

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



ONE *Good* MAN

LACEY THORN
CINDY SPENCER PAPE

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One Good Man

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ONE GOOD MAN

Cindy Spencer Pape & Lacey Thorn

Dedication

This book is dedicated to the men and woman of the United States Armed Forces, who give their all to ensure the continuing freedom of the American people and fight to protect those who can't protect themselves. Your bravery and courage is not forgotten.

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Chapter One

The dream never varied. Every night—or morning or afternoon if he tried to sleep during the day—the nightmare was the same. It started out pleasantly enough. Grant and his baby brother Lee laughing under the desert sun, kicking back a couple of beers and sharing war stories and dirty jokes with a couple of Lee's buddies.

The makeshift officer's club isn't much more than a tent with rolled-up sides and folding tables. The dry desert heat surrounds them—even visibly, rising in sinuous shimmers from the white sand outside the tent. Someone tells another raunchy joke that has them all choking on their beers. Lee stands up to get another round, stopping to chat with the bartender, a fresh-faced private probably not old enough to drink back home. Grant looks on from the far corner of the tent, still laughing.

Then the laughter stops and the sirens begin, the shouts of "Incoming!"

The heat-shimmers come inside the tent in a bright flash and the world switches to a surreal, slow-motion action. Lee flies over the table into the bartender, they both go down amid a shower of glasses and bottles.

Grant is moving, he thinks. He has to reach Lee, has to get him out of there. More flashes and he thinks, more sounds maybe even his own voice, screaming his brother's name but he can't hear anything anymore. He's clawing, digging and it's hot, so hot. Another flash blinds him completely and then the darkness crashes in.

* * * * *

As usual, Grant Kincaid woke to the sound of his own voice screaming.

"Fuck!" He shook himself the rest of the way awake, because awake was better than the dream. Bleary-eyed, he rolled over and stared at the glowing green numbers on the clock radio beside the bed. Three twenty-four in the morning. Damn, almost four straight hours. That was pretty much a record since he'd gone off the fucking drugs.

He lay in the darkness taking a mental inventory of bodily aches and pains. The leg wasn't too bad. Stiff and sore but it would probably hold him up when he tried to stand on it. That was a plus. The shoulder was in pretty decent shape too, from what he could tell. He'd dislocated that in the hospital after the blast, fighting the medics and trying to break the straps that restrained him to the gurney. He'd apparently been conscious enough to remember that Lee was hurt, but not enough to understand it was too late to help him.

Cautiously, he flexed the fingers of both hands. Those hurt like the devil—they always did—but they opened and closed on command, so that was good. Back and neck were stiff and his head ached like a son of a bitch but again, nothing out of the ordinary.

A hot shower and the one ibuprofen he allowed himself a day would get everything in more or less working order.

He thought about staying in bed and trying for another hour or two of sleep but he knew it would be useless. If he was lucky, he'd be able to catch a nap in the afternoon but once he woke up after the dream he was going to be up for a while. With a grunt and a sigh, he heaved his legs over the side of the bed and padded out into the main room of the cabin. He flipped the switch on the coffee maker he'd set up before going to bed, then went and stood in the blistering hot water of the shower until his skin—even the scarred part—was a uniform shade of lobster red. When the water started to run cold he got out, threw on some jeans, a thermal undershirt and a ratty old pair of sneakers. The cabin had a decent heater and good insulation but it was still a cabin—still too cold to wander around naked in November. Then he stuck a John Wayne DVD into the player and sprawled out on the couch with his coffee.

Tomorrow was Thanksgiving and part of him wished he could go home, spend the day with his parents. He knew they wanted him to, or at least they claimed to want him home. His mom emailed him almost every day but Grant knew they didn't really want to look at what was left of his face. All it would do is remind them of what they'd lost the day the missiles had torn into Lee's camp in Iraq.

Every time Grant looked at his parents, he knew they had to be thinking the same thing he was. The wrong damn brother had died.

* * * * *

Casey scrambled to throw things into a bag. It had been the longest day of her life and by the clock Wednesday still had a few more hours to go. *I gotta go*, was the mantra playing over and over in her head. It couldn't be a coincidence no matter what she wanted to believe. For the hundredth time she wished that she had never taken a midnight walk on Tuesday to get pictures of Detroit after dark. Most of all she wished she had never discovered just what was captured for all time on her film. Murder was deadly in all of its forms but a twelve-story drop to sidewalk city was gorier than she could have ever imagined. She still didn't know what freak force of nature made her turn her camera up and snap away instead of focusing on the body shattered on the sidewalk just across the street from her.

The pictures showed beyond the shadow of a doubt that a man had been there, that the woman notoriously referred to as Detroit's very own version of a Hollywood madam had been helped to her death. Something had urged Casey to make several sets of the incriminating pictures as well as scanning them into her laptop. She had put one set in a manila envelope and taken it to a detective with the Detroit PD. Two hours after she left his office assuring him that those were the only copies of the photos, someone had broken into her apartment and trashed it completely. Had she been there she had no doubt that she wouldn't be able to run right now.

Luckily she hadn't been there. Her neighbor had come home from work early and called the cops when she saw the door ajar and the living room in shambles. Casey had waited until the building was swarming with cops before she sought entrance into the building, telling them who she was and that it was her apartment. Lo and behold among the uniforms was one Detective Rick Mackey, the very man to whom she'd just given evidence of foul play in a death many wanted swept under the rug. Her gut told her that she could trust him and it had never failed her in the past. But someone close to him at the department obviously wasn't on her side. The notorious madam was reputed to have slept with many powerful denizens of the greater Detroit area and Casey couldn't help but wonder how many cops were on that list as well.

Right now she just didn't care. She was throwing stuff in a bag and getting the hell out of Dodge. The good detective was willing to set her up in a motel with some protection while the investigation got under way but Casey couldn't shake the feeling that she was better off on her own. It was just too much of a coincidence that within two hours of leaving the pictures with Detective Mackey someone was breaking into her apartment obviously looking for something. One guess what.

No, Casey was definitely getting out of Detroit and heading for the hills. Her grandfather's old cabin in the mountains might be just far enough. She double-checked the jeans and sweatshirts she had thrown in the bag. Quickly she opened a drawer and threw in a handful of her favorite white cotton bikini panties and several pairs of thick white socks. Another drawer yielded a selection of cotton bras in a random variety of shades. A bottle of lotion and some hiking boots followed, her toiletry bag that stayed packed with travel-size necessities went on top. She grabbed her purse and prayed that her laptop case remained untouched in the back of her Jeep.

At least she knew that the pictures were safe. She had left the police station and gone straight to the bank where she visited her lock box. Then she had dropped a package in the mail to her best friend Darcy with directions of what to do if anything happened to her. She knew the first thing Darcy would do was call and ask what the hell she had gotten herself involved in this time. Just that thought brought a smile to Casey's lips. She grabbed a scrunchie from the top of her dresser and pulled her long mane of thick brown curls up into a loose ponytail. She glanced at her reflection in the mirror and was happy with the strength she saw reflected in her dark green eyes.

I gotta go, she thought again. When she glanced to the doorway and saw Detective Mackey standing there watching her with his boy-next-door smile that oozed "trust me" she added one more mantra. *Trust no one*.

Over an hour later she was twisting her way through the northern Detroit suburbs, keeping careful track of her rearview mirror to check for anyone following her. Since all she could see were headlights, at this point she really had no way to tell. She had politely refused Detective Mackey's offer and told him that she was going to stay with a friend instead. Then she had left him with her cell phone number and the address of an

abandoned lot downriver. When he found out he was going to be one pissed detective. Since she didn't trust him, Casey refused to let it bother her.

Finally convinced she wasn't being followed, Casey merged onto I-75 and took the highway toward what she prayed would be safety. It would be a long trip to Grandpa's cabin. Glancing at the watch on her wrist, she calculated that she should arrive sometime around six or seven in the morning depending on the weather and the condition of the windy back roads she'd be using. Either way it would be a long night.

Her thoughts drifted once more to Detective Mackey. He was a good-looking guy with his military short black hair and chocolate eyes. He was just the right height as well, which for a woman who stood five ten in her bare feet meant anyone taller than her in heels. In another life she would have been interested. Then again in another life she would probably have never met him.

She pictured the voluptuous beauty whose death she had caught on film and tried to envision the shorter blonde woman with the detective and couldn't make it work. Then again what did she know? She had never seen her ex sleeping with his mousy secretary either. Point was that when it came to sex most men seemed to do most of their thinking with the head behind the zipper. So until she knew one way or another, it was best that she stay away from the detective.

Jangling electronic music startled her. She glanced at her phone lying on the seat beside her like it was a snake ready to strike and gobble her whole. The readout was her neighbor's number again and she wondered why Sandy was calling her so late.

"Hello?" Casey was too curious to let it go to voice mail.

"Hey, kiddo," Sandy said. "I saw the police finally leave and wanted to see where you had gotten off to. You need a place to stay tonight?"

"No, I'm going to be staying somewhere else for a while." Casey didn't want to go into detail.

"Does the hunky detective who was there know?" Sandy asked. "Or should I make a trip to see him personally and give him the four-one-one?"

"He knows." Casey almost smiled as she thought of her perpetually on-the-make neighbor trying to woo Detective Mackey into her bed.

"Bummer." Sandy sighed. "You need me to do anything while you're gone?"

"No thanks. I..." Casey stopped as a thought occurred to her. "Hey Sandy, there is something that you can do."

"Anything, kiddo. You know that," Sandy assured her.

"Call me if you see or hear anything in the apartment. But whatever you do don't play Charlie's Angels and go over there and check it out." The last thing Casey wanted was her friend getting hurt in the crossfire.

Sandy laughed into the phone. "Damn, you're ruining all my fun."

"I mean it, Sandy." Casey sighed. "No snooping."

"You sure that you're okay, kiddo?" Sandy's voice was suddenly very serious.

"I'm not sure, Sandy," Casey confessed. "I'm just not sure anymore."

"Watch your six, kiddo," Sandy told her.

"You too, Sandy." Casey hung up, hoping like hell her friend would listen to her and not go snooping into trouble.

She turned the radio up and turned on her cruise control, still keeping careful watch in the rearview mirror. Thanksgiving was tomorrow and she wished more than anything that she was heading home to Indiana and her mom's turkey and stuffing. Maybe next year. This year was going to be a solitary holiday spent in the middle of nowhere. If she made it to next year she knew just what she would say when her father asked what she was most thankful for. Life.

* * * * *

Late Wednesday afternoon, Grant checked the contents of the cabin's refrigerator and swore. Time to head into town and stock up. He hated going out in public, hated the curious stares almost as much as the pitying whispers when the locals caught sight of the scars on his face or hands. At least now that it was November he could get away with wearing gloves. A ski mask would attract a whole different kind of attention, so he was out of luck on that one.

He shrugged into his leather bomber jacket, combed his too-long hair into some kind of order and shoved his cell phone into his pocket before locking up the cabin. Not a whole lot of crime out here in the boondocks but there was no point in issuing a written invitation. Maybe he should get a dog if he was going to stay out here much longer. Something big enough to act as a security system. Might be nice to have someone other than himself to talk to once the snow came and he was stuck inside for days on end.

He got in his SUV and headed down the gravel drive to the main road. His knee and shoulder ached just thinking about a Northern Michigan winter—cold and damp. The doctors had recommended Arizona or New Mexico but he couldn't bear the thought of facing the desert again. If he never saw another sandscape it would be too damned soon.

The nearest small town was about twenty miles west and Grant had driven the route often enough over the last four months to be able to take the roughly half-hour drive in his sleep. He stuck a Warren Zevon disk into the CD player and hummed tunelessly along to "Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead".

The song hit too close to home though and he turned it off. It was too much like what he'd been feeling for the last ten months. Like he was walking around in a body that didn't know it had already died.

The owner of the tiny grocery store had gotten used to Grant in the last few months, so he didn't stare anymore, thank God. And his gray-haired wife who ran the branch post office out of the back of the store was a real gem. Both of them smiled at Grant when he walked back to the postal boxes to get his mail.

"Not going anywhere for Thanksgiving?" Molly peered at him over her half-glasses. "There's a community dinner at the American Legion hall if you're interested."

"Umm-no. Thanks." Christ, sitting around listening to a bunch of WWII vets sharing war stories—Grant couldn't think of anything worse. After half an hour he probably would have a meltdown, run screaming into a swamp or something.

"Your choice—Captain." How the hell did she know about that? As if she was reading his mind, she pointed at the sign that said "US Post Office". Aw shit, she delivered his fucking mail, including his benefit statements from the Army, which insisted on emblazoning everything with his former rank. "But there are plenty of decent folks in this community. You could do worse than get to know a few of them."

"While I'm sure that's true, ma'am, I have other plans for Thanksgiving." He wiggled his eyebrows, tried for a lascivious grin. Maybe she'd let it go if she thought he had a date.

"Well, anyway, you got a big package back here." She slid down off her stool and wrestled a huge box onto the counter. The return address was his parents' of course. Even though she had every reason to despise him, his mom had sent a fucking care package for the holiday. He'd have to take it out to his truck then come back for the groceries, it was that big. Tears pricked his eyelids for a second and he was glad for the aviator sunglasses he never took off in front of other people.

He loaded up a cart full of groceries, added a couple of packages of flashlight batteries and a box of emergency candles. A cold rain had started falling and the temperature was beginning to drop. According to the radio, they were looking at a full-fledged ice storm later in the night. Happy fucking Thanksgiving.

"Sure you don't want a small turkey? Got some fresh ones just the right size for two." Figured that Molly's husband Fred knew about Grant's imaginary date. Grant made an executive decision.

"Sure, why not?" He'd have plenty of cold turkey sandwiches, which didn't sound half bad. But damned if he was going to make stuffing or cranberry sauce. "Just a small one though. She doesn't eat much."

Thankfully, Fred let it go with the bird. He sent the bag boy—his son, Grant assumed—over to the meat counter while he continued to ring up Grant's purchases. After what seemed like hours, Grant handed over his credit card.

"Well, I hope your friend makes it before the storm hits."

"She should be here soon," Grant fibbed. He signed the slip and handed it back. Come to think of it, the storm could come in handy. It would give him an excuse if anyone ever found out his supposed date had stood him up.

"Well, you be careful out there. Hear the county road commission's been out checking on old Sawmill Road. Guess there's been lots of complaints about tire damage but nobody can figure out why."

Grant shrugged. The road leading back into the woods was a typical Michigan mess of cracks and potholes but he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

“Jesse Simpson claims she picked up some hitchhiker who wasn’t there when she went to let him out. Of course she was probably more than half drunk at the time so nobody paid much attention. Guy probably bailed out when she slowed down rather than ride with a drunk.”

Grant silently agreed. He shook the older man’s hand, returned the wishes of “Happy Thanksgiving” then loaded the supplies into his truck.

He drove back into the woods with those words ringing in his ears. Happy fucking Thanksgiving.

Not this year. The one thing Grant had left was the one thing he wasn’t the least bit thankful for. Life.

Chapter Two

Casey let out a deep sigh of relief when she finally hit the tree-shrouded back roads. Sawmill Road. She was almost there. Everything had been closed in all the little towns she'd passed through this early in the morning on Thanksgiving Day. She could only hope that there were still some nonperishables at the old place. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had been to the cabin. If nothing else she had the bottles of water and power bars that she kept in the Jeep. She was just starting to relax when she felt the Jeep lower on one side and a sharp tug at the wheel.

What the hell! Casey thought as she pulled as close to the side of the road as she could and parked. She eased the motor off, opened the door and headed to the back of the passenger side that was definitely sitting a little lower in the dirt. The tire was as flat as a pancake. How the hell had that happened? Surely she would have felt or heard something if she had hit something big enough to flatten the tire that low this quickly.

Shit! She kicked the tire, stubbing her toes and making her hop around precariously on the icy road. Freezing drizzle had been steadily falling for most of her trip out of Detroit, making the roads a bitch without the added hassle of a flat tire. She didn't even know if she still had a spare in the wheel well in the back of the Jeep. She refused to put one on the back door, thinking it looked tacky. Now she wished that she had. At least it would have been obvious then and she wouldn't have to go looking for it.

She was just reaching for the back door handle when a voice spoke from behind her.

"Ahh...a flat tire. Can I help you, ma'am?"

Casey spun around, wondering where the hell the guy attached to the voice had come from. It was hard to see in the weak glow of her taillights but he looked young—mid-twenties maybe—and he was definitely wearing the dress uniform of a military man. Marines, she thought. She glanced around but didn't see another car or really anywhere that he could have been.

"Where did you come from?" she asked bluntly.

He smiled a boyish grin and nodded back down the road. "Sorry, ma'am. I didn't mean to startle you. I've been walking for a while now. That was some dance you were doing just a minute ago."

So that's why she hadn't heard him. No more temper tantrums for her. "I don't remember passing a car anywhere." And she would have most definitely noticed something like that.

"Nah, ma'am. The bus dropped me off back in town." He smiled again, making twin dimples appear in his cheeks. "I've been walking ever since." He nodded to the large military duffel that was lying beside the road behind him.

"Where in the world are you headed?" Casey asked. There was nothing out this way but cabins.

"My brother has a cabin just a little ways up and I'm hoping to spend Thanksgiving with him."

"Oh." Casey felt like a dork. Of course he wanted to be home with his family on the holidays. Most normal people did.

"So, can I give you a hand with the spare?" He gave her the easy smile she was slowly getting used to.

"I'm hoping that it is in the wheel well," she told him, opening the back and shuffling her clutter around until she could pull the latch up and look inside. She breathed a sigh of relief when the tire was exactly where she'd hoped it would be. At least something was going right.

"Let me get that for you, ma'am." The young Marine reached for the spare.

Within minutes he had the Jeep jacked up and was removing the flat tire.

"So where have you been?" Casey asked to make conversation while she watched him with the tire.

"Iraq, ma'am." The one word said a lot.

Casey had been over there in the beginning of Operation Enduring Freedom. The photos she had snapped only showed a small portion of the hell it was. No wonder he was anxious to get home and see the faces of the ones he loved and who loved him as well. Nothing like a trip to hell to make you appreciate those you left behind. He had finished changing the tire while she had been lost in her own memories and now he placed the flat tire in the well.

"My name's Casey," she told him. "Thanks so much for helping me out. Can I give you a lift to your brother's?" Casey was startled by her offer but refused to take it back. All that she had seen over in Iraq wouldn't let her withdraw the offer of a lift. It was the very least she could do.

"That would be great, ma'am." The soldier gave her another bright smile.

"It's Casey," she reminded him and held the back door open while he stowed his duffel.

"Thanks, ma'am... Casey," he corrected himself. "I'm Kincaid. Lt. Lee Kincaid."

"Nice to meet you, Lieutenant." She held out her hand and he shook it. His grip was surprisingly cool.

"You can call me Lee." They both moved to opposite sides of the Jeep to hop inside. "I'd like it if you called me Lee."

"Lee it is." Casey nodded as she fired the Jeep up and pulled back onto the road. "So tell me where I'm headed."

"Straight ahead. You just keep following the twists and turns for about five more miles then the road to the cabin is on the right." He was looking out the window as he spoke, looking as if he wanted to absorb everything they passed and tuck it away for another time. "It's not much of a road actually, more of a dirt trail. We call it Kincaid Boulevard as sort of a family joke."

"Is your brother expecting you?" Casey asked, keeping her eyes on the twists and turns in front of her while trying to keep careful watch behind her as well. As far into the woods as they were, any other vehicle could be suspect. The moon was attempting to peek through the storm-laden sky, casting an eerie gloom.

"No. He's had some bad times lately and he came up here to be alone." Lee finally glanced her way. He had beautiful baby blue eyes that shone with some inner sparkle. His hair was a shade somewhere between red and blond and he reminded her of too many soldiers she had met when she was over in the Middle East. He was young and full of life and she wondered how long he would remain that way. She had met soldiers in their early twenties or even late teens who were already hardened from what they had seen and done. For some reason she didn't want that to happen to this boy.

"So what's he going to say when you show up out of the blue?" Casey asked. "Does he even know that you're back in the US?"

"He knows that I'm home." Lee caught her eye and grinned so boyishly that she couldn't help but smile back at him. "But he'll expect me to stay where he left me."

"So he's seen you since you've been home?"

"Yes. But he left too soon and I never really got to say goodbye." Lee had that faraway look on his face again and Casey couldn't help but wonder why.

"You said that he wanted to be alone?" She encouraged him to tell her more about this brother he was going through so much to visit.

"Yes. He was injured in Iraq while he was there guarding some hotshot senator. He was caught in a bomb blast and took some bad burns to his body, shrapnel took out his knee and tore his leg all to hell."

"Jesus," Casey said without thinking. "And he's up there by himself?"

Lee smiled and to her it looked a little sad. "Grant's always been a little bit of a loner. You can't keep him down for long and when he is down you don't want to be anywhere in the vicinity."

Casey laughed. "That bad, huh? So is he a Marine as well?" She had a feeling that with the injuries Lee described he wasn't active anymore but the way this war on terrorism was going you just didn't know.

"He was in the Army, Airborne Ranger." Lee's voice was filled with pride and the look on his face clearly showed how much he adored and perhaps revered his brother. "He was over in Iraq with the Secret Service. He's retired now."

"I bet he'd have some great stories to tell." Casey took another curve and wondered how many more miles to the road he was looking for. She was enjoying his company

but after driving all night she was about ready to crash hard and sleep for a week. "You said that his name was Grant?"

"Grant Jackson Kincaid but we call him Grant."

"Grant Jackson?" Casey almost laughed. "And you are what, Lee Stuart? Or Sherman?"

Lee looked startled for a moment and she knew that she had guessed right. "Sherman."

"My dad's a Civil War buff too," she explained. "He and my mom do battle re-enactments."

"That's cool," Lee said. "My dad's military to the core and to this day I'm grateful I didn't end up with a name like Stonewall Arnold or something. Or even worse Lee Hooker."

Casey burst out laughing and couldn't seem to stop. Lee laughed with her and it was good to hear. He had a unique laugh—sort of a snort followed by a guffaw. He laughed with his whole body and she liked that.

"I know, I know." Lee shook his head and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Grant says that I sound like a bullfrog when I really get to laughing. He's always called me tadpole."

"Tadpole?" Casey took another curve before glancing over at him. "Aren't you a little old to be a tadpole?"

"Grant was thirteen when I was born. I was the late-in-life surprise for the family." Lee didn't look like he'd suffered too much so he must have been a good surprise. "By the time I was starting kindergarten, Grant was leaving for basic training. I didn't get to see him much but boy was it fantastic when he was home."

"I bet you followed him everywhere." Casey could just see him as a little boy following an older version of himself around and hounding him with questions.

"He was great about it." Lee's face shone with the giddy excitement of the boy he must have been as he recounted some of the antics he had pulled on his brother. "He took me everywhere with him. We went fishing and hiking and swimming and camping. He even taught me how to drive when I was about thirteen. He came home and drove up in this black Jeep. It was battered all to hell and looked like it was ready to collapse but it ran like a dream." Casey smiled at the way he described the Jeep. She was pretty attached to her Jeep as well. "We went out on a country road and he let me get behind the wheel and drive. We came to a t-road by old man Cramer's farm and Grant told me to turn the wheel to the right." He glanced over at her and she just knew something funny was coming by the look in his eyes. "The thing was he never told me to quit turning so I ended up heading straight for the ditch and Cramer's precious fence. Grant yelled. I panicked and hit the gas instead of the brake and there went the fence."

Casey joined Lee in laughter. She could just imagine a thirteen-year-old boy driving for the first time and doing something like that. "Oh my God. What did your brother do?"

"He told old man Cramer that he was the one who had done it and spent the rest of the day working to repair it for him."

Ahhh... Casey thought. And a hero was made in Lee's eyes that day.

"So what did you do while he was fixing the fence?"

"Mostly got in the way and probably made the job that much longer," Lee admitted with a grin. "But Grant didn't mind. And when he was done we went to my favorite swimming hole and washed the dust off. When we got home Mom laid into him about being so reckless with me in the car. Grant just apologized and said that it wouldn't happen again. We never did tell anyone the truth."

"Sounds like you have an amazing brother."

"I'd love for you to meet him." Lee looked at her and something in his gaze held hers and refused to let her look away. "I think you might be just what he needs."

"What he needs?" Casey struggled to pull away from his eyes but couldn't. "I'm just dropping you off, Lee. I've got to get to my own cabin."

"Just what he needs," she thought she heard Lee mutter just before he hollered. "Look out!"

Casey tore her gaze away just in time to see the humongous tree lying across the road. She tugged on the wheel and stomped on the brake. The Jeep slowed somewhat but the tires refused to turn quickly enough and the Jeep slammed hard into the solid trunk of the tree. Casey heard a pop and inhaled a cloud of something as her head slammed back into the headrest. The airbag, she thought as she fought desperately to blink her eyes open. She had to see if Lee was okay. When she glanced over it looked like Lee was glowing and she worried that she had taken a harder hit to the head than she thought.

"He'll be here soon, Casey." Lee stroked her face gently, easing her hair out of her eyes. "He's the one you can trust. Believe in him, Casey. He needs someone to believe in him."

Casey blinked again and when she opened her eyes Lee was gone. He must have gone for help, she thought and then the blackness pulled her under and she thought no more.

* * * * *

It was after six when the dream finally woke him on Thanksgiving morning, so he felt better than he had in a long time. After coffee and a shower, he stuck his head outside the front door to check the weather. The sleet and freezing rain had kept up all night and though it was starting to taper off now, the ice storm was a good one. Every tree and branch was encased in a crystalline layer of ice that glittered everywhere the

cabin lights shone. Grant touched a match to the kindling and paper he had ready in the fireplace, made sure the oil lamps on the mantel were ready to go and the flashlights were at hand. The stove was propane, so he'd be able to cook. And if the fridge quit, the food could go out on the back porch. He'd be fine for days if the power went out.

It was almost a half hour later when he heard the crash of a tree in the distance. Five, four, three—there went the power. He lit the oil lamps, unplugged the television and his laptop. The fire was a hearty, crackling blaze that provided more than enough background noise to keep him from going nuts. He dug out a notebook and a pen, figuring he'd spend some time working on the security plans his buddy Jamie in Chicago had sent him to look over. He was still considering whether to take Jamie up on the job offer one of these days. Maybe when he felt human enough to be around people full time again.

Ten minutes after sitting down he decided it wasn't going to work—he was just too restless to sit still yet. For some reason the storm was adding to his usual cabin fever. He stepped out onto the back porch and decided that since the drizzle had pretty much quit he might as well go for his morning walk. The docs would probably go apeshit if they knew he was hiking on an icy hillside in the dark but then, what they didn't know couldn't hurt Grant. He pulled on his coat and a Chicago Cubs cap, grabbed a flashlight and ventured out into the winter fairyland.

The clouds were just starting to part, allowing a thin ray of moonlight to sparkle on the glass-like shapes of the trees on the hilltop. The cabin sat about three-quarters of the way up a hill, in a small clearing that barely disturbed the natural landscape that surrounded it. Ice-coated twigs and leaves snapped and crackled under the heavy lug soles of Grant's hiking boots as he cautiously circled the back of the cabin.

The loud squeal of the tires was the only warning Grant had before he heard the resounding crash echo through the frozen forest. Metal screamed and glass shattered. The loud impact thud nearly had him diving for cover. It took all of his self-control not to launch himself head-first into the underbrush.

What the fuck was a car doing out here at this time of the morning? A family getting an early start on the road to Grandma's house? It had to be down on Sawmill Road—there were no other buildings on the private two-track his family jokingly called Kincaid Boulevard. It sounded closer though. Maybe the weather was somehow amplifying the sound. Without even consciously thinking about it Grant began to make his way around the cabin and down the private road toward the blacktop.

Once he hit the gravel two-track he moved a little faster, his flashlight beam guiding every step as he checked for purchase. Slipping and breaking his neck on a patch of black ice wasn't going to help whoever needed help out at the road. He automatically reached for his cell phone before he remembered he didn't have it on him. No signal out here on the best of days.

As he approached the second-to-last curve of the drive, he saw that one of the giant maples had fallen down across the road, not far from the pole that provided electricity and phone service to the cabin. That explained why the power had gone. He swore

when he realized it also meant the phone was probably out. If the people in the car needed an ambulance, Grant would be hiking about two miles to the next house to call one.

He moved carefully, watching closely for the downed power line. When he spotted it tangled up in the top branches he breathed a sigh of relief that it was nowhere near the vehicle. About fifteen yards from the tree, he finally caught sight of the silver Jeep that had smashed into the other side. It didn't look too bad, he thought, picking his way forward. The front fender was crumpled but the rest looked mostly intact, at least as far as he could tell from this side of the tree. He climbed over the trunk and made it to the passenger side, which was empty. The Jeep was sitting squarely on a big patch of ice. Grant slipped and slithered around to the driver's door, was relieved when it opened easily. The air bag had deployed and the driver leaned forward with one cheek pillowed on it, a long mop of dark curls spilling all around. The woman lifted her face off the air bag to look at him, so he knew she was conscious at least.

"G-grant?" Her speech was a little slurred—it must have been his imagination turning her wordless murmur into his name. "Is Lee okay?"

All right, now he knew he was hearing things. Maybe it was time for him to talk to the shrink again. He'd think about it later—couldn't deal with that before Monday anyhow. Meanwhile what was he going to do about her?

"Miss, can you tell me how badly you're hurt?"

"Not bad." She started to shake her head but winced and gave a little moan instead. "Was going pretty slow by the time we hit the tree."

"We? Was there someone else in the car?" He shined the flashlight around the backseat, found no signs of another occupant.

"Umm-hmm." She straightened slowly as if testing each movement. The dome light and his flashlight provided enough illumination to tell she was fairly young, with a cascade of long brown curls, a heart-shaped face and big green eyes. "I picked him up a few miles back after he helped me change a tire. Said the bus dropped him off at the highway and he was trying to get home for Thanksgiving."

"Well, once we get you inside, I'll come back out and look." He wasn't sure if she was delusional or if her hitchhiker had fled before the cops could be called but either way he didn't figure he'd find any tracks. With no working phone lines he couldn't call an ambulance or the cops anyway but if there had been a rider, he was gone now.

"Do you think you can stand?" God he hoped so. He didn't think his body was up to carrying her all the way up the hill.

"Yeah. I'm pretty sure I'm okay." He looked her over to make sure. Her breathing was a little fast but that was normal after such a scare. Her speech was clearing up nicely—she was lucid now and her eyes looked clear with both pupils normal. This side of the Jeep wasn't too banged up, so odds were she was fine.

"Okay, then let's get you out of here." Grant braced himself against the Jeep and held her arm as she swung her legs around and cautiously placed first one then the

other on the ground. She was tall, he discovered. The curly hair on the top of her head tickled his nose—teased him with the fragrance of flowers and the scent of the powder from the airbag. It was touch and go at first, he had to steady her when her knees tried to wobble but she got it together fast, then stood with one arm braced on the door of the Jeep and the other held by Grant.

"Everything working?" His voice came out a little rougher than he liked. The last time he'd touched a woman other than his mother it had been Nurse Ratchet back at the VA hospital and she'd scared the piss out of him on a daily basis—would have even if he hadn't been half out of his mind with pain and drugs and grief.

"Let's get you up to the cabin then."

"Okay." She leaned into the Jeep and pulled out a big leather shoulder bag. She staggered a little as she straightened but caught herself on the door. "One ankle's a little sore but it will hold."

"Good." He leaned past her and swung the door shut. "'Cause the phone's out, so it would be kind of tough to call an ambulance."

"I'll make it. And I'd sell my left arm for a cup of coffee."

"That I can manage." He'd dug out the old metal percolator before the power went out. He took her arm again, helped her climb over the tree and started guiding her slowly up the hill. "The cabin's a good way up the road. Let me know if you need to stop and catch your breath for a second."

"I'm good. I'm going to have a nice collection of bruises, a puffy ankle and a knot on my forehead but nothing major."

"If you say so." The head injury would be the one to watch. She kept up pretty well, so he wasn't too concerned. Of course with his leg and the ice that wasn't necessarily saying much. The rain had started up again by the time they made it up the hill, making the trip even tougher. When they reached the cabin she stopped on the porch and kicked the snow off her sneakers before following him inside.

"Power's out," he told her as he unzipped his coat and stuffed his gloves in the pockets. "But there's plenty of firewood and the stove's propane, so we should be all right."

She looked around and gave him a smile that went straight to his gut—and lower. Jesus—in the firelight she was even prettier than he'd realized—all long hair, long legs and the most kissable damned mouth he'd ever seen.

"Nice place."

"I like it." He shrugged and turned away to hang his coat on a peg beside the door. He held out a hand for her coat, carefully avoiding any contact with her skin when he took it, then hung it beside his own.

She followed him over to the fire, held out her bare hands to warm in front of the flames.

"Thanks for the rescue." He dragged a couple of chairs over to the fireside and with a sigh she sank down into one. As soon as he sat down beside her, she stuck out her hand. "I'm Casey, Casey Shields."

He shook her hand then leaned his elbows on his thighs to hide his body's instant reaction to even that most casual touch. He hadn't had a waking erection in months. Why the hell had the equipment picked today to get back into working order? He managed to nod an acknowledgement and return her introduction. "Pleased to meet you, Casey Shields. My name's Grant Kincaid."

Her forest-green eyes widened and sparkled, "Oh you *are* Grant. Good! Now where is Lee? I assumed he'd come up to the cabin to get help."

Every hair on Grant's body stood on end and his guts clenched in a knot. "What the bloody hell are you talking about?"

"Lee. Your brother." She tilted her head to the side in a damn good imitation of confusion. "Oh that's right—he said it was a surprise—you didn't know he was coming. But you have to go out and look for him. He could be hurt!"

"Lady, I don't know what kind of scam you think you're running but unless you want to walk back to town it ends right now."

She blinked up at him with those big green eyes—those big green *lying* eyes. "What's wrong with you? Your brother could be lost out there somewhere, or hurt. Don't you even care?"

Rage burned in his belly. He wouldn't have been nearly this pissed if she'd shoved a gun in his face. There wasn't much left that he gave a damn about but Lee's name, Lee's memory—those were still sacred. Maybe the only things left that were. "You've got about two seconds to tell me what the hell is going on before I open that door and throw you out into the ice."

"I have no idea." She threw up her hands. "All I did was offer a ride to a nice young Marine who helped me out when I got a flat tire. And in return I got a smashed-up Jeep, a sore ankle and a bitch of a headache."

He started to speak but she shook her head and kept on going. "I don't know what the hell your problem is and frankly I don't much care. All I really wanted to do was to get to my own cabin and get some sleep since I've been driving all night. You, on the other hand, might want to go find your baby brother—who seems for some reason to idolize you even though you are obviously a freaking lunatic."

Grant stood and leaned over her, pinning her into her chair by leaning one hand on each armrest.

"Listen, lady. I don't know what your game is but mention my brother one more time and I will toss you out into the freezing rain. But just in case you hit your head harder than I thought and you've got amnesia, I'm going to say this nice and clear. My little brother Lee is dead. I watched him get blown to pieces right in front of my face, so there's no mistaking it. Lee Sherman Kincaid died January fourteenth at five thirty-six p.m. in a fucking tent in Iraq."

Chapter Three

Casey didn't know what to think anymore. Maybe she was under too much stress but even so she shouldn't be so far gone that she was seeing dead people. She almost giggled thinking of the little boy in the Bruce Willis movie confessing that he could see dead people. Yep, no doubt that she was definitely losing it. But she had seen Lee, could describe him perfectly if Grant had given her the chance. But no. Instead the asshole had dropped his own little bomb and slammed back out into the storm, going Lord knew where.

She stood gingerly, giving her legs plenty of time to hold her up before moving. The ankle was still tender, but there wasn't much swelling and it was nothing she couldn't walk on. There was a flashlight on a table near the fire, so she picked that up and used it to light her way. She moved cautiously out of the front room of the cabin and headed down the darkened hall. She wasn't snooping, just looking for the bathroom. If she could just splash some cold water on her face, wake up a little bit, maybe this nightmare would all go away.

She lucked out with the first door that she came to leading into a really nice bathroom. Casey stepped in and shut the door behind her, flipping the lock without thinking about it. She braced her hands on the sink and glanced into the mirror. The knot wasn't as bad as she had feared but the bruise would be hellacious. Her vision was good but then she had already known that. Grant might be an ass but he was definitely easy on the eyes. Too bad he thought she was either crazy or a scheming bitch.

Grant Jackson Kincaid. What a mouthful, and judging from his build, he would be. *Down, girl*, Casey growled. But her body wasn't listening. It was thinking of that hard body and all the wonderful things she could do to it, with it. He was tall, possibly six foot three or more, with lush locks of light brown hair streaked with blond highlights that could only be achieved by the sun. It was a little long now, hanging to his collar, and she wanted to run her fingers through it. Or even better clench her hands tight in it while he rode her to orgasm. Unfortunately his deep gray eyes had shown anything but interest when he had stomped out.

Casey shook her head slowly and heaved a deep sigh of regret. She wasn't here on a sex holiday anyway. She was here to hide out from someone who was determined to make sure that the madam's death stayed a suicide. What did she really know about Grant? Nothing but the true tales of a dead man. God, what kind of twilight zone had she wandered into? If there was no Lee then who had helped her with the tire on the Jeep? Who had ridden with her and told her stories? She had always had a vivid imagination. It was one of the things that made her photos so in demand. But she had never imagined another person when they weren't there.

So who—or what—was the Lee who had helped her and told her about Grant? Who was the polite young man who had laughed and shared memories with her? Was it even possible that she had met and chatted with the ghost of a man killed thousands of miles away? And Grant had said that Lee died back in January, almost a year ago. How was it even possible?

Casey reached blindly for the cold water knob and gave it a savage twist. Her hands were shaking when she filled them with the cold water and bent to splash it on her face. *What the hell is going on here*, kept repeating in her head but the answers were out of reach. Finally she shut the water off and reached for a towel to pat the water from her face and hands. Her hair was damp in places but she just didn't care. Nothing made sense at the moment. Nothing.

She stumbled toward the door and fumbled with the lock for a few moments before she could get the door open. She was panicking. She knew it and felt helpless to stop it. Her life was spiraling out of control and it had all started with those damn pictures of Detroit at night. Now she had pictures of a murder and someone was determined to silence her. No one to trust. No one to turn to. Hell, now she even had ghosts coming after her to fuck her life up some more. Casey giggled and was still cognizant enough to realize that sounded more than a bit mad.

She peeked back into the front room but it was empty. Grant hadn't come back while she was having her nervous breakdown. But really, what had she expected? The man had been decent enough to help her out and bring her to relative comfort and warmth and she had repaid him with freaking "Tales from the Crypt" crap about having given his dead brother a lift so Lee could spend the holidays with him. Hell, she would have run for the hills as well.

Sleep. That was what she needed. She had hit her head too hard, been up way too long and it was affecting her thinking. She would just find a warm spot to curl up for a while and everything would be fine when she woke up. This was probably all some wicked tequila-induced nightmare and she would laugh about it when she woke up.

Casey stumbled into a room that looked like a tornado had hit it. The covers were twisted on the big king-size bed and clothes were tossed around carelessly. Papers were strewn across the bureau top and a laptop sat on top of them. *Just a bad dream*, Casey thought. *It will all go away when I really wake up. I'll be home in my bed and this will just be a bad dream.*

She sat on the side of the bed and kicked her shoes off. Her jeans and shirt went next until she was stripped down to her underwear and socks. She looked down and knew she was dreaming because she never slept with a bra on because the underwire support her boobs required would dig in and make her sore come morning. She took it off and dropped it on top of the pile of her clothes. Looking around, she grabbed an old gray Army t-shirt that was tossed over a nearby chair that looked like it was from the kitchen. She held it up to her nose and inhaled the scent of sunshine and man. Perfect, she thought as she pulled it over her head. That would turn this dream into something much better.

Casey tumbled back onto the bed and burrowed under the covers, pulling them up to her chin. The same scent that was on the t-shirt permeated the bedding and brought a smile to her lips as she immediately dozed off. Everything would make sense when she woke up. Everything would be like it should then. This nightmare would be just a memory and she would never touch tequila again.

* * * * *

There was no fucking way she was telling the truth.

The rain had finally quit but the temperature had dropped further, making the ice even worse. A weak glimmer of dawn was trying to filter through the trees and clouds but it wasn't getting very far. One more time Grant searched the area around the Jeep, looking for some clue that another person had been in the vehicle. He'd been out here for almost half an hour since he stormed out of the cabin rather than strangle the woman inside and still hadn't found a goddamned thing.

The problem was, she hadn't *looked* like she was lying.

Not that he was an expert but he usually had some clue. It was part of why he'd been snagged by the Secret Service when he'd left the Army. He had some sort of weird sixth sense when it came to phonies and that had served him well in his years as a bodyguard and security specialist. At least one congressman was alive today because Grant had been good at what he did. Just not good enough to save his own brother.

Maybe there was something inside the Jeep.

He opened the driver's door and looked around. Nothing much—some fast-food coffee cups scattered on the passenger-side floor, a tube of lip balm, an elastic hair band and a couple of quarters in the tray between the seats. A cell phone. He pocketed that for further investigation, then moved around to the back.

Three bags here. One small duffel that looked like an overstuffed gym bag, a black nylon laptop case and a top-of-the-line camera rig, with a tripod lying under the pile. Since he was stuck with her for a while she might as well have dry clothes, so he tossed the duffel over his shoulder. Since the other two might hold clues as to her intentions, he grabbed those as well, setting the pile on a log while he checked the wheel well.

The tire inside was definitely flat.

But try as he might, he could not find any trace of a puncture or slash. It looked like someone had simply let the air out. As he was settling the tire back into its space, something fell out with a metallic rattle when it landed on the jack. He shifted the tire and felt around for the object, then slid the tire back in. He held his flashlight up to the two flat bits of metal on a long chain.

Son of a bitch!

No fucking way!

Lee's dog tags.

They'd never found them in the aftermath of the explosion. Just a red mark on his neck as if they'd been torn away. Lee's CO had had to identify the body – what was left of it – then brought pictures to Grant in his hospital bed for verification. It had definitely been Lee. Their parents had claimed the remains and buried him while Grant was still in traction at the evac hospital in Germany. Grant had seen the box of mementos when he got home, said his own private farewell. There was Lee's old footlocker with his dress uniform, his medals and commendations and the official telegram notifying next-of-kin of his death.

But no one knew what had happened to his dog tags.

What the hell were they doing here?

He looked around and realized he was sitting on the log that lay across the road. Which was a pretty dumb-assed thing to do considering he knew there was a live power line tangled up in it somewhere. Judging by the fact that he didn't need the flashlight anymore, he'd been sitting there a while. Given the temperature, that was kind of stupid too.

He wasn't sure what was going on but something sure as hell was. And he should probably check on the woman, make sure she hadn't either passed out from a concussion or robbed him blind. He picked up the three bags and climbed over the fallen tree.

Mind churning, he trudged back up to the cabin. His leg was sore from the additional hiking and from sitting too long in the cold. His hands barely worked well enough to get the door open. If he hadn't had on his heavy gloves, they probably wouldn't be functioning at all.

The cabin was quiet when he walked in. He looked around for his uninvited guest but didn't see her. Her coat still hung where he'd left it, her purse and shoes were on the floor in front of the fireplace, so she couldn't have gone far.

The bathroom was empty but showed signs of her presence. At least he *thought* he'd hung the towel up instead of leaving it in the sink. He hadn't really been much on housekeeping lately. But it was still wet, so she'd probably been here. That left the bedrooms. The back one held the two bunk beds he and Lee had used as kids. Being the older, he'd always gotten the top bunk. He'd refused to so much as open this door since he'd arrived, unable to cope with the memories.

Apparently neither had she. It was still untouched, still smelled musty and disused. There were no sheets or blankets on the old striped mattresses and cobwebs filled the corners. A bookshelf still held a selection of Hardy Boys mysteries and dog-eared comic books, along with some Nancy Drew books left by one of his girl cousins.

That left the master bedroom. *Oh shit*, he'd left his laptop and the security plans lying out on the dresser. Could she be in corporate espionage? He turned the handle of the door silently, paused and when he heard no sounds from within the room, he slowly pushed open the door.

His laptop sat on the dresser where he'd left it, the piles of paper still underneath. So where was she? He kept the blinds down in here so it took a second for his eyes to make out the long hair spilling across his pillow.

She'd gone to bed. The solution to her disappearance was so simple Grant almost had to laugh. She'd said she was tired. He'd stormed out. So she'd used the bathroom and found a bed. It was the first thing that had made sense all day.

As his eyes fully adjusted, he noticed something else, something he wished he hadn't. On the floor beside the bed was an untidy pile of clothing, topped by a sturdy pale-colored bra. His penis sprang to life instantly and Grant braced himself against the door jamb. *Jesus Christ*, she was in his bed. Naked, or nearly so. And while his brain said to leave her alone and have it out with her later, his cock was screaming, "Get her!"

His brain almost won the argument. It had conscience on its side after all. But then she moaned and started thrashing in her sleep.

"No!" she screamed. "Please, no!"

"Don't let them kill me!"

Then she just flat-out screamed and sat up in the bed.

She wasn't naked. Part of him registered relief, part of him disappointment and his cock just went, "Yum." She must have found the t-shirt he'd been wearing to sleep in and pulled it on. It was sure a hell of a lot more interesting on her than it had ever been on him. The ancient cotton clung to her lush, full breasts like a second skin. Even in the dim morning light he could see her plump nipples straining against the thin fabric.

She stared blindly into space for a moment then turned to see him standing in the doorway. "Grant?" Her voice was hoarse from sleep, from the screaming. He stepped more fully into the room.

"Yeah. Yeah, it's me."

She sagged back against the headboard. "Oh thank God!" Then she buried her face in her hands and started to cry.

She didn't cry, like some women did, in a cute, chick-flick kind of way. He was immune to that. His ex-wife had had it down to an art form. This woman cried from the gut—and if he didn't miss his guess—from the heart. Her shoulders jerked and she wheezed for breath as she sobbed and sniffled, then wiped her face roughly with the back of her hand.

He didn't even realize he was moving until he was there beside the bed. Then it was the most natural thing in the world to sit on the edge and gather her into her arms. Whoever she was, whatever game she was playing, right now all he could do was hold her in his arms and stroke his hands down her back while she cried.

After a few minutes the sobs dissolved into hiccups, then faded away to one locker-room loud snort. She pulled away from his soaked chest and used both hands to swipe at her face, shove damp strands of hair out of her eyes.

"S-sorry."

"For what?" His own voice sounded rusty, even to him. Now that she wasn't falling apart anymore, his cock had registered the fact that there was a real live woman sitting in his lap, all warm and soft, for the first time in almost a year. *Down, boy!* He tried to remember that he didn't know her, couldn't trust her. Too bad it wasn't working.

"Everything." She looked around wildly. It dawned on him what she needed and he handed her the first thing that came to hand, which turned out to be a pillowcase. She nodded her thanks and used the cloth to wipe her face then finally blow her nose. "Including the extra laundry."

"That would be the least of my worries. Probably should have put clean bedding on a while ago." Would have, if he'd known there was going to be a woman in the cabin. But he knew, or thought he did, what she was really apologizing for. Unless he missed his guess, Casey—her name was engraved in his mind from earlier—was a strong, independent type. And he knew very well how much he hated to fall apart in front of anyone else. He figured he might as well say something to put her at ease. They had a lot of talking to do. It would go easier if they didn't start out in confrontation. "Trust me, I'm no stranger to nightmares. They happen to the best of us."

"Thanks. I'm not usually such a wuss." Her voice broke and she sniffed but she kept going. "Yesterday was just a really, really bad day."

"And so far today hasn't been much of a peach either."

"Amen on that one." She sniffled again and took another swipe at her face with the pillowcase.

"You okay now?" He knew he'd better move away now, before the little head started making the decisions. He'd come in here to talk to her, damn it, not to jump on her. He shifted a little and she seemed to realize she was sitting in his lap. Her eyes opened wide and she scooted sideways on the bed away from him.

"Yeah. More or less at any rate." She looked down at her own chest and gulped. "I hope you don't mind I borrowed your shirt—and your bed. But I drove all night and then the crash and—"

"Stop." He held out a hand, laid a finger over her lips. "I don't give a shit about the shirt or the bed or even the wrecked Jeep in my driveway. I do mind if you're here running some scam that involves my brother. I do mind when you wake up screaming, 'Don't kill me!' And I fucking well mind about these." He pulled the dog tags out of his pants pocket and held them up.

She didn't say a word, just shook her head wildly then winced. Yeah, that knot on her head had to hurt. He took a deep breath to try to get his voice under control, since he'd been yelling at the end. "You want to explain to me how these got into the wheel well of your Jeep?"

She shook her head again but more carefully this time, her wide, dark green eyes fixed on the tags. "Are they yours?"

"Nope. Try again." He swayed them and her eyes tracked them like they were a hypnotist's pendulum.

"L-lee's?"

"Uh-huh. Now start at the beginning and tell me all about why you drove all night from Detroit, why you were on old Sawmill Road before dawn on Thanksgiving morning and what the hell you know about my brother."

Casey pulled the quilt up around her crossed legs and licked her lips. They felt like she'd been face-down in the Sahara for a few days and so did her throat. But she owed it to Grant to give him what little information she could. She just wished his closeness didn't set every nerve in her body tingling. This conversation would be much easier if the scent of him on the bedding wasn't still making her wet.

"Can I get a glass of water first please?" Casey asked, not just to stall for time to think but because she really needed it since all the moisture in her body seemed to be pooling somewhere else.

"Fine," Grant snapped out and turned to head back out of the room to the kitchen.

Damn, Casey thought. What the hell do I tell him? No I'm not crazy but I really do believe that I saw and spoke with your dead brother. Hell I even gave him a ride. A dead man changed my tire. Chills broke out all over her body as it dawned on her that a dead man had been in her car, sitting next to her, talking and laughing with her.

Casey jumped out of bed, suddenly deciding that she needed the comfort of her own clothes on instead of Grant's shirt and her panties. She was just bending over to pick up her stuff when she heard a deep groan from behind her. She turned and there was Grant filling the doorway with his big frame. His gaze zeroed in on her breasts and she blushed even as she felt her nipples harden and press against the cotton of his shirt. Her gaze dropped to his jeans and there was no missing the prominent bulge behind the fly of his Levis.

He started toward her and she noticed the glass of water in his hand. It was a paper cup she seemed to recall from the bathroom, which explained why he was back so quickly. He stopped when he was in front of her, so close that she could feel the heat radiating from him.

"Drink," he grunted and she grasped the cup and carried it to her mouth. She almost dropped it when she felt his knuckles graze the tips of her breasts. She did drop it when he pinched both nipples and pulled on them.

Casey moaned as the sensation speared her from breasts to belly and all the way down to her dripping pussy. God she wanted him.

"Fuck," she heard him mutter before he locked gazes with her and stated bluntly, "I want you, Casey. I want to throw you across my bed and fuck you hard."

Casey shivered with her own carnal need. It had been a long time and something about Grant increased her need, her hunger. "What's stopping you?" she tossed out before sitting on the bed and reclining back on her elbows. Her knees draped over the side and he spread them wide with his body when he stepped between them.

"I don't like people wearing my stuff, Casey," Grant stated matter-of-factly, nodding at his shirt plastered against her chest. Since he'd already said he didn't care, she recognized the command as purely sexual. "Take it off."

Casey couldn't stop the grin that tugged at her lips as she caught the hem and pulled the shirt up and over her head. She tossed it behind her and leaned back once more, letting him look his fill of her breasts. She could tell he liked them by the lust that flared in his eyes.

"Now the panties," Grant ordered.

"Are they yours too?" Casey said with a laugh that made him growl. She reached down and eased the bikinis over her hips and down her legs, hooking them on one foot before extending it out to Grant as an offering.

Grant took the panties and she gasped when he carried them up to his face and inhaled deeply. It was more erotic than she would have ever imagined to see him holding her arousal-soaked undies to his nose. She rubbed her legs together, feeling more moisture seep from her slit to coat her thighs.

"Open your legs and show me how much you want me." He stuffed the undies into his front pocket then proceeded to unbutton the dark flannel shirt he was wearing.

She spread her legs wide and lay back on the bed, enjoying the view just as much as his expression said that he was. He had a deep gray thermal shirt under the flannel that made his eyes appear almost silver in the soft light. She brought her hands up to her breasts and pinched lightly at her nipples, making them both groan. He pulled the thermal up and over his chest and Casey shivered at the sight of his naked chest covered in a light peppering of blondish brown hair that thickened in a line from belly to the top of his jeans. She knew it was pointing the way to the Promised Land.

"We're still going to talk later, Casey." Grant flicked open the top snap on his jeans. "You're not going to leave 'til I get some damn answers."

"Whatever you say." Casey was willing to agree to anything as she watched his hand finally reach for the zipper and pull it down. His erection sprang out and she licked suddenly dry lips. It figured that he would go commando. He was as impressive as hell, definitely more than nine inches and almost as thick as her wrist. Damn he was going to feel so good buried inside her. She could feel the juices gushing as they prepared her for him.

Grant only shoved his pants down and it was then that she realized that he must still be wearing his boots. Any other time it would bother her that the man she was with wasn't as naked as she was. Right now she was just too horny to care. "Hurry, Grant," she moaned lying back completely on the bed. "Hurry up. I need to feel you inside."

"You're going to feel me," he promised softly, shoving his jeans down and out of the way. "I can't promise to be gentle this time. It's been too long and you've got me tied in knots."

"No." Casey shook her head adamantly as he opened a drawer and from the crinkle she knew he was still thinking enough to protect them both. "I don't want gentle either. It's been awhile for me too, Grant. I want it as hard and fast as you can give it."

She loved the way that he growled as he slid onto the bed between her splayed thighs. The harsh feel of the denim scratched her skin, adding an additional layer of excitement to the moment. He paused when his mouth was poised over her breast and she cried out when he took a nipple between his teeth and bit down before soothing it with firm strokes of his tongue. He treated the other one to a deep suction before releasing it with a pop and settling firmly between her legs.

"Hard and fast?" he asked, making sure that was what she wanted.

Casey nodded as she felt the head of his engorged cock at her opening. "Hard and fas..." Casey didn't finish as Grant surged inside her, burying his long, thick length to the balls in her weeping sex.

She couldn't contain her cries as he rode her. She lifted her legs and wrapped them around his hips, lifting into each stroke. Her hands grabbed onto his broad shoulders and her fingernails sunk in to find purchase. He felt so good, so right stroking in and out of her. It was as if he fit her perfectly. She looked up into his eyes and saw so much in that unguarded moment.

He bent and took her mouth with the same fiery possession that he was taking her body. She loved it, reveled in it and longed for more. In that moment everything else ceased to exist and the world was narrowed down to him and her and the carnal act of pleasure they were sharing. Two more thrusts and she was soaring. Three more and her orgasm was ripping through her with a violence that burned even as it pleased.

She screamed his name as she convulsed with wave after wave of ecstasy. Vaguely she thought she heard him cry out something as he found his own release. He collapsed on top of her and the feel of his hair-roughened chest against her nipples sent off another small ripple of pleasure in her womb. When he went to move she held him tightly and gasped. "Not yet. Stay right here for a moment. Just let me hold you."

She didn't know who was more startled by her request but she relaxed when he settled on top of her, letting her absorb most of his weight like a thick quilt. She knew that it wouldn't last, that the pleasure would fade into a memory. Eventually he would pull away from her and the walls that sex had tumbled would be back up and twice as thick. The problem was that she still had no idea what to tell him. The problem was that part of her brain was still adamant that Lee had been in her car. And what did that say about her grip on reality?

He lay there for a few moments in her arms, inhaling the soft, sweet fragrance of her skin mingled with the scents of sweat and sex. There was no way he'd have admitted it but he was glad she didn't want him to move since he wasn't really sure he could. Every muscle in his body had gone limp in the aftermath. His hands tangled in her long silky hair, smoothing it away from her face, luxuriating in its softness. Lying

here with her lush curves beneath him and her arms wrapped around him was far and away the best thing he'd felt since the explosion.

And just that quickly, the moment was gone.

What the hell was he doing?

He tried to stand and all but tripped himself before he realized his jeans were bunched up around his knees, held in place by the hiking boots he hadn't even taken time to get rid of. "Son of a bitch!"

"Grant?" He heard the confusion bordering on hurt in her voice and had to stop himself from swearing again. "What's wrong?"

"Just my jeans." It wasn't true but he had no desire to hurt her by being completely honest. He was pissed at himself for letting his lust run away with him before they'd had a chance to talk. He leaned down and began to unlace a boot.

"Oh." That made her giggle. "Sorry about that. I guess we were in kind of a hurry."

Try as he might, he couldn't be angry at her. He even surprised himself with a rusty chuckle of his own. "Not sure that's anything to be sorry for."

He felt the bed shift as she sat up, then wrapped her arms around his chest and leaned her cheek against his back. He toed off the first boot and hurried to undo the other. The skin on skin contact still felt too damn good – better than he had any right to enjoy.

"Thank you." Her voice was so soft he felt the brush of her breath against his skin as much as he heard the sound. "I want you to know – I'm not normally like this. I don't usually jump into bed with a virtual stranger. Never before. Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought but something about this – with you – it just seemed right."

He wasn't about to admit the same, so he just grunted as he kicked off his other boot and pushed his jeans off his ankles. "It's okay," was all he said. But he couldn't resist the urge to turn around and hug her close to his chest just for a second. He buried his nose in her hair and held her tightly until he felt his cock start to stir again. Which reminded him of where he'd been heading in the first place. With one last kiss to her ear, he let her go and stood.

"I'll be back in a minute," he told her. "I'm just going to clean up. Then we can get dressed, something to eat and have that talk. Okay?"

She nodded. Even in the dim light he could see the soft glow of her skin, the brilliant shine of those gorgeous green eyes. Damn, he was in deep trouble if she really was here as part of some scam. It took every ounce of willpower he had to smile and walk out the door to the bathroom. Once he got rid of the condom and washed up, it took even more fortitude to walk back into the bedroom and face her. He'd told her they were going to talk but just thinking about her lying there soft and naked in his bed had him as hard as a rock again.

He hoped she wouldn't be offended if he postponed their talk for another round. Apparently his body had decided to make up for lost time—it was like being a teenager all over again.

Then he stepped into the bedroom and stopped dead in his tracks.

She was still in his bed, still mussed and naked and as sexy as ever. Her arms were wrapped around his pillow, cuddling it like a teddy bear with her nose burrowed into it as if she couldn't get enough of his scent. The whole damn picture was as arousing as hell.

She was also sound asleep.

Chapter Four

He wasn't sure how long he stood there, naked and horny, watching her sleep. It was a sound that brought him out of it—the unfamiliar sound of his own stomach growling. Hmm. Apparently his sex drive wasn't the only urge Casey's presence had kick-started back into working order.

Grant treated himself to one last look, then stepped over to the bed and pulled the covers up around her. She didn't stir, so he also took the time to smooth two tangled locks of hair out of her face before gathering up his clothes and padding out of the room.

Once he was dressed, he turned his thoughts to food. Well, there was the turkey, he remembered. Who knew he really would have a woman here for Thanksgiving? The power would probably be out for at least a day or two, Monday at the worst, so he pattered around in the kitchen while the oven heated up, figuring out which foods could go out on the back porch—the frozen food section. Then he filled up a cooler with snow and set that inside for the stuff he didn't want to freeze. Once the turkey went in the oven he made himself a thick ham sandwich to tide him over 'til dinnertime.

What was he going to say to Casey when she woke up? That question tickled the back of his brain the whole time she slept. According to his watch it was almost noon when she finally resurfaced. He was just debating about whether to wake her up to check for a concussion when he heard a noise in the hallway and looked up from where he'd been reading—or trying to anyway—on the couch.

"Hi." She stood in the hallway, once again dressed in his T-shirt and her dinky little panties. It was all Grant could do to make his butt stay parked on the couch.

"Hi. Feeling better?"

She rewarded his restraint with a smile. "Yeah. Thanks."

"I brought your duffle bag inside." He nodded at the luggage he'd sat right next to the hall entrance. He'd also gone through her computer and camera cases but he didn't think he needed to mention that little detail. He hadn't found a blasted thing that cast any doubt on her story. "And the water heater is propane if you want to take a shower. Just take one of the oil lamps into the bathroom with you."

"That would be great." She scooped up the duffel bag and her purse, then practically fled back down the hallway, calling "Thank you!" back over her shoulder.

When she returned a few minutes later, she was dressed in jeans and a tight little sweater that made Grant's mouth water and his jeans uncomfortably tight. Her long damp hair hung in thick, glossy strands down her back.

"Something smells wonderful."

"Turkey." It came out as little more than a grunt, so he tried again. "I put some potatoes in to bake too."

"Thanksgiving dinner with all the trimmings, huh?" She gave him a lopsided grin. "Anything I can do to help? I'll warn you I'm not much use in the kitchen."

Oh Grant could think of plenty of things to do with her in the kitchen but none of them involved getting dinner on the table. He pointed at the big cardboard box from his mother.

"There are probably more goodies in that, if you want to check." Yesterday he'd been too depressed about the whole holiday to even open the care package.

"You want me to open your mail?"

Grant shrugged and handed her a small paring knife. "It's from my mom, so it's not like there are going to be any dirty pictures or anything. But she usually sends cookies and we could use dessert."

"Ooookay." She took the knife and slit the tape on the box. While Grant pulled the potatoes out of the oven and put them on a plate, he watched her remove a layer of newspaper, then the rest of the contents, cans first.

"Cranberry sauce. A can of turkey gravy. Green beans. A bottle of white wine. A loaf of some kind of bread." She pulled out a small foil-wrapped package.

"Oh yum, that will be her homemade banana bread. Seriously good stuff. Anything else?"

"A can of mixed nuts, a big tub of cookies and something else. Looks like a framed picture." Grant watched as she dug into the bottom of the box. She pulled the flat rectangular object out and handed it to Grant. He could tell it had bothered her. She was trying not to look at it. He noticed when he took it that her fingers were shaking almost as much as his were.

"Mom, what did you do this time?" He recognized the frame though, didn't need to see the photo to know every line and shadow. It was a blown-up snapshot of his first Thanksgiving after his ranger training. He was home, in his dress greens, with his arm around his nine-year-old brother, who wore Grant's beret and a mile-wide grin.

"You have a non-electric can opener?" Casey turned away, the can of beans in her hand. "I can manage to heat up a can of veggies, I think." He heard the quaver in her voice and wanted to believe that the emotion was real, that she wasn't here out of some ulterior motive.

"Yeah. Second drawer." His own voice came out as a croak. He put the photo back in the box and turned to the cupboard to dig out a saucepan and another for the gravy. Trust his mom to remember that Grant had never mastered the art of making gravy.

He finished up the meal while Casey set the table, awkward silence stretching between them. The cracking fire and the oil lamps cast a glow that was almost too intimate and romantic for the talk they needed to have. When Grant finally took his

place Casey raised her wineglass to him. "Well, here's to Thanksgiving. At least we're inside with food and a fireplace."

Grant nodded and clinked his glass to hers. He still wasn't sure today was anything to be thankful for but at least it was a whole lot more interesting than he'd had any right to expect.

* * * * *

"So what had you traveling this way on Thanksgiving?" Grant looked at Casey as if her were trying to see her thoughts. "Didn't you want to be with your family?"

"You're alone," Casey countered his questions, stalling for more time while she decided just what to tell him. "Why didn't you go home for the holidays?"

"Nothing to celebrate this year," Grant muttered and took a drink of his wine. They had finished dinner and were relaxing on the couch in front of the fire place. They had each taken separate ends as if they needed the distance after what had occurred earlier.

"There's always something to celebrate if you want to." Casey could think of several in her life but only one made it past her lips. "What about life? We're still here and able to enjoy the fabulous world around us. That's something."

"If life is so freaking wonderful then what was the nightmare all about?" Grant caught Casey with his eyes and lifted a brow. It was almost as if he could see the wheels turning in her head as she tried to remember what—if anything—she had said. "Who's trying to kill you? And why?"

Casey took a long slow drink from her wine glass. What should she tell him? Something told her that he could be the one man whom she could trust but what if her instincts were off? Maybe she could just give him enough information to appease him without telling him all the details.

"I went for a walk to take some pictures of the Detroit night life. Greektown at night is something to see. Then I just started wandering around and somehow ended up around a bunch of high-rises. I started snapping pictures and..." She shrugged, trying to make light of what she was about to tell him. "I caught something on film that I hadn't meant to. I didn't realize exactly everything that I had captured 'til I developed them."

"Something?" Grant quirked an eyebrow and stared at her, making Casey squirm like a little girl waiting to see the principal.

"Murder." Casey whispered it, still not wanting to believe what her film revealed.

"Murder!" Grant exploded up off the couch and started pacing before the fire. "How the hell do you snap pictures of a murder and not realize it at the time? What kind of photographer are you?"

"A damn good one!" Casey fired back at him. She stood and faced him, her fists clenched at her sides to keep from pounding something. "I didn't notice at the time because the lens was focused on something else. What I caught was in the corner of the

photo. I had to crop and enlarge and before I truly realized what I had in my hands. Do you really believe that I would just watch someone get thrown twelve stories to their death and stand there and snap photos?"

Grant shrugged his shoulders and Casey came up for air. Grant grabbed her fist and used it to tug her off balance and against him. She wondered if it was merely to prevent her from hurting herself or had everything to do with the feel of her in his arms. "Whoa, Casey. People have been known to do just that. But," he added as she struggled against him in renewed anger, "I don't know you, Casey. I have no idea who you are. All I know is that you showed up here on the run from something, claiming to have seen my dead brother. What the hell would you think in my place?"

Casey heaved a weary sigh and sagged against him. "That I was a certified nut." She looked up into his eyes searching for something, anything that said that he believed her. "But I'm not, Grant. I inadvertently took pictures of a woman being thrown to her death, a death that Detroit PD was already set to rule as a suicide. I've opened up a can of worms and when I gave copies of the pictures over to a local detective I thought I'd done the right thing. But just hours after I talked to him someone broke into my apartment and trashed the place. I have a strong feeling that if I had been there I would have met with a similar fate."

He must have felt her shudder because he pulled her more firmly into his embrace. What the hell was he thinking about her? She was fairly certain that he wasn't the type who could leave her on her own now. Not with the knowledge that she had witnessed a crime that someone was determined to keep hidden.

Grant gave a harsh sigh. "Does anyone know where you are now?"

"I didn't tell anyone where I was going. Just that I was leaving my apartment for a few days." Casey hadn't thought about her cell not working here. That might create some problems but then again maybe it would be for the best.

"Does anyone other than you know about the cabin up here that you were heading to?" She could tell from his expression that Grant was pretty sure someone else did.

"My parents know of course but they're in Indiana. My best friend knows but she's in Indiana as well."

"It doesn't matter, Casey. Even one other person knowing means that whoever wants to make sure it stays a suicide has a way to find you. All they have to do is find the right story to feed the right person and then they have you." Grant held her tighter while she processed that unpleasant bit of news. Would he make sure no one got to her? Her head snapped up. Where the hell had that thought come from? It wasn't his job to protect her. He just wanted to find out what she knew about Lee and boot her and her troubles as far away from him as he could. She couldn't blame him.

But when she lay her head back onto the hard plane of his chest and sniffled against his shirt, he squeezed her closer against his chest and she felt sure that he would do whatever he had to in order to protect her.

"What am I going to do?" The cabin had been Casey's one hope of getting away for a bit. Where would she go now? She couldn't go home and put her family at risk and the same went for Darcy. No way would she risk her best friend's life. Darcy had enough to handle with her stalker ex. What option did that leave her?

"You're going to stay right here with me while we figure this thing out." Grant tipped her face up to his so he could search her eyes. He placed his finger over her lips to stop whatever she was going to say. "It's not up for discussion, Casey. You'll stay here because it will be safer." She smiled up at him like he was some type of hero and he responded in his gruffest voice. "Besides, I haven't got my answers about what the hell you're trying to pull with my brother's tags. You're not leaving until I do."

Casey didn't know the answer to that one either but she didn't think he would believe her. "I don't know what to tell you. I picked someone up between here and the last town back. He changed my tire."

"How'd the tire get flat?" Grant asked with a look that stated plainly that he would see through a lie.

"I'm not sure. I couldn't find anything wrong with it. It was just flat. I was mad so I kicked the tire and then this guy spoke to me and asked if I needed help." Casey knew what he was thinking. She could read it clearly in his eyes. But all she could do was keep telling him the truth and hope that he would believe it sometime soon.

"What did he say? Did he tell you his name?" Grant seemed determined to find out all he could about this guy. Was he starting to believe that it wasn't Casey? Maybe someone else was fucking with him by pretending to be Lee. But who the hell hated Grant enough to do that?

Casey took a deep breath and looked Grant straight in the eye. "He said that his name was Lt. Lee Kincaid and that the bus had dropped him off in town. He said that he had been walking to your cabin to surprise you for Thanksgiving."

"What was he wearing? What did he look like?" She could see the confusion in his eyes. And the pain.

"He was wearing a Marine dress uniform. He was carrying a huge duffel and he put it in the back with my stuff before he got into the Jeep." Casey was sure about that. "I didn't get a good look at him until we were in the Jeep." She judged her height next to Grant's before continuing. "He was about the same height as you with reddish, blondish hair and big baby blue eyes. He had a terrific laugh." She smiled as she remembered his laugh. "He said that you said his laugh sounded like a bullfrog and that you called him tadpole."

"What?" Grant shoved her away from him and she knew he must be reeling from that bit of information. How the hell would she know something like that if she hadn't met Lee? She could easily read that question on his face. "What else?" he grunted as if his throat was feeling dry and thick. "What else did he tell you?"

"He told me to call him Lee and that I could drop him off at Kincaid Boulevard." Casey could feel his pain radiating around him and wanted nothing more than to hold

him close and tell him that it was all going to be okay. But he was sending off definite “don’t touch me” vibes and the one thing she knew was that she didn’t have a death wish.

“I need some air.” Grant stumbled to the door, grabbing his coat and shoving his arms into it as he went. She could tell that he couldn’t handle anymore right now. But soon she would be forced to reveal everything that Lee had shared with her in the front seat of the Jeep. About Grant. About Lee. Obviously the two men shared a bond that even death couldn’t break.

Casey didn’t know what to do. The dishes were washed, dried and put away. She had straightened up her things. She had explored the little cabin and discovered that really Grant’s room was the only one that was inhabitable. The other bedroom held bunk beds and was filled with dust and cobwebs. It was a given that Grant hadn’t made use of it since he had been at the cabin.

She’d found some cleaner under the sink in the bathroom and tidied that room as well, which expressed just how fidgety she was. Still Grant was gone. She had no idea where he had gone or when he might be heading back. It was just after three in the afternoon according to the clock. He’d been gone for an hour. She hoped that he was warm. She hoped that he was okay.

Lee, or whoever had been in the Jeep with her, had known about the explosion Grant had been in. She had seen the scars on his hands, seen him rubbing at his knee when he didn’t think that she was looking. She had seen the faint white lines around his eye and cheekbone but somehow they just added to his appeal. At least for her. He was walking wounded and more than anything she wanted to comfort him. But Grant wasn’t looking for comfort, of that she was sure. He was looking for isolation, seclusion and just maybe self-punishment. Instead he was stuck with a woman he believed was crazy and just to add a little extra spice, someone was trying to kill her. Who could blame him for walking away the first chance he got?

Casey snagged her laptop and settled in on the couch. She could at least get some work done while she waited for him to come back. She clicked on the file for her photos and immediately brought up the ones that had placed her smack in the middle of this mess. Maybe if she studied them long enough she would see something different. Like maybe a great big sign that said “my name is...”. Who was she trying to fool? They were always the same and no matter how hard she tried she just couldn’t make out the identity of the person in the window.

* * * * *

She was sitting on the couch working on her laptop when he returned. Once again Grant had stayed out longer than he’d intended to but he’d spent some time trying to figure out how to get her Jeep out of the road where it was blocking the driveway. He could tow it with his Suburban but he didn’t think he could get it over the tree. If she

really was trying to hide, she wouldn't want it out there when the repair trucks showed up. Finally he figured out he could tow the tree first, then the Jeep. It wouldn't be easy, not with a live power line involved, but he only needed to shift it a bit to get the Jeep around the stump.

By the time he was done, he was hot, sweaty and sore as hell but the Jeep was up by the cabin and Grant's leg was throbbing like a son of a bitch. One last task was to stick a big hand-lettered sign up at the corner of the main road telling the crews that the power and phone were out. He figured somebody would notice it and call it in. Now he'd finished every single task he could think of. But he still hadn't figured out what the hell was going on with Casey. One way or another, though, he had to go inside and face her. It was too cold and he hurt too much to stay outside any longer.

He still didn't want to believe she was conning him but he couldn't make himself accept that she might be telling the truth. He'd never believed in ghosts, never really believed there was anything after death. Your body turned to a big bunch of carbon-based chemicals and your brain stopped having electrical activity. That was it. That's part of why he was having so much trouble with Lee's death. It was a whole lot easier to accept that kind of loss if you believed in a god or an afterlife. If you didn't then death just pretty much sucked the big one.

One thing he was pretty sure of was that Casey's fear was real. Nightmares were pretty hard to fake and so were the physical symptoms she'd shown when she told him about the photos and the murder. Her hands had been shaky, her pupils dilated, her shoulders tight. She might be lying about some of it but he had no doubt she was in genuine danger. And while he was no expert at dealing with ghosts, he did know a thing or two about avoiding murderers. With that in mind, he stomped the ice and frozen mud off his boots, then went inside.

She sat cross-legged on the couch, facing sideways, her laptop open on the cushion in front of her. In an unguarded moment when she saw him enter, she flashed him a brilliant welcoming smile. It was all too brief, though, seconds later her expression shuttered and she offered him a nod. "Nice of you to finally come back."

"Sorry it took so long but I got your Jeep towed up to the house." He stripped off his coat and gloves, unlaced his wet boots. "Didn't think you wanted it down where the repair crews could see it."

Her hand flew to her mouth. "Why didn't you tell me? I would have come and helped!"

He shrugged. She probably would have. She was scared but she didn't seem to be the frail, helpless type. So he answered with the truth. "Didn't think of it."

She gave him a weird little smile. "Well, thanks anyway. I do appreciate it."

He moved toward the bedroom for some dry clothes. "Looks like you were busy too. Thanks for cleaning up the dishes and stuff."

"You're welcome." Her voice called after him as he moved down the hall.

He almost wished she'd come join him while he was changing but she didn't and a part of him was glad. He was probably too damn sore to perform at the moment and that would have been as embarrassing as hell. He pulled on a clean pair of sweats, a sweatshirt and his canvas tennis shoes then rejoined her in the living room. She was still poring over her computer screen, barely even looking up when he entered.

"What are you working on?" He tried to make it sound like just conversation, not like the third degree.

"Going over the photos," she told him absently, her attention obviously still focused on the computer. "There has to be something in here, some detail I missed that will give the police the information they need."

"Want me to take a look?"

She shrugged and shifted on the couch, moving the laptop to the coffee table so he could sit down beside her.

Sitting next to her felt so natural, so comfortable, he didn't even notice he'd draped an arm around her and pulled her against him until the ache in his leg got annoying enough to make him shift. Even then, he just adjusted his position without moving far enough to dislodge the warm weight against his side. All his attention was focused on the stark beauty of Casey's photographs.

"Damn, you're good."

"Thanks." He thought she was pleased but she tried to downplay it. "It pays the bills. These were for an article about Midwestern night spots in a travel magazine."

"Well they're good, no doubt about it. But I don't see anything in these that looks suspicious."

"No, not in any of these. I saved the scary ones in a different file." She fiddled with the mouse, then another set of photos popped up. He could see right away that these were cropped and enlarged details from the originals.

"Holy shit!" She hadn't been kidding. He studied them carefully and saw what she'd shown the police. It wasn't even an ambiguous maybe. There had unquestionably been another person in the room when the madam had taken the twelve-story swan dive.

Grant watched as Casey manipulated the photos. He was awed by her talent but his security training enabled him to make suggestions on where to look and what to check for. Regrettably, they hadn't found anything a little while later when the battery light started flashing and her laptop went into automatic hibernate mode.

"Damn." He echoed Casey's curse as she closed up the now-useless computer.

Twilight had fallen while they were focused on the screen, leaving the fire as the only illumination in the room. He leaned back into the couch, his head on the cushions, his thigh still pressed along hers. If only things were different, this could actually be peaceful and romantic, stranded alone in a fire-lit cabin with a beautiful woman. A yawn split his jaw and he stretched, feeling all the muscles in his body protest.

Casey must have seen him wince. "You all right?"

"Kind of stiff. Did a little more hiking today than I'm used to." He gave her a grin and waggled his eyebrows. "Plus some other exercise I haven't gotten in a while."

He could have sworn she blushed but he couldn't quite tell in the firelight. "Is it your leg?"

He nodded curtly. His injuries were the last thing he wanted to talk about. "Mostly. But pretty much everything has stiffened up."

She bit back a giggle and rolled her eyes.

Damn. He may have blushed a little himself at the unintentional double entendre, though it was true, of course. After being snuggled up on the couch next to Casey, his cock was definitely standing at attention, even if he was too damn sore at the moment to do anything about it.

"I took a couple of massage classes back in college." Casey pulled the woolly throw off the back of the couch and folded it up to make a pad in front of the fireplace. "It's the least I can offer after all you've done for me today. Take off the shirt and lie facedown. I know I saw a bottle of lotion in the bathroom." Before he could respond she'd darted off down the hallway.

While Grant could think of plenty of better uses for that lotion, the simple act of trying to stand was enough to remind him that none of those was going to happen anytime soon. He might as well take Casey up on her offer in the hopes that he might at least be able to walk to bed by himself afterward. Glad she wasn't there to watch his halting movement, he pulled off his sweatshirt, limped over to the makeshift mat and eased himself down on his stomach.

"I know you don't believe that it was Lee who told me you'd been injured," Casey spoke softly as she knelt next to him. He heard the squirt of the lotion bottle, the rub of her hands as she warmed it up between them. "But *somebody* did. And while I appreciate the hell out of everything you've done for me today, I really wish you wouldn't overdo it anymore. I'd rather help out than have you mess yourself up any further on my behalf."

Chapter Five

Her hands were busy kneading while she spoke, so Grant didn't figure she really expected a response. She smoothed the lotion on with soft, gentle strokes then began to work his abused muscles with surprising strength and skill.

Even more astounding was the way her silky hands soothed his frazzled nerves as they eased his physical aches and pains. He hadn't realized until now how much he'd missed the simple human connection of touch. She started with his neck and shoulders. When she found the problem spot on the one he'd dislocated, she worked it gently but with just enough pressure that the knotted muscle finally loosened up. Then she worked her way down along his spine and out to the sides of his rib cage. By the time she reached his waist she was humming an eighties pop ballad—endearingly out of tune. He smiled into the pillow. It was nice to know there was *something* she wasn't perfect at.

"You need to lose the pants if I'm going to finish the rest."

Grant had just about dozed off so it took a second for her words to register. He was so relaxed he didn't argue, just automatically lifted his hips for her to peel the sweats down his—"No!"

He didn't want her looking at the scarred-up mess that was left of his leg. But when he tried to jerk upright, she pushed against the small of his back, holding him down.

"It's okay, Grant. Just relax."

There must have been something hypnotic about her voice, or maybe it was her hands, because he quit fighting. He allowed her to ease the sweatpants off, even though he hadn't bothered to put anything on underneath. Casey didn't say a word, just picked up the massage where she'd left off, at the base of his spine.

"When we're done you should soak in a hot bath," she suggested. "Since you said there's plenty of hot water. And I'll throw together some turkey sandwiches for supper."

"Okay." He'd have probably said the same if she'd told him to hike to Siberia barefoot, just as long as she kept on doing what she was doing. She moved down to his buttocks, her strong fingers digging hard into the taut gluteus muscles.

"Good. As knotted up as you are, I don't even know how you managed to walk."

"Practice." He wasn't sure she even heard the muffled response since he was facedown in one of the small pillows he'd grabbed off the couch. She didn't answer, just kept moving those magic hands lower. Somewhere along the way she started humming again.

When she reached the mass of scar tissue that made up his left thigh, her touch gentled and she worked more slowly but with even greater thoroughness. He could practically feel the ravaged tissues relaxing and beginning to heal beneath her fingertips.

"Why on Earth aren't you getting physical therapy for this?" Her tone was concerned and curious, not accusing. "Weekly massages would help a lot, I'm sure."

Grant tried to shrug but his position wouldn't allow it. "Got sick of it all. Figured doing without was better than winding up in jail after I clocked the next idiot who poked or prodded me the wrong way."

Her answering chuckle was warm, soft and understanding. "I'm not sure any jury would have convicted you. But I'll make sure not to poke or prod you wrong."

"Shit, I didn't mean you."

"I know, dummy. I was just teasing." He could still hear the laughter in her voice and it warmed some part of his soul he hadn't even known was chilled. "Now roll over, you big goof, so I can work on the front of that leg."

Okay that was so not a good idea. Most of Grant's body had relaxed while she was massaging him but there was one critical part that was stiffer than ever. Between her touch, her scent and the sound of her voice, he was more turned on than he could ever remember being. "The leg is fine," he mumbled into the pillow. "You can stop now. I'll just lie here for a bit."

She laughed again, the sound huskier this time. "It's all right, Grant. There's nothing there I didn't see—and touch—earlier." Damn, was she psychic, or was he just that obvious? "Besides, if you weren't turned on, I'd be kind of disappointed, seeing as I'm sitting here soaking my jeans every time I touch you."

She was? Hot damn! Obediently, Grant rolled over, managing to graze a hand along her lap as he did. Yep, she was wet all right. He lay back on the pillow with a grin on his face. She knelt beside him, her hands fisted and resting on her knees. Her nipples were hard little beads poking against her tight sweater and her breathing was rapid and harsh. She glanced down at the erection sticking straight up toward the ceiling and licked her lips.

"Leg first." She bit her lower lip and swallowed hard. "Then fun." With one last gulp of breath, she went back to work, meticulously kneading his quadriceps. Grant closed his eyes, torn between enjoying the incredible sensation of her touch and ripping her clothes off. It was horribly unfair that he was the only one naked.

He was glad the firelight was dim enough that she wouldn't be able to make out the details of the roadmap of scar tissue on his leg. Between the shrapnel, the burns and the subsequent surgeries, it wasn't a pretty sight. A quick glance up at her face showed she wasn't looking anyway. Her eyes were more than half closed and didn't appear to be focused anywhere in particular. Her glossy hair reflected the sparkle of the flames and a faint sheen of sweat glittered on her skin.

"You're too warm by the fire with that sweater on." He knew his voice was husky, didn't care. "Take it off."

She swiveled her head to look at his face and her hands stilled momentarily. Then she shrugged and let go of his leg with one hand at a time to pull the sweater off over her head. Her damp cotton bra clung to her generous breasts, outlining every delectable curve.

"You'd be even cooler without the jeans."

She shook her head and grinned. "Don't push your luck."

"Was worth a try."

"Fair enough."

She leaned back over to finish the massage, giving him an incredible view of her cleavage. Damn, if his cock stood up any straighter, she was liable to poke an eye out on the thing.

"There. Now you just wait there while I go start the bath." She patted his thigh one last time and shifted her weight in preparation for standing.

He snaked out one hand and grabbed her wrist. "Uh-uh."

"What?" She tilted her head and licked her lips. Yeah, she still wanted him.

He used the wrist to tug her closer. "No way, lady. You said leg first, then fun. You finished the leg. Now lose the jeans."

"I—um—but—" She sighed heavily, her vivid green eyes searching his. "Okay." He let her wiggle her wrist free and stand. She didn't disappoint him—her hands went straight to the fly of her jeans. Grant watched with total fascination as she wiggled the denim off and down her hips.

Her underwear was white cotton. They should have looked demure, but somehow on Casey, they were unbelievably sexy. Before she could remove the bra or panties, he motioned with his hand. "Come here."

She kicked her jeans off her ankles and toed off her thick cotton socks before sitting down beside him on the floor.

"Feeling better?" She leaned over him, her face close enough to his that he could feel the warm puff of her breath on his lips.

"Better than I have in a long, long time." He lifted his arms, wrapped them around her and pulled her down for a kiss.

The last half hour had been foreplay as far as Grant was concerned. He wasn't going to have a whole lot of patience for further preliminaries. Apparently Casey felt the same way, she moaned deep in her throat as she opened her mouth to receive his tongue and shifted her body so she was lying full-length alongside him, one leg thrown up and over his.

He plundered her mouth while his hands found the clasp of her bra. He'd forgotten that the fingers didn't work very well anymore. What used to be an easy task was now damn near impossible.

"Rip it." Casey pulled her mouth away from his just long enough to murmur the words and to nip his lower lip sharply with her teeth. "Or just push it out of the way. Don't care."

He grabbed the sides of the fabric in both hands and pulled. The clasps gave with a satisfying rip.

"Oh yeah," Casey moaned. She leaned up on her elbows and wiggled her shoulders to get the now-useless fabric out of the way. The position also gave his hands access to the pale globes that now swung free above his chest. He gathered one in each hand and squeezed, none too gently.

She pumped her hips, sliding the wet cotton of her panties along his engorged cock. He shifted one of her breasts to his mouth, sucking the swollen nipple between his lips while his hands slid down her back to get rid of the thong.

"Rip it too." She bit out the words between whimpers.

"Glad we're on the same wavelength." Of course he had to let go of her nipple to speak. One hand nudged the other peak into his mouth then he reached down with both hands and grasped the thin strip of cotton that was the only barrier between his cock and her wet, willing pussy.

He nipped lightly with his teeth then smoothed the taut bead with his tongue. At the same time he pulled with both hands, tearing the fabric along a seam. He pulled the shreds out from between them and lifted his hips, rubbing his shaft against the crisp curls between her legs.

"Now, Grant." She was panting and squirming above him. Her legs straddled his hips. She slid her pussy back and forth along the ridge of his cock, coating him with her thick cream.

The head of his penis nudged at her entrance and with just a twist of his hips he fit it up just barely inside. Casey let out a wordless cry and lifted up to give him room to thrust, when reality hit Grant like a bucket of ice water.

"We need to move to the bedroom." He pulled back, ignoring the frantic protests from his tight balls and aching cock.

"What?" Casey stilled above him, looked down at him with those incredible eyes glazed and unfocused. "Am I hurting you?"

Grant barked out a harsh laugh. "Not the way you mean. But, honey, all the condoms are in the bedroom."

"Oh!" He watched her eyes widen in horror at what they'd almost done. Another few inches and it would have been too late. He'd never have come to his senses in time once he was buried all the way inside that snug little box. "Actually..."

She reached over and grabbed her jeans, then rooted through the pockets until she came up with a little foil packet. "I grabbed it when I got the lotion. Just in case."

"Damn. Nothing sexier than a smart woman, unless it's a smart, naked woman. Lady, I like the way you think."

She tore the packet open with her teeth then shifted back on him far enough to take his cock in her hands. Slowly, each movement a caress that had him fighting not to move, she smoothed the condom down over his shaft. He let out a groan when she leaned down and kissed the latex-covered tip of him, before dipping her mouth down further to lick and nuzzle his almost painfully tight balls.

"Anytime now, sugar," he gasped. He grasped her under the arms and hauled her back up his body. Their mouths met and fused in a scorching kiss, his tongue and hers chasing each other back and forth. He palmed both of her breasts, loving their heavy weight in his hands, then pinched both the nipples hard enough to wring a cry from the back of her throat.

Grant thought he must have died and gone to heaven when she lifted her hips, reached down between them and positioned his cock at the mouth of her pussy. She was so wet that even with the condom on he slid in easily when she lowered her body, impaling herself on the length of his rock-hard shaft.

"Oh yeah, take it all," he urged, his hands on her hips now, guiding them down until her ass was brushing against his balls. She was tight, gripping him like a silken fist, and he was nudging against her cervix when he was all the way in. Christ, it was like she'd been built specifically for him.

"I want it all." She leaned down and rubbed against his chest, rasping her pebbled nipples in the curly hairs. "I want everything you can give me, Grant." She lifted up a bit then slammed back down, taking him even deeper.

"Good." It was all he could get out as she started rocking back and forth, her knees lifting her up and down as she rode him hard.

It felt like heaven but he needed more. He wrapped both arms around her and rolled sideways, taking them both off the mat and perilously close to the hearth. But he was on top now and could thrust as hard as he needed to. He pounded his cock deep into the heart of her snug wet heat. Everything else in the universe faded away. At this moment there was only Grant and Casey, the heat between them and the scent and sound of them fucking each other senseless.

Just like the last time, it didn't take long. Whether it was his long enforced dry spell or just Casey's amazing sexuality, Grant felt his body tighten after only a few deep thrusts. When she wrapped those long legs up and locked her ankles around his waist, he was done for. He rammed into her only twice more before his balls exploded and he came so hard he was afraid he was going to pass out.

His orgasm must have triggered hers. Right in the middle of pouring himself into her he felt her vaginal walls clench around him as she shattered, her cries echoing off the ceiling as her heels and fingernails dug into his back. Her obvious pleasure dragged even more response from his nearly depleted body and he felt another jet of semen stretch the condom to what must have been close to the breaking point.

"Holy shit!"

He was glad she whispered it. It might have sounded crass coming from him. Besides, he wasn't sure he could speak.

"You okay, big guy?"

He hauled in a deep breath and nodded, then dropped a kiss on the tip of her nose. "Perfect."

Grant was soaking in the tub. Casey had run the water for him, getting it as hot as she thought he could stand. He had just leaned in the doorway and watched her, his sweats back in place on his hips while she knelt on the floor by the tub naked. She knew he was self-conscious about the scars on his leg but she didn't understand why after what she had just done.

She turned the knobs off and eased back on her heels watching him. "Water's ready." His eyes were hooded where he stood and the bulge in his sweats was indication of his reawakening desire. He nodded but didn't move from the doorway until she had risen and was standing in front of him. "Need anything else?"

He just shook his head but she felt his finger graze across the tip of her nipple when she slipped past him. She glanced back and his smile was devilish.

"Sure you don't want to join me?" He had asked her the same thing earlier.

"I'm going to put some sandwiches together. I'm starving after all the exercise today." She looked him up and down before meeting his eyes. "And you accomplished a lot today while I lazed around on the sofa. Let me feed you, Grant."

His gaze dropped to the glistening curls on her mons and she swallowed a moan as his hand reached out and his fingers ran lightly over her flesh. "Do I get to choose my appetizer?"

She knew how badly he needed that soak on his leg. She knew how desperately she needed a few minutes to clear her mind and build the guard back up around her heart. She was falling in love with him and that was the last thing that either of them needed. She forced a careless grin to her face and met his eyes. "No but if you're a good boy I'll let you choose dessert."

Grant groaned and dipped a finger inside her slit, coasting over her clit before pulling it out and putting it in his mouth. He sucked the digit and his eyes flashed with an intense look of lust that had Casey reeling away and hurrying down the hall. She heard his chuckle behind her and wondered if he knew just how fast she was falling for him. Nothing like jumping straight out of the frying pan and into the fire. She had no doubt that Grant could hurt her a lot worse than any murderer ever could. Grant could destroy her completely if she let her guard down any further.

She pulled stuff from the fridge more by rote than because she was paying any attention. She didn't remember making the three sandwiches on the plate, didn't remember cutting them in halves. But there they were, sitting nicely on the plate on the counter and the knife was still in her hand. She shuddered out a harsh breath and

closed her eyes. Leaning against the counter, she fought to control the jumble of her emotions.

She felt him ease up behind her, his arms braced outside hers on the counter, his cloth-covered erection riding hot and hard on the small of her back. "Praying over our food?" His voice was a husky murmur at her ear and she groaned when he snaked his tongue out and traced the shell. She was praying all right but food was not on the list.

She set the knife on the counter and turned in his arms, braced her hands on his damp shoulders. His hair was still wet and she couldn't fight the urge to run her fingers through it. "I was just coming to get you." She nodded her head toward the plate behind her. "Dinner is served."

He eased away and pulled a chair out at the table for her. He dropped something in her lap before turning back to the counter for the plate. She sighed when she saw the shirt she had worn to bed earlier in the morning. She slipped it over her head and almost laughed at the way it felt like armor. He joined her, pulling his chair close to hers and setting the plate between them. He watched her with hooded eyes while they ate and she was pretty sure it wasn't all lust in his gaze.

How could she convince him that the man she had picked up and given a ride was real? How could she when she was no longer certain herself? But it would stand between them, preventing them from ever being anything but lovers if she didn't try. And God help her, she wanted more than a holiday weekend with Grant. She may have just met him but she was pretty sure she had spent her entire adult life searching for him.

She had only managed half a sandwich when Grant sat back with a satisfied sound. There was only the other half of hers left uneaten on the plate between them. She nudged the plate toward him. "I'm full. You can have that if you want it."

Grant shook his head and stood, taking the plate and moving behind her to place it back on the counter. She had no idea what to do or say to clear the air between them when it came to Lee. The last thing she wanted to do was bring up anything that was going to increase the tension between them. It was either sexual or filled with disdain and mistrust. She'd settle for sexual any time. Especially when Grant took care of that tension oh so well.

She startled when she felt his hands on her shoulders pulling her from the chair. "Something wrong?" she queried while he tugged her down the hall back to the bedroom.

"Nope," was all he offered until they stopped beside the rumpled bed and he tugged the shirt over her head again. "You promised me that I could pick my dessert if I was good." He gave her a soft nudge so that she settled back on the bed, her legs dangling over the side. "I was really good." He reached for the band of his sweats and shoved them down and off, revealing the turgid length of his cock. "I took my bath and soaked." He used his hands to nudge her until she was turned lengthwise on the bed

and he was lying beside her. "I ate my dinner." He reached over and ran a hand through the curls at the apex of her thighs. "Now I want my dessert."

Casey couldn't help it. She grinned and it probably looked as goofy as hell. But who cared? Her consciousness tried to urge her to talk but her body was liable to kill her if it didn't get a taste of the satisfaction promised in Grant's eyes. "And what can I get you for dessert?" she managed in a husky whisper.

"You," he lay his head flat on the pillow and patted his chest. "Why don't you come sit up here and feed me some of that pie that smells so good?"

Casey laughed at the double entendre but shook her head no. "That sounds like a one-sided dessert. How about one made for two?"

He grinned at her. "Sounds like the perfect snack." He helped her get into position over him with her knees on either side of his head and her mouth directly over his bobbing cock.

They leaned in at the same time. Grant palmed her ass cheeks, giving them a good squeeze while he ran his tongue along the outer lips of her sex. Casey leaned down and used one hand to cradle his balls, giving them a gentle squeeze while she ran her tongue over the leaking tip of his engorged cock. They both moaned their appreciation of the others' efforts. Then they continued with what they were doing.

Casey was bombarded with sensations. From what she was doing as well as from what he was. He was using one hand to spread the lips of her sex and the other to gently finger her channel while his tongue made lazy circles around her clit. Every few seconds he would draw back and blow across it. He was driving her crazy. She was doing her best to return the favor.

She nipped and sucked all along the length of his shaft, paying close attention to the large vein that ran just underneath and the dip just below the flared head. She worked one hand up and down his cock when she reached the base and took time licking and sucking each of his balls. His fingers began thrusting a little harder, a little faster and she rewarded him by taking as much of his length into her mouth as she could. She fisted the bit that wouldn't fit and began working her hand and mouth in tandem, sucking and releasing.

He returned the favor by increasing his pace even more and adding an additional finger. He sucked and nibbled at her clit and she was so close to coming that she could feel the tightening in her belly. She was going to reach her orgasm any minute. It was right there, hovering just at the edge of her reach. So close...and then he was gone.

"What?" she managed to gasp out loud but he was already using his hands to shift them again.

She was helped forward and he surged up to his knees behind her. She heard a harsh grunt and he reached beside the bed again. A drawer opened and closed and there was the crinkle of what had to be a condom wrapper. Then he was back and with one harsh slam he filled her pussy. He pulled back and slammed home again. Then again. And that was all it took to have her right back on the edge begging for release.

"Oh God. Oh yes. Oh yes. Yes, yes, yes!" Casey screamed with each vigorous thrust and finally crested into wave after wave of pure pleasure. He wasn't far behind and she felt every burst of seed that filled the condom as he joined her.

They were both panting for breath and coated in sweat when it was over. She could feel his skin against her where he was leaning over her back. His breath was hot on her ear.

"Best dessert I ever had," he whispered and dropped a kiss on her hair before pulling out and rolling off the bed to his feet. "Back in a minute, sugar." Grant patted her hip before he left to discard the condom, she assumed.

She turned and slipped under the skewed and twisted covers, doing her best to straighten what she could. She was so tired. She'd sleep. He had to be tired as well. They could talk in the morning. In the morning they would have to talk. About the ghost that brought them together. The ghost who just might tear them apart. Lee.

* * * * *

He figured that the best place to get a clue as to where she was hiding would be the diner just up the road in some backwater, one flashing light town. It appeared to be the type of place where everyone knew everyone else and a stranger was sure to be remembered. That was good because if Ms. Casey Shields had been through this way, then someone was sure to have seen her. The bad thing was that they would remember that he had been through looking for her as well. That would be very bad when Ms. Shields met with a fatal accident.

But he needed to get this wrapped up and out of the way. And the only way to do that was to get the photographer and her damning pictures out of the way. What were the odds that she was out on that night snapping shots of Detroit at night? Just his fucking luck that Ms. Photojockey had to be the one person who would turn concerned citizen and hand stuff over to the police.

He walked up to the café and frowned at the closed sign. That's when it hit him that it was Thanksgiving Day. Fuck. How the hell would he find her if there was nobody out in this god-forsaken town. He was just about to turn away when a woman opened the door and peeked out at him.

"Lost, hon?" she asked. She was mid-thirties maybe with a bright smile.

He let his own lips curve up and turned on the charm. "I seem to be, ma'am. I've been on the road for the last twelve hours looking for the cabin my sister headed to. She said it was up this way but I can't seem to find it." He reached into his pocket and pulled out a picture of Ms. Shields and held it out for the woman to see. "Perhaps she stopped through here as well?"

"I don't remember her." She shook her head as she studied the photo. "But then we don't get a lot of strangers here at the café. You might check the gas station out by the highway. Anyone heading this way would have stopped in for fuel. Tell Danny that Tammy May sent you." She smiled at him again.

He smiled back and this time it was genuine. He might just find the bitch yet. "Well, thank you, Tammy May. I'll do just that." He nodded and headed back to his car. Soon. He would have her at his mercy very soon. And his little problem would disappear again. This time for good.

Chapter Six

"Here's a question for you." Casey yawned up at Grant after he returned from the shower the next morning. He'd woken before her and figured separate showers were a good idea if they planned to get out of bed any time today. He'd even gotten dressed in the bathroom, mostly because he was afraid if he didn't he'd end up back in bed. In the dim light that filtered in through the window, her fair skin glowed with the soft luster of a marble statue. He couldn't think of a more beautiful sight than Casey sprawled naked in his bed.

"Uh-uh. Any questions before breakfast are going to cost you." Unable to resist, he sat down on the bed beside her and gave her a long, deep good-morning kiss. Finally he pulled away to breathe. "Okay. What's your question?"

"If you came up here to hide from anyone and everyone, why did you have a full box of condoms in the nightstand drawer?"

Maybe he needed to reevaluate his stance on the sexiness of smart women. Even half asleep she still managed to skewer him. "Umm..." The truth was, he had to stop and think about it. Was it last Easter? Or the fall before that? When had he planned on a hot weekend tryst up here that never ended up happening? "Wishful thinking?"

She laughed then sat up, drawing the covers up around her. "Okay. Well, are you sure they're from this decade? Those things do have an expiration date, you know."

The horror that washed through him must have shown on his face. Suddenly her eyes went huge and her whole body went stiff. "Shit! Grant, tell me the freaking condoms are still good. We've used what—six—eight—of the damn things in the last twenty-four hours?"

"Nah, couldn't have been more than five." Okay, maybe six. Certainly not more than seven. He fumbled for the box then held it up to the window to make the most of the minimal light. He'd left the oil lamp in the bathroom for Casey to use. "Expires January—of next year, thank God. Two more months to go."

"Whew!" She slumped back against the headboard. "There's an adrenaline rush to wake you up in the morning."

"No kidding." He took her hands rubbing them between his. "Sorry for the scare. But for the record, I am clean—had more tests ten months ago than I ever knew existed. And there hasn't been anybody since." He didn't add that he hadn't been able to since, not until she'd crashed into his life, though it was true.

"Me too. Had my annual physical in August and I haven't been with anyone since then." Somehow Grant had known that hopping into bed with a virtual stranger wasn't

exactly her usual style but it felt good to hear her say it. "Since quite a while before that, if you want the truth. Long enough that I'm not on the Pill, or anything."

"Hence the panic attack." Not that he'd blamed her. His own heart had practically stopped for a minute there. His life was way too messed up right now for him to even think about that kind of responsibility.

"Yeah." She nodded and swallowed hard. "Sorry about that."

He leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips. "Don't be. I think a moment of panic was in order. We'll be extra careful from here on out. But we're good now, right?"

She nodded again. "Right."

It took every bit of willpower he could muster to stand up and walk away instead of crawling back under the covers with her. He forced himself to walk to the door and call back over his shoulder.

"Well you can go ahead and take a shower. I'm going to head outside for a bit. Be back in about twenty minutes or so and we can scrounge up some breakfast." He was still stiff from yesterday and he knew his morning hike would help work the kinks out.

"Okay."

He left the bedroom, ignoring the scuffling sounds as she got out of bed and presumably located clothing. He laced up his hiking boots, pulled on coat and gloves and his baseball cap and headed into the great outdoors. A little time away from the cabin might help loosen up the kinks in his brain, as well as the ones in his leg. The weather was still cold today but the cloudless sky was promising. Maybe the road crews would make it out today. Not that he wasn't enjoying the interlude with Casey but it would be nice to have power and the option of leaving if they wanted to.

What was he doing with Casey? Besides having one hell of a weekend? When he looked at her, all he could think about was fucking her until neither of them could move but even when he wasn't with her, he couldn't get her out of his mind. And the worst part was that it wasn't just about sex. He wanted to make her smile and laugh almost as much as he wanted to make her scream. He found himself speculating on what she was like on her own turf, whether she liked baseball or hockey, jazz or hip-hop. He wondered if she preferred dogs or cats—or parakeets for that matter. Most of all, he wanted—no needed—to make sure she was safe. She touched emotions within him he'd thought long dead and that frankly scared the hell out of him. It was almost as if he was falling in love with her. And wouldn't that be fabulous if she did turn out to be the con artist he'd suspected she was? Grant had always assumed that the big L-word would never happen to him. He was too hard-bitten and crusty for such tender emotions. So why were butterflies taking up residence in his stomach every time he even thought about a certain green-eyed brunette? Whatever was going on in his head—in his heart—it couldn't possibly be good.

They hadn't talked again about the dog tags, about her claim to have encountered Lee on that dark country road yesterday morning. Partly because a stubborn part of his brain kept insisting that if he didn't ask her, she wouldn't have to lie and they wouldn't

have to fight about it. Grant did not believe in ghosts. Well, about ninety-nine percent of him didn't. There was that one niggling voice in his brain that kept reminding him of his Scottish grandmother and her so-called Sight. She'd spent a lot of years trying to instill in her descendants that anything was possible. And the damnable thing was, the stunt just sounded like something Lee would pull. If Grant's kid brother did have the power to come back from the dead, it would be just like him to play matchmaker for his grumpy older sibling. He'd always figured it was his job to make Grant smile.

Grant had to admit, Lee would be the first one to kick his ass over the way he'd been wallowing in his guilt and loss. In fact, if Lee was here in front of him right now, he'd be calling Grant all kinds of an idiot for being outside with his thoughts instead of inside with Casey. Lee had always had a keen eye for the ladies too. Casey was exactly the sort of woman Lee would have been drawn to. While Grant had usually gone for the party girls with bleached hair and fake boobs, Lee had been the one who liked his women "real" as he called them. Even that last day in Iraq, he'd berated Grant for wasting his time with "disposable" women. Of course, Grant had countered, that's why he liked them. They were disposable. No worries about attachment or commitment. Casey, on the other hand, was about as real as a woman could get. And Grant could see the threat of attachment like he was looking down the barrel of a gun.

He shook his head as if to clear the cobwebs out of his skull. All this thinking was getting him nowhere, except cold. As he turned to hike back to the cabin, he heard the crunch of tires on snow-crusting gravel. A few seconds later the engine noise cut but was followed by slamming doors and male voices. Of course it was the work crew, not somebody after Casey, but just to be on the safe side, Grant crept carefully through the trees instead of tromping openly down the drive.

By the time he reached the site of the fallen tree, the workers were already firing up a small front-end loader to move it.

"I'm guessing you already cut the power to this line." Grant stepped out of the woods and walked up to the man standing beside the electric company's van.

"Yep. Thanks for putting the sign up, if you're the one who did. My sister saw it on her way in to work at the grocery store and called me first thing."

"Your sister..." Grant had no idea who the man was talking about but was glad the sign had apparently worked.

"Molly, at the Super Shopper. Said you were out here alone and needed power to do your work."

Small towns. Grant didn't know whether he loved them or hated them but right now he'd gladly give Molly a kiss on her wrinkled lips if she was here. "I appreciate it," he told the other man as they stepped aside to allow space for the heavy loader to operate.

"She had another message she wanted me to pass along. Seems some guy was at the café last night looking for a woman, claimed it was his sister. He even showed my cousin Tammy May a picture. Pretty girl, long brown hair, green eyes. Molly was over

talking to her at the café when the guy stopped by. Moll says the only person she knew with young female company coming to town was you. Thought maybe you should know that someone was asking around."

Damn. Based on the description, it had to be Casey. And she sure as hell hadn't mentioned a brother. Grant thanked the man, shook his hand again. "Only thing is, my date is a blonde. Sorry I can't help you out. I see any pretty brunettes walking by, I'll be sure to let Molly know."

The man laughed, all the while giving hand signals to his buddy about moving the tree.

"And speaking of the blonde, I'll bet she has breakfast waiting. So I'll let you guys get back to work. Thanks again."

Grant put a lot of effort into keeping his face and movements casual. It wouldn't do to let the workmen know he was in a hurry to get back to the cabin and check on Casey.

* * * * *

Casey knew it was time to take a hike up to her grandfather's cabin while Grant was gone. She had a feeling that he would do his best to keep her away from it otherwise. She liked the fact that he wanted to make sure she was safe, liked it too much. And that was becoming a big problem all on its own. She was falling in love with him more and more every moment that they spent together.

It should only be about a fifteen-minute hike to the other cabin if she cut through the woods. She just hoped that her memory was correct as she hadn't actually been out here since she was a teenager. She'd just keep heading in the general direction and pray that she didn't get lost. She was pretty good at muddling through on her own. Lord knew she had been in some places before where her sense of direction had been the difference between becoming a political hostage or not. Luck seemed to be with her.

Casey heaved a sigh of relief when she spotted what she was looking for through the group of trees up ahead. It looked older and more rustic than she remembered or maybe it was just seeing it for the first time through the eyes of an adult. She found the key where it had always been kept and headed in to take a look around. Dust was everywhere and it was apparent that it had been a long time since anyone had been there.

She shut the door gingerly behind her and slid her camera case off her shoulder and sat it on a cloth-covered table, hoping that no animal larger than she was had found refuge for the winter in the abandoned cabin. Memories overwhelmed her, of her grandparents, her parents and summers spent here soaking up nature and all her beauty. Just being here brought back memories of life before the worries that came with independence and adulthood. She smiled and could almost hear the echo of laughter and running feet from when she and her cousins were younger.

She shook it off and went through looking from room to room to see what was still there and what would never be again. The layers of dust made her sad and she knew

that if she survived the mess she was in now she would make a commitment to come up at least once a year to keep it up. The roof would need to be replaced and everything needed a good cleaning. She would take care of it all if she just had the chance. She went back and grabbed her camera out of the case and snapped some photos of the dust and neglect that surrounded her. They would serve as a reminder to her when she didn't think she had the time to come here again.

When she had snapped enough she laid the camera down and found an old t-shirt in the closet of one of the bedrooms. It looked like her cousin Maddy's from when they were teens. Casey used it to do a little dusting. Going from room to room, she did just enough so that it didn't have the same abandoned feel to it anymore. Maybe she would give Maddy and Chels a call sometime soon and see if they wanted to plan a girls' weekend up here. It had been too long since the three of them had been together.

She tossed the shirt in the empty trash can and grabbed her camera back up. There were four deer just outside the back window of the cabin, two does and their fawns. She wanted to get some pictures if she could. Wildlife photos were normally easy to sell. Maybe that was what she needed to clear her head, a day spent hiking the woods of her youth snapping photos of things she had long since forgotten. If nothing else perhaps the exercise would help her clear her mind.

She slipped out the back door and managed to snap maybe ten quick shots before the deer spooked and ran off. She glanced at her watch and realized she had been gone for almost two hours. She had left Grant a message that she was going for a walk and would be back later but still two hours was a long time and she didn't want to worry him. She decided to lock up and head back toward Grant's. She could snap pictures as she walked back.

She stepped back in the back door and locked it behind her. Making her way back through the house, she snapped a few more shots before spotting a brown rabbit against the backdrop of snow out front. Locking the front door behind her, she snapped some of Thumper before he hopped away. She laughed out loud at the sheer simplicity of just her and her camera.

Forgotten in the house behind her was the camera bag still filled with different lenses and unused film. Casey was too lost in the moment to care about it.

Casey opened the door and stepped into the blessed warmth of the fire Grant had going in the front room. She hadn't realized just how cold she was until she had run out of film. That was her own fault for taking along the old camera and leaving her digital in her purse back at Grant's cabin. She had three canisters of film to develop in her coat pocket. She'd head back to the cabin tomorrow to get her camera bag and supply of film.

She shrugged off her coat and gloves and sat down on the sofa to unlace her boots. The cabin was silent. Where was Grant? She really hoped that he wasn't out looking for her. Something smelled good in the kitchen and her stomach growled a reminder of

how long it had been since the last time she had eaten. She followed her nose to the source and found that Grant had some kind of soup going on the stove. It smelled done but she figured she'd better wait for him anyway. She grabbed an apple from the bowl on the table and headed down the hall to the bedroom and her supply of film.

The door was open and sleeping in the bed was the man of her thoughts. He was still wearing his jeans and sweatshirt and he looked so good just lying there. She wanted to snuggle up with him and wish the world away but it wouldn't do any good. She'd have to head back to Detroit soon and face the pictures. And when she did she might very well never see Grant again. Just the thought of it hurt.

She grabbed her purse from the top of the dresser and stepped back into the hall and headed to the living room. She'd grab her digital camera out of it and snap some shots of him while he was sleeping, mementos that she could safely tuck away and pull out when she was missing him. The battery was still good and she had a fresh memory card in so she was good to go.

She slipped back in and snapped different angles of his face and torso before widening the frame to show all of him at peace in the bed. She was as quiet as she could manage because she knew how tired he must be. He never seemed to sleep much and when he did he tossed and turned. Maybe everything was finally catching up with him or maybe the intense sex they'd been having was finally allowing him to rest.

After taking a few more close-ups of his face and the way that one arm was thrown up over his forehead she slipped back out and put it in her purse. She'd upload them onto her laptop later when the power came back on. Right now she just couldn't resist the temptation to slip into the bed with Grant and cuddle close. She had no idea just how much more time they would have together and she wanted to make the most of it. They'd have to discuss Lee soon and that one conversation was sure to change everything.

Grant's arms went around her as soon as she lay next to him and he pulled her close to his chest. She thought she heard him murmur her name but it could have just been wishful thinking. All she knew was that if she had her choice they would spend forever just like this. Well, maybe minus the layers of clothes they both still wore. But she honestly wanted nothing more than to spend the next fifty or so years wrapped in the arms of Grant Kincaid. If only life would let them.

* * * * *

He found fresh footprints about a yard back from the house. He had left his Jeep parked back on the gravel drive and walked the rest of the way up to a cabin that looked like it had seen better days. It wouldn't take much to make sure the house collapsed in on itself. The girl was going to make his job easy after all. By the time anyone thought to come and check on her she'd be in too many pieces to find.

His harsh laughter sounded loud in the silence of the woods and he cut it off abruptly. It wouldn't do to let her know that he was here until it was too late for her to

do anything about it. Within thirty seconds he had the back door opened and slipped inside. He knew immediately that the place was empty. She wasn't here at the moment so he would make the most of the time he had.

He dropped his backpack to the floor and removed the materials he needed to ensure she had an explosive homecoming. His lips curled up at just the thought. And with the farewell of Ms. Shields he would be in the clear for good. Life would return to the order he demanded and no one would ever know that the notorious madam of Detroit had once been his lover. He would never have to sweep anything under the rug again to keep her from sharing his secret with the men he worked with.

He set the timer so that the Shields bitch would be sure to be at the cabin and in bed when she received his message, her last ever. He whistled all the way from the cabin to the car. It looked like he had something to be thankful for after all.

Chapter Seven

When Grant returned to the cabin to find Casey gone, he panicked for a minute, afraid someone had already found her. Then he noticed her note and the missing camera bag and had to smile. Of course. Not taking pictures was probably as impossible for her as not breathing. That was fine. The deer and wild turkeys wouldn't cause her any grief.

He started a pot of soup with some of the leftover turkey and some frozen vegetables off the back porch. She'd probably be half frozen when she got back. Somehow taking care of Casey had become perfectly natural to him. Letting her take care of him was harder but he was getting more and more used to it, which scared the hell out of him. He had to be careful not to let himself depend on it. When she left, he still had to be able to survive on his own.

Once the soup was simmering, he turned the heat off and wandered into the bedroom for the book he'd been reading before she arrived. He found it on the floor next to the nightstand, along with a handful of condom wrappers. He stuffed those in the trash with a grin. Who'd have ever thought they'd end up using so many in just a couple of days? He made a mental note to grab another box next time he went to town.

He kicked off his sneakers and stretched out on the bed to read. A few minutes later he felt the paperback slip from his fingers. Figuring a nap wouldn't hurt, he set the book aside and pulled the blankets up. The way he slept, he'd be awake long before she got back anyway. With one huge yawn he rolled onto his side and went to sleep.

He woke to the incredible warmth of Casey in his arms. She was curled close to his chest and at some point he must have wrapped his arms around her in his sleep. She was making a little snuffling noise that might have been a snore if it wasn't so cute. He almost laughed thinking how she'd react to that comment. One thing he'd learned about Casey Shields was that cute wasn't how she thought of herself.

His cock stirred as he thought about waking her up by peeling her clothes off but she looked so content he decided to let her sleep. They'd spent so much time going at each other like rabbits that she hadn't slept much more in the last few days than he had. Besides, he'd been waiting for a chance to go check out her cabin and he was sure if she knew he was going she'd insist on going with him. The professional in him rebelled at that idea almost as much as the chest-beating caveman did.

His side of the bed was up against the wall, so it was tricky to disentangle himself and crawl out without waking her. She stirred restlessly when he moved away, until she got hold of his pillow and wrapped her arms around that and settled back into

slumber. He tucked the covers around her then tiptoed out of the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

He got smart and did a few stretches before he headed outside this time. It was pretty freaking amazing how much better his leg and shoulder felt after last night's massage and he didn't want all Casey's hard work to go to waste. Then he bundled up, grabbed his gun and trundled out.

It wasn't far to Casey's family cabin. He'd gotten pretty detailed instructions from her and the name on the mailbox confirmed his navigation skills. The place looked old and deserted, which tallied with what she'd said. The porch was sagging and so was the roof but the place looked mostly sound. He'd have to be careful on the steps was all.

But first he needed to check the perimeter. He needed to do that soon, since dusk was starting to fall and soon he wouldn't be able to see. This afternoon's sun had melted most of the snow and ice but that left mud. And mud retained tracks better than almost any other substance on Earth. Grant reached the gravel drive and immediately went on alert. A car had been up here and not too long ago. Deep ruts showed where the vehicle had parked and a man's big booted footprints led from the driveway up to the house.

Using the cover of the woods as far as possible, Grant crept up on the rear side of the cabin. There were no sounds coming from inside and no lights burned in the windows but that didn't mean no one was there. He ghosted all the way around the building until he'd checked in every window and was certain there was nobody inside. Then he slipped a thin wire out of his jacket pocket and picked the lock on the back door.

When there was no movement in response to his efforts he slipped the lock pick back in his pocket and slid his Glock out of its holster and into his hand. Then he eased the door open and cautiously crept inside.

The cabin had the feel of an empty place. The back door opened into a dusty utility storage room. He followed a short hallway to the front of the building, checking open bedroom and bathroom doors as he went. Like his, the kitchen and living room were fused together into one big space. He got a shock when he looked at the kitchen table. What the hell was Casey's camera bag doing here?

Now he knew why she'd taken so long on her walk and his blood ran cold. Had she been here before or after the guy with the big feet? Hopefully after. Thank God that it hadn't been at the same time. Otherwise she probably wouldn't be back at Grant's place safe in his bed.

Now he wasn't worried about stealth. Grant grabbed the camera bag and rooted through it. Nothing was missing except the camera and a few canisters of film. He'd seen the camera on his own kitchen counter, so he wasn't concerned about that. He hoisted the bag on his shoulder and slipped out the front door with his Glock in his hand. By the front steps, he clearly saw two sets of tracks but had no idea which had come first. Darkness was falling fast and Grant hadn't thought to bring a flashlight.

Hugging the shoulder of the road, he moved as fast as he possibly could back to his cabin.

Casey woke to silence. She knew before she reached across the pillow she was cuddling that he was gone. She jumped out of the bed and stretched. Grant's t-shirt was tossed once more over the chair and her eyes seemed drawn to it. It was the memory of him ordering her to take it off that put the goofy smile on her face. No matter what became of the two of them she planned on escaping with that shirt. She'd probably never wear anything else to bed for the rest of her life.

She glanced back at the bed and frowned. The covers were every which way with the sheet buried between the bed and the wall. She couldn't contain the wicked grin that flashed across her lips. It had been pure bliss getting the bed into such a state with Grant. But she really should go ahead and fix the bed so that the covers were on like they were supposed to be. She heaved a sigh and climbed onto the bed on her hands and knees reaching out for the edge of the sheet that she could still see.

"Now that is a pretty sight." She glanced back over her shoulder to see Grant standing in the doorway behind her. She wondered how long he had been awake and what had prompted him to leave the bed in the first place. She started to turn but caught the shake of his head as he moved forward.

"Face the wall, Casey." His voice was deep and thick with the lust she felt radiating off him. She would have had to be blind to miss the bulge in his jeans. She heard the drawer open and shut and the rasp of a zipper being lowered. She could feel her sex clenching and heating with anticipation. "Undo your jeans and kick them off."

She hurried to comply, being sure to keep her eyes in front of her. This was a new side of Grant and she found it very sexy.

She felt him move into place behind her and groaned at the first stroke of his palm over the cheeks of her ass. "Grant..." She murmured his name, conveying her need with just that word. She cried out when he pulled his hand back and returned it with a slight smack. The heat from his hand soaked through her ass and found a home in her pussy, intensifying the need already there.

"Quiet," he ordered her and she could feel more than lust darkening his hunger. There was an edge there and an underlying need to assert dominance and control. She wondered briefly what had prompted this particular need in him and then didn't care when his hand landed again on the other cheek.

She lowered her upper body so that her forearms lay along the mattress and her head rested on them. Her ass was lifted high for his perusal and she instinctively widened the spread of her knees. She heard Grant's groan and matched it with one of her own when she heard the rip of cotton before her panties were removed. She felt both of his hands squeezing and spreading her cheeks and thought she was prepared for anything.

"Have you ever been fucked in this pretty little ass, Casey?" Grant's voice was harsh with need and she thought she would die if he didn't take her soon. Then his words penetrated her mind.

Casey tried to jerk up but he wouldn't let her. "No. No, I don't want that, Grant. I... I don't think that I would be comfortable with that."

"I could make it so good for you, Casey. I could make you beg me to fuck your ass." He spread her cheeks wide apart again and she could feel his gaze centered on the tight pucker of her anus. Nerves and a slight fear of the unknown tightened every muscle in her body. Funny thing was that she honestly believed that if any man could make her want to try anal sex it would be Grant. "But I won't ask you to do it today. I'll ease you into it, sweetheart, until you burn for me to possess you there. Everywhere."

She wondered if he realized what he was giving away with those words. Like the fact that he saw a future for them. She was hoping for the exact same thing. She opened her mouth to tell him what she had just realized in those moments. There was no more maybe, no more falling. Somehow Casey had tumbled headfirst into love with Grant. So much so that she didn't want to think of ever being without him. But the words never made it past her lips.

With one fierce thrust Grant buried the steel-hard length of his erection deep inside the welcoming heat of her pussy. The words became senseless cries of pleasure as he rode her hard and fast. His cock stretched and burned the sensitive tissue of her vagina with each pounding stroke. His hands were firm where they gripped her hips and held her exactly where he wanted her. Each harsh stoke of his engorged cock brought them both that much closer to the ultimate release that they were both reaching for.

Casey was so close that she could feel the tightening knot in her womb just waiting for that one stroke that would send her careening over the edge into sweet oblivion. She felt one of his hands move off her hip but as long as he continued fucking her she didn't care what he did with his hand. She felt his fingers trailing along her stomach as he leaned over her, covering her with his body. His questing fingers found her leaking juices and rubbed all along her folds but only darted over her clit before going back for more fluid.

She cried out when he removed his hand and straightened back up behind her. All it would have taken was a few well-placed strokes of his fingers over her clit and nirvana would have been hers. She wanted to beg him to put his hand back, planned to do just that, until she felt those same fingers spear between the cheeks of her ass. Before she could tense up he inserted one lubricated finger inside and wiggled it around. Casey screamed and bucked back against him, impaling more of his finger up her tight back hole.

It was pure fire in her ass. It was such intense pleasure-pain that it triggered something primal in her, some part of her that she hadn't even known existed. With a harsh grunt she thrust back into him, grinding her pulsing sex into his and sending his finger all the way home. Grant's harsh cries matched hers and he began pulling his finger in and out of her ass, fucking her there with the same intensity that his cock

plundered her pussy. It was heaven. It was pure sensation. And when he added a second finger to the first it was exactly what her body needed to let go and find the Promised Land.

"Grant!" She screamed his name as she tightened and convulsed around his pumping cock and thick fingers. She heard his guttural moans and felt the orgasm ripping through him as he filled the condom. His fingers stilled inside her and rubbed against a spot that set her off on another journey of mindless pleasure. When he collapsed against her back she didn't have the strength to cry out at the way his cock buried deeper inside her. She felt him ease his fingers out and found the energy to moan at the odd feeling of emptiness that settled there.

He tugged until they both lay on their sides, her head tucked under his chin, his cock still sheathed and firmly wedged inside her. She was ready to relax and go back to sleep when his next words jolted her wide awake.

"We need to talk, Casey." His sigh feathered her hair as he continued. "We can't put it off any longer. We have to talk."

"Look, Grant..." she started to say but Grant began at the same time.

"You went to your family's cabin today on your walk." His voice was soft in her ear and his arms gave her a squeeze before he shifted away. His cock came free with a sucking noise and Casey felt empty and alone.

"How did you know that?" she asked but she knew the answer before he spoke it. He had been there after her, checking things out in his quest to protect her.

"You left your camera case there. I brought it back for you." She heard him remove the condom and dispose of it with a tissue in the trash can he'd brought into the bedroom the day before. She was pretty sure that all it had in it were tissues filled with used condoms. She wanted to laugh but didn't think that he would appreciate it right now.

"I just went to take a look around and see if things looked the same as I remembered them." She rolled over to face him and was struck again by how rugged and handsome he looked, just the way that a man should. "I didn't stay long."

"Someone has been into town asking questions about you, Casey." His voice had an edge to it and his words sent a chill down her spine. Who would possibly be searching for her here? No one knew where she was. She should have been safe here.

"Who? What?" She couldn't seem to catch her breath. She would have to go, find somewhere else to hide out until the detective unraveled the murder. Where would she go? And how would she ever survive without Grant?

"That's not all, Casey." His eyes were hard as granite when he looked at her and for the first time she really saw the warrior that he was. He had been trained to kill and looking in his eyes now, she had no doubt that he would be more than capable. "There was someone at the house after you left."

"What?" Casey couldn't believe that anyone had found her cabin so soon. "How could anyone find me out here?"

"If a person really wants to they can track you anywhere. You are never truly hidden." He pulled her close against his chest and held her. She could feel the thudding of his heart against hers and it felt so comforting, so right. She would have to leave to keep him safe. "I know just what you are plotting, Casey, and forget about it."

She looked up at him, being careful to keep as much of her thoughts hidden as she could. "What am I thinking then?"

"You're planning on running." It was a statement and it scared her just how well they could already read each other. "Don't try. I won't let you." He bent down and kissed her softly on the lips. "I'll take care of you. I promise you, Casey, that no one will get to you without first going through me."

"I don't want you to get hurt, Grant. I can fight this on my own." She was determined that he not be hurt because of her. From what she had seen and heard it was pretty clear that Grant had been through enough already.

"But you won't. We have other things to discuss when this is all over. Once I know that you are safe from the danger that is stalking you then I will have my answers, Casey." The hard glint was back in his eyes and she felt a shiver work down her spine. "And you'd better have something better to tell me than that a dead man sent you here."

With that parting shot he was out of the bed and out the door. She heard a door shut and the sound of water running. With a weary sigh Casey lay back against the pillow. When she was safe, when this was all over she would have to run as fast as she could anyway. Because she had nothing to tell Grant but the truth. And the truth was apparently that the ghost of his brother had sent her to him. She didn't know what else to say that would convince Grant that she was telling the truth. She didn't know why Lee had chosen her as his messenger or what he had hoped to accomplish by sending her to Grant. But she was sure that it wasn't going as he planned.

* * * * *

Grant stirred the soup, reheating it on the stove while Casey washed and dressed. His brain kept replaying her words when he'd pulled her out of the Jeep and she hadn't been fully conscious. She hadn't mentioned her Jeep or even her own safety, she'd asked about the wellbeing of her passenger. Unless she was a damned good actress, he doubted that part of her story was fake.

And then there were the dog tags. He really couldn't come up with a single damned explanation for those. He'd fucking seen them around Lee's neck before the explosion. And he'd damned sure have noticed Casey if she'd been there in that half-assed excuse for an OC, so she couldn't have stolen them from his body.

Then there were the things she'd said, things that only he and his brother would know about. He closed his eyes for a minute and muttered. "Christ on a crutch, tadpole, if you were going to send me a woman, couldn't you have given me some kind of sign?"

At just that moment, the lights went on.

Grant damn near wet his pants.

His heart pounded furiously as part of him really, truly, desperately wanted to believe. It had been years since he'd had any faith, really believed in any kind of life after death. If there was such a thing, nobody deserved it more than Lee and damn if it wouldn't be just like him to use the afterlife to try to hook his brother up. Grant stirred the soup with hands that had gone more than a little shaky.

There was another reason, scarily more powerful, why he wanted like hell to believe that Lee's ghost was indeed playing matchmaker. He didn't want Casey to be lying. Somewhere in the last few days she'd chipped away at his defenses to the point where she'd crept inside them. He'd gone and fallen in love with her and that was more dangerous than facing down a hostile army.

If she was lying, then what did she want from him? Protection? She could have found somebody in the phonebook a whole lot easier. Somebody with all their body parts in working order. And why invent the story about Lee? Why not just say she'd been alone when she crashed into the tree? He wouldn't have doubted that for a minute. None of it made any sense. Unless she was telling the truth.

Casey came out of the bedroom brushing her long, gorgeous hair.

"The soup smells great. Is there any of that homemade bread left over?" Without another word she placed the brush on the arm of the couch and moved over to start setting the table. "Feels almost weird to have the lights back, doesn't it?"

Grant nodded. At first he tried to keep the damaged side of his face away from her. It took a little work but putting on sunglasses seemed a little over the top. Finally he gave up. She wasn't showing any discomfort so maybe the scars on his face had faded enough that she wouldn't run screaming when she looked at him.

The comfortable rapport between them while they prepared dinner and set the table was seductive. It would be all too easy just to enjoy it and forget about the issues they had to face. But he'd promised they'd talk after the danger was past, not before. So he settled back to enjoy the meal.

They actually talked. About books and music and politics and their childhoods. They steered away from religion and the recent past but everything else was fair game. The conversation lasted through dinner and even through doing dishes and the subsequent water fight. Grant knew he hadn't laughed this much since before Lee's death, maybe even not then.

After drying off and mopping up the kitchen, Grant ran the sheets through the washer, then they each worked on their laptops for a while, sitting across from each other at the kitchen table. Later, they collapsed together on the couch. The satellite dish for the TV was back, so they settled on a classic black and white movie. Sprawled there with Casey snuggled up against him, Grant had to admit he felt pretty fucking good.

Grant leaned his head back onto the arm of the couch and felt something sharp and bristly stab him in the back of the neck. He reached behind him and plucked Casey's

forgotten hairbrush out from under him. Then it seemed like the most natural thing in the world for him to shift her into his lap a bit and start running the brush down the length of her hair.

"Mmm, that feels nice," she murmured, scooting forward a bit to give him better access. Reflections glinted off the lustrous tresses as he stroked, static crackled at the ends, turning the mass of hair into an almost living thing.

"You have gorgeous hair. I love feeling it against my skin when we make love." It took him a second to realize he'd said "make love" instead of "have sex" or even "fuck". She didn't call him on it, just gave a little sigh that sounded like an agreement.

"I hated my hair when I was little." Her voice was mellow and warm. "The curls were so hard to manage. It never wanted to go into any of the cute trendy styles. And it was always just brown. As a teenager I wanted something more dramatic, like red or blonde. But I only tried dyeing it once. The maintenance was way too much trouble."

"I'm glad," he admitted. "I like it the way it is. The color's perfect." Just like the rest of her.

When he'd finished smoothing every strand, he lay the brush aside and lifted the hair away from her neck, running a row of nibbling little kisses along the tendons there. She made a cute little humming noise and stretched her neck, giving him more room to play. His hands went around her waist and up under the sweatshirt—his—that she was wearing. Now it was his turn to moan. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her big, beautiful breasts were gloriously free. He lifted one in each hand, loving the way they spilled over his palms.

What was it about her that turned him into a horny teenager again? He'd lost count of the number of times they'd taken each other over the last couple days. He pinched both of her swollen nipples between his thumbs and forefingers and she moaned, rubbing her ass back and forth across his groin. He nipped her neck gently with his teeth. He'd already learned a number of her major turn-ons and her throat was definitely one of them.

"God, Grant!" She squirmed, thrusting her ass even harder back against him. "Every time I think you've totally wiped me out, that I couldn't possibly want you to fuck me again, you prove me wrong."

"Good." He sucked on the spot where her neck met her shoulder and pinched her nipples again at the same time. He knew he was probably leaving a mark on her porcelain skin but he didn't think she'd mind. Some Neanderthal part of him wanted—no, needed—to mark her as his. He took one hand off her nipple and slid it down inside the waistband of her stretchy running shorts. She wasn't wearing panties either and her pussy was warm and dripping wet. He slid his fingers through the puffy folds, spreading her juices around. She leaned her shoulders back into his chest and her fingers dug into the muscles of his thighs.

His thumb found her clit and began to rub tiny little circles around it while the tip of his middle finger nudged just past the entrance to her vagina. She ground against his

hand, trying to work his finger deeper, while at the same time forcing him to maintain the pressure on her pebbled clit.

"You are so beautiful, you know that?" He flicked his tongue around the shell of her ear while he whispered, "I love to watch you come." He increased the pressure from his thumb while his other hand continued to knead her breast.

She whimpered and bucked her hips, her lashes fluttering shut.

"Come on, Casey," he breathed into her ear. "Open your eyes."

She did, though he could tell it was an effort to force them open while she frantically rode his hand. He pushed his finger deeper into her sheath, added another and pressed down hard on her clit.

"Grant!" Her green gaze locked with his as she came, her muscles clamping down on his hand. He pressed his body against hers, rubbing circles on her breast and mound until her spasms ceased.

"Fuck me." That was his girl, no coy invitations, no euphemisms for her. She pulled away to kneel on the sofa facing away from him. With one quick tug of her hands and a shimmy of her hips, her shorts fell down to her knees. Grant knelt on the cushion behind her and shoved his own sweats down. She was so wet and ready for him that it only took a gentle push to bury his cock up to the balls inside her heat.

Grant set up a slow pace, thrusting and retreating while his hands held her hips in place. He could see her hands gripping the arm of the couch, her knuckles white as she pulsed her hips back to meet each of his strokes. Her tight inner walls, still twitching from her orgasm, gripped and caressed his shaft, magnifying the sensation. The hot silky softness of her wrapped around him like a glove. He wanted to make it last but he couldn't take it slowly. He slammed into her over and over, the couch shaking in time with her hoarse cries and his grunts. He'd never felt anything as fucking incredible as the feeling of Casey's pussy squeezing him, wet velvet skin sliding over rock-hard flesh...

"Fuck!" Grant's eyes flew wide as he realized what he was doing. He was only seconds from coming, his balls full and drawn up tight, his cock harder than it had ever been in his life. "No!"

He yanked himself out of her sheath, praying he didn't hurt her with his roughness.

"Grant?" she cried out. He could hear the shock in her voice but he was too far gone to answer. He wrapped one hand around his cock and pumped hard. With the other hand he slid two fingers up into her pussy, matching the rhythm of his hips. He wet the tip of his thumb with her juices then popped it just inside her rosy pink sphincter. She screamed and came on his hand again, just as Grant bellowed his own completion, spewing ribbons of thick hot semen all over Casey's ass and back.

"Sorry," he panted. He unfolded his legs and sat, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her back onto his lap. He buried his face in her shoulder. "So sorry."

"It's okay." She was breathing almost as heavily as he was and he loved that she snuggled back into him seemingly instinctively. "Nice catch."

Good. She'd figured out why he'd withdrawn at the last minute. A knot formed in his gut. That had been way, way too close. Another two seconds and it would have been too late. He'd have come inside Casey without a condom, filling her womb with his seed. Grant breathed a huge sigh of relief at the near miss.

"Maybe we should move to the bedroom," she suggested with a husky chuckle. "First off that's where the supplies are and secondly it will be more comfortable when we pass out from sheer exhaustion."

His throat was so tight he couldn't speak, just nodded against her hair and stood, pulling her up off the sofa with him. They each pulled up their pants then walked hand in hand to the bedroom, turning off lights and the TV as they went. He couldn't believe she wasn't screaming at him or running away. How could he have been so criminally careless?

When they reached the bedroom, she stopped and pulled him around to face her. She laid both hands on the sides of his face, forcing him to meet her gaze. "Stop beating yourself up. You remembered in time. That's more than I did. I'm not going to claim to understand everything that's going on between us but whatever it is, Grant, it's pretty powerful. We're both going to have to be careful. But it's a risk I'm willing to take, rather than waste this chance to be with you."

He reached up and gripped both of her wrists, too moved to speak at first. How had she known what he was thinking? She'd put into words the emotions he'd been wrestling with and losing. Her soft steady voice was like a caress on his soul. She went up on her tiptoes and popped a kiss on the end of his nose, then gave him a goofy grin. "Now don't you think we have way too many clothes on?"

The laugh that burst from his throat sounded rusty. "I guess we do." He tugged the damp sweatshirt up and over her head while she lifted her arms to help. Then he tugged her shorts down over her hips and she wiggled them down to the floor, toeing off her fuzzy slipper socks as well. He stepped back to gaze at her, his eyes drinking in her head-to-toe natural beauty.

"Gorgeous!"

She rolled her eyes and stepped toward him. "Your turn, pal. One of us is still dressed." She grabbed a handful of his sweatshirt and tugged. Obediently, Grant twisted and lifted his arms so she could pull it off. When she gripped the edges of his sweatpants, however, Grant's laughter suddenly fled.

"Lights." He twisted out of her grip, lunged for the switch. They'd been going at it like rabbits for the past two days but she'd never seen him in bright light. He knew what his leg looked like and there was no way he wanted to see horror, or worse yet, pity in her eyes when she looked at him. In the dark or the dim light of a kerosene lamp he could pretend to be whole.

"What?" He could still see her outline, vaguely, in the dim moonlight that filtered through the blinds. He pulled off his pants then moved back to her side.

"It's more fun in the dark," he answered. He took her hands and tried to pull her to the bed.

"No. You got to look, now it's my turn." She snaked one hand away from his and flipped on the bedside lamp before he could stop her. She blocked the lamp with her body, swaying from side to side to block his hands as he tried to reach around her. Finally she just grabbed his hands. "Stop."

He paused, closing his eyes. "The difference is you're beautiful. I'm not. You don't need to see this, Casey. Just turn off the damn light and come to bed."

"What is your problem?" He could hear the confusion in her tone, then she squeezed his hands and said, "Ah. I get it. This is about the scars, isn't it?"

Chapter Eight

He sighed and nodded. She could tell he had to force himself to open his eyes. "They're not pretty."

"You have no idea how gorgeous you are, do you?"

"Casey –"

"No, I mean it. You're a bit chewed up, it's true, but they're only scars. You're not the fucking elephant man." She reached up and brushed her fingers across the lines that crisscrossed his temple. What an idiot! "These have almost faded. The only thing they do is draw attention to your gorgeous eyes."

She leaned up and feathered kisses along them. "And your leg is a testimony to the service you gave this country. It shows your honor, courage and dedication. That *is* beautiful, Grant."

"You're just saying that." He sounded like he had no intention of believing anything she said.

Casey sighed and turned toward the living room and her laptop. "I'll be right back." She padded down the hall naked, grabbed the case and returned to the bed. She sat down and took her computer out and set all the cords up, handing the plug to Grant when he stuck his hand out.

"You changed your mind and decided to work instead?" He sounded like an irritated little boy and Casey had to fight hard to hold back a grin.

"I've decided to show you the beauty that I see when I look at you." She booted up the system and took the flash card from her camera and plugged it in. With a few clicks she had the pictures she'd taken of Grant sleeping up and on her screen. "Take a look and tell me what you see."

Grant sat next to her, just as naked as she was but no longer trying to hide from her. She heard the hurt beneath the anger in his voice when he spoke. "When in the hell did you take those fucking pictures, Casey?"

"I took them when I came back and you were sleeping. You looked so peaceful lying there. I wanted to savor the moment, to keep it with me for always." He looked intently at her face and she knew that somehow he understood her fear that at some point it would all end between them.

He reached up and cupped her cheek, running his fingers gently along the skin there. "I know what I look like. I've seen it every day for a long time now."

"Have you, Grant? Have you really looked at yourself? Or are you just seeing what used to be there?" Her eyes were begging him to believe her. "Just look." She pointed and enlarged one of the pictures she had snapped of him sleeping. It was a close-up of

his face. It was one of her favorites. It was also a very vivid portrait of the side of his face that he was worried about. "They've faded almost all the way. There is just the tiniest bit of white there now but you have to look very closely to see it."

She watched as he studied the picture and when he kept looking she scrolled through the rest of them, stopping and allowing him the time he needed to really see what she saw when she looked at him.

"So the face isn't so bad anymore." There was still an uncertainty in his voice when he spoke. "The leg is still ugly. There is no amount of fading that will ever occur to change the way it looks."

"And that's a good thing, Grant. It will remind you every day to be thankful that you are alive, to show you where you have been and how far you have come since then." She pushed the laptop to the top of the bedside table and turned more fully toward him. "It will remind me how lucky I am that you survived." She leaned into him, her breasts rubbing along his arm as she leaned in and nipped at his neck and shoulder. "I'm glad for the scars because they are attached to the man that I lo—need right now."

He groaned and turned into her taking her lips in a passionate kiss that left them both trembling with need. She didn't know if he had caught her almost slip or not but as he pushed her to her back on the bed, she didn't care.

"Do you believe me?" It was a husky murmur as his lips trailed down her chest, grazing over her nipples before continuing down to her belly.

"I believe that you think that," he whispered against her skin. "I believe that you see me that way."

"That's all that matters for now. That's good enough." She ended with a soft moan as his lips nuzzled her damp sex and his tongue snaked through her glistening folds. She reached her hand over and grabbed blindly for the drawer on the table, frantic for a condom. She just wrapped her fingers around one when he drove his tongue deep inside her pussy, fucking her with it.

"Yes," she cried out, her hips flexing up to meet his devouring mouth. "God yes."

The only noise that filled the room was the greedy sucking of his mouth on her cunt and the harsh moans that shuddered from her as he urged her further and further along a plateau of pleasure. He was voracious, using his teeth and tongue to catapult her into one orgasm after another until she lay like a boneless doll beneath him unable to move in the aftermath of such intense ecstasy.

He eased up until he was on his knees between her thighs. With one hand he took the condom from her lax fingers and tore it open with his teeth. She watched as he easily sheathed his glorious erection before guiding it toward her pulsing channel. "You've got it all wrong though. You're the beautiful one."

He nudged until the head was seated inside her and bent lower to take her mouth with his lips. She could taste herself on his lips and tongue and it was the most erotic kiss of her life.

"I'm the one who's grateful that I met you. I'm the one who needs you right now." With those words he slid fully inside her, groaning as her flesh pulsed and squeezed around him. He held himself perfectly still, his eyes closed, his face a picture of pure ecstasy. "I'm the one who needs you," he whispered before opening his eyes and setting up a rhythm that had her on the brink of another orgasm within seconds.

She thought she heard him murmur that he loved her when the waves pulled them under but she was too afraid to ask. There was the echo of a loud boom in her ears and she sighed her pleasure. "You make the earth tremble."

"Thanks, honey, but I don't think that was me." Grant grunted as he rolled over and slipped from the bed. He had already snagged his clothes and started getting dressed before she realized that he was serious.

Casey bolted up in the bed and scrambled to find her own things amid the chaos in the room. "What do you mean? What do you think it was?"

Grant was already heading toward the door. He had managed to get dressed and was lacing his hiking boots. She knew what he was going to say before the words even left his mouth. "Just wait here for me. I'll check it out and be right back."

"No." She was panting in her rush to get her jeans up, almost tripping in her hurry to follow him to the front room. She tugged the zipper up but didn't take the time to do the button or grab her shoes. "Just wait a damn minute, Grant! Let me get my shoes on and I'll go with you."

Grant snagged his coat and pulled it on before turning back to her. "Not this time. I want you to stay here for now while I check everything out." She knew that he was only trying to protect her but she could feel her anger growing. She wasn't some fragile thing who couldn't take care of herself. She had been in tight places before and she was still here to talk about it. But then he stepped forward and the look in his eyes took her breath away. "I need you to do this for me right now. I need to know that you'll be here waiting for me when I get back." His fingers were gentle as he brushed her cheek. "Please do this for me."

Casey knew that she wasn't going with him. There was no way that she could deny his request. She loved him. "I'll wait for you here," she promised and turned her face to grace his palm with a kiss. "I'll be here when you get back."

"And we'll talk." It was his promise and she knew that it would be about more than the ghost of his brother. "There are things that I need to let you know. We'll talk about everything when I get back. No more hiding behind a ghost. No more putting it off. Promise me?"

"I promise." Her breath caught when he bent to kiss her. It was warm and tender and filled with a pledge she was afraid to accept. It was a kiss of love.

She watched him walk away, watched him pull the door shut behind him as he stepped out into the cold and whispered the words that had been stuck in her throat earlier. The words she had almost let slip out before. "I love you."

* * * * *

Grant knew the sound of an explosion when he heard one. It wasn't something he would ever forget, not after having been in one. And he had a gut-deep suspicion about where the sound had come from. As he skulked through the woods toward Casey's cabin, his suspicion grew into a certainty. When he topped the last hill, he saw the flames and smelled the smoke.

He almost fell to his knees in gratitude at the knowledge that Casey hadn't been in there.

He didn't hear any sirens yet, so he stayed a moment to make sure he didn't see any movement in or around the conflagration. Then he double-timed it back to his place to call in the fire. Even in the winter, there was always the risk of a fire spreading to the trees and half the county could go up in smoke before you knew it.

He shook his head at Casey and moved straight to the phone the minute he burst through his cabin door.

"Hi. This is Grant Kincaid out on old Sawmill Road. I need to report a fire."

At the operator's question, he gave the address. When she asked if he knew the cause, he told the literal truth. "No idea. Gas explosion or something, maybe. I heard a big boom, went outside to check it out. Whole cabin is going up in flames."

There was a silence as she apparently relayed the information to the fire department. He answered her next question with a flat-out lie. "No, I have no idea if the cabin was occupied. I've never met anybody who lives there and I didn't hear or see anyone. No cars either."

"Will you be at this number if the responding officers need further information?" The operator was polite but sounded faintly suspicious.

Grant sighed. "Of course. Though I'll probably go back to bed at some point."

He was assured that that would be fine. He hung up the phone and turned to find Casey slumped into a chair. Her mouth was open and tears were running down her cheeks as she stared at him.

"My—my cabin?" Her voice was barely a whisper.

He nodded and moved to sit on the edge of the big wooden table and take her in his arms. "I'm so sorry, Casey. But it's gone." Or it would be by morning, he amended mentally.

He felt her crumple against his chest and he tightened his hold on her as the sobs began to rack her body.

"It's all my fault. They followed me here and they b-b-blew it up." She sniffled against his shirt.

"Looks that way." He had no idea what to say or how to comfort her. So he just held her close and smoothed his hands up and down her spine. He rubbed his cheek against the top of her head, reveling in its softness and inhaling the warm sweet scent of her hair.

After a while the sobs softened to hiccups and then quieted altogether. He handed her a paper napkin from the holder in the middle of the table and waited while she mopped her face and blew her nose.

"You okay now?"

She shook her head. "All those memories. All gone because of me." She sniffled again and grabbed another napkin.

He rubbed the pad of his thumb across her cheek, wiping away a tear. "Now you do know it isn't your fault, right? You're not the murderous psychopath in this picture."

"I know." Her sigh about broke his heart. "But I guess they figured out that I came up here."

All he could do is nod.

"So now I have to run again."

He started to nod again, then realized what she'd said. He pulled back to give her a dirty look. "What?"

She shrugged. "It will be only a matter of time before they find me here with you. I can't put you at that kind of risk, Grant."

He crossed his arms over his chest. "You're not going anywhere without me."

"I won't put you in danger."

He wasn't exactly sure why that comment pissed him off but it did. "So now I can't even protect myself, let alone you? Is that what you're trying to say? I may not be up to Secret Service caliber anymore but I'd like to think I can still watch my own ass, not to mention yours."

She gave him one of those looks that women only use on men when they think you've gone off the deep end. Hell, maybe he had.

"Look," she began. "That's not what I meant at all..."

"I know." He scrubbed his hands across his own face. "It's late, it's been one hell of a stressful day for both of us and I'm sure as shit not letting you walk out of here tonight. What do you say we go back to bed, get some sleep and make plans in the morning? I'm sure we'll both be a whole lot more rational in the daylight."

She bit her lower lip and he could practically see the wheels turning inside her skull. Finally she allowed her chin to dip a fraction of an inch. "All right."

He stood and took her hand, helping her out of her chair. He wrapped his arm around her waist as they walked—or in his case limped—to the bedroom. After all the hiking and sex, his leg hurt like a son of a bitch again. He was glad to see that Casey's ankle didn't seem to bother her at all anymore.

They undressed each other slowly. There was no heat in it this time. A few tender kisses and gentle strokes but none of the frenzied passion that had been there every other time they'd touched. Tonight it just felt—nice. And that surprised him almost as much as the passion had, though in a different way. It simply felt good not to be alone, to fall into bed exhausted and have Casey curl trustingly into his arms. He knew she

was still in shock, so he gathered her close, wrapping her in his warmth as she settled into slumber.

Though he was exhausted, he lay awake for a long time as his brain processed every conceivable angle of the situation. The only thing he knew for certain was that he couldn't lose her. Lee's death had flattened him. Casey's would disintegrate what little was left of his soul.

* * * * *

At first the pounding on the front door didn't register through the fog of sleep. It had been so long since Grant had woken to anything but nightmares that his sleep-deprived brain completely ignored the noise until Casey yelped and jerked upright. She shook his arm.

"Grant."

He opened his eyes, looked up at her and grinned. God, she was gorgeous in the morning. He vaguely noticed the heavy knocking but was still groggy enough that it hadn't sunken into his skull.

She batted his hand away from her breast. "There's somebody at the door."

Right. Grant sat up and reached for his discarded jeans. "Get dressed but wait in here. Okay?"

Casey nodded and climbed out of bed. Grant spared a lust-filled glance for her luscious ass as she bent over to retrieve her clothes. He grabbed his shirt and hurried out of the bedroom. Casey nudged the door shut behind him.

"Mr. Kincaid?" A man's voice barked through the front door. "Mr. Kincaid, are you in there?"

"I'm coming," he bellowed at the front door. He wished he'd taken time to grab his weapon but when he checked the peephole and saw uniforms he was glad he hadn't.

"Deputies." He checked the insignia carefully. He'd made a point to do a little background research on the local sheriff's department when he'd moved up here, just in case some old enemies had decided to pop up. The department was small enough that he'd seen the roster. Both of these men were on it. "Can I help you?"

"May we come in?" The younger of the two had dark hair and a short sturdy build. He was polite though. The older one just gave Grant a hard stare.

The younger man, whose name badge read Martinez, spoke. "We understand you placed a 9-1-1 call at..." He checked his notepad. "Eleven forty-three p.m. last evening. You reported a fire and explosion."

Grant waved at the table. "Please, have a seat. Do you mind if I start some coffee while I answer your questions?"

Martinez glanced at the older deputy who nodded briefly. "That would be nice," Martinez answered. They moved into the kitchen area and took seats at the table while Grant busied himself with the coffee maker, keeping his body turned slightly toward

them at all times. They were real cops but that didn't mean he was going to let them out of his sight.

"Yes, I placed a call just before midnight."

"Would you please tell us what happened?"

Grant nodded slowly. He'd known these questions would be coming. "I was in bed when I heard an explosion. It sounded fairly close but not right on top of the cabin. I got dressed, went outside and walked in the direction of the sound. When I got closer I could see the flames and smell the smoke. I got close enough to tell that there were no cars in the drive and I didn't see any movement or hear anyone scream. I'm afraid I didn't go inside to check for survivors, though. It was pretty bad by then and I was relatively sure that if anyone had been in the cabin it was already too late."

The older cop, Jones, finally spoke. "How'd you know it was an explosion, *Mister Kincaid*? You familiar with them?"

Grant forced his grip on the glass coffee carafe to loosen before he broke it. He set it down and turned his face to the deputies, scarred side directly in their line of vision. "Iraq. Ten months ago. Uncle Sam has all the files. And for the record, it's *Captain Kincaid*. Or Special Agent. Retired, either way. Any other questions?"

Martinez looked toward the hallway. "Yeah. We hear you have a houseguest. We need to talk to her."

Grant finished setting up the coffee and nodded his head. He'd been afraid of this. The damn town was too small for someone not to have talked. "Understood. If you'll wait here, I'll go make sure she's up and dressed."

Martinez followed him to the living room but waited at the mouth off the hallway. Grant could feel the other man's eyes on him as he knocked on the bedroom door. "Casey, honey, are you decent?" He opened the door and beckoned her forward, trying to convey with his expression that she needed to do this. He knew she didn't trust the cops but if they knew she was here, she had to at least pretend to cooperate.

Casey stood by the bed, Grant's gun in her hand. He nodded when she moved to set it on the dresser, then he held out his hand. Together, they walked back and sat down at the table.

"Deputy Martinez, Deputy Jones," Grant said. "May I present Ms. Casey Shields."

Casey didn't know what to say, what to admit or even what Grant may have already told them. She was afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing and getting Grant in some kind of trouble. How had her life become so complicated so quickly?

"Ms. Shields." The younger of the two deputies nodded his head at her and pointed to the kitchen and the table there.

Casey let herself be propelled forward by Grant and thought nothing of it when he pulled the chair out for her and handed her a cup of the fresh brewed coffee. Her mind

was a chaotic circle of endless possibilities. Everything depended on how much she shared with the officers.

"Ms. Shields, do you know anything about the cabin that was damaged early this morning?" It was the older of the two deputies this time and he seemed to be ordering her with his gaze, making her feel that he would know if she lied to him.

"Yes," she whispered, unable to keep the truth inside. Maybe if she told them everything she could protect Grant. Maybe she could protect them both. "It was my family's cabin—technically my father's and my aunt's I think. I think that someone is trying to kill me."

The deputies looked at each other and then glanced toward Grant who looked anything but pleased with her response.

"Why do you feel that someone is trying to kill you, Ms. Shields?" There was no missing the doubt in the older man's voice. She remembered that Grant had introduced him to her as Deputy Jones.

"Because I witnessed a murder in Detroit, Deputy Jones." Casey's backbone straightened and her voice hardened as she came to grips with what she had to tell. "I took photographs in Detroit that showed the murder of a certain notorious woman who was thought to have committed suicide. My photos showed that she didn't. I turned them over to the police and within hours someone ransacked my apartment looking for any copies that I might have had. I came here to hide out while the detective in charge looked into matters."

"He sent you here?" Deputy Martinez asked.

"No. I didn't trust him at the time. He has my cell phone number but it doesn't work here so I have no idea if he knows where I am."

"Do you have his contact information? Maybe a card that he gave you or something?" Casey knew that as soon as she gave them the card that Detective Mackey had given to her that they would contact him. But it seemed that whoever she was hiding from already knew where she was. If Detective Mackey was in Detroit when they called then she would know whether or not she could really trust him.

"It's in my purse." Casey stood from the table and blinked when all three men stood with her. "I'll just go get it and be right back." She smiled and nodded and walked as quickly as she could to the bedroom to grab her purse and the card. It didn't even surprise her when Grant followed right on her heels.

"Are you sure that this is what you want to do, Casey?" He turned her to face him, his fingers gripping her shoulders. "Are you sure that you want to trust them with this? Can you trust this Detective Mackey?"

The truth was that she didn't know. She didn't know who she could trust and who she couldn't. All she knew was that she would do whatever it took to protect Grant. She loved him and it scared her to think of what could have happened if he had been killed when the cabin exploded. He had been there just as she had. She would never forgive herself if something happened to him because of her.

"Yes, I think that I can. I have to try, Grant. I can't run forever."

"You won't be running anymore. I won't let you." His grip gentled as he pulled her to him until her head rested against his shoulder. "I can't let you. I care too much, Casey. I feel too much."

"Me too." It was a soft whisper against his shirt that she wasn't sure he heard.

"Promise me one thing?" He used his fingers to urge her face up so that she was looking into his eyes. "Don't run. I want you to stay with me. No matter what happens, I want you to stay with me. Can you do that for me?"

"I'll try." She couldn't promise him any more than that. If it came to a choice between her and him she knew that she would walk away from him if it was the only way that she could protect him.

He looked in her eyes for a long time and Casey prayed that he couldn't tell what she was thinking. Finally he nodded and after giving her a squeeze and a kiss on the top of her head he moved away, allowing her the space she needed to retrieve her purse and the card inside.

"I'll protect you with my life. That's my promise." Grant's voice was strong and sure though he spoke quietly enough that only the two of them would hear his words. She looked into the face of the man she loved and knew fear as she had never known before. He would protect her with his life. And that was the one thing that she could never let him do.

Chapter Nine

It was over an hour later when the deputies left, armed with discs from Casey's computer and Detective Mackey's card.

They'd given him a pretty thorough quizzing on why he hadn't mentioned it last night but seemed to eventually accept that he'd been too tired and stressed out by the explosion to be entirely coherent.

Grant stood and pulled cereal and bowls from the cupboard and the carton of milk from the fridge. He was starving and Casey had to be too. She looked up at him with an ominously narrowed gaze.

"You mentioned yesterday that somebody had been in town asking about me but then you never explained. Care to give it a try now?"

Ouch! He handed her a bowl and spoon then returned to his own seat. "I meant to do that. Somehow it—just never came up."

"Uh-huh." She tapped her spoon on the table. "Anything else you want to get off your chest that 'never came up'?"

He shook his head. "Just that. I found out from the guys who fixed the power line."

He poured a bowl of cereal and handed her the box. She poured her own, added milk and handed that over to him. Their movements had the easy familiarity of an old married couple. Even though they were fighting, he automatically handed her the sugar bowl when he saw her start to reach toward it. When he knocked his coffee cup and slopped a bit on the table, she did the same with a napkin.

"So tell me what they said."

He swallowed a mouthful and shrugged. "Pretty much exactly that. A guy showed up in town Thursday night asking about his supposed sister and where she might be. The repair guy's relatives didn't know anything, told him to try asking at the gas station and that was about it."

"Hmmm." She eyed him suspiciously over the rim of her coffee mug then must have decided she believed him. She nodded. "So what should we do now?"

"Dishes. It's your turn."

She shot him a dirty look but he saw her upper lip quiver. He winked and the tension was broken as they both laughed.

"Okay, I'll make a deal with you." She dabbed a napkin at her eyes when they had both quit laughing. "I'll do the dishes while you take a closer look at the photos on my hard drive. Maybe your 'trained eye' can spot something I missed."

He wasn't about to admit he'd already looked. Especially not if it got him out of doing dishes. Besides, he hadn't spent a whole lot of time studying the photos. There was an outside possibility that he could still spot something new. They finished their breakfast, then he went to fetch Casey's laptop from the bedroom while she cleared the table and ran water in the sink.

"Do you still have the original photos somewhere?" Grant hollered from the couch where he sat with her laptop.

Casey dried her hands on the towel and hung it back on the wall over the kitchen sink. She headed to where Grant was sitting. "What are you looking for?"

He glanced up and casually brushed his hands over her hair as she joined him. It made her catch her breath—the sense of easy familiarity in the motion, as if they had been together for a long time. She watched as he became engrossed once more in the screen.

"I can tell that these photos have been cropped and zoomed in. But there is something here in this one, just at the edge of my vision. I can't put my finger on it but...there's something there. I'd like to see the originals if you still have them."

"I'm a photographer. Of course I still have them. Let me get my flash drive and I'll upload the originals for you." She reached into the computer bag at his feet and after searching for a few moments located the thumb-size drive that held her most recent digital photos. She sat back up and held out the drive to him but he just slid the computer into her lap and let her take over.

Within moments she had the photos uploaded and opened. Grant leaned in close to her and they both peered at the screen.

"Which one were you looking at?" Casey asked him as she put the photos on a slide show.

He watched the photos closely and suddenly tensed up beside her. "That's it." He tapped the screen and Casey hurriedly clicked on the photo to bring it up and enlarge it on the screen.

"Oh my God," she breathed as she finally noticed what held his attention. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Yep," Grant muttered as he focused intently on the picture. "That reflection right there in the glass on the window...that's your killer. Did you give the cop the originals? Or the ones you had on your computer?"

"The originals." Casey couldn't believe that she had missed this the first time around. Of course the woman sailing through the air had captured most of her attention. But still. She was a trained photographer. She knew that it was attention to the small details that made a picture. Now that Grant had brought it to her attention she couldn't believe she'd missed it. She not only had pictures of the crime scene. If she could blow up that one spot enough without distorting the image too badly, then she would have a face shot of the killer.

"No wonder whoever this is wants you out of the way. He must have seen the ones you gave to the detective." She could feel him watching everything she did as she struggled to bring the image into better focus without losing the clarity. When she was done it was all she could do to breathe.

"Is that who I think it is?" Grant whispered by her head and it sent chill bumps through her.

"Yes. That appears to be the deputy mayor of the city of Detroit helping the notorious madam to the sidewalk below." Casey glanced up at Grant. "I need to get a hold of Detective Mackey as soon as possible with this information. We've got him, Grant. You just solved the murder of the season."

"We did, Casey. We make a hell of a team." His words wound their way straight to her heart at the same time his arm wound around her waist. For the first time since this nightmare had begun Casey wasn't afraid.

* * * * *

He watched her as she made the calls, first to Mackey in Detroit, then to the local cops. He stored up every image, every gesture, so he'd be able to replay it all in his mind after she left him. He couldn't believe that after all the years he'd lived and all the things he'd seen he'd gone and fallen in love—totally head over heels, no holds barred, once in a lifetime in love—in just the space of a few days.

He knew he was anything but a prize. Regardless of what she said he knew his face was a mess and always would be. The leg would never be one hundred percent and somewhere down the road there would more than likely be more surgeries, more therapy, more bullshit. Same with the hands. He didn't have a job at the moment, let alone a career. What he did have was a load of guilt and a chip on his shoulder the size of Lake Superior. If you'd asked him a week ago he'd have told you that for all practical purposes, he'd died back in January. But now when he was with Casey that wasn't true anymore. When he held her in his arms he felt alive for the first time in months.

And someone was trying to kill her.

That was simply not acceptable. He'd lost one person he loved. He wasn't losing another. Period. No ifs, no ands, no buts. If anyone was going to die in this whole clusterfuck, it wasn't going to be Casey. First choice was no one. Second choice was the asshole trying to kill her. Third choice was Grant himself. Casey's death was not an option.

She finished one call and made a face before picking up the card left by the deputies and placing another. Grant wished he'd had a chance to meet Mackey, to decide for himself if the man was dirty or if he'd just passed the pictures up the food chain to someone else who was.

"The deputies have already sent the photographs to the state crime lab." Casey hung up the phone for the second time and plopped her chin down on her crossed arms

on the counter. "But they only had the cropped image, so we need to take them a copy of the original."

That seemed reasonable enough. He moved over behind her and began to rub her tense shoulders between his fingers. "We can pick up some more groceries while we're in town. Last time I was there I didn't know I was going to have company." More condoms were also on the shopping list. Wouldn't Molly and Fred at the store get a kick out of that? Maybe they could take the afternoon and drive to the next good-sized town.

"Mmmm." She let her face drop forward onto her arms and relaxed beneath his hands. "Since everybody knows I'm here now, we can get a tow truck up here for my car too."

"Yep." He knew it was a reasonable thing to do, even though part of him rebelled at the idea of her being able to leave at any time.

The way she leaned over the counter made her ass stick out and he couldn't resist rubbing against it.

She made a low humming sound deep in her throat and rubbed back against the hard-on that had become pretty much a permanent fixture whenever she was around. "I need to take a shower before we leave for town."

Hmm that sounded promising. He leaned farther over and tickled her ear with the tip of his tongue. "And..."

"And you do too." She tilted her head to the side to let him nibble on her neck. His hands went around her almost automatically. He didn't even have to think about sliding them up under her shirt to palm her breasts.

"So what do you propose we do about this need?"

"We could be ecologically correct and conserve water." Her tone was a low seductive purr that kindled fires in his blood.

"I suppose that would be the environmentally sensitive thing to do," he agreed. Her breasts swelled and peaked as he kneaded them through the cotton of her bra. The speed and intensity of her response still knocked him for a loop. He'd finally found a woman whose sexual hunger equaled his own. She continued to grind her ass against his groin. He groaned. "Keep that up and we won't make it to the bathroom."

Her breath was rapid and shallow. "Is that a problem? We haven't fucked in the kitchen yet either."

"Works for me." He let one hand slide down the smooth skin of her stomach to the fastening of her jeans. She stopped writhing against him for long enough to let him unbutton and unzip her then stilled his hand with one of her own.

"Back pocket," she whispered. "Condom."

Grant chuckled. "You too?" He'd instinctively stuffed one in his pocket this morning after the cops had left. Last night had been just a little too close for comfort. He tugged the one from Casey's pocket though. It was way more fun to fondle her ass than his own. Then he hooked his thumbs into her waistband and shoved her jeans and

panties down together. She kicked them aside and widened her stance, bracing her arms on the counter.

"I always wanted to be a Boy Scout." He hurried to get out of his own jeans. Her laugh was strained but genuine. It still amazed him that she could tease and joke even when so much intense shit was going down in her life. "They always got to do much cooler stuff than the girls did."

"Somehow I think you've made up for it as an adult." He ripped open the foil packet and suited up. "I doubt life with Casey Shields is ever dull."

"Not lately." She squirmed impatiently 'til he brought his hand around and found the wet heat between her legs. She was already dripping. He ran his fingers between her lips, coating them, then found the taut bud of her clit and rubbed it gently. "Oh yeah, Grant. Right there."

He positioned his cock with his other hand then canted his hips up to slide home, gloving himself in her snug pussy. For a moment he just held himself still. One hand still toyed with her clit while the other went around her waist to hold her close. He breathed in the fragrance of her skin and her hair. The spicy scent of her arousal filled his nostrils.

"I could spend the next fifty years making love to you and I'd still never be bored." Slowly pumping his hips, he began to move. Her inner muscles gripped him tightly while she lifted her ass to welcome him with every thrust.

"I wouldn't argue with that." She flattened her hands on the counter and whimpered when he speeded up his fingers on her clit. "No one has ever..." She broke off, panted, then continued. "Ever made me feel like you do."

He wanted to respond but his body had taken over. "Likewise," was the most he could manage as he gave in to the urge to fuck her harder. She was *his*, damn it, he thought as he pounded into her slick pussy. This wasn't the time for words. It was the time to demonstrate his primal claim to this woman, his mate. He nipped the tendon at the base of her throat and pressed down on her clit. She moaned and bucked against his hand and he could feel every muscle in her body go taut as she ascended the peak. Then with one more flick of his thumb and a sucking bite on her neck, she came, clamping down on his cock like a vise.

He buried his iron-hard shaft up deep in her cunt and let go. Pulse after pulse spiked through his system. He was momentarily blinded by the sheer intensity of the orgasm. All he could do was hold on to Casey for dear life until his senses quit reeling and he was sure his rubbery legs could hold him up again without support.

"You okay?" He wheezed out the words against her neck. His lips soothed the red mark he'd left on her tender skin.

"Fabulous," she murmured. Her head was pillowed on her arm on the countertop. Dark lashes lay against her pale cheek as if her eyelids were too heavy to lift. "But I suppose we have to move."

"Uh-huh." He didn't want to either. He toyed with her sweat-damp hair. "Shower, remember?"

"Yeah." She made a sound that was probably meant to be a chuckle. "Need it even more now."

"Mmm." With effort he straightened then helped her to do the same. "Much as I like you sweaty, we could both probably use some soap and water before going out in public."

"Yep." She picked up her jeans and handed him his. "And ecological concerns aside, we should probably clean up separately. If we get into the shower together, we may never make it to town today."

She was right. They held hands as they walked down the hall, then he stopped and nodded at the bathroom door. "Ladies first." The truth was he wanted to sit down for a few minutes to take the weight off his leg. Sex standing up might have been just a bit on the ambitious side. He grinned as he headed into the bedroom. It hurt now but he'd be damned if it hadn't been worth it.

Several hours later he wished he could say the same about the trip to town. Sure the state police now had the pictures and they'd loaded up on groceries and prophylactics, so technically they'd accomplished all their goals. But the deputies had been skeptical at best. Casey had been more or less ordered not to leave town until Detective Mackey arrived from Detroit to take control of the case. Since Grant still wasn't convinced the detective wasn't the one who'd blown up Casey's cabin, he was less than pleased. The cool, damp weather made his leg and shoulder and hands throb and the deputies had given him a raging headache. The visit to the Super Shopper had been the icing on the cake. Molly had bustled over to introduce herself to Casey, chatting her up like a long-lost friend. Casey had responded with an easy friendliness Grant assumed was natural when she wasn't encountering cops or a grumpy bear of a hermit. Soon the two women were comparing notes on Grant, much to his disgust.

"Thought you told Mike she was a blonde?" Fred leaned against the meat counter after he'd cut Grant some steaks. The women were still talking so the two men just stood there and watched.

"What? Who's Mike?" And what blonde? Grant turned away from Casey to raise an eyebrow at the older man. He hadn't bothered with the sunglasses today, was relieved when nobody he spoke to in town seemed to gag or run away at the sight of him.

"Moll's brother. Works for the power company. He said your girlfriend was a blonde."

Shit, he'd forgotten about that. Since anything he said was liable to make it all over town anyway, Grant decided to tell Fred an abbreviated version of the truth. "Casey witnessed a crime in Detroit. The cops are pretty sure the guy who was asking about her is involved with that."

"You mean out to get rid of the witness?" Fred might be a small-town grocer but he wasn't stupid. Grant appreciated that.

He shrugged. "Maybe. She came up here to hide out while the cops did their job but last night somebody blew up her grandparents' cabin. Doesn't sound like a friendly neighborhood chat to me."

Fred nodded, stroking his gray beard with one hand. "You two going to be all right out there?"

Grant gave another shrug. "As safe as she'd be anywhere else. Bodyguarding is what I did for Uncle Sam the last few years." He sure as hell hoped that was the truth. Part of Grant was very afraid that he wasn't up to the job. After all, he hadn't even been able to save his own brother.

"Figured it was something like that, Cap'n."

"Used to be Captain," he agreed. "Then it was Special Agent for a while—Secret Service. Now it's just Grant." It felt wrong to accept the respect he saw in the older man's expression. He wasn't anything special, not a hero or anything. Just a has-been soldier who'd finally found something, someone, worth living for.

Just then Molly and Casey finished their chat and Casey started pushing the cart toward the checkout with Molly alongside. There were no other customers in the store right now, so Fred followed Grant as well, a habit that had never really bothered Grant before.

But other times he hadn't had a beautiful woman with him. Or a jumbo-sized box of extra-large condoms in the cart. He caught Molly's snicker and knowing glance as she rang them up and reached for the next item. Grant felt his face warm in the first blush he could remember since high school. Casey just grinned wickedly and winked at the older woman. Then Grant saw the next item in Molly's hand and felt his face flame even more. *Make that two boxes.*

"I'll never be able to walk into that store again," he grumbled in his car on the way back to the cabin.

Casey's laugh was sweet and musical. "Poor baby. They like you, you know. Molly was singing your praises the whole time. They've figured out that *something* happened overseas and that you came up here to heal. Apparently the entire town is proud of the fact that you chose this area for your hermitage."

Now wasn't that just a thought to turn a man's stomach. He just grunted. "Molly's the postmistress. She sees my benefits checks."

Casey chuckled again. "Of course she does." Then she leaned her head back against her seat and hummed along to the music on the stereo. "I'm going to guess you never spent much time in small towns."

"None at all in the United States," he admitted. "Spent some time in a few in less familiar parts of the world."

"Well, small-town America is a world unto itself. You get used to it."

"You're from Detroit. How does that make you an expert on small towns?"

"I live in Detroit now. I grew up in a small town in Indiana." That's right, she'd mentioned that before. "My parents still live there. Where are yours?"

"Outside of Chicago. Illinois side, though. Nice, sane suburban neighborhood."

She turned her head and he could almost feel the warmth of her green gaze caressing his skin. "What about you? Before you came up here, where did you call home?"

He shrugged. "Wherever Uncle Sam sent me. I had an apartment in DC but I don't know that it was ever really home. Right now most of my stuff is in my parents' basement waiting for me to figure out what the hell I'm supposed to do with the rest of my life."

"Live it?" She kept her voice soft, nonjudgmental. "Somehow I doubt your brother would be happy to see you shutting yourself off like you have."

He turned up the radio and ignored her comment. Lee was still something he wasn't ready to talk about with Casey. The wounds were too raw.

The uncomfortable silence lasted until they'd pulled into the driveway. The tow truck wasn't far behind them, so he had another reprieve from a conversation that had gotten all too intense and all too personal. He helped carry the groceries inside, then he went back out to meet the tow truck driver around back while Casey put away the groceries. She'd objected to that too but he'd won the argument. Until they knew the threat to her was gone, she wasn't going to be standing around talking to strange men.

When her Jeep had been taken away he went back into the cabin to see what she was up to. The food had all been put away in the kitchen but Casey was nowhere to be seen.

He walked back into the hall, wondering why it sounded like she was talking to someone when he heard her soft voice murmuring in the bedroom. He opened the door to see her standing beside the bed, the drawer of the nightstand hanging open. The drawer held one of the boxes of condoms and he started to wonder where she'd put the other one when he realized what she held in her hands. She hadn't seen or heard him, she was so wrapped up in her own thoughts. She stared down at the dog tags, trailing the metal chain through her fingers and she was talking.

To Lee.

Grant's blood ran cold. He stood in the doorway, frozen in place and listened.

"What were you doing, Lee? Was it really you? How did you know I needed protection?" She paused between each of the questions.

"He's a great guy. You had that right. You could have mentioned that he was fucking gorgeous but I don't suppose you think—thought—about him that way."

Still not looking up at Grant, she sank to the bed, still talking to the scraps of metal in her hand. She gave a ragged laugh and he thought he heard tears in her voice.

"I've fallen in love with him, you know. Well, you probably do. I have no idea how this ghost business works. You were real enough to change a flat tire and then after the

crash, you were just gone. And he doesn't believe you were ever there. I don't know if we can get past that."

She made a little sniffling noise that made something hurt deep in Grant's chest. A single tear rolled unheeded down her silky cheek. He wanted to go to her, to take her in his arms but he had no idea what to say.

"If you can think of any way to help here, Lee, I'd sure appreciate it. Your brother is a wonderful man and he deserves so much more than to be caught up in my mess but I don't know what to do about it. I've never been so scared in my life. But I'm more afraid of losing him than I am of getting killed. Isn't that a strange turn of events? Keep watching over him, Lee. And if you can nudge him back into the world of the living, I'd sure appreciate it. Whatever happened over there, I know it can't have been his fault. And I know you love him too."

"Missile fire into the camp." The words were out of his mouth before he even knew he'd said them.

"Grant!" Casey dropped the dog tags to the floor and her eyes flew up to meet his as he crossed the room in two long strides. He dropped to his knees beside the bed and took both of her smooth, perfect hands into his big scarred-up paws.

"I was on bodyguard duty for a senatorial 'fact-finding' mission." Ha! It had been all about image and the appearance of "supporting the troops". The damned politicians hadn't given a rip about facts. Just about being seen on camera hanging out with the desert sand at their back and a bunch of smiling kids in fatigues waving hi to Mom on the television.

He stared down at their clasped hands, afraid to look up and see pity in Casey's beautiful eyes. "I finagled it so they made a stop at Lee's camp. I figured it would be nice to shoot the breeze with my kid brother for a few hours while the bigwigs did their thing. I left my senator with a couple of the others and took the evening off to hang with Lee and some of his buddies at the officers club. Club—ha—it was a tent. While we were in there, the missile fire hit. They say Lee was killed instantly. I tried to get to him but then another round must have hit the tent and I don't remember anything else until I woke up in the hospital."

It was more than he'd said—had been able to say—to anyone at one time. Even the shrink or his parents.

She brought their joined hands up to her lips and kissed them. "That's how you hurt your hands, wasn't it? Trying to get to Lee?"

He nodded, still staring down at her knees.

"It's not your fault, Grant."

He shrugged. "He only enlisted because he wanted to be like me. His fucking big brother. He wanted to be an architect, damn it. But no, he had to go join the fucking Marines, just to try to live up to some damn-fool notion of making me proud of him."

"That still doesn't make it your fault. He was a grown-up, probably as old as you were when you made the same decision."

True. But it didn't matter. Grant just shrugged.

"Let me ask you something." Casey took his face in her hands and lifted it up so she could see him. He tried not to meet her gaze but she stared him down. A tear leaked down his own cheek when he saw the utter love and trust in her expression. No revulsion, no scorn and thank God, no pity. Just caring reproof. "If the tables were turned—if you were the ghost and Lee had survived—would you want him to wear a hair shirt for the rest of his life? Would you want him to spend the next sixty or seventy years punishing himself for not dying with you?"

"No, of course not!"

"Then what gives you the right to think he'd want that from you?"

"What?" Now she'd lost him.

"By choosing to retreat from life instead of living it, you're not honoring your brother. Whether you believe I saw him, talked to him or not, you know I'm right. Lee loved you. He'd want you to be happy."

It was all more than Grant's brain—or heart—could handle. He stood, wiping his face with the back of his hand.

"You have no idea what you're talking about." He flinched at the harshness in his own tone. He had to get out of here, away from Casey's warped logic and farfetched assertions. They made him want and hope too much and those feelings could only add to his heartache. "I'm going for a walk. Lock the door behind me and don't leave the cabin." She'd be safe here and he'd have time to pull his battered emotions back together. He grabbed his coat as he all but flew from the bedroom and out the front door into the woods.

Chapter Ten

Casey stared at the bedroom door, listening as Grant slammed out of the cabin in his rush to get away from her. She wanted to run after him, to make him understand the truth of what she was trying to tell him. The young man she had met on the road, the one she truly believed was Lee, had been full of life. Casey couldn't stop the snort of macabre laughter at the thought of a dead man being full of life. But the Lee she had met had been just that way. And she knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that he would want more for his brother than this lonely isolation and self-inflicted penance for something that was no fault of his own. She wanted to run to him, to hold him, to love him. But it was the last one that kept her where she was, waiting in the cabin. It was that love that held her in place, respecting his need for privacy.

Casey walked to the window and glanced out at the winter sky and the woods white with winter snow. It was beautiful. There was something about the lack of footprints marring the simplicity of the earth that called to the photographer in her. She didn't need to take pictures but it would give her something to do, something to focus on while Grant was still away. She could lose herself in her work and maybe for a brief moment stop wondering when—or whether—he was coming back. Her head told her that he would return soon due to the cold but her heart was still fragile and fear refused to release its hold.

She donned her coat and gloves and grabbed up her 35 mm camera, stepping through the door into the crisp cool air before she could talk herself out of it. She had always disregarded what she was told, preferring to forge ahead on her own. She loved Grant but he had been the one to leave. She needed to clear her mind as well and the best way to do that was by focusing on something else for a while.

Slowly she trudged through the snow, snapping pictures as she went. Briefly she glanced up and snapped a few of the branches draped in their robes of white and caught her breath. There above her was a snowy owl, which was a rarity in Michigan. They only ventured this far south when their Arctic habitat was too cold for the rodents that were their food. The last time she had seen one she had been a young girl in these woods with her grandfather. When the owl stretched its wings and flew farther into the woods it was natural for Casey to raise her camera and follow. So lost in the moment was she that she never heard the footsteps behind her. There was no time to run, no time to panic, no time to scream for help. One moment she was alone with the snowy owl. The next she was pulled roughly against a body and inhaling the sickeningly sweet scent of chloroform. She felt her lungs fill and her muscles relax. The last coherent thought she had was to pray that Grant was okay.

Detective Rick Mackey hung his cell phone up again. There was still no answer on Casey Shields' cell phone. He hoped she was okay and still with the former Secret Service agent whom she'd told him about earlier. He had been blown away when he had seen the copy of the picture. The crime lab had enhanced it even further and now they had a clear picture of Robert Davis, deputy mayor of the city of Detroit, smiling as the woman many men in Detroit had known intimately sailed through the window in front of him. Because of the angle of the photo the eye was pulled immediately to the victim and away from what lay right at the edge of the photo, a reflection of a man watching as the victim fell.

Mack shook his head in disbelief. Now he understood why the mayor's office had taken such a personal interest in this case, why Robbie Davis had pushed to have it closed so quickly. The upstanding citizen, devoted husband and father had been secretly indulging in a torrid affair with a woman known to have a revolving door to her bedchamber. And now with Ms. Shields' pictures it was apparent that his own political dreams and ambitions would never see fruition. No, Robbie Davis had just become Detroit's most wanted man. And had conveniently disappeared.

Mack picked up his phone and dialed again. He was still over an hour away from where Ms. Shields had said she was staying in a cabin. Hopefully she was still there, safe and sound and enjoying the day. But that sick churning in his stomach made him think she was in a lot of danger.

Robbie lifted her carefully into his arms and carried her back toward the cabin. He should have just enough time to carry out his plans before the boyfriend came back. And if he came back too soon then Robbie would just kill him as well. One more death wouldn't kill him. His snorted a laugh at that.

Everything was finally falling into place for him. He had been waiting in the woods, staring at the cabin the little troublemaker was staying in with her boyfriend. He had been trying to think of a way to get her on her own so that he could get rid of her once and for all. Then fate had given him exactly what he asked for.

As he had discarded one idea after another the front door of the cabin had opened and the man had slammed out and walked away into the woods. He hadn't looked happy and Robbie smiled with glee as he realized that now was the perfect time to get the woman and the evidence. He was ready to make his move toward the cabin when the door had opened again and she had stepped out with that damn camera. How he longed to smash it into a thousand pieces. He'd caught his breath when she began heading right toward where he was hiding, absorbed in the pictures she was snapping.

Now he had her and if he played his cards right he could be done with her and the photos she still had before the boyfriend cooled down and headed back. All he had to do was tie her up before he woke her up and search the cabin for anything of hers that she had brought with her. Then it would be an easy matter to set off another explosion and this time ensure that the bitch died.

Robbie tossed her up over his shoulder, grunting at her boneless weight as he turned the knob and re-entered the cabin she had so recently exited. He locked the door behind him, not wanting any surprises while he did what had to be done. He tossed her on the couch and flipped her over, tugging the cords out of his inside coat pocket. He had come prepared to take care of her and that was just what he intended to do. He pulled her arms up behind her back and tied them tightly with the cord. He hoped it cut the circulation off and hurt like hell when she came to. She deserved it for all the hell she had put him through. Next he pulled her ankles together and tied them just as securely before using a third cord to connect her wrists to her ankles, ensuring that she could not move at all unless he wanted her to.

Finally satisfied that she would stay put, he began systematically searching the rooms for all of her things. He was quick but thorough as he had no idea how much time he had before the other man would return. Lovers' quarrels were so unpredictable. He hoped that it had been a good enough argument to keep him away for at least an hour or more. But with the weather he couldn't be sure. The man had walked and not taken his vehicle. Of course that might come in handy if Robbie needed it.

He had gathered quite a pile of things in the living room. He had her laptop and all the paraphernalia that she had with it as well as a digital camera and a duffel bag. Her purse was emptied out on the coffee table. He booted up the computer and searched for the pictures. They were right there and the bitch had enlarged the one that showed his reflection and saved it. He'd have to take the computer with him so that he could search it and make sure that she hadn't sent it to anyone. He didn't believe that she would have been able to out here but she might have gone into town and tried.

Robbie opened his coat and took the .38 out. Now came the fun part. Making the bitch tell him everything that he needed to know...by any means necessary.

Casey's face felt like it was on fire and her cheek was sure to be bruised. She had no idea how long the deputy mayor had been slapping her but her face assured her it had been a minute or more. She couldn't stop the groan as he hit her again. She felt her lip split where it was mashed against her teeth and she jerked her head to the side. That was definitely not a good idea as nausea rolled through her belly. She lowered her head, breathing deeply as she fought against the need to heave up the contents of her stomach.

Casey cried out as Robbie Davis grasped her by the hair and jerked her head up, forcing his face into hers. Her shoulders were screaming and her knees ached from the way he had her hands and feet bound. How long had she been out? Where was Grant? Had Davis gotten him too or was there still a chance that he might come back and find her? She prayed that he would until she noticed the gun that was wavering in the hand not clenched in her hair. Then she prayed just as fervently that Grant would stay away, stay safe.

"You finally awake, you little bitch?" The words were spat in her face and his fingers managed to tighten even further in her hair. "Who have you sent the pictures to? Where else do you have them tucked away?"

Casey scrambled to engage her brain, trying to push the pain away so that she could think of what to tell him. He couldn't possibly know that she had already spoken to Detective Mackey. Not unless the detective was involved as well and her gut kept telling her that she could trust him. Her eyes watered as he tugged her hair again, sending prickles of white hot pain through her scalp.

"Answer me, bitch!"

"They're on my laptop and the flash drive in the computer." She hoped that he would believe her but she couldn't be sure. His eyes glinted with a desperation that made her uneasy and the gun he kept waving in her face only made it worse. She prayed that he wouldn't shoot her. She prayed even harder that somehow she would survive. She had only just found Grant. She didn't want to die before they got a chance to see if maybe they could find a happily ever after.

"Did you send them to anyone else? Is Mack the only one you gave them to?"

Casey was blank for a moment until it dawned on her that Mack was what the guys at the station had called Detective Mackey. Surely it didn't mean anything that he was referring to him that way as well. *Please God, don't let the detective be involved in all of this as well.*

"I only gave him the one set of photos at the station. I swear to you." She cried out as he jerked her head higher and pressed the nozzle of the gun against her chin.

"The one set huh?" His laughter filled the room as he caressed her jaw with the gun. "The set that conveniently disappeared from the evidence room. The one that I took great pleasure in getting rid of. It's amazing the places you can go when you know the right people, people who will turn their heads for the promise of a favor down the road."

So he didn't know that she had given Detective Mackey a disc as well. Mackey must have had his own suspicions and kept that one as backup. At least she prayed that was what he had done. She was jerked rudely from her thoughts when Davis stood and pulled her by the hair until she fell onto the floor. Without the use of her arms or legs to brace herself, she landed hard, her chest, hips and chin taking the brunt of the fall. The pain that shot through her shoulders on impact was excruciating and it was all she could do not to throw up.

"So how do you want to die? Maybe a gunshot to the head." He caressed her face and neck with the gun, his grin just a little too crazy for her taste. "Maybe I should set another explosion, only this time making sure that you're where you're supposed to be. Maybe I should just drag you out somewhere and let you die slowly from exposure to the cold. Maybe a nice bear or something would come along and eat at you while you were still alive." Something was wrong with that plan but Casey couldn't quite put her

finger on it. His laughter sounded again and Casey shuddered with the fear coursing through her body.

He stood and used his foot to push her face up to him. "So what's it going to be, bitch? How would you like to die?"

Casey did the only thing that she could do. She opened her mouth and threw up all over his shoes.

* * * * *

It was a cramp in his leg that finally broke Grant out of the near trance he'd fallen into since leaving the cabin. He stopped to rub the spasming muscle and realized he'd gone a lot farther than he'd intended. The angle of the sun told him it was late afternoon. He'd only planned to go far enough into the woods to think. Not far enough that he couldn't keep an eye on the place – and on Casey.

He eased himself down to rest on a fallen tree. He was probably about a quarter mile from the cabin as the crow flew, a little more on the winding forest trails. As soon as the cramp passed, he'd head back. He still hadn't come to grips with his roiling emotions but the first rush of panic and fury had passed. He didn't even know what he'd been so furious about. She hadn't spoken a word that wasn't true, unless it was the part about seeing Lee's ghost. And most of him had decided to believe her about that as well. The simple truth was he couldn't bear to think she was lying. She'd also been dead-on in her descriptions and her assessment of Lee's personality. The kid *would* be pissed at Grant for turning hermit. Just like Grant would have been if the tables had been turned.

So what was he supposed to do about Casey? Besides protect her, of course. He wanted her, that was for sure. Hell, wanted wasn't the right word. There was no point in lying to himself anymore. He loved her. And she'd said she was in love with him. So why wasn't it that easy?

He had nothing to offer her. He snorted, the sound as loud as a shot in the silent forest. That little detail sure didn't seem to bother her a bit. She should have been running away from him as fast as her feet could carry her. Instead, she kept poking at him, gently trying to push him out of his self-imposed isolation and back into real life. Why the hell wasn't she running from him as fast as her feet could carry her?

Okay, so the guy trying to kill her might have a little to do with that. But Grant was starting to believe, to really hope, that that wasn't the only reason she'd stayed.

He did a few gentle stretches, trying to make sure the leg was up to the hike back. Maybe tonight he'd call his friend Jake and get some more details about that job he'd offered. A photographer could live in Chicago as well as Detroit, couldn't she? All Grant could do was ask. Maybe even buy her a ring, if she'd let him.

He stood and tested the leg. Thankfully, it held his weight. He took two steps forward, then almost toppled back over when he saw the shape that materialized in front of him on the trail.

"You have to go back. Right now."

Grant hauled in a breath. He tried to speak but no sound emerged from his lips.

"You need to hurry. He has Casey. And a gun."

"L-L-Lee?" The figure on the trail still wore the dress blue uniform they'd buried him in. But his face was smooth and unmarked by shrapnel or flames. Waves of shock, disbelief and hope skittered along Grant's spine.

"It's me. But you knew I was around. Deep inside, you knew that Casey was telling the truth." Lee's vivid blue eyes were full of love and concern but mostly impatience, his body quivered with urgency. "There's no time to talk now. Casey is in grave danger."

That trumped all the questions that were practically bursting like fireworks inside Grant's brain. Even as his mind reeled, his body was moving. He set off down the trail at a run. Adrenaline muted any pain he might have been feeling in his leg. He couldn't help Lee anymore but maybe, please God, he could save Casey.

Grant turned his head as he hurried toward the cabin, glad to see Lee keeping pace alongside him. He tried not to notice the fact that his brother's footsteps didn't make a sound or leave a mark on the frost-covered trail. "You brought her to me." It wasn't really a question but he looked to Lee for confirmation anyway.

"I knew the minute she stopped on the road that she was the one. She was perfect. Strong, smart and kind, not to mention gorgeous. And she needed you almost as much as you needed her." Unlike Grant, Lee wasn't breathing heavily. Well, Grant supposed, Lee probably wasn't breathing at all. Grant's lungs were working hard, his heart pounding in his chest.

"What's the situation at the cabin?" Sure, Grant had a million questions about ghosts and life after death but those could wait. He hoped he'd have time to talk to Lee later but right now they had a killer to stop.

"He's keeping her alive until he can get the pictures but he's hurting her, trying to make her talk."

Fury cast a red haze over Grant's vision, tinting the landscape that blurred before him. He added speed. "Position?"

"Living room." Lee gave him a precise accounting of the setup. Grant began making plans in the back of his brain. Why the hell had he left his Glock in the bedroom? A lot of good that was going to do him now.

"She just threw up on his shoes." Amusement tinged the worry in Lee's tone. "She aimed."

"That's my girl." They crested the last hill, looked down at the cabin.

"The cops are coming too but I don't think they'll be here in time."

Grant had no idea how Lee was getting this information but he was sure glad to have it. Fear coiled in the pit of his stomach like a giant cobra poised to strike. "That could be good. If they came in sirens blaring, he'd be liable to panic and shoot."

"The latch on the back bedroom window," Lee whispered as they skulked down the hillside to the rear of the cabin. Grant moved more slowly now to avoid detection. Lee didn't make any noise as he moved anyway.

"It never locked." Grant had forgotten about the times he'd used that broken latch to sneak out and go swimming at night, or meet up with friends for a couple of illicit beers. Apparently Lee had discovered it too.

"And Granddad never fixed it," Lee added. And then his image faded away, leaving Grant alone to sneak into the building.

It was a lot harder now than it had been the last time he'd done this, almost twenty years ago. For one thing it was winter and the aluminum stripping around the window was cold and slick. Grant's messed-up hands didn't help the process but he finally managed to get the window open without making too much noise.

Crawling in was another challenge. He was a good bit bigger than he'd been at seventeen, even without his bulky coat, which he left lying on the ground along with his boots. He finally wriggled in over the sill on his belly, landing in sort of a push-up position with his hands on the floor. He lowered his feet and then closed the window behind him before pulling off his damp sweat socks. Wouldn't do to slip on the varnished hardwood floor during his rescue attempt.

He cracked open the bedroom door and was relieved to find the hallway clear. Then he darted across the corridor in a crouch, ducked into the master bedroom and retrieved his hand gun. Now he felt a lot less like he was going into a fight naked. He crept back into the hallway and flattened his back against the wall, blending into the shadows as he inched toward the main room.

He could hear their voices now and he had to fight his own wave of nausea. The man was screaming at Casey about the mess on his shoes. There was a sickening thud that sounded a lot like a booted foot impacting flesh and Grant heard Casey groan.

Davis was so focused on Casey that he didn't see Grant standing in the hall. He drew back a booted foot for another kick but stopped mid-motion as the front door flew open.

While Davis spun to face Lee at the door, Grant clicked the safety back into place on his weapon and made his move. He crossed the room at a run and bounded up over the back of the couch for a flying tackle. Davis fired several rounds, all of which seemed to go right through Lee's semi-transparent form. He never even saw Grant coming. The politician went down hard under Grant's heavier weight and his small automatic pistol sailed from his hand, spinning and eventually sliding under the dining table.

Davis may have been down but he wasn't about to give up without a fight. The eyes that glared up at Grant were full of hate and fury magnified to the point of madness. Grant had seen that look before and it never boded well. This was a man who felt he had nothing left to lose. Instinctively Grant ducked a blow then tried to bring his weapon up into position. He didn't want to kill the man. He was so tired of death. But if that's what it took to keep Casey safe, he'd pull the trigger in a heartbeat.

Casey's ribs were screaming. Her entire body was one giant ache but there was no time to dwell on it. Nothing felt broken and she had plenty of experience with what that felt like. Grant was rolling on the floor fighting with Davis, trying desperately to get the upper hand. But the deputy mayor had the adrenaline of fear on his side and was hard to contain. Casey looked around, frantically searching for the gun that Davis had threatened her with. She noticed it under the end table on the other side of the room.

Slowly she began wiggling around the two thrashing figures and to the gun. She had to get there, had to do what must be done in order to protect Grant. If anything happened to him it would be her fault. If not for her, he would still be up here hiding from the world, perfectly safe. But she was just greedy enough to be happy that she had met him, that Lee had placed them together. If not then she would have missed out on the greatest love of her life. And she did love him, more now than she would have ever thought possible.

She was almost to where she needed to be when she heard the sharp retort of gunfire. Casey spun around to glance at the two men. Both lay motionless on the floor, Grant on the bottom of the heap. Casey screamed and, finally managing to get her knees underneath her, crawled frantically to where they lay.

"Grant! Grant! Talk to me. Please God don't let him die." She begged and pleaded as she pushed at the dead weight of Davis with her head and shoulders, struggling to get to the man she loved.

His chest was covered in blood, so much blood. She didn't know where it was coming from but she was determined to find the wound and do everything in her power to staunch it before he bled out.

"It's not mine," Grant murmured and Casey gave a cry of relief when she felt him move slowly beneath her.

"Grant? Grant, are you all right?"

"A little winded," he grunted out as he struggled to sit up. "Son of a bitch fights dirty." He looked down at the blood covering him and cursed again. "Bleeds like a stuck pig too."

Casey ran her eyes over his torso, searching fervently for any injuries that he might have. "Are you hurt, Grant? Is any of it yours?"

"No, honey. Physically I think that I'm all right though my leg is hurting like a bitch." He reached down beside him and picked up a gun that she remembered seeing in the bedroom. "I shot him."

Casey launched herself into his arms and shuddered. "I thought you were hurt. I thought that he had killed you."

His arms tightened around her and his words whispered outside her ear. "I died a thousand times when I thought that I might not get here in time. Nothing would have mattered if you weren't okay." His hands were gentle as he went over her body, taking special note of her ribs and chest. It took a few minutes but he managed to release the

ords on her wrists. "Are you okay, Casey? Did he hurt you seriously? Anything broken?"

Casey groaned as she moved her hands around and her shoulders screamed with pain. Grant reached up and gently massaged around her shoulder blades. "No. I'm pretty sure that nothing is broken. Just some bruises and aches." She leaned back and kissed him soundly on the lips, using her mouth and tongue to express what she couldn't find the words to say.

"I guess I didn't need to break quite so many speed laws getting up here." Mackey's voice interrupted their kiss from the doorway. "Is he dead?"

Grant eased Casey away from him and leaned over to check Davis. "Yeah." He handed his weapon butt-first to the familiar deputy who was the second person to come in the door. "His is over there under the table."

"Detective Mackey." Casey pushed her hair out of her face, feeling streaks of Davis' blood cling to her skin. *Yuck!* "You did get up here fast."

Mackey told them that he and the other cops had seen most of the fight through the open front door as he'd run up the steps. Casey knew Grant was in no danger of being charged with anything. Still, papers had to be filed and procedures had to be followed. Casey knew they were in for a long night. Grant's sad, tired smile told her he knew it too.

Paramedics were called and statements were taken. Davis was officially pronounced dead and removed from the cabin—not nearly soon enough, in Casey's opinion. Casey and Grant both refused transportation for x-rays but they were glad to be allowed to shower and change before the whole shebang moved downtown to the sheriff's department. Along with Mackey and the deputies, a couple of state troopers had shown up to complete the party. Sometime about eight, somebody sent for pizza.

Casey was worried about Grant. She knew he hated hospitals and she trusted his judgment enough to believe that nothing was broken but she wished he'd been checked out all the same. Based on the concerned looks he kept shooting her, he felt the same way. Her ribs ached like crazy but she'd recover. Thanks to Grant.

She reached beneath the table and laid her hand over his on his thigh. His fingers twined around hers and he smiled, making Casey feel about ten feet tall. When they finally finished wading through the red tape, she snuggled close to him in the front seat of his SUV on the way to the nearest motel. The cabin was still officially a crime scene and neither one of them wanted to spend the night there until the blood was cleaned up anyway.

* * * * *

"So where will you go from here?" Casey asked as they unpacked the few items they'd grabbed when they left the cabin. Toothbrushes and clean underwear—and condoms. Grant raised one eyebrow. Casey had apparently thrown in a whole box while Grant wasn't looking. "You can't be planning to stay in the cabin forever."

He heard the unspoken question in her tone. The danger was past and so was their original reason for being together. Now was the time to lay all their cards on the table.

"I'm thinking Chicago," he told her. He popped the lid on a bottle of ibuprofen and shook two into his hand. Tonight he figured he could make an exception to his one-per-day policy. He ran two glasses of water from the bathroom sink, then came out to hand one to Casey, along with the bottle of pain tablets. "My friend Jake owns a company there. He's been after me to come work for him, designing corporate security systems."

He watched her face carefully as she took the bottle, shook out a couple of the tablets and swallowed them with a drink of the water. She set the glass and bottle on the dresser and raised her eyes to his, not saying a word.

"Of course I could probably find something in Detroit," he added. "If I needed to."

She nodded slowly. "Chicago's nice. Closer to my parents than Detroit. And a freelance photographer can live anywhere."

A tiny seed of hope started to take root in Grant's heart. A heart which seemed to have just started beating again today. "I almost lost you today." He heard the gravel in his own voice, had to blink back some moisture in his eyes. He strode across the room to sit on the bed, then took her hand and drew her down beside him. "Not an experience I want to repeat. It really woke me up, Casey, made me think about what I want out of the rest of my life."

Casey shuddered. She knew exactly what he meant. The sound of that gunshot, the fear for Grant's life, would be with her until the day she died. "I'm so glad that you got there when you did. I was so afraid that he would kill me and I would never get the chance to see you again, to tell you how I feel about you."

He started to say something but she pressed her palm against his lips, silencing him so that she could say the words she needed to. "I love you, Grant. I don't know when it happened but it did. I would have died myself if you had been injured because of me. I know you came up here to be alone and I know that you think that I'm after something with the things that I told you but I swear to you that I really did see Lee on the road that morning and..."

"I bwatha tu," he tried to say around her hand.

"What?" Casey asked and moaned when Grant kissed her palm before moving her hand from his lips.

"I said that I believe you. That's how I found you in time. That's how I knew that you needed me."

"Then you've seen him too?" She was sure her caution showed in her expression and sounded in her voice though it was more fear than anything else. She didn't want to make him angry with her right now.

"Didn't you see him crash the door in just before I launched myself at Davis?"

Casey worried for just a brief moment that he might be testing her but there was wonder and sincerity in his eyes. "Yes, I did see Lee. You saw him too?"

"Yes, I did. Scared me to death when he just appeared before me in the woods but his words that you were in danger were even scarier. I had to get to you. I had to do everything in my power to protect you." He cradled her head in his palms and leaned forward to place a gentle kiss on her lips. "I love you, Casey. You are what I have spent my entire life looking for, someone to love and protect and grow old with. You're more than I ever thought that I deserved. But I'll be damned if I can let you walk away from me."

"What are you saying, Grant?" She knew that her heart was in her eyes but she didn't care, couldn't care as she held her breath, waiting for what she prayed was coming next.

"Casey Shields, will you marry me? We can live in Detroit or Chicago, or anywhere you want. I won't always be easy to get along with. I'm a prickly bastard and demanding as well. I won't always say the right words or do the right things but I swear I'll always love you."

"Oh Grant. That is all I could ever ask for. I love you so much."

"So does that mean the answer is yes?"

She almost laughed at the look on his face. After all they had been through how could he even fear that she might not want forever with him? She kissed him again, infusing it with all the love and hope and security that she could. "That means yes. Lee may have been the Marine but you are the one good man whom I have spent my whole life searching for."

* * * * *

The dream came that night, for the first time since he'd met Casey.

He was there again, in that crowded tent in the middle of the desert. Lee was laughing and joking the way he always was, at the beginning. But then it changed. Everything went silent and all the laughing young soldiers froze in place like someone had paused a DVD. Except for Lee. Lee turned to Grant and smiled. The tent, the sand and the rest of the crowd faded away.

"I'm glad." His bright blue eyes were crinkled and his grin stretched from ear to ear. "Casey is exactly what you needed. Congratulations on the wedding."

"Thank you," Grant had trouble getting the words out around the lump in his throat. "For finding her, for helping me rescue her. For everything. And Lee... I'm sorry. So sorry..."

Lee shook his head. "Don't be. It's not so bad here. Just live for both of us, okay?"

Grant nodded. "I'm not going to see you again, am I?"

Lee shook his head again. "No. My business here is finished." Lee reached out a hand and touched Grant's cheek. "Take good care of each other, okay?"

"Promise." Grant snapped his brother a salute, not caring now that a tear rolled down his cheek. "Goodbye, tadpole."

Lee returned the salute. "Goodbye."

* * * * *

Opening his eyes in the dark motel room, Grant wiped his eyes and tightened his grip on Casey. She stirred in his arms.

"Grant? You okay?"

"Everything's fine," he assured her. "It was just a dream."

"Okay. As long as this is real." She moved against him, her lips soft and warm on his. Her hand snaked down to find his cock, already hardening in response to her nearness.

"Oh that's real, all right." He chuckled then took control of their play, claiming her mouth with his. His hand reached down to find her already wet and ready for him.

He broke away for a second to grab protection, then rolled her to her back and slid home as their tongues dueled furiously. He stroked deep inside her then pulled his mouth away from hers for a moment to whisper her name.

"I love you, Casey. With all my heart."

Her arms wrapped around him, sheltering him. Her heels dug into his calves. "I love you, Grant. My one good man."

About the Authors

Cindy Spencer Pape has been, among other things, a banker, a teacher, and an elected politician, though she swears she got better. Her degrees are in zoology, and she currently works in environmental education, when she can fit it in around writing. She lives in southern Michigan with her husband, two teenage sons, a dog, a lizard, and various other small creatures, all of which are easier to clean up after than the three male humans.

Lacey Thorn spends her days in small-town Indiana, the proud mother of three. When she is not busy with one of them she can be found typing away on her computer keyboard or burying her nose in a good book. Like every woman, she knows just how chaotic life can be and how appealing that great escape can look. So toss aside the stress and tension of the never ending “to do” list. For now sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride with Lacey as she helps you to unlace and unleash the woman inside.

Cindy and Lacey welcome comments from readers. You can find their websites and email addresses on their author bio pages at www.ellorascave.com.

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Between a Rock and a Hard-On

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