlety of a dash of ice water. Frank rolled clear of her as he exhaled sharply. “I can’t Kerry. I’ll free you from Roy if you want, but one of us has got to be attached to you all the time until this is over. I can’t risk you making a phone call or hunting for your gun. I’m sorry, but there’s no alternative.”

The euphoria that had followed her orgasm faded fast. *Damn it, how could I forget myself so far? It was just good sex, that’s all. No sentiment, no quarter. He’s still on the wrong side of the law, no matter what his reasons, and I’m still FBI. Shit. Double shit.*

She blinked against the sudden sting of tears. *How could I have been so friggin’ dumb, pretending it meant something?*

Without another word, Frank pulled her slacks up to cover her again as soon as he got his own clothes back in place. Finally Roy made a muffled sound and shifted position slightly, but he still seemed to be sound asleep.

Again Kerry found herself wondering what the relationship between the two men really was. She felt she might be between them in more ways than merely her position on the bed. The idea disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. If Frank was gay, he’d certainly made a good show of enjoying her. *Perhaps he’s bisexual.* Lots of people were, not caring which gender they took pleasure with. How would she feel

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about sharing a lover with another, a man instead of a second woman?

As if there's going to be a relationship. Stop it, Kerry, just stop it. Start thinking about how you're going to get yourself out of this. That's what's important. Solving this case and catching the doer. All Frank Ogden or Steadman or whatever he goes by can be is a means to that end.

CHAPTER 3

Frank felt Kerry relax when she finally went back to sleep. She'd lain there tense and silent for quite a while. He hated having to hurt her like this, almost gaining her trust, only to throw it away because there was no other choice.

Damn you, Gary. You owe me more than you can ever repay. There's gotta be some way I can help to take you down.

Somehow he even went back to sleep himself. He came awake to a loud banging on the door. From the looks of the light, it was still very early morning. "Hang on. I'll be there in a minute."

He fumbled the handcuff key out of his pocket and unlocked his wrist from Kerry's. She'd awakened when he

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yelled, but didn't say anything, just watched him with those changeable hazel eyes, now close to the hue of deep water. He saw a mixture of wistfulness and anger in their depths. He held a finger to his lips to indicate silence. She nodded once.

He hurried out to the living room. Of course it was Gary at the door. To keep the racket from getting any neighbors too curious, Frank let him in. "What now? It's not even breakfast time yet."

Gary swaggered in, then glanced around the room, scowling. "The goddamn cops are swarming all over the place on Bellflower. She must've told somebody where she was going. I oughta slap the bitch silly and you, too. Can't you do anything without fuckin' it up?"

Frank bit down on his temper. The plan hadn't been all that brilliant, but it wasn't his plan. "You saw the note. How was I to know whether she obeyed it or not? The woman isn't stupid, Gary, but she came alone and unarmed. I got her off your back for the time being. That's all I promised to do."

"Well, you'd better hope they don't get any closer. It wouldn't take much to finish your old lady off these days. I could do it without leaving a mark, so it'd look like she just had a heart attack or something. Keep that in mind, little brother."

"I am not and have never been your brother. And if anything happens to Mom, I'll go to the police so fast your head will spin." Frank bit out the words, a cold rage searing his mind.

"Not if I get to you first."

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Frank folded his arms across his chest. "Don't push too hard, Gary. I'm not the skinny, asthmatic kid you used to kick the shit out of. I didn't spend two enlistments in the service learning how to be a wuss. You've pushed me just about as far as I'm going to be pushed. You can run, but you can't hide forever—you and those boys you trap and abuse. Sooner or later one of them is going to get away and describe you. Then the game will be over."

Gary puffed himself up, but he didn't come any closer. Instead he fell back on bluster. "I ain't done nothin' wrong. Those kids stay with me of their own free will. They all left bad homes, slut mothers and junkie dads, crack houses. Every one of them will say that if anybody asks. They wouldn't think of takin' off neither."

"So what're you worried about? Is there anything in the apartment on Bellflower to provide clues to the cops?"

That stopped Gary for a minute. He frowned, his mud-brown eyes squinting as he thought. "No, don't think so. It's rented in the name of Paul Parton and the rent is paid every month with a money order, right on time. Had Rickie tell the manager we were taking a trip about two weeks ago—him and his dad, he said—and wouldn't be there for a while. Shouldn't be anything the cops can use there."

"Well, get out of here then and go on about your business. I have the FBI woman nailed down and I'll keep her as long as I need to."

"She here?"

"You don't need to know where she is. She's safe, she's

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off your back, and she'll stay that way. That's all I promised to do and I've done it."

Frank could tell Gary wanted to argue, to barge through the apartment and see if Kerry was there. *I'm not about to allow that.* He widened his stance and shifted to block entry to the hallway.

Somehow Gary seemed to recognize Frank's determination. Bullies were cowards. He hadn't understood that for a long time, but once he did, he quit being afraid. If he could get Mom in a safe house somewhere, he'd end this charade for good. *Soon, very soon.* As he made himself the promise, he hoped he could convince Kerry to go along with it.

Muttering and grumbling, Gary let himself out.

At that moment, Roy called from the bedroom. "Hey Frank, come on, man. I gotta take a leak and I'm handcuffed to your lady friend here."

Frank chuckled. "So take her with you." But he headed for the bedroom, pulling out the handcuff key again. Kerry glared at him as he re-cuffed her to himself and let Roy loose.

"I'm not going to run. I heard you talking out there—that was Gary, I s'pose. Why do you put up with his crap?" She sat on the side of the bed beside him, tense as a racehorse in the gate.

Would she bolt if I released her? Go for her gun or her purse? I didn't check, but I bet she has something in there to use...pepper spray or a knife or something.

"I don't plan to for much longer. We need to talk about

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that. Would you like some coffee?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I'd almost kill for a good jolt of caffeine." She made a face. "My mouth tastes like used kitty litter. What did you drug me with?"

"I really don't know. Gary got the stuff and I'm not sure what it was. He works part-time in a nursing home where he gets access to some junk he isn't supposed to. I suspect some kind of under-the-table deals with a doctor. He gets some stuff that'll keep the kids quiet when he needs to. I think that's what he gave you."

Kerry shuddered. "Good Lord! I don't have anyone to worry about since Mom died, but tell me the name of that joint so I won't let any friends use the place. It sounds squalid."

"It is. They call it Holiday Recovery Center. All that recovers is the owner's bank accounts from what I've seen. Gary wanted me to put my mother in there, but she's still perfectly capable of living on her own. Besides, what would happen to her once she was there? I don't even want to think about it. No damn way."

He stood, giving her time to get up and come along without being jerked around. In the small kitchen, he hesitated. "If I let you loose, do you promise not to do anything stupid? No dashing for the door or back to the bedroom to look for your stuff the minute my attention wavers?"

She exhaled sharply. "At this point, I'd agree to just about anything to be able to move freely. I don't like to be restrained. If I don't really fight to stay in control, it makes me

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crazy. Please. I promise I'll behave if you hurry up with that coffee."

He took the key out of his pocket one more time and released the handcuffs. With a ragged sigh, she sank onto a chair and reached for the steaming mug he set in front of her.

Getting one for himself, he sat down opposite her, nearer both the hall and the front door. "Okay, I've come up with a plan. I've been working on it for a while and it all came together this time. I think I've got all the ins and outs figured. If you'll go along with me, we can get Gary, but we'll have to play this one very carefully. What do you say?"

"Let me hear it first. I don't buy bridges or pigs in pokes. You ought to know that much about me. In many ways, I haven't changed too much."

* * *

About two hours later, the three of them left together. This time they took Roy's car, a tan Ford Focus that didn't stand out in the crowd. They didn't think Gary was hanging around, but they took no chances.

In a pair of Roy's jeans, which fit in length but had to be cinched in at the waist, and a UNLV sweat shirt with her hair stuffed into a baseball cap, Kerry made a semi-credible male, at least from a distance. Frank opted for dark glasses and slicked his hair down with heavy grease. He adopted a *pachucko* swagger he'd learned from a couple of his military friends who came from east L.A. Since Roy had never made a secret of his sexual preferences, the neighbors were unlikely to

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pay a lot of attention.

The first step of Frank's plan to close in on Gary involved going AWOL. When Gary couldn't find them, he'd probably panic. The next place he'd go would be to Mrs. Steadman's little house, only she wouldn't be there.

Kerry slouched in the back seat of the small Ford, trying to convince herself she was okay with all this. The worst part was her purse and her pistol were both back in Roy's apartment. The fact Frank wouldn't let her take them along eroded the fragile trust in him she'd begun to build. *If this wild ass plan falls through, we're all going to be in deep shit. I wonder, could I jump and run when Roy stops for a light?*

At that moment, Frank turned in the seat, looking back at her. "Don't even think about it, Kerry. This car has those childproof locks. Only Roy can open them when the car's in gear. Even if you did get a door open and make a break for it, you'd be likely to get hurt. I don't want that to happen and for sure I don't want to have to hurt you myself."

Kerry sighed. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since she'd gone to meet Frank at the apartment on Bellflower. Too much had happened too fast. How it was all going to turn out was anybody's guess. Part of her, recalling the friendship they'd once shared and the great sex just a few hours ago, wanted to trust Frank. If she could help him get this issue resolved, a threat that had haunted him far too long, would they have a chance?

Hard experience had a different slant. It warned her not to trust anyone, whispered how people changed and good guys

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could turn bad for all kinds of reasons. Worst of all, she might have muffed this case beyond repair, the first one she had ever really blown to hell. Already she'd done way too many things far out of bounds and against the rules.

Is this all going to turn and bite me in the ass? Damn, I'd give my right arm for a crystal ball.

They zigzagged around the city, stopping several different places, where one of the men would get out for unexplained purposes. One of them always stayed, though, so she had no chance to take off. With an element of surprise, she might overpower Roy, but he kept an alert watch on her when he was the one left, taking no chances and giving her none. With Frank, she wouldn't stand a chance. Lean, but rawhide tough, he'd have her down before she got five feet from the car.

Whatever he'd done the past fifteen years had changed him greatly. Apparently the military from what he'd said, but that bald fact gave no details. Navy Seal? Marine? Commando? Special Forces? Undercover operative? Her imagination ran a little wild, wondering.

Late in the afternoon, they pulled in at a seedy-looking motel. Frank went into the office and came back with a key. The unit he'd rented was at the back in an out-of-the-way corner of the quadrangle. Both Frank and Roy looked around after Roy parked the Ford. When they finally decided all was clear, they trooped into the room together.

Kerry had seen worse. She'd lived in worse, but not happily and not recently. She wouldn't walk barefoot on the carpet on a bet. The mere thought made her skin crawl. The

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room held two queen-sized beds, one with a piece of unpainted wood supporting it where a leg of the bed frame had been broken. One sagging chair, with the upholstery frayed along the edge of the seat, squatted in a corner. The television was bolted to a heavy metal mount set into the wall. The odor of Pine-sol hung heavy on the air, perhaps intended to disguise the stench of puke, sweat, sex, smoke and alcohol. It didn't quite suffice.

Tired, hungry and disgusted, she sank onto the foot of the bed farthest from the door. Finding the remote, Frank turned on the TV. He channel surfed to CNN, then to another channel that carried local news. Glancing at her watch, Kerry saw it was 5:30, just about time for the early evening report. Now it had been twenty-four hours.

Nothing was said about a missing FBI agent/profiler. There was a very short bit about a raid on the Bellflower apartments. The chirpy blonde reporter said it was believed to be related to the ongoing kidnapping case, but the police were not talking. She hinted they'd gotten a faulty tip and let it go at that.

Frank nodded to himself, apparently pleased with what he heard and saw. Of course, the Bellflower raid was no surprise because Gary had mentioned it first thing this morning. When the news was over, Frank shut the TV off. He turned to Roy.

"So far, so good. No new kidnappings yet and no mention of an agent gone missing. Why don't you run out and get us some food? I need to make a couple of phone calls, so I'll keep watch on Kerry."

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Roy nodded. "Okay. What do you want? Mexican? Chinese? Hamburgers?"

Frank shrugged. "Any preferences, Kerry?"

She was hungry and she wasn't a picky eater. "Doesn't matter. Nothing too greasy, no ptomaine and I'm okay with it."

"Mexican then," Roy said, grinning. He slipped out, shutting the door quietly behind him.

Frank took out his cell phone, hitting a one-button speed dial. It must have been answered almost at once. "Mom?"

Kerry could only hear his half of the conversation.

"Did you call Jeff Cantrell like I said?"

He listened a moment and then nodded slightly. "Don't worry about it, Mom. If this guy is as nice a man as you've said, he won't think less of you for seeking his help. I'm pretty sure Gary has no clue you have a new male friend. Get over to his place and don't leave until I tell you all's clear, okay?"

"No, I'm not in any danger, Mom. I'm with an FBI agent." He glanced at Kerry and winked.

She rolled her eyes. "Come off it, Ogden. That's a bunch of hooey!"

He ended the call, still grinning at her. "You *are* an FBI agent, aren't you? You're here, aren't you? So what's your beef?"

She shook her head, angry without fully knowing why. "I didn't ask to be a...umm...special guest for twenty-four hours plus. You know, as it stands, you're guilty of kidnapping a federal officer and holding her hostage. I won't hesitate to

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bring charges if this doesn't work out like you've told me it would. If we get Gary, nobody will ever know, but if we don't..."

"We'll get him. I hadn't counting on having you be part of it, but this has been in the planning stage for a few months. It's just lucky Mom recently found herself a boyfriend she can stay with for a day or two until this is wrapped up. The one weak link in the whole thing has been getting her safe somewhere. The guy's actually a former cop, so I think he can keep her out of harm's way."

Alarms went off as suspicion again nibbled at Kerry's mind. *Where would an ex-cop fit into all this? Was he retired or "ex" for some other reason? Would he have any idea about Gary's activities?* "How much is she telling him?"

Frank shrugged. "Not much, basically just what she knows. That her stepson resents the money his father left her and has been making threats. There's no way she could know Gary's involved in this other stuff. I'm sure he hasn't told her and I wasn't about to. It took me quite a while to catch on, myself. Finally, with one more hint, it all came together.

"I can't even say what it was now, just something that said 'Gary' to me plain as day. I did some checking then and when the facts started to develop, he realized I was onto him. Of course, his first move was to threaten Mom. That's when I began to figure out how to bring him down once and for all. If push came to shove, I'd kill him, but that would leave me behind bars and Mom alone.

"Roy needs me, too. We hooked up in the service. He'd

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had a much worse time than I did, raped by a stepfather when he was just a kid, beat up..." He stopped, shook his head at the memories or the awful tragedies of too many lives. "I'm trying to help him get on his feet, able to really live, not just survive."

He came across the room then and knelt on the floor in front of Kerry. He took both her hands in his. "I want you to trust me. I know I haven't handled this as smoothly as I should have. You're still doubtful, like you've been trained to be. Not only by the FBI but by life, right?"

Almost against her will, Kerry nodded. "Yeah. Trust doesn't come easy to me. Why should it? No one ever earned my trust. Once upon a time a kid—a boy—almost did, but he's long gone."

Frank shook his head. "No, he's not, Kerry. He's changed and grown, but that boy who worshiped the ground you walked on still lives inside me. It may be unorthodox as hell, but I want you to bust this case and get the credit. One more kudo—until someday you have enough to believe in your own worth. Two things just happened to come together here—helping you make a tough case, along with getting Gary off my back and away from Mom for the rest of her life. I've lived with this bullying bastard for almost twenty years. I know him and I can use my knowledge to get him. Together, we can and we will get him."

He let go of her hands to put his arms around her, pulling her off the bed and onto her knees in front of him. He swept her into an enveloping embrace, into the hungry heat of an

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urgent kiss. Opening her mouth to the invasion of his tongue, she leaned into the supportive, suggestive power of his hard body and let desire flood past her doubts and uncertainty. She needed this like air to breathe. Needed it so badly she couldn't deny herself however much she could grab—even if it was only this moment, this space and time.

Passions escalating fast, they jumped apart like guilty teenagers when Roy let himself in, loaded down with two big bags radiating delicious, spicy scents.

"I can go somewhere again," he offered, setting the bags down on top of the dressing table counter. "I'm really not into voyeurism."

"No," Frank growled. "We all need to eat more than fool around right now. What did you get?"

"A dozen tacos, a dozen burritos and six sopapillas for dessert. Extra salsa, sour cream and honey, too. Root beer for me, iced tea for you and I took a chance and got Kerry a Coke. Is that all right?"

"That's fine. So long as it isn't the caffeine-free kind." Kerry lusted for caffeine, wanted it almost as badly as she needed Frank right now.

"Do they actually make decaf Coke?" Frank framed the question in mock surprise.

Kerry nodded, her lip curling in disgust. "Yeah, and it sucks."

He laughed. "Typical cop—living on caffeine."

Biting back a snarky comment, Kerry took a moment to pull herself together. Moist heat burned in her pussy, her

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breasts ached, and her lips were so tender they felt raw. Arousal buzzed along her nerves like a lightning-struck strand of wire. *Damn, why does it have to be Frank—a felon's brother—who turns me on like a 500-watt bulb?*

Roy unfolded the tops of the bags, spread out the contents and then began to divide the items into three piles. He'd grabbed a stack of napkins, which served as impromptu plates as they began to feast. For a few minutes they were too busy eating to talk.

It started out innocently enough. Roy had dragged the chair over by the counter since Frank sat on the foot of one bed and Kerry on the other. Roy tossed Frank another burrito. Somehow the wrapper came undone and it squirted filling when Frank caught it, beans and shredded beef spraying out in every direction. He grabbed a sticky gob and flung it back at Roy. Not to be out-done, Roy pitched another burrito in Kerry's direction before he took the remaining part of the one he'd been eating and threw it back at Frank.

For the next few minutes a full-fledged food raged. Before it was over, each of them was splattered with *refritos*, cheese and saucy meat. By then they all laughed almost hysterically, a kind of delayed reaction to the tension of the last twenty-four hours.

"This was pretty damn stupid," Frank said, after they all stopped for breath, looking at the mess they'd made. The motel room wouldn't be in much worse shape than they'd found it, but their clothes were a disaster. Hair, hands and faces all bore burrito residue. "We didn't bring any extra

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clothes and going back to get some would ruin the whole plan.”

“If we wash things right now, they should be dry by morning,” Kerry offered. “We’ll all be semi-undressed, but what the hell? At least we can go out in the morning looking halfway presentable.”

She felt giddy and silly, as if she’d drunk a pint of whiskey instead of just a super-size Coke—with caffeine. The last twenty-four hours had an unreal quality, like an insane dream triggered by fever. What she did here didn’t count, wasn’t real. She stood and began to strip, taking her own sweet time and adding a few bumps and grinds just for fun as she peeled off the sweatshirt and jeans. Her underwear wasn’t obviously grubby, but she’d worn the panties and bra longer now than she usually did. *Might as well take them off, too.*

Frank watched her with avid attention, his eyes bright and hungry. Roy looked on, a mixture of amusement and dismay on his face. When she reached for the clasp of her bra, Frank stood and began to strip as well. Not to be left out, Roy rose, too, stepped out of his jeans, then yanked his T-shirt off.

All three crowded into the bath once they’d undressed. Kerry ran the tub half full and unwrapped the microscopic bars of soap, all three of them. They scraped as much of the food off as they could and threw that in the commode before they dunked garment after garment into the hot water, shirts first and then jeans. Frank went back to get hangars from the closet niche and carefully hung up each piece of clothing as Kerry finished washing and then rinsed them. The impromptu

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laundry job was far from perfect, but they wouldn't look like walking ads for Taco Bell in the morning.

"Now us," Kerry said. Giggling a little, she drained the tub and then turned on the shower. There wasn't a lot of soap left and no shampoo, but she had to get some of the goop out of her hair. Her scalp had started to itch as the beans and salsa dried.

Frank followed her into the shower, which was barely big enough for two, but somehow Roy also crowded in. They washed one another, scrubbing until skin glowed and hair squeaked. Gradually the strokes grew more languid, more caressing than scouring.

Pinned between the two men, Kerry lifted her face to Frank's kisses, feeling his cock throbbing against her belly. Behind her, Roy pressed close, his cock thrusting between her buttocks as he nibbled on her shoulder. After a few minutes, either Frank or Roy had the presence of mind to turn off the water, which had started to grow cool.

CHAPTER 4

Four hands fondling her at once was definitely the most erotic thing Kerry had ever experienced. Shivery excitement danced along her nerves, her skin tingled and a weakening, fluttery heat swept her from head to toes. She opened her mouth to Frank's demanding kiss, all the while aware that Roy's lips, teeth and tongue savored the tender skin at the base of her neck. She moved enough to slide a hand between her body and Frank's, finding his cock stiff and heated. She wrapped her fingers around him and squeezed gently. His prick bucked in her grasp as he sucked in a sharp, quick breath.

"Careful, baby. That feels too damn good."

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Roy reached around and grasped her tits, one in each hand. He rolled the nipples between his thumbs and forefingers, then kneaded the sensitive flesh just outside the areolas. His cock continued to slide back and forth between her buttocks, another new sensation, but a titillating one. Itchy, insistent and urgent, hunger built inside her. Warm slick moisture dewed her pussy and seeped out to prepare for the fucking she hoped would come soon. Right now she didn't really care which one of them did it, or even if it was both.

With a sudden surge of awareness, she stilled in shock. *What the hell am I doing, making it with two guys at once? This is the craziest thing I've ever done, but God, it feels so freakin' good!* Of course, it helped that Frank was one of the two, the first boy she'd ever loved, the attraction she'd never completely forgotten. *But wait, I thought Roy was gay. Maybe he's actually bi. Oh my God, is this really happening to me?*

Still clinging together, they had to move as a unit. Somehow they managed to get out of the shower and then stumble to the nearest bed. Frank jerked the dingy bedspread down before he pushed Kerry onto the mattress. She fell, sliding clear of both men's embraces, and landing hard enough to bounce a couple of times. The bed rocked even harder when Frank sprawled on one side of her and, moments later, Roy tumbled down on the other side.

The positions were now different, but she was still the filling in the sandwich, as well as the object of both men's attention. Two mouths, four hands...skin still moist enough to be slippery, sliding together. The rougher textures of hairy

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chest pressing against her sensitized flesh, muscled legs tangling with hers. The sensations were exquisite, arousing, enticing, demanding. She writhed and shivered, tension building deep inside, an invisible noose tightening, drawing, building toward an explosive release of unbearable ecstasy.

Frank edged a knee between her legs, raising his leg until he pressed it into her crotch. She almost cried out at the pressure. Her clit twitched, hardening even more. Fumbling with her eyes shut, she found a cock with each hand and stroked them both. Breathing quickened, heartbeats accelerated and coherent words became impossible. She knew nothing now but feeling—every sense and every atom of flesh attuned to pure sensation. So very much of that, though, a virtual flood of it.

Frank pushed himself up onto his knees and moved between her legs. He lifted them to put one over each shoulder. Wide open to him, she clawed at his shoulders, wanting her cunt filled. A new desperation drove her. But he hesitated, finally bending down to nuzzle into her moist coppery nether curls, thrusting his tongue down between the labia to lap back and forth in the slick moisture, spreading it even farther. At that, a thin, keening wail issued from her throat, startling her.

The bed rocked again as Roy moved, but she had little attention to spare for him right now. She could not miss two hands and one mouth when Frank's were doing such delicious, amazing things to her. But she wanted more, needed more, required the filling force of him thrusting inside her.

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“God, Frank, just do it. Quit teasing! I’m going to die.”

“Do what, honey?”

“Fuck me!”

“Oh, that.” He shifted, bringing his cock to her opening at last, teasing around it for a moment before finally sliding in with one long, smooth thrust. She gave a groan of pleasure when he was fully sheathed inside her at last. It didn’t take more than a few hard thrusts for them both to come. She felt his first spurt inside her just as the contractions began to work their way from the gateway of her womb down her vagina.

A moan from a little farther away penetrated her awareness as the waves of her climax began to subside. She opened her eyes to see Roy behind Frank, his face contorted in the throes of his ecstasy as he pumped into Frank’s ass. Frank’s hands were fisted, clutching the sheet on either side of her head. He grunted once as Roy came, slumping against Frank’s back for a moment.

Then Roy withdrew and sagged down near the foot of the bed. Frank lifted himself free of Kerry and flopped back down beside her. They all three lay quietly for a few moments, relaxing muscles drawn tight with the ratcheting tensions, letting the intense aftermath of powerful sex subside.

In a few minutes, Roy crawled back up to nestle close to Kerry’s free side again. Their combined body heat became almost too much, yet Kerry had never felt so secure, so protected, so cared for. It seemed this closeness was the one thing she had searched for all her life. Her eyes moistened at the intensity of her emotions. She’d finally found a sense of

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belonging after a life-long dry spell of being alone.

This is what love feels like, how a family should be, being part of a unit. I never guessed, never dared to hope. Tears leaked from her shut eyes and slid down her cheeks.

“It’s all right, Kerry. Don’t cry. I didn’t hurt you, did I? Things got pretty intense there the last few seconds.” Frank’s voice held tender concern.

She shook her head. “It’s all right. I’m all right. It’s just, I’m just...happy, I guess. Safe. Not alone any more.” Her voice quavered. She sniffed and blinked against the salty flow.

With a touch of exquisite tenderness, Frank wiped the wet trails away, finally bending down to take them with his lips, gathering the salty drops on his tongue. On the other side, Roy’s thumb brushed her cheek and collected some of the moist trickles.

As much as she felt for Frank at that moment, Kerry sensed there was something special about Roy, too. Whatever quality it was made him an integral part of their unit, strange though it seemed. Mulling over the complex new ideas flooding her mind, she drifted into a dreamy half-asleep peace.

* * *

The sharp jangle of Frank’s cell phone sometime before dawn jerked them all awake. He climbed off the bed, padding over to the counter where he’d left the phone when they undressed.

This has gotta be Gary. A glance at the small screen confirmed his guess. “What the hell do you want? It’s four in

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the freakin' morning." He didn't have to fake a half-asleep grouchy tone.

"Where you at? I've been looking all over for you." There was a strong edge of panic in Gary's voice.

"I'm fine. Roy and I took a night out."

Gary growled savage curses. "Somebody tipped off the cops, you bastard. It has to be you and that pansy friend of yours. They're hot on my trail, about three apartments back from where I've been staying the last couple a days. They talked to Rickie there, and he denied anything was wrong. Said his dad was working and he didn't know the address of the place, but that it was a warehouse down by the rail yard. He just called and told me. You know where I'm going next, little bro. Mama better give me a safe place to hang out 'til the heat dies down."

"You stay the hell away from my mother, you fucking monster."

"No! I can't. There's no place else to go. If she's nice and lets me in, I won't hurt her, at least not yet."

"If you harm one hair on her head, asshole, you're dead meat."

"Oh, we're gonna be tough now, huh? You and how many other marines?"

"We're like the Texas Rangers—one ranger, one riot. That's all it takes. One bullet, one dead asshole."

"Go fuck yourself, pussy-boy. You can't touch me."

Frank didn't bother to answer. Things were going just the way he wanted, the way he'd planned. He turned to Kerry and

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Roy, both watching him with anxious expressions.

“Get up and dress, kids. We’re gonna rock and roll.”

Their clothes were still somewhat damp, but they dressed fast and quietly left the room. After Roy handed him the keys, Frank unlocked the Focus’s trunk. He took out a bundle wrapped in an olive drab blanket. Inside were three black 9mm pistols with holsters. He handed one to Roy and another to Kerry.

“You’re going to trust me with a gun?” Her taut whisper reflected the surprise he dimly saw in her face, barely lit by the parking lot lights..

He nodded. “None of us are going in there empty-handed. Next stop is my mother’s place. We should get there before Gary does if he’s staying where I think he is, but I could be wrong. I hope I’m not wrong, though. I’m driving, okay, Roy?”

“Sure. You know the quickest way to get there.”

Frank drove fast but carefully, keeping an eye on the rearview mirror and a look-out for any cops cruising around. He didn’t need to be stopped for speeding right now. In just over ten minutes, he pulled into the alley behind his mother’s little house. It was an older neighborhood, once one of the better areas in town, but now boasting mostly retirees and a few young families who could afford the 1960s era homes.

The house sat, dark and silent, as it should be. The first hint of daybreak had barely lightened the eastern horizon. He expected Gary would probably be here in about five to ten more minutes, the time it took to drive across town.

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Frank parked near the back gate. He shut off the engine, then motioned the other two to exit the car and follow him. They slipped into the back yard as silent as ghosts. Digging a key out of his pocket, Frank opened the back door and eased into the kitchen. He quickly peeked into his mother's bedroom, but it was empty as he'd hoped. He'd been pretty sure she'd stay with her friend as he'd told her to, but he had to be positive before any lead started flying.

He pulled a chenille bathrobe off the door and carried it back to the kitchen. "Kerry, I want you to put this on. When Gary knocks at the front door, go let him in. If you slouch a little, you won't seem too much bigger than Mom, not enough to notice in the dim light. I expect he'll be here any minute. Roy, get into the hall, just out of sight, and keep me covered."

Roy nodded. "Got it."

Kerry hesitated, but then slipped into the robe. It was too small, barely overlapping in front to cover the clothes she wore, the hem hitting her about halfway from knee to ankle. She made a face as she tied the sash. "I look like a freak. He'll never think I'm your mother."

"All I need is a moment, just long enough for him to come inside, close the door and realize things aren't going the way he planned. You can give me that much time, can't you?"

She shrugged. "I can try." Then she shifted the pistol until it was barely concealed behind the right side of the robe where she could grab it easily.

A car coasted to a stop out front, coming in without lights. Frank nodded. "It's him. Get ready."

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Gary didn't knock loudly, just enough to be heard inside the house. "Come on, Ma. It's me, Gary. I need help."

"Just a minute," Kerry replied. She seemed to be trying to make her voice sound older, a bit quavering and higher pitched than her normal tones. "I'll be right there."

She waited a believable few seconds before going to the door. Keeping in character of a fearful older woman, she opened it a crack and peeked out before taking the chain lock off.

Gary was fidgeting. "Hurry up. I wanna get inside."

As soon as she released the lock, he barged through the door, pushing it hard enough to shove Kerry back behind it for an instant. Momentum carried him another two steps before he skidded to a halt. He was looking right down the barrel of the 9mm in Frank's hand. From his expression, that black circle looked big enough to swallow him whole.

Without taking his gaze off Frank, he reached back and grabbed the sleeve of Kerry's robe, jerking her forward. He obviously didn't expect the weight and resistance her larger frame created. Instead of spinning around in front of him, as Frank's mother would have done, she dug in her heels and dragged back. Then she swung her right hand in a wild punch that glanced off his jaw.

"What the fuck?"

Gary still had hold of the left sleeve of the robe, but, with a sudden jerk, Kerry tore free. Frank recognized she was snarling mad. "You're not going to make a shield out of me, you perverted creep! There're two guns on you right now and

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I can have the third before you can pull whatever you're carrying left-handed." She grabbed his right arm as she spoke and hung on like a bulldog.

Frank grinned. He didn't envy Gary at all. Kerry could be tough. However, Gary wasn't finished yet. He was big and he was strong. Surprise might slow him briefly, but he wouldn't go down without a fight. He'd figure he could beat a woman, probably forgetting Kerry was FBI trained in hand to hand combat.

Frank still had his pistol leveled on Gary's midsection, but the two of them were moving too fast. Frank couldn't risk hitting Kerry by mistake. He didn't want to kill Gary if he could help it anyway. The son-of-a-bitch needed to stand trial and go to prison where knowledge of his particular crimes would make him fair game for a whole bunch of convicts who hated rapists and child molesters even more than they hated cops. He'd be lucky to last a year, or maybe luckier not to.

Gary and Kerry wrestled for several minutes...at least it seemed that long. Frank waited, all set to intervene if it seemed she was not holding her own, but she did.

She made a wild grab and got Gary by one ear. Clenching her hand around it, she squeezed, digging her fingertips and nails into the flesh. He gave a howl, kicking and thrashing, but she didn't let go. Then she drove an elbow hard in his gut and almost simultaneously slammed a knee up into his crotch. The combination did it. His legs crumpled and he sank to the floor, gagging and groaning.

Kerry stepped back, swiping her hair away from her face.

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“Damn it, I wish I had my handcuffs. Grab him before he gets up.”

“Don’t need cuffs. I’ve got some nylon cord that’ll work just as well.” Frank handed his pistol to Roy when he emerged from the hall. “Keep him covered just in case until I get his hands tied.”

Roy nodded, smiling. He leveled both pistols in Gary’s direction.

Kerry lurked close until Frank grabbed Gary’s arms, jerked them behind him, and bound them quickly with a length of cord, drawing it tight enough for the line cut into Gary’s fleshy wrists. There was no way he’d wiggle out of that. He didn’t try. Frank then went over him in a quick frisk, got a pistol out of his waistband and a switchblade out of one boot.

“Did you bring your phone, Frank?”

Kerry’s question startled him at first. “Yeah, it’s right here. What do you need it for?”

“I’m going to call my boss. He’s prob’ly a bit concerned about my disappearance, but once he hears we have the Shadow Son Snatcher in custody, I don’t think he’ll have too many questions about where I’ve been.”

Frank handed her the phone. Obviously from memory she punched in a number and then lifted the phone to her ear. “Hey, Jeff, it’s Kerry.”

She waited a moment, as the other half of the conversation clearly had something to say. “Oh, no, I’m fine. We’ve got the Shadow Son Snatcher. I think he has the latest kid out in his car. We’re at...wait, let me get the address.” She glanced at

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Frank.

“2456 Kachina Drive.”

“We’re at 2456 Kachina Drive and we’ve got him in custody. Send the home boys over ASAP. It’s been a long thirty-six hours and I need some coffee. I got up at o’dark-thirty and started my day before breakfast.”

Frank almost laughed at her cocky, truculent tone. *Shit, she’s talking to her boss, for God’s sakes.* But that was pure Kerry, never one to be cowed or to knuckle under to anyone anytime. It was one of the things he’d always loved about her...

CHAPTER 5

Midmorning came and went before all the admin stuff was accomplished. Finally the officers took Gary away, closed their notebooks and left the scene. The parents of the boy who had cowered in Gary's car the whole time came and got him. They wept with relief to find their son alive and relatively unharmed. Some of the officers left to collect Rickie from the other apartment where he'd been barricaded inside.

After Kerry promised to check in first thing Monday morning and get her report done by noon, Jeff Fields excused her to go home and recover from the adventure. Getting home would take some time, she knew, as they had at least two stops to make, but that was okay. She wasn't quite ready to say

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goodbye to Frank and Roy until she knew how things stood between her and them. Was it just a wild one night stand and over now that the crisis was behind them?

If I just imagined the togetherness I felt last night, it's going to hurt like hell.

No longer certain and empowered, she trailed behind Frank as he tidied up the slight mess they'd made and locked the house. All three slid into the front seat of the Focus, Roy at the wheel this time and Kerry in the middle. It didn't take long to get back to Roy's apartment. As they drove into the parking lot, she saw the dusty tan pickup parked at the far end. The sight triggered a tangled recollection of the past frantic day-and-a-half. She still had a hard time assimilating all that had happened. Somehow she suspected her life had been unalterably changed. *Maybe that's a good thing. No maybe about it. If it's real, it's definitely good.*

No longer a prisoner, she walked between Frank and Roy to the apartment door. Roy unlocked it and they all went in. Kerry made a beeline for the bedroom, headed for the dresser. Her purse and pistol rested in the top drawer, nestled in a pile of sox and Jockey shorts. Her slacks and T-shirt lay on the chair where she'd left them when she dressed in the clothes borrowed from Roy before they left yesterday morning. She lost no time in changing.

It felt good to get back into her own clothes because the bunched waist of Roy's jeans had begun to rub in spots, the fabric even more harsh today after the hasty laundry she'd done the night before. She found comfort in sliding the

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familiar clip-on holster into place in the small of her back and settling her snub-nose into its bed there. With that, she resumed a sense of identity and reality, yet something was missing. Could she keep the new identity she'd found as a key third of a new partnership and still be herself—the self she knew?

She turned to find Frank in the doorway, watching her. “Ready to go pick up your car and head home?”

“In a hurry to get rid of me?”

He lifted an eyebrow at her pointed question. “No, not really. I just figured the way you talked to your boss that you were anxious to write an end to this whole caper.”

“No! I just... I was trying to keep him from getting too curious, wondering just how the three of us were there at the right time and place together. Like what was going on. I told you yesterday if we got Gary the kidnapping and all would never come to light. I'll honor that promise, but...well, are we going to be friends again, still?”

He took a step toward her. “If you want to. If you're willing, I certainly am. We have a lot of catching up to do. But I warn you, anything I get into has to include Roy. I made him a promise, one I am not going to break. I'll tell you about it later, but that's how it is, how it has to be. He's been through hell, I can say that much right now. He's finding his way back and he needs all the help, all the support he can get. It's something I do...”

Then Frank took another step, opened his arms and reached for her. Walking into his embrace felt exactly like

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coming home. A moment later, Roy came in and joined their hug.

Two friends, two brothers, two lovers. Yes, I want this. I want it with all my heart.

“I’m good with this,” she said. “Really good with it. We make a damn good team, much too good to break it up so soon. I think you guys have a story to tell me. Let’s hear it over some coffee, okay? Going home will keep for a little while longer. It’s not home anyway, just a place to crash. Home is where your heart is. Like maybe right here, where my partners are.”

DEIRDRE O'DARE

Deirdre O'Dare, who also writes milder (roughly PG-13 rated) romance as Gwynn Morgan, has loved reading and writing since early childhood. Writing came naturally to Deirdre/Gwynn, who scribed her first simple verse at age eight. An avid reader, she devoured hundreds of books while growing up and later as an adult. Somewhere along the way she found romance and then romance with more explicit and detailed love scenes. "Ah ha," said she, "I think I have found my niche!" In the last decade after leaving her "day job" as a civilian employee of the U. S. Army, she finally settled into romantic fiction writing as a second career. Deirdre has a growing number of shorts and novellas, all published by Amber Heat.

With Irish and Welsh ancestry on both sides of her family, Deirdre has always been enthralled by the history and customs of the Celtic peoples as they have come down to us. The Mother Goddess idea particularly resonates with her as well as the notion that physical expressions of love between consenting couples are both a divine gift and a sacred duty to honor the Mother. Deirdre admits her favorite heroes are cops, cowboys and Celts.

* * *

***Don't miss Journal Of A Timid Temptress,
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