



In Her Defense

Book Two of the Heart of Justice series

Denise A Agnew

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This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Dedication

To my husband, Terry. Forever and always my number one hero.
To Lena Robinson for her encouragement, support, and excellent critique skills.

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Chapter One

Celeste Rice knew whatever happened tonight would change her life...for better or worse. She wouldn't know *which* until she spoke to Deputy Mick MacGilvary.

Warm and unusually humid, the Colorado night pulsed with exhilaration as Celeste and hundreds of other spectators watched and cheered the martial arts opponents battling on the mat. She'd come to this charity event to help the El Torro Sheriff's Department raise funds for a local community center, but as soon as she saw Mick, she forgot everything but how he'd always made her feel.

Hot. Bothered. Ready to do something nasty and illegal.

She worried the hem of her teal camisole blouse. Her nipples beaded tightly against the fabric. She squirmed, her new low-rise denim shorts feeling too tight against the sensitized tissues between her legs.

Sitting in the gym's bleachers, watching Mick perform, she experienced undeniable, jaw-dropping, full-throttle lust. She couldn't squelch her reaction to the magnificent primal male display.

She recognized Mick's opponent as his brother, Trey. Trey had a lean, corded strength not unlike Mick's, but Celeste's eyes were drawn to how Mick's physique flexed, his body a weapon as he jumped high into a kick. Trey dodged, then went on the offensive, attacking with force. Mick blocked the blow, his face filled with ruthless determination.

As applause rose, she joined with others in showing her appreciation. Soon Mick and Trey changed to another form of martial arts. Keysi, the announcer called it, and the sheer brutality and harsh determination showed in both Mick and Trey's faces. Her focus stayed on Mick as he performed each move.

From her position at the bottom of the bleachers, she heard their harsh breathing, the slap of bare feet on the mat, grunts of exertion. As Mick feinted to the right, his muscles rippled. Caught up in the excitement, she leaned forward until her elbows rested on her knees. She could almost feel the energy, their breathing coming hard, hearts pumping strongly, sweat beading.

Quick and graceful, Mick's moves showed a raw masculine power she felt down to her bones and through every fiber.

His black hair, cut short, curled the slightest bit with moisture. His expression was hardened with purpose. As his navy blue t-shirt strained over his wide shoulders, broad chest, and strong arms, her mouth dried up and her throat constricted. Blue shorts allowed a full view of tan, sturdy leg muscles that surged and bunched. Even from a distance, he was one of the most compelling men she'd ever seen. *God he's fantastic.*

Yet ten years ago, she'd turned down a chance to discover ecstasy in his arms.

Now she craved him with no-holds-barred desire. She hadn't understood how much she wanted him until she saw him tonight. Now she hoped to rectify her past mistake.

She pulled air into her lungs on a slow inhalation. He was dangerous and she'd always known it. The idea should repulse her. After all, violence had taken away everything she loved. Not that she believed Mick would ever hurt her, but his job was hazardous. Frightening.

She glanced around at the other women watching Mick and Trey. Were some of them wives and sweethearts of the cops participating in this exhibition? How did they do it? How did they accept the danger these men lived with every day?

Even as she wondered how these women coped with the possibility of violence tearing apart their lives, she couldn't deny the appeal of these oh-so-physical men. They were strong, protective, powerful. Energy seemed to pulse around them, drawing her attention to their potency.

Once again, her gaze swung back to Mick. If she could have sex with him once, maybe it would vaccinate her against any deeper feelings, from thinking she'd thrown away a chance at true happiness.

Just once I'd like toe-curling, bone-melting sex.

She could search for raw sex with another man, but her obsession with Mick wouldn't retreat. She'd tried to beat it into submission more than once, and failed.

I'll flush him out of my system once and for all.

Even as she sat among hundreds of people with the lights blazing, sounds of the fight echoing in the huge room, she couldn't deny her arousal. She knew if Mick touched her intimately he'd find her swollen and hot with need. She licked her lips. *Oh, God. Yes.* Just the thought of such an intimate touch made her close her eyes and visualize. His fingers would slide with a tender touch, taunting her as he stroked ultra-sensitive surfaces and listened to her moan. She'd imagined, night after night, how a heart-stirring intimacy with him would feel. She wanted to be close to him again, to understand his thoughts, his feelings—

No. Intimacy had nothing to do with this. She needed to discover the sexuality she'd denied for so long. She needed to get over the frigidity that threatened every relationship she'd attempted with a man. She trusted Mick to help her find that sexuality and bring it into the light. She knew he would make the experience one for a lifetime.

She heard one of the men groan with effort, and her eyes flew open. With another lightning maneuver, Mick avoided one of Trey's strikes.

Trey backed off the fight. "Uncle."

Mick and Trey patted each other on the back, shook hands and bowed. Bystanders clapped and cheered. The master of ceremonies for the event thanked everyone and the gathering broke up.

Now's the time, Celeste. Though she'd come here hoping Mick would agree to a date, he might also help her with a niggling problem she'd encountered the last couple of weeks. She chewed her lip just thinking about the situation.

As a cop, and member of SWAT, no less, he could tell her how to jettison an ex who didn't understand the meaning of the word no. She would approach him and ask. Simple.

Right. Her stomach did a nervous flip. After the way they'd parted ten years ago, he might reject her. *Buck up.* She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly, cloaking herself in a mantle of confidence she sometimes didn't feel. Not lately anyway.

As Mick left the mat, her gaze riveted on him. She would know Mick's familiar walk anywhere—commanding, self-assured, and with the slightest swagger. Mick laughed at something Trey said, and she noticed two other women not far from her staring at the men with clear interest.

She remembered his no-nonsense, see-through-to-the-heart gaze. He always had the most beautiful, burning eyes. Mick swung his attention toward her. For a minute, he

looked shell-shocked, and her surprise kept her from moving forward to greet him. Seconds later, his face transformed into a soul-stirring gorgeous smile. *Oh, yeah. A full-fledged, you're-the-only-one-for-me grin.* She sucked in a breath as he walked toward her and Trey followed.

I'm in such trouble. Such trouble.

Her legs didn't feel quite stable. She thought she recognized more than one emotion in Mick's eyes. Maybe curiosity—but also a smoldering warmth that sent her female corpuscles into immediate meltdown. The brothers made quite a pair, and a woman would have to be half-dead not to tingle in all the right places just watching them. A wild flush heated her face as she imagined serving as the filling for their testosterone sandwich. She finally found her nerve and left the bleachers to meet them.

Mick strode toward her with purpose. "Celeste? Is that you?"

Hearing her name on his lips and the warm, slightly rough sound of his voice...well, it did more funny things to her equilibrium. Her super-confident, extroverted best friend Leigh wouldn't hesitate to greet these men head on, but Celeste felt a bit nervous. She decided to tread water and see how to approach.

"Hi Mick. It's me."

When Mick reached her, he slipped his arms around her waist and hugged her close. "God, Celeste. It's been so long. I thought dufus over there managed to get me in the head and I was seeing things. I didn't know you were coming."

Happiness mixed with enjoyment as she snuggled into his embrace. So much for worrying he didn't want to talk to her.

His six-foot-three frame made her five-foot-five feel petite. Well-developed arms clasped her to chest, hips and thighs, and every other inch of his unyielding body. Celeste slipped her arms around his neck and held on like a lifeline. He felt wonderful. Big. Hot. Solid and dependable. He smelled like hot man mixed with sweat.

No doubt about it. Giving in to his embrace translated into heaven on earth.

She drew back far enough to see his face. "A friend told me some of the SWAT team were participating, so I hoped to find you here."

Definite interest ignited in his eyes, and her loins melted with a fluttering response.

Mick drew back, and Trey put his hand out to shake hers. "I'd hug you, but I'm all sweaty. Mick just wanted to get his arms around you."

She smiled broadly. "I can see that."

Trey held her hand longer than necessary, but when Mick threw him a semi-disgusted look, Trey released her.

"It's good to see you. How's it going?" Trey asked.

She gathered her thoughts quickly. "Great. How are you guys?"

"This animal just kicked my ass," Trey said. "I need to work out more or I'll be bounced down the food chain."

Feeling playful, she squeezed Trey's sizable bicep. "Right. You are so out of shape. Not."

Trey's eyebrows wriggled. "See, bro. I told you I'm in fighting shape. Celeste said so."

Mick's mouth tightened into a thin line and he crossed his arms. Disapproval carved his face. "Yeah. You're in such good shape that guy's bullet almost parted your hair last week."

“What?” she asked, concerned.

Pure indignation burned in Trey’s face as he stared at his brother, then it vanished as he smiled at Celeste. Trey winked, his whiskey-brown eyes sparkling with a charming mischief. “You could say I had a wakeup call. But I’m good now.”

She saw the bandage near his hairline. “Thank goodness you’re all right.”

Trey pushed a hand through his hair—barely short enough for sheriff’s department regulation. Wavy and thick, the chocolate-brown length was warmed by red highlights. Many women probably found the tall SWAT Sniper Team Leader as gorgeous as his brothers Craig and Mick.

Mick’s rugged features were rougher, less refined, and more defiant than Trey’s good looks. Mick’s carved cheekbones gave him a slightly exotic appearance she found intriguing. He’d changed over ten years; at thirty-three he seemed more intense, more dangerous. His cerulean eyes held a gravity she didn’t see in Trey’s gaze, and that bottomless, mysterious glimmer in Mick’s countenance made her blood run thick and hot.

Damn, but she liked his edge. Scenarios ran through her head. She’d love him to play cop to her bad girl. Would he handcuff her to the bed if she asked? Would he search her? She wanted to try it all, and she wouldn’t wait anymore.

Trey’s gaze wandered over her with sincere male awareness. “What brings you here?”

She swallowed hard, nervousness cramping her stomach a little. “Charity, of course. And I think Mick can help me with a problem I have.”

Well, maybe two evils, if she spoke honestly. *Sex and her ex.*

Trey’s eyebrows spiked upwards, and a grin parted his lips. “Well, I’m outta here.” He smacked his brother on the back. “See you at the office.” His warm grin touched her again. “Good to see you, Celeste. Take care.”

“You, too. Night,” she said.

After Trey ambled away, his self-assured stride taking him into the locker room, she turned her full concentration on his older, sterner brother. Despite the chatter of people milling around the gym, the world fell away and left only the two of them.

A frown creased Mick’s brow. He placed his hands on her shoulders. “I’m sorry I couldn’t make it to your homecoming party last week.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still sorry I couldn’t make it. Work got in the way.”

She shivered inside. His career meant danger. Violence. All the things she didn’t want to revisit ever again. Yet she couldn’t deny how the brush of his skin against hers removed thoughts of aggression. The tantalizing intimacy of his touch slipped over her shoulders, his slightly callused skin reminding her of his masculinity. His fingers trailed down her arms before he released her. Did he have any idea what he did to her?

A rueful smile touched his lips. The grin transformed him from staid guy to heart-melting hunk in a flash. *Did he have to be so damned sexy?*

“You down here alone?” he asked.

His question jerked her back to reality. “Yes. Why?”

His gaze hardened into what she thought of as scary cop face. He glanced at the big clock on the gymnasium wall. “It’s almost nine o’clock on a Friday night. It’s dark as hell, and a storm’s building.” As if on cue, thunder rolled outside the gym. “How close are you parked?”

"I'm practically at the front door." *Come on, Celeste, spit out.* "When I saw you tonight, I realized you could give me some advice."

He crossed his arms, cop-face firmly in place. "Okay. What is it?"

She looked around. "Can we go somewhere and talk?"

He nodded, but the profound awareness in his expression intensified. Puzzlement entered his eyes. She couldn't blame him. The warm hug he'd given her, though, said he didn't harbor a grudge, something she might have expected considering what she'd done ten years ago.

He wiped his hand over his forehead. "I need a quick shower."

"Of course." Her voice cracked. She cleared her throat and heat flooded her face.

Her vivid imagination jumped to Mick standing naked in a shower, suds following every carved muscle. What would he look like naked? She'd seen his bare chest when they were teens, but he'd been skinnier, less developed than now. Her mouth watered. She could almost visualize pressing a kiss to the center of his chest, right between his pectorals. Her belly tingled.

"Where did you want to go?" Again he jerked her from her fantasies.

"Delio's?"

Surprise filled his eyes. "A bar?"

She smiled. "A friendly, cozy club with music and dancing. But not too loud."

His gaze danced over her in that 'I'm-going-to-find-out-what-you're-hiding' look he no doubt used on criminals. "Sounds good. Meet you out front?"

"Okay."

"Good. I won't be long."

She watched his world-class butt as he walked away. *Wow.* It looked tight and hard, and she imagined gripping one ass cheek in her hand and squeezing. She smiled. What would he do if she tried it?

She frowned. Other than knowing he was the hottest man she'd ever seen, nothing had changed. He still had a hazardous job, one that sometimes proved more perilous than a regular cop's day-to-day career.

So what? This time she wouldn't let that knowledge interfere.

Butterflies danced in her stomach, and she wondered if she could overcome her inhibitions, could learn to trust enough to discover true physical intimacy and ecstasy. With Mick, perhaps she could.

She tucked her hair behind her ears and smoothed her hands over the trendy top. She smiled as she recalled how Trey's gaze had skipped over her with teasing assessment; his attention hadn't set off any three-alarm fires within her. *Now, Mick...* She sighed. Yeah, he presented a different story. She shifted and pushed her handbag higher on her shoulder.

She closed her eyes and memories swamped her. She put her hands to her hot cheeks. Oh, yes. She'd never forget his closeness, his breath ticking her forehead as they danced at the party ten years ago. Warmth curled in her stomach as she recollected his hands encircling her waist, his mouth hovering over hers—

No. She didn't want to bring that memory to the fore. He hadn't kissed her. She'd stopped him before he could. She'd been a fool.

Surprised and relieved he hadn't twenty-questioned her, she stepped into the hot city night and a refreshing breeze blew over her bare shoulders. The scent of moisture teased

her nostrils pleasantly. Lightning flashed nearby and a threatening rumble followed. She quickened her steps and found her car.

“Celeste, where are you going?”

She froze as surprise jolted up her spine. Serious annoyance followed close behind. She’d know that deep, imperious, and uncompromising voice anywhere. She turned, fingers clutching her keys tight. Sure enough, her ex Darrell stood nearby. He must have lurked near the hedgerows by the gym. God, she couldn’t believe it. Vermont to Colorado was a *long* way.

Seriously creepy.

“Darrell, what are you doing here?”

He didn’t speak at first. He stared with a cool superiority that always made her want to grind her teeth. His eye contact was so intense and direct—he didn’t soften the unrelenting force of his gaze with the occasional glance away. It was one of the things about him that always made her think something odd inhabited Darrell’s psyche. His comments on their few—very few—dates only cemented that impression.

At over six feet tall, he possessed a muscle-bound, wrestler’s body. His curly blond hair tossed around his head in artful disarray. He wore a tight t-shirt and faded jeans that strained over strong thighs. His features were almost too handsome, as if the heavens had carved an Adonis. He looked like an all American athlete; few people would see past his fresh-faced appearance and guess he was a psychologist. Of course, when he detailed his qualifications, people soon discovered his legitimacy as a mental health professional. Women loved him for his looks and intelligence. What more could a woman want?

Most individuals would think him funny, interesting, and normal.

Just as she had when she’d met him a few months back at another charity event back in Vermont.

At least at first.

Several other people left the gym and passed by. She glanced at the door she’d exited seconds ago. She could only guess how long it would take Mick to run through the shower and gather his things. If luck went her way, he’d be fast.

He crossed his arms over his chest, his voice calm. “I’ve been waiting here for some time.”

Celeste placed her hands on her hips. “Why are you here? It’s a long way from Vermont.”

He took a step forward. “I left you the message on the phone last night. I miss you.”

“You were already in Colorado when you called?”

“Of course. I wanted it to be a surprise.”

Exasperated, she rolled her gaze to the heavens. “God, Darrell, it’s over between us. I moved out here to start a new life.”

“You should have come back to me where you belong. That’s why I came here. To bring you back.”

Lightning forked down from the heavens, thunder crashing, and she startled in response. *Is he insane?* Her fingers tightened on the keys. He’d never physically abused her, but this behavior went beyond the norm. She couldn’t believe he’d come from Vermont to confront her. “I’m not the woman for you. You need to find someone else.”

I pity any woman who is bowled over by your initial charm and good looks and your so-called credibility. Any woman who is as much a fool as I was.

He put his hands out, palms up and took a step toward her. "How can you say that? We had a few good weeks together."

"That's it. We had some fun and now it's over." Fun didn't describe their brief relationship, but what else could she say diplomatically?

"It's *not* over."

"I'm not going to discuss this, Darrell. We talked about this when I told you I was moving back here. I thought you understood I wasn't interested any more and it was over. Darrell, you called me ten times in the last week. That isn't... I'm concerned you don't understand I mean what I say."

Another few steps brought him off the curb and to within a foot of her. Involuntarily, she stepped back, her body on alert if he tried anything, made one more move. Her breathing quickened, her heartbeat picking up speed. Her fingers tightened around her car keys.

"How did you find me?" she asked.

"I followed you. How else?"

A tingle of dread trickled up her spine. That meant he had tracked down where she lived in Gold Rush and must have lurked outside her house and followed her here.

Definitely not normal behavior.

What had seemed annoying and strange at one time had turned into disturbing when he'd left those ten messages on her cell phone, demanding she return his calls. Yet it had taken the phone calls before she realized she needed to ask someone for advice.

Desperation didn't fill his eyes, but a strange, possessive light did. As if he knew he had her—as if he was one hundred percent assured of success. "I love you."

Darrell never declared love before, and instinct screamed the situation could explode out of control in seconds. She glanced around. There wasn't a soul in sight other than him.

"Darrell, you're a mental health professional. I would think you would recognize your behavior as unusual and obsessive."

"My behavior is fine. It's yours that's questionable." He grinned, but the smile left warmth and sincerity in the dust. Had he always smiled this way, and she'd missed it before now?

"You're stalking me."

The smile in place he crossed his arms and shook his head. "You are delusional, Celeste. That's why you need expert care and advice. I'm the only one who can assist you."

Fresh anger welled inside her. "I broke up with you, I moved away, and that's the end of it. Goodbye."

He cocked his head to the side, his penetrating green eyes telegraphing a cold serenity that belied his words. "It isn't over until I say it is." He reached for her wrist, clamped on tight, and started to walk away with her. "We need to talk."

Fear bolted through Celeste, and she dug in her heels. His grip tightened. "Ow! Let me go! No."

Her sandals slipped on the asphalt. A small cry escaped her throat as he released her, and she landed on her butt with a painful jarring. She gasped in pain.

"Hey!" The angry, deep voice came from behind her. Seconds later Mick stood beside her, his feet planted firmly apart. "What the hell is going on here?"

Oh, damn. Memories of a time long ago assaulted her. She'd only been fifteen when an inebriated teenager had attacked her at a party. Mick had heard her scream and come running, just as he did now. Only then, Mick had done something that had changed both her life and his.

"I'm her boyfriend," Darrell said, voice still implacable, eyes ice chips of indifference to the threat.

She scrambled to her feet and reached for Mick's shoulder. "No, Mick. He's my ex, and I don't want anything to do with him."

Mick didn't take his attention away from Darrell, and his face showed unmistakable anger. His jaw muscles clenched and released. "You heard her. I'll give you ten seconds to get your ass out of here."

Darrell tilted his long nose upward slightly. "Who the hell are you?"

Mick took a step forward, his stance intimidating as he matched gazes with Darrell. Mick topped Darrell by a scant inch. For a second she worried the men would fight.

"First, I'm an El Torro County Deputy. Second, I'm with her now." Mick glanced at her. "Do you want to press assault charges?"

Startled by Mick's statement that they were a couple, she stumbled over her next words. "No, I—just leave, Darrell."

Darrell pointed at her, his face transforming from arrogance to a flash of impatience that gave him a quick, ugly mask. Immediately his features returned to peaceful, and she could almost believe she'd imagined that abhorrence in his face. "This isn't over, Celeste. We have things to talk about."

With that pronouncement, Darrell stalked away. Once he disappeared around the side of the building, Mick turned to her. A light, cool breeze blew over her skin. She rubbed her arms as potent emotions danced inside her like ping pong balls. Fear. Uncertainty. Anger.

Raw male aggression flickered through his eyes, as if he couldn't shake the fury. "How did you get hooked up with that asswipe?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. I thought I'd left him in Vermont." A violent quiver shook her body.

Worry pushed rancor from his eyes. His hands came up to cup her face. Warm and comforting, his touch settled remaining fears. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine. He just scared the crap out of me."

"You're trembling." His voice went soft and husky.

Before she could take another breath, he gathered her close. Deep satisfaction enveloped Celeste as his arms anchored her to his chest. Her hands moved involuntarily over his chest, her fingers encountering unyielding pectoral muscles. When her touch accidentally brushed over his nipples, he trembled in reaction. *So hard. So hot.* She felt feverish and out of control. Celeste had never experienced this alignment of sheer fear and stark excitement rolled into one response.

She slipped her arms around his waist. He felt so invincible Celeste almost believed nothing bad could ever happen to her if this man held her. He laid his cheek down on the top of her head and tucked her closer.

Oh, yeah. I could get used to this.

"Why did you say that you're my boyfriend?" she asked.

"I thought it would help defuse the situation. And if he thinks I'm your boyfriend

maybe he'll back off."

His hands roamed over her back in a soothing motion, and then his fingers slipped under the hair at the back of her neck and massaged tense muscles. Her nipples tightened into hard, achy points, and she barely stifled a moan.

"You're safe," he said.

When she tilted her head back and looked into his eyes, his long lashes barely veiled sexual awareness. His pupils dilated in the dim light, and his lips parted.

He drew in a deep breath, pulled back, and held her at arm's length. "You all right now?"

"I'm fine." She managed a weak smile. "Thanks for coming to my rescue. Again."

One corner of his mouth curled upward in an almost boyish grin. "At least the outcome is better than the last time."

She nodded. "No kidding." Celeste thought she could almost see the memories flickering through his eyes. "This time you're on the right side of the law."

His mouth thinned into a hard line. "Damn straight. So what's with this jerk-off harassing you?"

Once more, the heavens answered with a flash of lightning and a loud rumble. "He's my ex-boyfriend, like I said. Let's get to Delio's before it rains."

He released her. "I'll follow you."

Rain pelted the earth as she jumped into the car and another lightning flash carved a sharp, bright knife through the air. Suitable weather for what may lie ahead.

During the drive, she glanced into her rearview mirror a couple of times and felt reassurance as Mick's SUV followed her. Maybe she'd done the smart thing to consider asking his advice. Now, if she could rein in her crazy libido and calm down.

Unlikely.

When she pulled into the huge parking lot at the hip bar, the excitement rocketing through her system went into overdrive. Despite the ultra-modern chrome and glass façade, the restaurant and bar attracted people on all levels who craved rock and roll loud but not too earsplitting. She hopped out of her car and saw his SUV pull into a spot nearby.

Mick joined her on the sidewalk and they remained silent as they entered the packed establishment. Noisy laughter and talking filled her ears. An old rockabilly song pumped through the speakers. As they followed the host, patrons at a few tables recognized Mick and he waved and smiled at them. They nodded to her, curiosity outlined on their faces.

The host found a secluded horseshoe shaped booth in the back, barely illuminated by a single tea light candle in the middle of the table. Seclusion appealed to Celeste, as well as dim lighting. Intimate and cozy, the bar and restaurant sported a variety of antique items hanging from the warehouse-high ceiling. The two-level dance floor nearby was already jammed with people gyrating to tunes.

When Celeste sank onto the red leather seat and scooted to the middle, Mick did the same. He sat so near she could smell his warm, delicious musk scent and her stomach flipped with renewed nerves and exhilaration at what might come later. She emphasized *might* in her mind.

His gaze held the secrets of the sea as it did a quick, sizzling pass over the bodice of her top, then met her eyes. "Something wrong? You look nervous."

Damn. She didn't want her edginess to show, but she never lied well, so she didn't

try. Besides, ole eagle eyes always had an excellent built in bullshit-o'meter. "I am. A little."

His frown caused creases between his eyebrows. When he shifted on the seat, his knee bumped hers. His disconcerting concentration played over her face, as if memorizing every detail. Criminals doubtless turned into blathering idiots around him. She couldn't think straight when he positioned that laser-sight stare on her.

There was a profound difference in the way his gaze made her feel excited, unraveled and cared for...whereas Darrell's soulless verdant eyes chilled her to the core.

A server stopped by the table and gave Celeste a few seconds reprieve as the woman took their drink orders. Celeste chose a diet cola and he decided on iced tea.

When the woman walked away, Celeste knew she had to answer Mick's curiosity. "As you can see, Darrell is a loose cannon. I wanted your advice on what to do."

"What is this Darrell character's last name?" he asked.

"Huntley."

"You knew him back in Vermont?"

"I met him at a mutual friend's house two months ago. We hit it off at first, and I agreed to a date. I only knew him three weeks before things started getting weird."

"How weird?"

She pushed her fingers through her hair and sighed. "He called me every single day, which would have been flattering if I was that into him—but I wasn't. We had three dates in those three weeks. He tried to push a sexual relationship, and I wasn't comfortable because I didn't feel any...you know..." Heat rose into her face.

He smiled. One of those full-fledged, sultry male grins that probably enticed females to drop to their knees and beg to have his baby. "No I don't know. Why don't you tell me?"

She shrugged. "I didn't feel any spark. No fire. Most of the time he made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn't explain. Darrell fooled me for a while because I didn't listen to my instincts. I mentioned to some friends that he made me uneasy, but they said he was a great guy and that I was overreacting. There's something strange going on with him I can't pinpoint. More than once he had me convinced I *was* being dramatic, and I started to doubt my own ability to tell what was real and what wasn't about him."

"He has strange eyes. He doesn't blink much and hardly ever looks away like normal people do. As if he could see through to your soul and know every secret."

She sighed in relief. "You noticed that, too?" She shivered. "It's the creepiest thing I've ever experienced."

"And your friends know him well?"

"They've known him for a few years. He's a rich man and a well-respected psychologist."

Mick's eyebrows lowered as he frowned deeply. "I see. So your friends think because he's a psychologist he must be okay?"

"Exactly. How many psychologists do you know that are disturbed?"

"None."

She pointed at him. "Exactly again."

He grunted. "He made everyone doubt you, rather than the other way around. I wouldn't swear on a stack of bibles, but the little you've told me makes me wonder if he's a sociopath. Not crazy. Just remorseless. No conscience."

She put her hands to her cheeks for a second. "Oh God. I never thought of that." Amazed at his insight, she said, "Everyone started looking at me as if I was nuts for not liking Darrell anymore. And after my aunt died and I learned I'd inherited the house, I reassessed my life. When the school year ended I decided I missed Colorado and wanted to move back. When my dog Jessie died..." Her throat tightened as she recalled the sweet Yorkie. "I'd had Jessie three months and one day he just disappeared out of my back yard. A few hours later I found him by a creek. He'd been run over by a car."

"Damn. That's horrible. How did he get out of your back yard?"

"I don't know. The only thing I think of was that someone took him out. Maybe they deliberately ran over him." Her throat tightened as emotion punched her in the gut. She swallowed hard.

"I'm sorry."

She nodded. "It was perfect timing to leave Darrell and start a new life."

"Just like that?"

She decided not to tell Mick that thoughts of him had influenced her to move back to Colorado as well. "Just like that."

"Did you have a job lined up here?"

"I heard about year-round grade school and that they need a teacher, so I gambled on it. I have an interview next week."

"What happened when you told Huntley you were moving back to Gold Rush?"

"He wanted to come with me."

Mick's eyes widened. "He didn't know you very long to make that kind of commitment."

"No."

She wondered if Mick had ever fallen hard and fast for anyone. The thought he might have sent a tiny tremor of jealousy straight through her. If he fell in love, would he turn on a dime to make a sacrifice for a woman?

Get a grip. I haven't seen him in ten years. A lot can change in that time. Just because I'm still so damned attracted to him doesn't mean anything. I don't know him anymore.

"I realize people can fall in love quickly, but there was no way I could return his feelings. After I broke it off, he started calling me at all times of the day and night. Some of the time, he'd talk to me, other times he'd stay silent. It was weird."

"Scary stalker material."

"Exactly. I hoped when I moved back here that would be the end of it. I haven't seen him for a month. Then this last week he left messages on my cell phone. Ten of them. I didn't call back, figuring he'd get the message. When he turned up tonight it shocked me."

His gaze hardened. "When I saw him dragging you along and you fell, I wanted to rearrange his face."

She gave him a feeble smile. "Shades of the old Mick I used to know?"

He sighed. "Yeah."

What else could she say? Though Mick had sworn to uphold the law now, maybe a smidgen of the juvenile delinquent still commanded him. She wanted to see that wildness unleashed in a deep kiss, an intimate caress. To experience a complete sexual experience.

He rubbed a hand over his chin, and she imagined his five o'clock shadow sliding

over her breasts, across her belly. His mouth finding hot, intimate secrets.

“I wonder if I should get a restraining order?” she asked.

When he didn’t answer, she prompted him and he finally replied. “There may be a problem with that at this state in the game. He hasn’t done anything a judge would say is threatening enough. Plus, restraining orders can sometimes aggravate a stalker into escalating.”

Apprehension settled over her like a cold front.

Mick’s serious gaze caught hers and held. “He’s going to have to do a lot more than harassing phone calls and showing up to talk to you.”

She ruminated. “You probably scared him off.”

He reached into his back pocket and retrieved his wallet. He pulled out a business card and scribbled phone numbers on the back, then handed it to her. “That’s my work phone on the front, cell and home numbers on the back. If he contacts you again in any way, you call me. I’ll put the fear of God into him. I don’t care what time of day or night it is, call me.”

His declaration, spoken in his deep, husky voice, sent a new thrill racing across her body. So his protective streak continued after all these years. Yet she couldn’t believe it was just for her. The cop in him truly believed in the phrase “to serve and protect.” He’d do the same for any woman as an officer of the law.

Mick sat forward, even closer than he’d been seconds before. “Why didn’t you sell your Aunt’s house? Why did you decide to stay in Gold Rush?”

Celeste had to think—really think why. “The house is beautiful. My best years were there.”

“The best? What about Vermont?”

“My time there was good but pretty ordinary. I’m looking for more.”

A new silence overlaid the air between them, until he spoke again. “Your aunt was a fantastic lady.”

She sighed. “That’s for certain. I don’t know what I would have done if she hadn’t taken me in after Dad and Mom...” Even now she didn’t like recalling that time. She shrugged. “After Dad gave up on everything, she helped me back to a happy life. If I would have tried to deal with Dad alone, I don’t think I could have managed.”

“You’re strong. You could have done it. But it would have stolen your teen years from you.”

She nodded. “She wanted me to leave here after the boy...assaulted me. I told her I wouldn’t leave until I’d finished high school and knew which college I’d attend.”

“Six months of my life went down the drain after I beat up that jerk. And you know I’d do it again.”

Her throat tightened. She knew he spoke the truth. “You’d lose your job.”

“Yeah. I would.”

Old guilt twisted inside her. “I’m sorry you were sent away back then.”

“Don’t be. I’m not sorry I pulled that kid off you. If I hadn’t—”

“I know. If you hadn’t come looking for me, he would have...”

Even years later, she sometimes couldn’t force the truth past her lips.

Tears filled her eyes as she recalled what Mick had sacrificed for her. Damn, she hadn’t realized how emotional she’d become seeing him once more. She broke the silence. “You remember ten years ago when I came back from Vermont for Christmas

and to visit my aunt?"

"I remember."

"All of it?"

"Yeah." As an old Foreigner tune blared over the speakers, he edged closer. His voice lowered. "I never forgot one single moment of what *almost* happened."

The melting sensation in her stomach almost unraveled her one thread at a time. "It was quite a night."

"You telling me you want a repeat?"

Her breath caught in her throat as apprehension mingled with excitement. Could she do this? Could she take the next step to bring him closer? "I want to find out what it would have been like if I'd let you kiss me. Show me what would have happened, Mick."

Her heart thumped as she dared gaze into his eyes and absorbed the building responsiveness she saw there. She licked her lips and plunged into the deep end, hoping the water wouldn't turn icy. Her throat turned as arid as the Mojave.

"What if my job interferes? Are you going to run from me? Now that I'm SWAT, I'm on call twenty-four hours a day."

Right now, when she wanted his arms around her so desperately, he could get a call and leave. Head into the perilous, unpredictable world she so hated. "I know."

How would she react? She didn't want it to come between them again. Confusion entwined with desire.

A new song, this one sounding vaguely country, throbbed over the speakers. Voices around her seemed too loud.

His hand slipped down and covered both of hers, which she'd clutched in her lap. She stiffened at the feel of his warm flesh. Before she could speak, the server came back with their drinks and asked if they wanted to order food. They declined and the server departed. All the time, his hand stayed over hers.

Mick turned back to her, and his gaze held that limitless, incredible concentration that had always filled her with need. He stayed silent, and their stare-down ended with her looking at their hands. His fingers had a few scars, the dark hairs along the back catching her attention. Long fingers, broad palms. Beautiful structure. She imagined them coasting with eagerness over her breasts, learning her body in ways a man never had before.

She couldn't stand the silence. "When I walked away from you that night ten years ago, I regretted it. But I was afraid."

Mick's arm slid around her shoulder, and the other hand cupped her face. His big fingers and palm brushed her skin. "Not of me, I hope."

"Not of you. Of what I felt. Of what I wanted to do."

She sighed. Warmth tingled from where he touched her. She wanted this more than she could have imagined. His gaze glittered with intent.

"Easy fix," he said.

Chapter Two

Mick's mouth covered Celeste's and the world disappeared. A low-throated saxophone played a sultry tune in the background and added to the sensual flow in her blood.

A heated rush spilled through her lower belly as his fingers caressed the side of her cheek, and his mouth coaxed hers with a deliciousness more carnal than any kiss she'd ever experienced. Her breath hitched in her throat as his mouth plundered without remorse, a hungry invader determined to know her at every level. His tongue rasped against hers with one stroke, then another, each thrust a slow, seductive taste. She responded as the white heat grew and exploded. She couldn't get close enough.

Mick didn't involve her in tender, tentative kisses. He kissed as if starving, dying to know her. His aggressiveness pushed her to respond with everything she possessed. Her touch brushed over his jean-clad left thigh, and his hard muscles quivered.

Her hand crept higher up his leg. Higher yet. She stopped. Someone could see them kissing as if they wanted to make love right here and now.

He clasped her hand and drew it upward until her fingers rested solidly over his cock. She sucked in a surprised, excited breath. Trembling on the edge of pulling away, she still allowed him to direct her hand, drawing it upward along the broad length of male muscle. Up. Down. Until the rhythm caught her. She wouldn't relent, wanting to see how far he'd go. He hardened even more, and she increased the motion. He stopped her hand suddenly.

He drew back from the kiss, staring deep into her eyes. A flush had crept over his cheeks and his lips stayed parted. While the tablecloth covered their activities, the illicit, about-to-be-discovered sensation surged, her eagerness unfettered.

"Isn't this illegal, officer?" she asked, her voice raspy.

"No. But this is," he said huskily. "Undo my pants."

She hadn't expected this. "What?"

He tucked her hair behind her right ear, then leaned in until his breath puffed hot into her ear. "Are you afraid someone will see?"

"Yes."

"Do you want it anyway?" His tone, a hoarse, needful sound, drew her into action.

"Yes."

"Then do it."

"I...no. Not here. It's too much." And to ease the rejection, she kissed him.

This time her tongue acted the aggressor, until he speared his hands through her hair and held her steady for his return parry.

Finally he released her from the kiss. He watched her, his chest rising and falling on deep breaths, his tongue passing over his lips. Watching his male needs rise to the surface added to her own craving. She savored the way his body shivered, his nostrils flared.

"You're doing this to drive me insane, aren't you?" he asked, his tone rough-edged.

She grinned. "Maybe."

One corner of his sinfully carved mouth curved upward. "Well, you're succeeding. I'm all for breaking some of the rules, but doing anything more in public could get us

arrested. Not exactly a stellar career move for a SWAT officer.” He shifted on the seat and winced. He grimaced. “Shit.”

“Hurt?”

“It only hurts because we aren’t somewhere I can fuck you.”

Heat flared into her cheeks at his bluntness and set up a new conflagration low in her stomach. *Oh, my.* Embarrassment mixed with arousal. Before she’d decided to approach him tonight in the gym, she’d rehearsed what he might say and what she’d say in response. She hadn’t felt the uncertainty, the wildfire emotions that tossed her from barely able to keep her hands off him, to the fear that lingered around the edges. Not fear of him so much...no. Fear of what she wanted, fear of the unknown.

He slid his arms around her shoulder and brought her up against his body. She liked the heavy weight of his arm, protective and possessive. “Let me settle down. When I walk out of here I don’t plan on sporting a huge hard-on for everyone to see.” She laughed softly, and yet he didn’t join in. His gaze had returned to cop with questions. “You’ve shocked the hell out of me, Celeste.”

“Have I?”

“Yeah. You aren’t the woman I knew ten years ago.”

Old self-consciousness made her look away. “Is that a bad thing?”

“Hell, no.” He laughed, the husky sound sending trickles of pure pleasure over her. He caught her gaze once more. “Kiss me again.”

She did, and immediately his tongue sought hers. His breath came faster, his boldness sending heady thrills darting along her body in a race. Her nipples tightened, drawing into stiff peaks and brushing maddeningly against the satiny texture of her bra. She moaned at the exquisite satisfaction. She felt naked, bared to the core by his unwavering seduction of her senses.

Her left hand splayed over the area between his pectorals, finding the muscle solid and warm. When her fingers passed over one hard pec, her palm brushed his nipple. His breath sucked inward.

Mick’s arousal strummed an answering chord between her legs. Restless and eager, she itched to feel his touch in far more intimate locations along her body.

“Ahem.”

She jerked out of the kiss and drew back from his embrace, her face flaming.

Mick released her quickly, but his expression held none of the embarrassment she felt at being caught kissing in a public place.

Their server, a tall blonde woman of about forty, stood next to their table. “Sorry, folks, but I wondered if anything was wrong with your drinks.”

“They’re fine.” Mick’s face went clean of expression. The server nodded, her knowing smile still in place as she left their table. Mick’s gaze flicked to Celeste.

“Do you think she...uh...interrupted us because someone saw us and complained?” she asked.

His gaze took in the room, and she did the same. No one paid any attention to them. “I doubt it.” He grinned, and the hard, blank edge in his face dissolved.

Still, the fact she’d engaged in a full-throttle kiss in public sent waves of excitement through her. It felt damned good to be daring for a change and let it hang loose.

He reached for his drink and took a long, chugging swallow, and she watched his throat work as he downed half the glass. The man even had the audacity to look sexy

drinking iced tea.

He leaned closer to her once more, and he whispered near her ear, “Do displays of public affection bother you, or do they turn you on?”

His warm breath on her ear sent untamed spirals dancing in her stomach. Was there anything he could do or say that didn’t electrify her? “Both.”

Mick tilted his head slightly to the side, his gaze holding hers. “How did you feel when I kissed you?”

She felt singed, but didn’t admit it. She liked the game between them, wanting a little space, stimulation drawn out until she couldn’t stand it anymore. “It was nice.”

His gaze dropped to her breasts for a second, then met her eyes. “You’re lying.”

“What?” she almost gasped the question. “It *was* nice—”

“You were gone for a lot of years, Celeste, but you forget I’ve known you since you were fourteen. You don’t think I can read you like a book? I’m good at telling when people are false with me, but even if I wasn’t, the way you kissed me back and the fact your nipples are on high beam tells me something else. You want me.”

Renewed heat surged up her neck and pinked her cheeks. His quick intimate questions and statements cut straight to the truth, and that frightened the hell out of her. She tried to remember the last time she’d blushed this much and couldn’t. She felt like a damned schoolgirl under his penetrating scrutiny. Even before Mick became a cop, he’d always possessed an unwavering ability to ferret out her secrets one by one like an archaeologist on a dig.

Mick’s eyes deflected every myth that blue eyes were too icy to flame with passion. “Liking my kiss it isn’t good enough. I need you to admit that you want me so much you can’t wait for it.”

Oh, God. Maybe she *wasn’t* ready for frankness, even though she’d thought she could take it. She reached for her purse, intent on leaving. She started to slide away from him.

“Wait.” He reached for her wrist and held it. “Shit. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to sound harsh.” He closed his eyes, then opened them. He released his grip. “If my kiss was just nice, that means what I’m feeling right now is pretty damned one-sided.”

She dared to ask, “What are you feeling?”

“Don’t ask me questions you already know the answer to.”

A smile formed on her lips as she dared stare into his smoldering gaze. “Mick, what am I going to do with you?”

A wicked grin answered her. “I could give you some ideas.”

The intensity in his gaze eased, and she remembered the good old days when they’d hung around the neighborhood as teens. Even then, his potent male presence had taunted her femininity, demanding a response.

The music segued from slow and seductive to the rambunctious beat of a more recent rock tune.

Her temples started to throb and she rubbed them. “Could we go somewhere else? The music is fraying my nerves.”

“Sure. Where do you want to go?”

“My place.”

His eyebrows shot up, then he melted back to the old inscrutable Mick MacGilvary she’d known forever.

“Let’s go,” he said.

* * * *

Mick’s hands gripped the steering wheel as he followed Celeste through the city into their neighborhood. Tall Victorian homes lined the rain-slick streets, shadowed by towering, mature trees. The rain had eased, and intermittent lightning illuminated the night. Thunder growled low, a lion’s anger in the distance.

When he’d heard that Ginger Rice, Celeste’s aunt, had died, he’d wondered if Celeste would return to the house where she spent most of her teen years. When his mother told him Celeste had come back to Gold Rush for good, he’d reacted in a way that surprised himself.

He’d felt excited. Eager to see her, even if seeing her again would dredge up old memories he’d avoided for years. When she’d sent a handwritten invitation to her homecoming party, he’d decided to attend. Then a SWAT call-out had come that day and he’d worked all night.

A Keysi martial arts workout like tonight often took enough of the piss and vinegar out of him so he could sleep. Then she’d changed everything by showing up at the gym. He felt strung as guitar wire.

Jesus. That kiss messed with my head. He smiled. *Both my heads.*

Her mouth had tasted minty, delicious. A fuckin’ banquet he wanted to consume over and over. Even now, his cock surged against his jeans, aching to sink deep into her body. When he’d kissed her and felt her satiny depths, his libido decided it didn’t care that he sat in full view of other people. He hadn’t used his brains at all when her hand had teased his cock and he’d dared her to see what she’d do. He’d almost come right there and damn the consequences. His hands gripped, then released the steering wheel, frustration eating away at him.

A woman had never, *ever* made him lose control the way he did with Celeste.

He dragged his thoughts back to when he’d left the gym and saw that son-of-a-bitch grab her and start dragging her away—

She was right. The old, impulsive Mick wanted to clean the parking lot with Huntley’s face.

He turned his thoughts back to Celeste and smiled. Had the smart, determined, yet sweet young woman he’d known turned into someone else? Maybe. He’d always admired her strength and determination, especially given the hardships she’d endured as a kid. Something vulnerable in her eyes destroyed his legendary restraint and he worried about her. Damn it, he shouldn’t have kissed her in the restaurant, but she’d driven him crazy.

Celeste’s car turned and eased into the long driveway of her beautiful rambling Victorian house. The structure was far more ornate than his simpler abode. Not that he gave a damn. His own Victorian, a half block down on the same side of the street as hers, reminded him of the times they’d spent together as teens, visiting each other at their respective homes. His mom and dad—the man and woman who had adopted him—had given him and his brothers a second chance at life. Their home, like them, had established a cozy, warm, and safe environment. Mick sighed as he thought about the man who’d raised him and doubtless saved his life, Justice MacGilvary.

Dad, I wish you were still here.

Sure, he could talk to his mother about women if he wanted to—she was open-

mindful. But Justice had understood people inside and out, his cop instincts right on the money.

Dad, what would you say about Celeste?

Mick parked behind Celeste in the circular drive, left the car in a rush and came alongside her as she reached the front door. "You didn't leave the porch light on?"

She glanced up at him in the dim light thrown from a street lamp, her face showing exasperation. "Normally I do, Mr. Cop. But I forgot this time."

"Don't forget again."

She jammed her key into the lock and opened the door. "I almost forgot how bossy you are."

A glow from a small stained-glass lamp illuminated the entryway. "It's not safe. That's all I'm saying."

After she closed the door behind them and locked it, she tossed her keys and purse on a table. She rolled her gaze heavenward. "Like I don't know that, Mick. Come inside." He followed her as she trailed through to the sitting room and clicked on large lamp by the couch. "Would you like something to drink?"

"No, I'm good."

"Make yourself at home. I'll be right back."

He plopped onto the comfortable green couch not far from the huge fireplace and allowed his curiosity full rein. The place hadn't changed one bit. Her aunt's antique furniture, much like the pieces in his house, reflected a conglomeration of decades. Subtle shades of sage and burgundy mingled in the materials and ornate wallpaper. With a cop's attention to detail, he eyed the room. If Celeste had added any personal touches, he couldn't see them.

With a hunger that surprised him, he wanted to know *everything* about the new Celeste.

When she returned with a glass of water, she placed it on the coffee table and sat next to him on the couch. She crossed her legs, and his gaze snagged on the long, pale length of her legs. Strappy navy low-heeled sandals encircled her narrow feet. Her hair tumbled around her shoulders in a thick, beautiful mass of red and gold.

He turned toward her slightly and couldn't resist placing his arm over the back of the couch behind her. His groin tightened as it had when he'd kissed her, threatening to turn hard as a pile driver. *Fuck this*. He couldn't control it and stopped trying. If she saw he had an erection, so be it.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry I couldn't make your aunt's funeral either. I was working that day, too."

She nodded. "Thank you for your card, by the way."

"You're welcome. I hoped it might make up a little for missing her funeral. I liked your aunt."

"Everyone did." Silence grew until she said, "I imagine it's a real disadvantage for families and girlfriends of SWAT team members. The unpredictability of your job, I mean."

He shrugged. "My family is okay with it."

"Your mother is used to it. How she survived Justice, you, and your brothers all being cops, I'll never understand."

Slight condemnation in her tone set his teeth on edge. Crap, she always managed to

come around to this. To his job and the danger and how she couldn't stomach any part of it. Ten years ago, she'd shunned him for this reason, and he had a feeling she could do it again in a heartbeat. He allowed disappointment to swirl in his gut. *Why am I here?*

"It's a part of SWAT, Celeste. Family and friends either take it or they leave it. Mom loves us and she loved Dad. She put up with our jobs."

"Justice's job took him away from all of you."

Rather than return to their old argument concerning the dangers of police work, he said, "He died loving his job and loving his family. What else is there?"

"You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." She closed her eyes a minute as if she wished she could take it back. "You must miss Justice. He was such a great man."

"Yeah, he was."

Quiet cloaked the room until the mantle clock ticking out a monotonous beat filled his head. She looked down at her hands. God, he could imagine what those hands could do to him. What he wouldn't give to have her heat wrapped around his cock, pumping him into a teeth-gritting orgasm. A muscle in his jaw twitched. Her hair, her breasts, her legs reminded him of erotic teen fantasies. *Oh, yeah.* Way too many fantasies over the years featured her as a major player. He wanted to growl, to pull her across his lap and show her how freakin' obsessed he was. Heat flooded his veins.

"You looked fantastic at the gym, Mick. I've never seen anything like it before. How did you and Trey keep from hurting each other?"

"It takes work. There's another demonstration tomorrow night if you want to watch again."

Her eyes sparkled. "Gee, I don't know if I can take the testosterone. You guys are too hot."

He blinked, surprised. "What?"

"All the women in the room were squirming. You and Trey looked very...masculine. Hunky."

The smallest twinge of jealousy soured his next statement. "I'm sure Trey would enjoy knowing that."

She laughed, and the pure sound held a throaty nuance that generated a new wave of heat straight to his cock. *That's it. I can't stand it. Enough of the small talk.* If he didn't touch her again in a minute, he would go nuts.

He captured and held her gaze. "Was my kiss really just all right? Tell me the truth." She watched him with those green eyes, the corners tilted up enough to remind him of a cat. "There's something still between us, Celeste. I can feel it."

Understanding and something warm and intimate crossed her features. She scrubbed one hand over her cheek. Tonight the natural paleness of her skin highlighted the dozen freckles sprinkled over her small nose. He closed the gap between them, his arm going around her shoulders, the other hand finding her waist. Yeah, right now, with Celeste's beautiful cheeks flushed, her lips parted, the rounded tops of her breasts enticing him—*fuck, yeah.* He'd jump off a building if she asked. All he wanted was to appease the raging, raw animal instincts that hungered to shove her shorts down, rip her panties off her ass, and fuck her like tomorrow would never come.

"Tell me, Celeste."

"Your kiss was fantastic. Everything I've wanted. It turned me on." Her voice went throaty. "You know it did."

What I wouldn't give to see her eyes as I gave her an orgasm. I want to see her expression when I sink into her. He swallowed hard and took a calming breath. It didn't work.

"Something's holding you back," he said. "What is it?"

*

Mick's question made Celeste think, when the haze of building arousal heated her entire body. This was the Mick she'd wanted to experience. Mick barely holding back, ready to be unleashed. But now that she had him more than willing to take her, she worried she couldn't measure up. She didn't do one-night stands. What if her inexperience disappointed him?

He kissed her forehead, and as his hand drifted to her waist and slowly upward to her ribcage, she gasped at the exquisite friction. He pressed his hand between her breasts. "Your heart is pounding. Are you afraid of me?"

"God, no. Of course not. You'd never hurt me."

"I never could take you being afraid of anything."

She sighed. "I know. Even when we were teens, I wanted you. So badly I ached. And tonight...I was out of control when we kissed."

He produced a wicked grin. "Not quite. But that's what I want tonight. You, out of control. Holding nothing back. When you came to the gym, did you plan this?"

"Yes."

Celeste heard the breathiness in her voice, felt the corporeal ache in her throat. She hadn't been this blunt with a man before. She'd never imagined seeing Mick would ignite old, treacherous feelings and wishes with such magnitude.

As Mick sprawled on the couch like a big cat, his expressive eyes telegraphing a promise of sex so soul stirring, she almost believed making love with him would be her cure. He appeared so male and invincible. Tenderness mixed with the heat in his gaze.

Without thinking, she reached up and touched his hair-roughened jaw. The tickling sensation as his five o'clock shadow brushed her fingers made her stomach burn with pleasurable heat.

Craving pulled tight and deep in her womb. She could hear his deep breath, the exhalation. His tantalizing, musky scent teased her nose. The man presented one staggering buffet of excitement.

Overheated and afraid she'd combust on the spot, she stood and headed for the fireplace. She paused to ponder the beautiful Colorado landscape above the mantle. A lone cowboy riding a painted horse under a snowcapped mountain. She could almost drift into the scenery.

She heard him leave the couch, and seconds later his hands cupped her shoulders from behind. She leaned back into his hard, supporting frame and closed her eyes. Could there be anything better than this? A quiet, cozy home filled with good memories and the electrifying sensation of Mick's body cradling hers. Giddy anticipation teased as his hands smoothed down her arms and clasped them above the elbows. She trembled as sensual awareness grew. Thunder growled in the distance and rain beat steadily on the roof, a backdrop to the turbulence rising inside her. Mick's warm breath wisped against her ear as he nuzzled into her hair.

His fingers landed on her waist, the other hand sliding over her naked belly and holding there. *Oh, God.* Could he feel the excitement in her stomach? Did he know what

his touch did to her?

As his hand moved over her belly in a slow caress, her neck arched. Pleasure danced along her nerves and held her breath captive. His touch slid upward until he cupped her breasts through the silken top. She gasped, her hips pressing back into his.

“Mick.”

“Mmm,” he murmured into her hair.

His fingers came together, clasped her nipples and held steady. The gentle, barely there pinch made her arch in breathless pleasure. She twisted until she turned in his arms and faced him. His chest pressed her breasts and they ached for more intimate contact. Like a long, hard bar, his erection pressed against her belly. Lightning flashed, and thunder answered, as if the elements understood the craziness building inside her.

Mick gathered her close as she slipped her arms around his neck. His strength wrapped Celeste in comfort mixed with volatile anticipation. His gaze was sapphire, green and topaz, all wrapped into one spectacular shade.

She slipped her fingers into his hair and brought his face close to hers.

A deep, shuddering breath went through him. “God, I can’t resist you any more.”

Mick kissed her, pushing his fingers through her hair and holding her in place for a ravaging kiss. Their breaths came hard and fast as they devoured each other. She melted like warm butter on bread, then combusted into the feral, out-of-control woman she wanted to be.

He tore his mouth from hers and buried his lips against the side of her neck. His tongue caressed, licked a trail up to her ear. He flicked her earlobe, plunged his tongue inside. Mick’s breath rasped, his groans of pure male desire harsh and needy.

The thunder grew louder, almost as if it fed upon the heat and arousal rising between them.

She licked her lips. “Please, Mick. I want more.”

“More of this?” He swept her hair aside so he could whisper in her ear provocatively. “Or this?”

He nibbled a path across her chin. When he captured her lips a spark ignited, so powerful her heart slammed in her chest. Her skin tingled. But this time his mouth didn’t just possess, it explored, doing sinful things to her no other man had tried. Mick nibbled her bottom lip, then her top, then his tongue eased into her with mind-melting strokes. Wicked sensations darted along her body like electricity. Her breasts felt round, plump, and her nipples begged for his touch. She responded wholeheartedly, thoughts drifting away as she tasted him with equal fervor.

When he drew back, his eyes were heavy-lidded and filled with irrefutable craving. His breath came in pants as his chest rose and fell. She licked her kiss-swollen lips and his gaze followed. His mouth slanted over hers as if to find a perfect fit, until one kiss turned into two, then three. Glorious and hungry, his lovemaking lit a fire. Her hips surged against his. She was wild for a better fit, to feel his thickness. She needed something to ease the relentless ache. Her hands roamed through his hair, down his neck, over his shoulders.

Oh. Oh, yes. This is what she wanted...needed.

Mick walked her backwards until they came up against a wall. Trapped between his solid body and the unforgiving surface, she squirmed. As if he read her mind, he slipped his hands under her ass and squeezed.

Then he lifted her off her feet. "Wrap your legs around me."

She closed her eyes and did as he demanded, his cock pressed right where she needed it. Iron-hard strength pressed her clit. He rotated his hips.

"Oh." The involuntary sound escaped, and Celeste writhed in his hold as heady pleasure darted around inside her.

Rain came down so hard she could hear it above the pounding of her heart.

She moaned as he kneaded her ass. Her eyes closed and her head tipped back as his lips slid over her neck and touched her pulse point. Under his seduction, she surrendered, flushed and eager. Working his way upward, he tenderly caressed and kissed her neck. He held her still for another deep kiss. A guttural sound left his throat. He bumped and rubbed, undulated his hips until the insistent pressure between her legs threatened to explode. Her head fell back and she closed her eyes.

"Please." She whimpered the word, shameless for completion.

"What do you want?" His hot breath fanned against her neck as he kissed her there. "Say it. Don't hold back."

A simple groan left her lips.

"Tell me." His hips worked her. Thrust. Withdrawal. Bump. Rub. Ceaseless stimulation drawing her body to a cataclysmic peak.

Despite her rampaging desire, the words came with shyness. "Make me come."

"Yes." Low and sultry, his voice sent trailers of fire along her skin.

Jolts of delicious, heart-stealing desire fanned her pulse and mocked any resolve she had left to stay unmoved. Despite the fog of passion overriding her thoughts, she couldn't miss the sensation of his hand sliding upward, cupping her breast in his palm. She gasped into his mouth at the exquisite pleasure, the heat and pressure. Though the silky material kept her naked flesh from his, it didn't stop the involuntary moan that left her throat when his thumb stroked her nipple. When he continued the motion with touches so steady and light, she gave a soft cry of raw delight.

"For as long as I remember I've wanted to take you up against a wall," he said.

Surprise and heady pleasure combined as his hips continued to move, the sensation making her moan and pant. "Really?"

"Yeah." Rasping the word, his breath came harshly. "I fantasized when I was a wet-behind-the-ears teen. I used to lie in and bed and think about you. About how it would feel to make love to you. And you know what teenage boys do when they get horny."

Her breath sucked in at the thought of how long he'd wanted her. "When I was a teen I just wanted you to kiss me. The last ten years I wondered what it would feel like to sleep with you."

He grinned. "Damn, I like the sound of that."

Breathless, her excitement blown into the stratosphere, she shimmied in his hold.

"My, God, Mick. I never knew you felt this way about me."

"Ten years," he rasped. "Ten years of wanting you. It isn't going to be pretty when we come together the first time, sweetheart. I want hard and fast and deep." He sampled the hollow of her throat and made her shiver in hot appreciation. "I want you begging for it."

She gasped, mindless with the knowledge he wanted her fiercely and that she could have him here and now. Wriggling under the erotic sensation, she watched his eyes turn thermal. With a jolt of realization, she saw the raw, man-on-fire side of him that refused

suppression. She'd unleashed a powerful thing between them and trembled as she recognized she couldn't turn back. She clung to the spiraling tension that throbbed and burned brighter.

"You know where this is heading?" Mick's throaty question came as he clasped her ass cheeks in a tight grip, drew her away from the wall and headed down the hallway.

"Yes."

"Where's your bedroom?"

"Same one I had as a kid."

"Jesus, I hope you got rid of that pink bedspread with the little angels on it."

"You remember that?" She couldn't keep the amazement out of her voice.

"I remember everything about you."

She tightened her legs around him. "You know just what to say, officer."

When they reached her bedroom, she reached for the light, and a dimmer switch illuminated everything in a soft glow.

She unwrapped her legs from his waist, and he allowed her to slide down each powerful inch of his body. God, it felt primitive to have him cradle her with possessiveness. Hard and protective, his muscles secured her to him. Excitement cartwheeled in her stomach. He sat on the edge of the bed and tugged her into his lap. His cock prodded her buttocks. She squirmed in response.

His breath hissed inward. "God, Celeste. Don't do that."

She smiled, aware of a sinful craving to make him suffer. "Why?"

"Why?" His answering grin belonged to a plundering pirate, a man who'd captured a prize in a raid and planned wicked deeds. "Because you're driving me crazy. Because I'll rip those shorts off your ass and in three seconds I'll be inside you."

A wicked, stomach-melting sensation shot through her. Celeste understood right then she didn't care if he took her sweetly and tortured her into giving her all. She wanted fast and hard. She liked the wicked feeling of knowing she had this big, powerful man in a world of hurt.

"Good," she said.

His eyes flashed with resolve, and she knew Mick would take sweet revenge. He tipped her backwards, and she sprawled on the bed. He returned to plumping her breast, kneading her roundness with a steady persistence. When his thumb and forefinger plucked at her nipple, she gasped at the tight, wonderful tingle.

Oh, there. Yes, there.

When he edged the thin strap of her top down over her shoulder, she shuddered in expectation. She hadn't quite anticipated this wild, uncontrollable reaction within her heart and soul, this persevering need for completion. Seconds later, he bared her breast, and under the soft lamplight glow, his expression rapt.

"Beautiful," he said.

One single, declarative word and he swept his fingers over her already sensitive nipple. She whimpered in sheer enjoyment and closed her eyes. Her hand slid up over his shoulder as he leaned inward. Warm, wet suction sipped at her. She quivered as the breathtaking pleasure caused another yielding sound to leave her mouth. His tongue twirled over her flesh, dancing and laving and nipping. His teeth closed gently as he worried the very tip. He drew her top down until he bared both breasts. She drifted in a sea of exhilaration as his touch tugged and plucked without remorse. Celeste's legs

shifted, her hips moving in restless little jerks. The ache built with every second. When he looked up, his eyes held promises and wishes, and she suddenly felt she understood him on a primal level that went deeper than sex—into his very soul.

Mick dipped in for another taste of taut flesh. Drawing deeply, he worked a nipple with caresses both soft and hard. He tugged at her other bud with persistent, unrelenting attention while his tongue curled, played. Within the sensual haze clouding her thoughts, Celeste barely registered that her shorts were unbuttoned and the zipper was down. He caressed her bare stomach as her muscles quivered.

His fingers smoothed a trail, teasing before he slipped first one, then a second finger into her tightness and sank deep.

She gasped. "Mick. Oh, my God."

On and on his mouth tortured her nipples, testing them with long, wet, slow licks and deep suckling. She clasped his head and eagerly held him to her breasts. He drew his fingers out to the tips, then slid them back inside with firm pressure. The wonderful sensation of his thick fingers pushing in and out, smoothing and stroking, sent every muscle to quivering. As his caresses continued, she realized she couldn't take it any more. Her body was shivering, shaking, the heat building swiftly.

"Mick, damn it. Please. You're killing me."

He stopped, his head coming up. With a tip-tilted smile, he stopped his caresses but kept his fingers wedged deep. The incinerating heat in his gaze asked for more and begged her to let him continue.

"Trust me." Once more, he kissed her nipples, punctuating each caress with a small swipe of his tongue. "Feel it. Take what you need."

A male growl of enjoyment left his throat. She whimpered as one finger traced moist flesh, then drew her wetness upward. With one tiny brush of his finger over that sensitive nubbin, she shivered uncontrollably.

"That's it," he said, a harsh edge to his voice. "God, honey. I want to be inside you. *Everywhere* inside you."

Everywhere.

Oh, man.

She danced on the edge, her body quaking, everything drawn tight. Reaching for the stars, she headed for rapture. Something, though, held her back. She couldn't quite make it to the top. Couldn't reach...

Under the dim light, his eyes burned with a feral intensity that showed he still needed sexual release. She could feel his erection pressing against her thigh. The musk of sex scented the air.

The pager on his belt went off.

She moaned.

"Damn it," he said. "I've got to check that. It might be a call-out."

"Of course."

She sighed as he rolled away from her and snatched the pager off his belt.

"Yep." He looked at the pager. "I've got to go."

Sharp disappointment snaked through her as she drew the straps of her top up over her shoulders and redid her shorts. She was still shaking, her heart hammering in the aftermath.

And it scared her.

She didn't want to feel this fiercely attracted to him, but she was. She didn't want to hate that SWAT took him away, but she did.

His frown looked thunderous. "I'm sorry."

She nodded, not sure what to say. He left the bed, his gaze cooler, almost detached. She could tell he already slipped into the mindset he'd need to survive whatever waited for him out there in the night. Worry nagged at her.

"So this is how girlfriends and wives feel when their husbands get a SWAT call-out," she said with a hint of unguarded sarcasm. She followed him down the hall to the front door. When he turned back to her, she spoke once more, her throat tight with suppressed emotion. "Mick, tonight was incredible. It was—"

"No." He cupped her cheek, caressed her mouth with his thumb. "Don't tell me how wonderful it was, honey. I saw you struggling with it." His voice held a rough edge, husky with suppressed desire. His eyes held a sadness she didn't expect. "If you have problems with me being a cop, sort them out or let me know before we take this any further." He pressed his lips to her forehead in an exquisitely gentle kiss. "I want you, Celeste. I want to strip you naked and sink into you so deep you won't know where I begin and you end. Think about what we've said and done and if you can handle it. Call me *if* and when you're ready."

He left without another word. She locked the door, then pulled the curtain aside on the front window and watched him as his vehicle pulled away. Roiling emotions ruled her. Urgent happiness and encroaching despair fought for space within her psyche. Cold, hard reality slapped her in the face. *He is right, damn him.* She forced back a rush of tears.

She still feared his job and what could happen to him in it.

Was that why she hadn't climaxed even though he'd driven her to the ultimate edge of insanity?

She headed to her bathroom, flipped the light on, and stared into the mirror. Her hair was a wild toss, her makeup a little smeared, her lips kissed swollen. To phrase it succinctly, she looked like a woman who'd been thoroughly fucked.

But she hadn't.

Celeste wanted that final measure of passion, hungered to complete the staggering sexuality pulsing between her and Mick. Yet she feared the final connection if they made love. If she allowed herself to care so much for him and something horrible happened—

No. Don't think about it.

Trepidation fought for ground. No matter how wonderful he made her feel, his job was risky. Violent. Filled with uncertainty.

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

Chapter Three

The phone rang Saturday evening and woke Celeste. She'd been watching television and fallen asleep on the couch. She jerked out of slumber and stumbled across the room to the table holding the phone. "Hello?"

"Where were you last night?" Darrell asked.

His low, deep voice purred along her nerves, but not with pleasurable strokes. Unlike Mick's delicious, husky voice, Darrell's syllables didn't send tingles into every part of her body. He sounded unbearably officious and his tone immediately put up her back.

"Celeste?" His voice held a hard edge, as if reprimanding a recalcitrant child.

"Where did you go?"

"None of your damned business. Mick warned you off and he means it."

"I'm the man for you. Not him." Clipped, his voice changed from merely husky to rough-edged. "I suppose he was nice and made you think he cares about you. But *no one* can care about you as much as I do."

Nice didn't describe Mick. He could be sweet under the right circumstances, yet he always held a nuance, a hard-edged defiance, a barely controlled rebellion, she found intriguing for a man of the law. She understood it, though. His past sometimes dictated his attitude; it made him Mick.

Angry with herself for engaging in useless conversation, Celeste did what she should have done as soon as she heard Darrell's voice. She hung up. Before the phone could ring again, she hit the "do not disturb" button so she couldn't hear it ring and the answering machine would pick up.

She returned to the couch, laid back and tried to relax. Mick had said she should call him if Darrell contacted her, but what could Mick do about a phone call? Not a lot. He'd said as much last evening.

She'd hoped after last night's encounter with Mick that Darrell would get a clue. A gnawing certainty rose inside Celeste. She didn't think Darrell's harassment would end with phone calls. A ball of fear twisted in her stomach. Mick had labeled Darrell a stalker, and if Darrell had come all the way to Gold Rush, he meant business. Perhaps she should call Mick and advise him of this latest contact.

An image formed of Mick sprawled on the couch with her, his strong body as intoxicating and sexually stimulating as anything she'd imagined. *Mick*. Hot. To die for. Even in high school, with his shiny dark hair tossed around his head, his t-shirts and ripped jeans, he'd always had a bod that gave girls heart palpitations. She sighed.

Last night had been incredible. The things he'd said to her—he'd blown her mind with the explicit, hard-core approach he'd taken. She'd hovered on the edge of a heart-shaking, mind-melding climax.

If it felt that good with just the modest amount they'd done, what would it feel like when he finally took her?

A yawn cracked her jaw. Fatigue weighted her eyelids. She closed her eyes completely and tried to relax, her dilemma bouncing around in her mind.

* * * *

The grandfather clock in the hallway let out a loud bong. Celeste sat up with a start and swept her hair away from her face as the clock announced the time. Almost eighty-three.

A strange sensation crawled along her skin. She jerked her gaze to the window, where the curtains gaped like the maw of a dark mouth. Though streetlights gave the nighttime a soft glow, her discomfort remained until trepidation grew deep in her bones. Something felt off. Creepy. She acknowledged the sensation and shivered under a deep memory. One she *never* revisited.

Until now.

Her mother never coming home. Her father in the hospital and paralyzed for life. Her loneliness compounded as strangers from child protective services offered meaningless platitudes and attempted to comfort.

She took a shaky breath. She didn't need to remember... It was long ago and so useless. Times better left in the forgotten hallways of her mind.

Again, she surveyed outside, and primordial certainty chewed its way into her awareness.

Someone had stood outside the window and watched her.

Darrell?

She leapt from the couch and grabbed the curtains. She snapped the material shut and closed out the night and prying eyes.

Celeste stood stock-still for countless moments, her fingers clutching the curtains. She drew in a panicky breath born of fear that rose without remorse. She couldn't tell the police—Mick—that she thought someone stood outside and watched her. They'd think she imagined it.

Had she?

* * * *

Celeste would have to learn the game, or pay the consequences.

Darrell sipped the now-lukewarm cup of coffee he'd bought from the local coffee establishment in midtown not far from his hotel room.

"Shit," he said. "Bitter."

He grimaced, pissed they'd forgotten the cream. They always forgot. This was the last time they'd overlook it. Soon, like Celeste, they'd know the meaning of paying for their sins.

He watched Celeste yank the curtains closed and smiled. His gaze roamed over the obscenely large Victorian. If she'd followed the pattern he wanted—no, expected—he wouldn't have to sit here and watch her. He wouldn't have to play games. He wouldn't have to punish her.

From his vantage point in the nondescript white sedan, he could view that deputy's house down the block. The cop's house was dark, unlike the cheerful gleam of lights in Celeste's home. Darrell sipped the coffee and grimaced at the taste once again.

He knew she'd screwed the cop last night. The asshole hadn't left the house until midnight. When the cop had interrupted his talk with Celeste Friday night, he'd wanted to lash out at them both immediately. Compulsion had burned in his gut, urging him to do it. *Do it. Do it.*

But if he'd been hasty, Celeste wouldn't know the inconvenience he'd experienced

in coming here to collect her. No. She would understand soon enough.

Would she string along the cop as she had him? The bitch had teased him with her longing looks and self-deprecating comments. Always so modest. *Right.*

Now she thought she could dump him. “I don’t think so, Celeste.”

Bitch was too good a word for her. Like any good bitch, she would learn to heel.

* * * *

“So, bro. Trey tells me he saw you with a babe Friday night.”

Mick threw a glance at his youngest brother Craig as they walked along the path away from the firing range. Automatic weapons fire echoed in his ears, then the shout of “clear” from the range officer.

Sunday afternoon sun bounced off his safety glasses and a gust laden with moisture blew by. Clouds threatened, towering dark and ugly above the Rocky Mountains.

He didn’t want to answer his brother one way or the other. Despite a bruising workout in the gym at o’dark-thirty this morning, a regular day on patrol and this late afternoon range training, he was spring loaded for action. He’d head straight to the gym again and maybe bleed off this persistent jumpiness.

He glanced over at Craig.

Decked out like Mick was in the Army Combat Uniform the Sheriff’s Department had purchased last year to replace the old black uniforms for SWAT, Craig slung his Colt M4A1 rifle over his shoulder, striding like a warrior ready for serious business. Though not quite as tall as Mick, his hard-muscled body and intense green eyes betrayed Viking ancestry. His icy Nordic looks warranted the call sign of “Viking” to his fellow officers. Blond, with a receding hairline, his military-short hair added to his commanding presence. Craig normally showed a stern, no-nonsense façade. Without fail, people thought Craig was the eldest of the three brothers.

“Mick?” Craig’s eyes narrowed in concern. “You all right?”

“I’m good.” Mick smiled. “I’m not used to anyone asking about women I date.”

“What women? You haven’t had a date in what, a year? Unless Friday night qualified as a date?”

Mick didn’t like admitting to a lack of female companionship—Trey seemed to have dates every weekend and taciturn Craig even managed a female encounter once in a while. “We’ve been too damned busy, and I have the promotion test coming up.”

“You think a date or two here and there will keep you from making rank?”

Mick grunted and threw his brother an arch look. “What are you now, Dr. Phil?”

Without cracking a smile, Craig said, “Hey, I like Dr. Phil. He’d say you should chill. It’ll give you less gray hair.”

“I don’t have any gray hair.” Mick stopped before they reached the squad cars parked in rows.

Craig glanced at his slightly taller brother. “I dunno. You’re getting up there in years.”

“I’m only fuckin’ thirty-three.”

Craig winked. “Starts early on some guys. Next thing you’ll have to look out for is receding hair line.”

“Look who’s talking, baldie.”

Craig’s grin stayed put as they opened the trunk of the car and started putting away

their weapons. Once that was accomplished, they piled into the car.

“Do me a favor, don’t call her babe,” Mick said as he drove them out of the range area and back toward the city. “It’s Celeste.”

“That’s what Trey said. Not that she wasn’t a babe, but that it was Celeste at the gym. You don’t think she’s hot?”

“She’s beautiful.” Mick could say it without hesitation. A troubling thought intruded. “Why? Are you interested in her?”

He felt Craig’s scrutiny and glanced at him. His brother looked flabbergasted. “Hell, no. She’s got too much baggage.”

Mick snorted. “And you don’t?”

“We all do. More than most. But I need a woman who doesn’t have *any* baggage. You know, to counterbalance my crap.”

“You need a woman? I thought you were against hooking up long-term. Like Trey.”

Craig shrugged. “Most women can’t put up with our career.”

Mick knew that like he knew every inch of his MP5 weapon.

“I always thought she was pretty,” Craig said. “Too young, but pretty.”

“Are you kidding? She’s thirty, the same as you.”

“Seems younger than that. She always looked so delicate, like porcelain or something.”

Mick thought back to the first time he’d seen her. “I only knew her a year before that asshole tried to rape her.”

“Yeah. Who could forget that night?”

Mick hadn’t, and he figured he never would. Even if he never saw Celeste again. The thought of not seeing her stung in places he didn’t want to acknowledge. Mick suffered his brother’s scrutiny and resented it, though he should be used to it by now. Did his feelings for Celeste show on his face?

Since his encounter with her Friday night, he’d spent too much time fantasizing about her moist parted lips and how the sheer heat and softness of her had felt clenching around his deeply imbedded fingers. Man, the memory of her arousal almost made him break out in a sweat.

He’d meant every word he’d spoken. Now that he had her primed, he knew when they did make love it would be raw and elemental.

First he’d build her up, make her so crazy and hot she wouldn’t know north and south from east and west. He’d do things to her she’d never imagined, discover her most erotic fantasies and play them one by one until she screamed for him to finish her.

His jaw muscles worked as he thought about that final pleasure, the moment he’d discover what it felt like moving deep inside her. To feel her come around his cock.

He’d awakened last night with a spike-hard erection from a dream where he’d taken her fast, and her shouts of pleasure echoed in his ears.

“What did Celeste want?” Craig asked.

He couldn’t say what Celeste wanted, and he didn’t think she could say either. That was part of the problem. He sure as hell wouldn’t let it rip with, ‘well, she wants me to fuck her.’

“Mom will want to know all about it,” Craig said.

It took Mick a minute to realize his brother hadn’t read his mind. “What?”

“You said no one asks you about your love life, but Mom does.”

“She doesn’t count. Besides, she asks everyone about their love lives.”

Craig threw his head back and laughed, another amazing and unusual occurrence.
“Especially Trey’s.”

“Is that what he calls it? A love life? More like a revolving door.”

“He’s going to tear you a new one if he hears you say that.” Craig’s smug expression formed into a grin. “By the way, why would Celeste contact any of us? It’s not like she’s kept in touch all these years.”

“Celeste wanted to rehash the good old days,”

“Yeah? That seems weird. Old times weren’t so good for you.”

“Truer words couldn’t be said.”

Craig didn’t pursue the subject, and that worked fine for Mick. Plus, Mick didn’t kiss and tell. He figured what went on between consenting adults remained their business. On the other hand, his brother deserved some of his own medicine.

“I haven’t seen you dating anyone lately,” Mick said.

Craig shifted in his seat, an uncomfortable expression on his face.

Their pagers went off a second later with a call for SWAT to report to the El Torro County Sheriff’s Department.

Mick pressed his foot on the gas. “Let’s mount up.”

* * * *

As Celeste drove toward Maria DeAngelo’s Tuesday night, she was looking forward to the party and maybe catching up with people she hadn’t seen in long years. She also wanted to forget the twelve messages on her answering machine from Darrell. Maybe he thought he could reach her more easily on a landline than her cell. Either way, she was through talking to him. Each message had escalated, his voice patently condescending.

Why won’t you talk to me?

I’m concerned about you.

I don’t understand what I’ve done to deserve your displeasure.

And the final one this afternoon put the icing on the proverbial cake. *I’ll see you again really soon, Celeste. Really soon.*

She’d decided not to answer the phone ever again, and the answering machine remained on all the time.

She’d also gone to the Gold Rush police station to make a report about the calls. The officer at the desk didn’t suggest a restraining order, and she didn’t ask for one. *I also need to call Mick. I promised him I would if Darrell continued this garbage. So why haven’t I?*

Because she might have to see him, and her attraction to him would jump right up and bite her, and she’d have to deal with her feelings. Her erotic encounter with him last Friday hadn’t removed her hunger. What would dear Auntie say? *Just deal with it, honey. The problem won’t disappear because you ignore it.*

Okay, she’d call him after the party.

She’d done an excellent job of forgetting he existed until one night she’d turned on the television and caught a news report on a recent meth lab bust. The news report showed men in SWAT uniform. She’d searched the screen for any sign of Mick, but she didn’t recognize the deputies she saw on the screen. She almost never watched the news. She didn’t want or need reminders of violence.

As she turned onto another street, big trees loomed out of the darkness and reminded her that Darrell could easily be lurking out there.

Watching. Waiting.

For what?

What exactly was he willing to do?

A shiver snaked through her body.

She arrived at the DeAngelo house a few moments later. Built in the early nineteen hundreds, the house stood on more land than most of the homes in this old neighborhood. The white abode always seemed friendly and inviting. Maria's good heart permeated the entire place. She'd met Maria when she first moved to Gold Rush years ago, and she relished the opportunity to see her again.

As she left her car and headed down the sidewalk, she almost came to a stop when she saw a familiar vehicle. Mick's truck. It had to be. She hadn't looked at the license plate the other night, but the SUV looked like his. Excitement pierced straight to her core as she imagined trying to greet him without reliving their encounter last week. Oh, she'd remember it all right. A woman would have to be dead not to.

Conscious of her vulnerability as she stood outside the house alone, she quickened her steps.

It didn't take long for Maria DeAngelo to answer the door. When she saw Celeste, she enveloped her in a huge hug. Then she held Celeste out at arm's length.

"Celeste, doll!" Maria's dark eyes, expertly made up, sparkled with delight. "It's so wonderful to see you. It's been too long. Ten years."

"Well, we kept in touch with emails and letters, didn't we?" Celeste said.

Maria kept her sturdy hands on Celeste's shoulders as she looked up at her. "We did at that."

Though small, Maria wasn't frail. Her silvery hair, still thick, piled on her head in a bun. She wore a beautiful turquoise jacquard pantsuit and had decorated herself with matching topaz earrings, necklace and ring. Her round face, wrinkled and yet always cheerful, sent renewed gladness to Celeste's heart.

"How are you?" Celeste asked.

Maria's eyes twinkled with clever mischief. "I'm wonderful. At my age, when you wake up in the morning, it's a good thing. Come in, come in."

After Celeste removed her light sweater and handed it to the maid, Maria led them toward the back of the house. Celeste realized her shoulders felt tight, her jaw clenched. She expected to see Mick any second. She both dreaded and anticipated the experience.

"We've got a barbeque going back here, but there are so many people it's spilled into the living room, too," Maria said.

As they stepped through multi-paned French doors onto the patio, the scent of grilled beef, hot dogs and chicken filled the air.

Around a hundred people occupied the expansive back yard and garden. The courtyard glowed with special lights strung from poles, giving the area a fairy tale ambiance. Celeste scanned the garden and pinpointed Mick.

At the sight of him, a thick pool of heat stirred in her lower belly. Instant, unrepentant craving.

Oh, I am so screwed

Seeing Mick would always do this to her—this out-of-control, please-take-me

response. Something live and deep-seated blazed between them, and admitting it put her thoughts into a riot of resistance even as she was drawn to him.

Dressed in a jungle green polo shirt that hugged his chest and shoulders and green khaki pants, Mick appeared yummy enough to eat. She licked her lips. He chatted with another man and didn't look in her direction. She tore her gaze from him when a woman she hadn't seen in ages greeted her.

Several minutes passed while she conversed with the woman. After the lady moved away to mingle with others, Celeste noted that Mick had disappeared, and severe disappointment welled inside her. He'd probably been called to work.

What else is new?

"Get over it," she muttered.

Once she'd slept with him, she could turn her back on a deeper relationship. They'd both have their itch scratched.

I can walk away from him when I want. Anytime.

Celeste wandered toward the gardens and beyond the maze. As old as the house, the maze fascinated her. She'd learned the labyrinth's secrets as an adolescent and could find her way out in no time. But more than that, the hedgerows reminded her of that horrible time in her teens when her foolhardy venture into the maze just before dark with an older boy had turned into a nightmare. She hadn't been in here since then.

Her body refused to take another step.

She turned away and decided to make a pit stop in the restroom. As she came around a corner, she ran full force into a solid body and started to bounce back. She let out a startled sound as her pulse fluttered and her heart banged against her ribs. Two big hands clasped her upper arms to steady her, and she ended up plastered to a tall, hard body. Her heart did a little stutter and leap of relief as she recognized him.

"Mick."

His fingers caressed her arms, but his face remained a grim mask. "Hey, I'm sorry. You okay?"

She grinned. "I'm fine."

The intimate press of their bodies played havoc with her libido. Every leanly-carved sinew reminded Celeste that she wasn't immune to a healthy dose of pure male testosterone in a gorgeous package.

He heaved a deep breath and released it slowly, as if he tried to restrain himself.

From doing what?

Mick's touch slipped up to her ribcage, the movement of his fingers startling a shiver of enjoyment from her.

A stirring of white-hot need developed in her belly. She caught a slight whiff of musky delicious aftershave. He looked fresh, put together, and yet the animal in him hovered around the edges. He released her, and some of the tension ebbed away.

Mick's gaze skated over her from head to toe, his attention blatantly admiring. "I didn't know you were going to be at this party."

She shrugged. "Why should you know?"

His eyes, so crystalline and as mysterious as the deepest sea, boiled with either perturbation or passion and it stirred a primitive reaction in her deepest being. "Because if I'd have known you planned to attend, I would have offered to pick you up."

"I saw you earlier, but then I thought maybe you'd left the party."

“Hell, no. Maria has the best parties in town.” His eyes twinkled with amusement. “What’s up?”

“A couple of things.”

His eyes narrowed, and he looked around as two people walked down the hall, laughing and appearing somewhat inebriated.

“Can we talk somewhere more private?” she asked, not wanting anyone else to be privy to her business.

“Come this way.” He clasped her and pulled her into the guest room. He flipped on the light and closed the door.

Large and well appointed, the big room invited visions of cozy nights curled up on the king sized four-poster bed with a lover.

He placed his hands on his hips. “Okay, shoot. What did you want to talk about?”

She took a deep breath. “It’s Darrell.”

He let out a puff of air. “Great. What’s he done now?”

She explained the phone calls and the fact she’d made a report with the city police, and Mick’s grave expression turned icy.

“Son-of-a-bitch,” he said, the sound harsh and certain. “You should have called me like I asked you to.”

His imperious tone irritated her. “What could you do? I mean...it’s not like I know where he is so you can go and talk with him. Like I said, I put in a report with the city police.”

His eyes calmed, his mouth softening. “You’re right. I can’t talk some sense into him if I don’t know where he is.”

“I didn’t want to bother you when I know you can’t do anything about Darrell’s idiocy.”

“No, I can’t, but...” He took a deep breath. “Keep his phone messages just in case. You might need it for evidence and for the phone company.”

She grimaced. “I was so angry that I erased the messages he left on my cell and home phone.”

“Damn.”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

He clasped her shoulder. “No sweat. Just record them from now on. And if you answer the phone and it’s him, hang up immediately. Don’t engage him in conversation, okay?”

Feeling safer and more reassured, she brushed her fingers down his shoulder to his powerful bicep. Then she released him.

His breath drew inward, slowly and deeply, then he edged nearer. “What else did you want to say?”

“I thought about what you said Friday night.” She dared to take the next bold step that would leave him in no doubt she wanted their intimate connection to continue. “That I needed to decide what I wanted.”

His gaze went hot as she inched nearer. “And?”

She slipped her hand along his muscular chest. As she explored in pure pleasure, his gaze burned with obvious intent. Sparks of electricity danced over her skin. Their noses almost brushed. His warm breath touched her lips.

“This. I want this,” she said.

Celeste reached up and clasped the back of his head, urging him down. She brought his mouth to hers.

With a groan, he hauled her up against him. His mouth twisted over hers, ravenous, tasting like chocolate as he plunged into the kiss with feral possession. With deep tongue thrusts, he left no doubt that he wanted more. Her heart thumped heavily, her skin tingled. Her mind shouted with a primal joy.

Yes. Yes. Yes.

Mick tore his lips from hers, his gaze holding the scorching passion of a man who didn't want to stop at one explosive kiss.

Voices sounded outside the doorway.

"Damn it," he said in a low whisper.

Before she could make a sound, he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward the walk-in closet.

"What are we—" she started to say.

He urged her into the closet, snapped on the light and closed the door. A wild, forbidden thrill coursed through her. *Oh.*

Celeste got the impression of bright clothes and a shoe rack with a dozen pairs of shoes of all different colors. As he loomed over her, she forgot everything but his fresh masculine scent and potent male presence. His muscled frame tantalized her and crumbled her ability to stay indifferent. Her libido became an infuriating traitor, wreaking havoc with sensibility.

She fell into the moment, excitement snatching her breath away.

"You kissed me," he said matter-of-factly.

She smiled crookedly. "Yes, I did."

Mick looked like a man ready to start an inquisition. She blinked, surprised they'd ended up here, and wondering at his nerve. At the same time, she couldn't squelch the thrill bubbling to the surface. She'd never surrendered to crazy impulse like this until now.

Only her fantasies were this wild.

"What are we doing here?" She felt a tad breathless. "I'm not sure Maria would like this."

His grin turned sinful and sexy. "Then we'd better be quick."

She responded to his playfulness with a smile of her own. "Are you sure this isn't illegal, officer?"

"It's probably illegal somewhere." He nuzzled her temple. God, Celeste, I've been thinking about you."

Secretly thrilled, she said, "Really? I tried not to think of you."

"Did it work?"

"No. Then I made the mistake of turning on the news and I saw the SWAT team."

Wariness filled his eyes. "The drug bust."

"Exactly."

He tilted his head slightly to the side. "How did you feel when you saw the report?"

"I'll admit it. It scared me. The thought of anything happening to you scares me."

He moved in, cradling her head in his big palms. "You care about me?"

She slipped her hands onto his taut waist. "I cared about you ten years ago when I walked away." Unexpectedly, tears stung her eyes. "I've always cared for you. We were

such good friends when we were kids. Can we be friends again?"

His eyes were warm and soft as he smiled. "Yes." His fingers slipped through her hair, cupping the back of her neck. "You know what I've done every night when I've gone home? Even when I've had one hell of a day?" He kissed her nose, then her forehead, each exquisite brush of skin-to-skin a tender touch. "I've jumped in the shower and closed my eyes and wondered what it would feel like to be inside you." His voice went low and throaty. "It's driving me nuts."

She flushed, arousal rising inside like a wave. She smiled, trembling deep inside and wanting his caresses, his kisses. "I think I like the sound of that. Big, tough cop under my spell."

One corner of his sexy mouth turned up.

She linked her arms around his waist and tugged him close. The long, thick blade of his erection nudged her belly.

"I'm staking a claim right now," he said.

Maybe to some women his statement would sound caveman, but to her, it started a chain reaction. A rich vulnerability entered his eyes, and she ached to see more emotions, more craving in his expression. He curved his hand around her jaw and tilted her chin upward. Charged seconds drew out as she waited. Her legs felt unsteady. Exhilaration pierced her. She made a sound in her throat, inarticulate and whispery. All around her, the air seemed rich with the promise of sex. Hooded and persuasive, his gaze drew her in until she saw nothing else.

Mick kissed her, his mouth moving hungrily over hers. Her spine arched as she surrendered to touch, to a loving so beautiful, she couldn't think, couldn't hear, couldn't feel anything else. Mick's virility called to the feminine inside her until she melted into his body, hardness to softness, curve to curve. He walked her backward and they bumped against an empty space along one wall. She allowed her touch to traverse his broad shoulders, his strong neck, to test the carved muscles of his biceps.

His pulled up the soft cotton of her sleeveless top until his touch teased her spine. He wedged one thigh between her legs, pressing upward into her mound. She made a throaty sound of erotic delight. Wriggling against his thigh, she pressed tight to steel-hard muscle. Pleasure shot high into her stomach.

He mastered her mouth, taking her with a rhythm she wanted deep in her core. Her womb ached, craving completion; her nipples tingled and drew taut. His touched slid up over her ribcage and palmed her breast. She filled his hand, and as he massaged the globe, she ached for his touch on her nipple. Celeste clasped her hand over his, directing his fingers. She quaked with a naked and elemental desire as she undulated on his thigh. Mick drew back to gaze into her eyes.

It was pure torture. She wanted to strip bare and beg him to take her here and now, but one last barrier in her mind made her hold back. Her throat ached. "Mick."

A wicked grin touched his mouth. "I know you're not quite ready."

"I am."

"No, you're not." His breath came faster, arousal evident in the heat in his eyes. "You need more time, and I'm willing to ride this out." He brushed her nipple through the thin barrier of blouse and bra. He clasped her nipple and tugged. "I've thought about this. Hell, obsessed over it. When we sleep together it's only going to be because you want me more than you've ever wanted another man. When you're open to me and

nothing else matters. Not my job, not anything in our pasts.”

She gasped as exquisite arousal spiked hard and high inside her. Passion flared and exploded in his gaze. She closed her eyes to escape the raw intimacy, her breath taken and held captive. As he tormented a nipple, he thrust his thumb between her parted lips. She sucked it greedily.

Seconds later, he lifted her blouse. He unhooked the front of her bra, then dipped down and captured her nipple with his mouth. A soft groan, barely stifled, left her throat. Hot and wet, his tongue smoothed over her flesh. He sucked hard and a swift flush of heat rose through her body. Pleasure drew another gasp as he tasted and licked, varying his strokes until she whimpered under the onslaught.

He released her breast and kissed her again. Mick’s hand skimmed upward over her thigh, pushing up her denim skirt.

“Damn, sweetheart. Your legs are so beautiful.”

Trembling and eager for his touch, she parted her thighs. His fingers brushed over her cotton panties, the swift touch making her moan.

He worked under the elastic leg of her panties and stroked.

“God, Mick.”

“Shhh, sweetheart. You don’t want anyone to hear us, do you?”

She couldn’t answer; she was so unbearably aroused the entire party could have walked through the closet door and she wouldn’t have cared. She panted, quaking on the edge. He dipped one finger inside.

“Yes.” She whimpered.

Another finger joined the first. “Oh, yeah.”

He kissed her deeply as he worked his fingers in smooth strokes. He pressed upward, and he swallowed her gasping, choking groan of pleasure. He felt so incredible, thick, stretching her.

She had no control. No thoughts. Nothing but mind-destroying, gathering passion. His fingers slipped from her and brushed over her clit, swirling, teasing.

She was going to die. *Right here. Right now.*

“Don’t come yet,” he whispered. “Not yet. Tell me one of your fantasies.”

“This is it. This.” She groaned. “Making love in a closet.”

“You want me to take you here? Now?”

It was wild. And so damn risky. Half the town stood a few feet away from the bedroom door. Her high school Spanish teacher could walk in and find them. The mayor. Her next-door neighbor.

She wanted it.

The word tore from her throat. “Yes.”

He thrust two fingers deep inside her again, thrusting and retreating as her channel clenched and released. Trembling and shaking, she took the pleasure. His sheltering embrace gave her the courage to let go. Her head fell back as heat waves washed over her body in a tidal wave. She held back the scream threatening release from her throat, her whimpering moan testifying to the ecstasy rippling over her. She burned up, a supernova of pleasure.

As Celeste came down from the plateau, she instinctively reached for and found his erection. He pressed hard and thick against his jeans. Aggressive desire pushed her to caress him.

He grabbed her hand and groaned, the sound almost a growl. "No. Not now. If you touch me one more time, I'm going to explode." His voice went rough and hot. "And I want to be inside you when I do that."

Her mind swirled, filled with desire so sizzling, she could barely think. As his hands slid down to her thighs, he went to his knees in front of her.

Oh, my.

Celeste shivered as his fingers glided under her skirt again, pushing the material upward with slow deliberation. He gripped the elastic waistband of her panties.

With a swift tug, he drew them down to her ankles. "Step out of them."

She almost said no, but the stimulation, the essence of the forbidden made her want his lips on her more than she wanted to breathe.

She stepped out of her panties and kicked them aside. Mick's fingers traced over her ankle. "I like these shoes."

She rarely wore high heels, but tonight she'd worn wedges with ties around the ankles.

His hands moved back to her naked ass, cupping, smoothing over the skin with caressing touches. He squeezed gently, and she gasped.

He inhaled. "God, you smell good."

Celeste closed her eyes, the passion in his eyes too much. Mick's warm breath gusted over her mons. Anticipation roared through her. When his wet, warm tongue slipped over her, she moaned softly in pleasure. Hot bliss surged through her. She clutched at his head, burying her fingers in his thick hair. Stroke after heated stroke licked along her sensitive tissues, igniting a tingling, building rise toward climax. Once more something inside her fought the pleasure, denying her that final measure, as it had the night he'd been called away.

"Mick." The words sprang from her without forethought as pleasure threatened to shake her to pieces but couldn't. "Please."

Arousal drew higher as he licked. Her breathing came quicker, her heart pounding as pleasure pumped and surged, turning her into a mindless creature bent on nothing but the final explosive result.

She hovered on the edge. One pass of his tongue over her clit, and she knew she'd lose it.

Simply lose her mind.

Lose precious control.

She heard the bedroom door open, and it was then the full realization of what they were doing hit her.

Chapter Four

Mick stood long enough to reach for the cord and snap off the overhead light. Then, to her total surprise, he returned to his knees. *Oh, my God.* He planned to continue the torment. Excited beyond bearing, yet terrified they would be discovered, she closed her eyes and waited for judgment day.

He caressed her thighs and dipped between her legs. His touch flicked over her, so teasing, so light and sensual. Mick smoothed his tongue over her clit, and the pleasure wouldn't wait. Celeste expected her excitement to disappear like smoke, but the danger of discovery ignited feral desires. Rebellion raked at her with sharp claws. She didn't want to stop. Didn't want this moment marred by adult considerations. Didn't want her fears to destroy the chance for pleasure once more. She was in a friend's closet, a man's head between her legs while he explored her feminine mysteries with delicious movements of lips and tongue. She should push Mick away and rearrange her clothes, and pray to the heavens no one found them.

More than that, she'd expected Mick to stop.

Instead he sucked her highly sensitive clit with one gentle, slow movement. Time paused as Celeste held her breath, muscles tensing in pleasure that threatened to rend her into tiny pieces.

Despite voices in the room, Mick tasted her with another sweet lick.

Celeste imploded as exquisite, bone-melting ecstasy spread out from deep inside, uncoiling with the heat of melted sun deep in her core. She clutched at his head and shoulders, breathing rapidly through her nose as she almost strangled trying to hold back the raw cry threatening to escape.

Though bliss melded her into one pulsating ball of pleasure, Celeste restrained her cries, muffling them with one hand. Mick's hands slipped up to her waist as she continued to shudder, the last vestige of delicious sensation vibrating within her.

Mick stood. He still needed release, and the long bar pressing against her stomach proved it. His chest rose and fell with deep movements, betraying that he hovered on the edge of losing control. She was glad she couldn't see his face. Would his features show satisfaction and raw passion?

Fear replaced reckless impulse as reality came to roost. *God, what have I done? This is...insane. Too much.*

"Did you hear something?" A female voice asked outside in the bedroom. "Like a little animal whimpering or something?"

"No." Maria's calm voice answered the question, not sounding the least concerned. "My cats are all in the kitchen."

"If it was a cat, it was a weird sounding one."

Maria chuckled. "Freddy is like that, but I don't think it was him. Unless he got caught in the closet again."

Oh, shit. Oh, shit. Celeste stiffened, mortification scorching her cheeks. If her friend found them in here, Celeste would discover what it meant to be beyond embarrassed. Her panties were still wadded up at her feet and the entire closet smelled like sex. Musky, intimate. Undeniable evidence of hanky panky.

Mick didn't move and neither did Celeste, both barely breathing.

A phone rang somewhere in the house.

"Oh, there's the phone. Here's your sweater, dear. Let's go."

Maria's voice faded as they left and the bedroom door closed.

Mick's hands slipped around Celeste's back as he pressed her to him, his touch a massaging caress. His breath tickled her ear. "Easy. You can relax now."

She listened, half afraid someone would still discover them in the closet. She kept her voice low. "This was a mistake."

She couldn't see his face, but he removed his touch and snapped on the light. The closet was suddenly way too confining. Now she could see his features clearly, and the raw passion she half expected to see wasn't there. Instead, his gaze had cooled. She hurried to pull up her panties.

"A mistake?" His eyes looked darker in this dim light, filled with challenge.

Bristling with testosterone, this side of Mick always gave her pause. His absolute confidence, his masculine, cut features, always made her feel out of her element, somehow inadequate to cope with his strength.

"Celeste?"

"Can we not talk about this in the closet?"

"Yeah. All right."

Even as they checked for all clear and left the bedroom, she knew she'd made a huge faux pas. *This was a mistake*. She hadn't meant it quite like that.

Yes you did.

Frustrated, she heaved a sigh, and said in low tones, "I need to use the restroom. Can we meet out in the garden again and talk?"

He glanced at his watch, face still implacable. "I would, but I'm on shift in two hours and have to get home and shower."

She glanced down and realized he'd managed to harness his physical reaction to her. Good. It wouldn't do to run around during the party with a major hard-on. Her words in the closet had probably done plenty to douse his interest in her. Maybe permanently.

"Okay." She glanced around, aware they stood in the hallway where anyone could eavesdrop.

Her cell rang, and she dug the tiny flip phone out of the pocket of her skirt.

She didn't have time to say hello, before her caller spoke. "Hello, Celeste. It's me."

Her blood froze, and she glanced at Mick. His gaze narrowed, his eyes curious when she didn't say anything.

She almost choked on the words when they did come forth. "Leave me alone, Darrell."

Mick reached for the phone and before she knew it, he snatched it from her hand. "Huntley, this is Mick MacGilvary. We met in the parking lot the other day. For the last time, Celeste wants you gone. Another call and El Torro SWAT will be at your door." He closed the phone and handed it to her. "Maybe that will do the trick."

Mouth open, she stared at him a few seconds before she could recover. "You are the most to-the-point, direct man I've ever met. Direct with words, and direct with...uh..." She swallowed hard. His glower didn't diminish. She cleared her throat. "Mick, I'm sorry about earlier. When I said it was a mistake."

He waved one hand. "Forget it. Look, I've got to get going. Tomorrow is my day off.

Could you meet me in Finney's Park tomorrow for lunch?"

His invitation surprised her. "All right. What time?"

"Twelve sharp. Lunch is on me. I'll talk to you later, all right?"

Without a goodbye, he headed down the hallway and out of sight. She leaned against the wall as she slipped the phone back into her pocket.

God, this was a mess. She closed her eyes for a second and remembered the delicious pleasure she'd experienced with Mick. The park, eh? She didn't know if she could stand much more of Mick's magic.

Yeah, but you got yourself into this, Celeste. You wanted him and you still do. Don't back away from another chance at pleasure.

* * * *

Darrell opened the door to the hotel room and wrinkled his nose in disgust.

The room, like everything else in this stupid town, proved substandard. Well, he couldn't have expected better. This mid-grade hotel was the best thing in Gold Rush other than the Stampede, an ultra-luxury resort a few miles outside of town that catered to the spa and golf crowd and skiers in winter.

Too many people would see him there and pay attention to his movements. Studying people pleased him, and he knew better than most that there were always people watching, always taking note of how they could use others. Even casual vacationers had an angle when they were rich enough to stay at a place like the Stampede. Rich, annoyed, and neurotic. His clientele fit the profile. He didn't feel like socializing on this trip. Besides, his goal in this Podunk little town required a low profile.

He couldn't afford Celeste's cop taking note of him any more than he already had. Rage seeped inside Darrell with slow, deliberate drips more insidious than a leaky faucet. How dare she use the cop as a bodyguard?

She's thrown me over for a mere cop? She will pay. Oh, yes, she will pay dearly.

A deep breath heaved from his chest. Wouldn't do to become distracted. Right now he enjoyed the preparation, the plans toward making Celeste rue the day she'd run from him. Planning began here and now.

He slammed the door, locked it, and threw his suitcase down on the queen-sized bed. Buried on a side street off Main, the hotel didn't get much notice from the police. Places like this never did. Something big had to happen for cops to pay attention and cruise by here, like murder, hostage situations or drugs. While drugs were found in every town, he doubted murder or hostage scenarios made much of a blip on the radar around Gold Rush and El Torro County.

The room was utilitarian, but better than the no-tell motels that populated the less fortunate side of town. He'd spent the first few nights in one of those hotels, then decided he couldn't take the ambience any more. Homeless people and not-so-savory types had wandered by with a frequency he found inconvenient. He didn't want those people anywhere around, touching things he wanted to touch, moving in the same air he moved within.

He drew in a deep breath. The place smelled like glass cleaner, pungent and offensive. Proof the place had been unclean before the maid came in and gave it a thorough scrubbing.

He drew off his polo shirt and tossed it on the bed next to the suitcase, then worked

on removing his shoes, socks, pants, and briefs. After fetching his shaving kit from the suitcase, he headed into the bathroom. Like the rest of the room it possessed the accoutrements expected. Hair dryer, small basket with shampoo, conditioner, lotion—all from a no-one-has-ever-heard-of-‘em so-called designer company. He snorted and retrieved his pricey shampoo, conditioner and shaving cream. He hadn’t shaved in two days and looked scruffy. After shaving and brushing his teeth, he stared at his blond hair with regret. He hated dying it but needed to change himself superficially. Changing internally...well...the only person who needed to do that was Celeste. She would change. She would give him what she owed him. And she would like it.

He smiled, then jerked back from the mirror. There was a speck on the mirror. Damn it all to hell. Maybe the maids around here didn’t use as much glass cleaner as they should. He looked again. A speck all right. Darrell leaned forward to take a closer observation. Right there. In the middle of his eye, right on the pupil. A speck. He blinked. The speck grew.

Curiosity worked its way into his psyche as he recognized an emotion hovering around the fringes. Panic? No. Worry? No. He shoved aside the perceived weakness ruthlessly. Only his shadow self mattered, and with that persona came a well of calm. No feelings short of his goal to acquire what he wanted when he wanted it. No obstacles. No one in his way.

Granted, allowing one’s shadow self to take over resulted in impatience, avarice, and any number of mental aberrations. He expected it. He wanted to experience it all. At the same time, he *couldn’t* feel these emotions most of the time.

A long time ago, as he studied psychology in college for the first time, he discovered what made him special and embraced it. His professors had lectured on sociopaths and how they differed from “normal” people. The more he heard, the more it sparked a light bulb inside, leading him to an inevitable conclusion.

Curious, he studied the condition and realized he could use this self-knowledge to his advantage and manipulate others so they wouldn’t discover his true nature.

Certain words had never meant much to him. Not like they did to others.

Terror. Love. Pain.

Knowing the word and experiencing the corresponding sentiment became a playground of pretend. He became expert at acting the emotion so others would believe he understood the sensation.

And so he could label himself and understand.

He was a sociopath. Or as some called such people, a psychopath.

Unfortunately, most people thought sociopaths crazy, even when they weren’t.

People are pathetic, dumb ass creatures.

He asked his professors a plethora of questions, read publications until he felt with absolute certainty that he fit the description. He rolled the word around in his mind and explored it on his tongue.

“The sociopath.”

If one had to be a sociopath, one should be the best.

The spot on the mirror grew yet again. If he waited much longer it would increase until it took up the whole mirror.

He reached into his shaving kit again and drew out latex gloves. He stretched them onto his hands with all the satisfaction of a doctor preparing for surgery. Annoyance

stalked him, enlarging second by second. He made the mistake of glancing up at the mirror and the menacing speck had increased to the size of a golf ball. Leaning forward, he placed his left eye behind the large speck. Blackness threatened to swallow him and devour his control. Almost as if he stood outside his body and watched, Darrell recognized the sheer lunacy of his actions. Darkness threatened, commanding him to stay still. To continue his staring until that piece of dirt swallowed the whole room.

“Where will I be, then, if it swallows the entire room?”

A shivering overtook his body, and he hurried to reach for the abomination before it got out of hand. He swiped his finger over it, drew it toward him, and realized it moved. He jolted, dropped it into the sink. Legs—eight of them—wriggled in a death struggle. He turned the water on full blast, and the live thing swirled in the current and went down, down. Darrell breathed a sigh of relief.

A large spider, yes. A huge inconvenience again. Yes.

He washed his latex-clad hands in the cheap hand soap. After carefully drying the gloves, he put them back in his shaving kit.

Good. He could return to pondering what to do about Celeste. For something must be done about her and soon. Problems like this, as he told his clients, didn’t disappear without immediate action.

He closed his eyes and thought of the numerous ways he could assure her compliance. A woman like Celeste cherished the people she loved. A few weeks of probing her psyche had proved she valued secure friendships, even if she didn’t cultivate many.

Who did Celeste care about since she had no family left? It might take time for him to excavate deep enough in Gold Rush to discover whom she cared for and how that could be used against her. No matter. He had the time and resources to wait as long as it took.

He leaned forward and stared into his own eyes. With hands on his hips, he posed. He knew his good looks worked against him in some ways. Though he never had trouble attracting women, sooner or later they found something they didn’t like and ran away, or he tired of them. Usually he dumped them first.

On the other hand, the sharp planes of his cheekbones and jawbone didn’t make him frightening enough for anyone to believe him capable of crime. People were damned stupid. Women especially. He smiled at the man in the mirror and didn’t recognize him. The eyes went narrow, the lips tighter and thinner. An urge stirred inside him that he’d long ago stopped trying to resist. Better to get it over with.

By the time he’d rinsed the hair dye out in the shower and looked in the mirror, his dripping wet hair shone coal black. He smiled. Blacker than Celeste’s new boyfriend’s hair. Close enough. After toweling off, he blow dried and styled the sophisticated cut, then left the bathroom and moved into the flowing motions of his tai chi routine.

Soon he would make Celeste understand that ending their relationship had been the worst decision she’d ever made.

* * * *

“Where are you going?” Leigh Strong asked over the phone.

Celeste settled onto the small chaise in her back yard, ready for a heart-to-heart with her best friend. She smiled, happy to absorb the fresh air. “Finnay Park for lunch. Today

at noon.”

“Mmm. Mick MacGilvary? Sounds Irish.”

“Scots ancestry, actually.”

“And SWAT, no less? Now that *is* sexy. What is it about a man in uniform anyway?”

“I thought you said you didn’t like men in uniform of any kind?”

“Well, I like them better out of them than in them, but I don’t have a special prejudice one way or the other. Does Mick have any brothers?”

Leigh, always ready for fun and games and highly extroverted, would play this line of questioning down to the end.

“I can’t believe you don’t know at least one of them. Gold Rush isn’t all that big. And yeah, he’s got two brothers. All three are SWAT.”

“Holy cow! Are they good looking?”

Celeste laughed and kicked off her sandals. The day proved unusually warm, and Celeste enjoyed the breeze that blew gently over her body. “Yes. Trey is the next youngest. He’s gorgeous. Craig is the youngest, but he’s rough around the edges.”

“In what way?”

“He has this stern, no-nonsense look half the time. As if he’s ready to growl at a moment’s notice.”

“Un-huh. Sounds like he needs loosening up.”

“Would you like an introduction?”

“Huh! I don’t have time for that. Too busy.”

Celeste laughed. “What red-blooded woman isn’t interested in a SWAT officer?”

“You, remember?”

Celeste sighed in resignation. “You’re right. I wasn’t. And I’m not, except…”

“Except?”

“It’s a really long story.”

“Honey, sometime you and I will have to get together soon and you can tell me what’s going on.”

She and Leigh had met when the other woman sent Celeste a sympathy card upon her Aunt’s death, and Celeste responded to the sincere and heartfelt note with a personal call. When they’d met in person, there’d been an almost audible “click”. Leigh had become a friend when she desperately needed one, and that friendship had grown stronger over time.

“I’ll tell you soon,” Celeste said. “I’m still trying to figure it out for myself.”

“Good deal. Anyway, it’s a good thing I’m not dating right now. I have no time. Delilah has some type of corn cob up her butt about the Lender wedding and thinks the whole thing is going south.”

Celeste laughed and tilted her head back on the chaise. Leigh constantly complained about her boss and the bridal shop she worked in. “Are you sure it was a good idea going to work for her?”

“Seemed like a good idea two years ago.”

“And you’ve fought like cats and dogs every day since.”

“I know. And get this. There was this man that came in the other day saying he wanted to try on a tux. Delilah picked a fight with me right in front of the guy. I tried to stay professional, but I think the man got the wrong impression. He walked out mumbling something about two lesbians running a wedding shop and wasn’t that ironic.”

Celeste clapped a hand over her mouth as a howl of laughter tried to escape. “Oh, my God. He didn’t.”

“Did.” Leigh sighed. “Now it’ll be all over town that we’re lesbians even when we aren’t.”

Celeste put her hand over her eyes this time. “Don’t worry about it. The guy is probably an uptight, ultra-conservative wad.”

“Yeah, but even uptight ultra-conservative wads have to get married. We serve all political parties here.”

Celeste’s bark of laughter startled birds out of a tree nearby. Leigh’s irreverent sense of humor always made Celeste feel better.

“Leigh, you are a hoot. Are you sure you don’t need a conservative, uptight cop to curb your out of control ways?”

Leigh snorted. “Well, if these brothers are as hot as you say, I might consider curling their toes.”

“I wish I had your confidence.” It was so nice to have another woman to talk to. Even in Vermont she’d been a bit of a loner, doing her own thing and trying not to lean on anyone.

Leigh broke into her musings and she accepted the interruption gladly. “What? You don’t think I could curl their toes?”

Celeste broke out in another grin and snickered. “I’m absolutely sure you could. In fact, Trey is something of a ladies’ man. He’d probably jump at the chance for you to curl his toes or any other part of his body.”

“Ooo, that sounds promising.”

“Craig on the other hand...” Celeste sighed. “He’s got baggage bigger than a semi.”

“Sounds like a delicious challenge, and believe me, I haven’t had one for a long, long time. I’m getting rusty.”

“Oh, Craig would be a challenge all right. I’m not at liberty to say what his problem is...I wouldn’t want to tell tales.”

“A secret. I like that. Is it something juicy?”

“He had a troubled childhood, just like the other brothers. They were adopted by the same parents, but they aren’t blood brothers.”

“Ah, I see. Fascinating. Well, I suppose I’ll have to get the gossip somewhere else.”

Celeste chuckled again, but before she could respond, Leigh switched gears. “So you’re meeting Mick for a treat in the park today,” Leigh said in one of her trademark subject changes. “Call me later and tell me how it went.”

“I will.”

“But you’re going to get the restraining order on that Darrell creep, I hope?”

“Mick said Darrell hasn’t done enough to get a restraining order.”

“Damn it. Well, just keep Mick on speed dial.”

“Believe me, I do.”

They signed off with promises to chat later—Leigh insisted they do lunch so Celeste could keep her up to date and dish the dirt. Celeste knew insatiably curious Leigh would prod her for answers about her time with Mick. At the same time, Celeste knew she would never reveal intimate details. Her time with Mick was too personal to speak about with anyone else, even her best friend.

Celeste drove around town completing her errands with a sense of trepidation. She

glanced in her rearview mirror constantly, expecting to see Darrell at any time. Maybe, just maybe, the man had taken Mick's threat to heart and decided to leave well enough alone.

Rather than turn on the air conditioning, she rolled the window down partway. Soon she'd flow back into Gold Rush society without a hitch. She'd always loved the way the small town maintained a laid-back attitude mixed with timeworn historic splendor. She passed row after row of Victorian era structures, built for mining magnates during the heyday of the Colorado gold and silver booms. Eventually, despite the mines running out, the town drew in the wealthy and those looking for a dip in nearby hot springs.

Gold Rush and the surrounding county vibrated with a new start to the summer tourist season. The population swelled during the summer, lulled during the fall, and came to full bloom again with ski season in winter. She remembered what the fall was like here, with beautiful aspens turning gold, and pinecones and needles dropping to coat the forest floor. She breathed in the high altitude, all nine thousand feet of it, and savored the thin air that always energized her. It felt good to be back, even if returning here spurred a few complications.

Driving through town on a clear day with bright sun reminded her of how much she'd missed this bustling place. Car exhaust from the vehicle in front made her nose twitch, and she reluctantly rolled up her window. Main Street meant traffic near the noon hour, regardless of small town atmosphere.

She'd rounded one corner when she thought she saw Darrell in a cream-colored sedan trailing behind her.

Chapter Five

Celeste glanced back as often as she could and still pay attention to traffic. The last thing she needed to do was crash her car. Sun slanted into the car behind her and left the driver in shadows.

“The police station,” she said out loud.

She’d drive there and park and see what the sedan did.

As she drove into the police station parking lot, the sedan continued down the street. She parked near the entrance and heaved a sigh of relief. Maybe she’d imagined Darrell in the sedan. For what seemed like forever she sat and reflected. Her location brought back bad memories, just as it had when she’d reported Darrell’s calls earlier in the week. She hadn’t been near a police station in over a decade until she’d reported Darrell’s calls. Going to the police station reminded her of that awful night long ago when Mick beat up that boy and—

Enough. Dwelling on the past where old hurts threatened to revive bad feelings wouldn’t prove helpful. Moving forward would bring her peace. She couldn’t suppress a twinge of apprehension. Visions of what happened when she was fifteen threatened to strip her of nerve.

Once she was certain the sedan hadn’t tailed her, she returned to the road. As she drove toward the park, she glanced back and saw the cream-colored sedan once more.

Or did she?

Maybe this was a different sedan? She couldn’t see inside the car all that well. Determined she wouldn’t let her recent dealings with Darrell derail her plans with Mick, she drove onward.

She kept watch until she came to the turnoff for the park. Once more, the sedan went by, the driver not even looking her way. Celeste thought she saw long hair on the individual. Good. It couldn’t be Darrell. She scanned the park, eager to see Mick. Ah, there he was, sitting on a—wow—a blanket with a picnic basket.

Interesting.

Pleased, she left the car and headed for the middle of the large park. At this time of day the park should be filled with people eager for warmth and sun. Yet few people walked along the paths. Good. More privacy for her time with Mick. She needed to apologize, number one. Seeing Mick sprawled out on the proverbial red and white-checkered blanket sent her heart into overdrive.

God, he looked yummy.

Lying on his side, he propped up on one elbow, the rest of his body out to the side in a masculine sprawl. Dressed in a sky blue short-sleeved shirt that hugged delineated muscles, he appeared delicious enough to eat. Did he know how disgustingly masculine he looked with that material clinging a bit to his wide shoulders, the curve of his big biceps, and pressed against the hint of six-pack stomach? Jeans hugged his legs, but not too tightly. They hinted at his strong thighs and calves. An answering vibration coiled in her loins. She wanted to see his chest, his stomach, and every inch of muscle hidden beneath those clothes. A breeze ruffled his very short black hair, and she wanted to reach out and smooth it into place.

When Mick saw her, his gaze took her in with a glance that held a hint of surefire sexual heat. It flickered, flamed, and extinguished. He didn't move a muscle except for a twitch of his long lashes. Lashes so thick and luxuriant, they added the barest softness to eyes that could hold a brutal edge.

He picked up a cowboy hat and clapped it on his head. "Glad to see you brought a hat, too. It's getting warm out here."

"I hate hat hair." She tapped the broad brim of the straw hat upon her head. "But I hate sunburn even more."

His gaze slid down her close-fitting tank top and skimmed over the denim Bermuda shorts.

Scorched by his attention, she lowered her eyes and took in the spread before her. "Wow, this is a gastronomical feast."

"Mom's potato salad, sub sandwiches, and chips." He sat up and opened the red cooler. "Plus diet colas." He gestured to the blanket next to him as he divested the cooler of other items such as utensils and paper plates.

Watching him complete a domestic habit eased Celeste's concerns. She'd worried all morning about this so-called lunch date. His serious expression had turned almost tranquil.

As she took a cola, he loaded their plates with food. "Whoa there. That's enough potato salad for me. A girl has to watch her figure."

He tossed a heated glance her way as he devoured his sandwich with the single-minded aggression of a starving man.

He chewed thoroughly before speaking. "I hope you're not on a diet. You've got a beautiful body."

His praise, even stated matter-of-factly, aroused genuine pleasure. A blush heated her face. "Thank you. And no, I'm not dieting."

"Good. You are not overweight."

"Thanks again." She smiled and took a healthy bite of sub sandwich. "Now that the weather is better, I've taken to walks outside."

His gaze darted to her, concern clear in the blue depths. "I hope you don't walk at night."

"Don't worry, Deputy MacGilvary. I walk early in the morning, then go home and do yoga and weight lifting."

He nodded. "Good."

Her first bite of the salad made her mouth water for more. "This is delicious. Did you say your mother made it?"

He chuckled. "Are you kidding? Mom hates to cook. This is all from Mom's Kitchen over on Second Street."

She nodded. "Ah, that mother."

He laughed and bit into a forkful of salad. He didn't seem eager for discussion as they munched. Instead he gazed out over the green expanse toward playground equipment where several women supervised a passel of children.

"Have you heard back on whether you're hired at the year-round school?" he asked.

"Not yet. I'm not too worried, though. The school is still on their break and won't start for a while yet. They should call me any day one way or the other."

"Good. Any more calls from Darrell?"

“No.”

“Good. I wish my brothers and I had a reason to track him down and pay a visit. We’d put the fear of God in him.”

The tough-as-nails disgust in his voice caused a shiver to shimmy up her spine. When this man played rough, he went for the jugular. “Your reaction to him on the phone last night probably drove him away.”

Mick shook his head and took a long swallow of his drink. “I wouldn’t be too sure. One warning in person didn’t do it.”

She remembered all too well the way Darrell and Mick had faced off, both tall, bristling with energy and aggression. “Darrell has a black belt in karate.”

“I’ve studied judo, karate, and Keysi. I think the Keysi Fighting Method would make Darrell’s eyes water.” Mick’s assured tone was filled with the arrogance of a man who knew his business. Then he cracked a smile. “And I’ve got the damned badge.”

She couldn’t return his grin, old feelings about violence rising to the surface. “You wouldn’t pick a fight with him, would you, Mick?”

Frowning, he sent her a look edged with exasperation. “Of course not.”

She wasn’t certain she believed him.

Once more they sank into silence, until she knew she would have to break the ice. His eyes, so vivid and intense, caught hers, and fire spread slow and thick through her veins. “About the party last night...”

“Last night was incredible.”

Whoa. That wasn’t what she expected. She put her sandwich back on the paper plate and dabbed her mouth with a napkin. “I panicked when Maria and that other woman walked in. I thought for sure they would hear us, especially when I...”

She couldn’t say it. *When I came. Climaxed.* Whatever word she chose, she couldn’t say it. As if she’d spoken, her face flamed.

A warm, forgiving smile touched his lips. He’d finished his sandwich and put the plate aside. “You might have panicked, but I think you enjoyed our adventure in the closet.”

She laughed through her blush. “That’s true.”

Silence whittled away their lunch hour until he asked, “Do you plan to stay in Gold Rush long-term?”

“I think I will.” She shrugged. “I’m not one hundred percent committed forever, but as I was driving here I remembered everything I like about this place, even if it’s gotten bigger.” She sipped her cola, appetite appeased. She crossed her legs and leaned forward, curious and yet cautious. “Did you ever think when you were a kid that you’d become a cop? I mean, before you were adopted by Justice and Arlene?”

He propped himself back on his hands, long legs sprawled out in front of him. “No way. Remember how I grew up before they adopted me.”

She did remember, far too well. “I can’t imagine tolerating what you went through.”

He shook his head. “Yeah, but it was what I went through that made me what I am today. Think about it. Alcoholic father who beat on my mother every chance he got. Mom tried to shelter me, and she did a good job except for not taking me and leaving. That was the best option she didn’t take.”

Heaviness settled in Celeste’s chest. “We don’t always pick the right option, do we?”

He gazed into space, his eyes thoughtful. When he didn’t respond, she continued.

“Did you ever hear from your father after he was jailed? You didn’t contact him, right?”

Sadness eased into his eyes, and the lump in her throat grew more solid. “No. That day in the courtroom, after they convicted him...that was the last time I saw him.”

She remembered all too well the day she heard that his real father, or the ‘sperm donor’ as Mick called him, had died in prison. Two years after Campbell MacGilvary had driven drunk and killed his wife in the accident, and two years in incarceration. That was the very same day Mick had come unglued on the boy that tried to rape her.

“Leave it up to my father to pick a fight with the biggest badass in prison and get his skull cracked open.” Mick’s voice was harsh. “He was a walking time bomb.”

“So were you,” Celeste said.

Mick’s gaze turned hard and as unforgiving as his words. “That’s all behind me now. No more need for psychoanalysis or contemplation. People have to move on or be stuck forever in their own morass.”

She could see him locking off his anger, despite the way it simmered in his eyes. She knew he’d never forgiven his father. She wondered if, in the same horrible situation, she could have forgiven her father for killing her mother. Even if it wasn’t intentional.

“In a way you still feel almost as if your father did it on purpose. I mean, drove that car into the tree. When my dad died...” She shrugged.

“Three years ago, right?” he asked.

“You knew about that?”

“Your Aunt Ginger told us right before she went to his funeral.”

Mixed emotions swirled inside Celeste. “After I came to live with Aunt Celeste, I didn’t see Dad much anymore. He was a broken man. Paralyzed and unwilling to do much for himself.”

She didn’t need to explain the whole sordid thing to Mick. He knew the story backwards and forwards.

A mask of indifference came over Mick’s features, all except his eyes. They burned with certainty. “I don’t think about my biological father. I think about the man who changed my life. Justice MacGilvary was my real father, and the one I miss. The man I wish was still here.”

Mick’s adoptive father had always treated Mick with the utmost respect, and for that and so many other things, Justice and Arlene MacGilvary had taken Mick MacDougal and turned him into a brand-new Mick MacGilvary. Just the way they had taken Trey Phillips and Craig Jacobssen and given them new hope and new lives under the MacGilvary name.

Celeste allowed the cold cola to soothe her tight throat. “You still have Arlene.”

He cracked a broad smile. “She asked me about you.”

“Really?”

“Trey spilled that you were in town, and I think she heard from some other people, too.”

“I’m back for three weeks and everyone knows.”

“You lived here a long time, Celeste. People are glad to see you back.”

“You included?”

He leaned forward until she could smell his clean, masculine scent and feel the sweet tension pinging between them. “What do you think? Would I have kissed you if I wasn’t glad?”

"I guess that was unfair of me to ask. You hugged me when we saw each other after ten years. That was a warm welcome. Especially when I couldn't be sure you'd want anything to do with me."

"What made you think I wouldn't want to see you?"

"Come on. We didn't exactly part on good terms ten years ago."

He nodded. "True. But we were younger. I'd just celebrated getting onto the sheriff's department after graduation from college, and you were considering going away. We had a lot of decisions to make."

She recalled that night as well as she anything in memory. "You were high on graduating with a criminal justice degree. It was what you wanted more than anything. The sheriff's department was the icing on the cake."

"Now, see, that's where you're wrong." His voice lowered, the husky timbre causing curls of heat to roll through her stomach. "What I wanted more than anything ten years ago was *you*."

Celeste couldn't think, her mind stunned by a knot of emotions. Surprise. Delight. Fear. "No."

"Yeah. I wouldn't have picked that dance with you. I wouldn't have held you so long and so tight."

She didn't want to recall that night so vividly, even though she did. For that would mean remembering long-suppressed desires that always simmered between them. At twenty-three he'd filled out well, his body no longer that of a gangly teenager. Her hormones had turned wild for him.

"We didn't know what we were doing," she said in defense.

"I guess I didn't." His gaze clouded with disappointment, as if he expected a different response from himself or her. "Believe it or not, your rejection that night hurt like hell."

Surprise halted her voice for several seconds. "I never knew. I mean, you didn't show it. We were dancing and when you tried to kiss me, I just froze."

"Froze me out, you mean."

"You walked away."

"You didn't give me a chance." He looked at the ground, at the blanket where they sat. "I guess you knew what you wanted, too."

Unspoken words hung between them. *You didn't want me.*

She'd hurt him and didn't even know it. Not until now.

"I'm sorry," she managed to say. "I'm sorry I hurt your feelings. I kept seeing that night when that boy tried to rape me. Then you rescued me like an avenging angel, but you were so angry then, pounding that boy. Blood flying, your voice so harsh, your face a mask of..." She shook her head. "You looked out of control."

He drew in a deep breath and looked at her. "I was. But I never would have hurt you. I was trying to protect you."

"I know that now."

"Do you? Or do you still think there's violence hiding inside me?"

Do I?

She took a last swig of her drink. "When I heard you intended to get a criminal justice degree, I just figured you'd decided to channel your aggression into something good and you did it to impress Justice."

“I did and I didn’t. I wanted to protect others from people like the dirt bag that tried to rape you. That’s why I’m puzzled, Celeste.” He turned until he faced her, his gaze pinpointing hers until she couldn’t look away. “Why you feel like you can’t trust me.”

“I do trust you to keep me safe, Mick. It’s not that. Sexually I’m a little freaked out.”

“In what way?” He smiled slightly. “The other night you came on so hot and heavy, I know you’re attracted to me. You wanted me. If my pager hadn’t gone off we would have made love.”

She heaved a deep sigh and tried to relieve the tension drawing tight inside. “Sex is different for men, Mick. Women need warm up. They need emotional connection—”

“You have an emotional connection to me. And the other day in the closet you had an orgasm. If that isn’t warmed up, I don’t know what is.”

“You always have to come right to the point, don’t you?”

His fingers slipped into the back of her hair to cup her neck. Wind came up and blew off her hat and his. Before she could reach for her hat, the breeze tossed her below-the-shoulder hair into a wild tangle. He brushed it back, then cupped her face.

“Don’t tell me you don’t still want me. Because whenever I look at you and you look at me, I can see it. There’s something between us.”

“There is, but...”

“But?”

“I went to the martial arts exhibition the other night wanting your advice about Darrell, but I also wanted to explore our attraction. I had to find out if what I felt for you ten years ago was a fluke. It isn’t. So I’m going to be blunt now. I want to make love with you. I—”

His mouth stopped her confession.

Chapter Six

Mick needed to shut her up, and he did it the most pleasurable way he knew.

God have mercy.

She tasted delicious. On fire.

When she'd said she wanted him, he couldn't take it any more. Since she'd walked toward him in that form-fitting top that curved over her small, round breasts, and those shorts that hugged her ass just right, he'd wanted to lose himself in her taste. He wanted to prove that all he desired, ever, was to keep her safe.

Bringing up bad memories earlier made him want to retreat, to leave her here and forget how being around her resurrected those reminiscences. After all, he'd taken quite a fall for her when he was a teen. A long, painful fall. And, heaven help him, he'd do it again.

Shit, maybe she should fear him.

He didn't regret what he'd done to that asshole who attacked her all those years ago. He would have done anything to save Celeste from that slimeball's attack.

Now, as she eased into his touch, melting like hot butter under his kiss, he fell into the heat willingly.

As her mouth molded to his in surrender, he moaned. *Oh, Jesus, yes.* His tongue swirled across her lips, and she opened to him. Surging deep inside her depths, he teased her relentlessly. Her arms went around her neck. They sank to the blanket, his leg insinuating between her thighs as he pressed upward into her mound. Through the fabric Celeste's heat beckoned him. If they'd been anywhere else but a park, he would have touched that heat immediately to assure himself she was real.

She clung to him, her touch skimming over his biceps, his shoulders. She moaned softly, moving and shivering in a way that told him she relished their embrace. As her mouth moved over his, she gave him life breaths. After all, he drowned, tossing on a sea he couldn't control.

His touch explored—her hips, her back, skimmed along her sides as her breath accelerated. SWAT or not, the search and seizure part of this operation sent him into internal meltdown. Frantic needs roared inside him; taste, touch, plunge so deep inside her he'd reach her womb. *Oh, yeah.* His erection went spike hard, and her gentle response overruled his restraint. He touched between her breasts, searching for her heart, and found it pounding as frantically as his, demanding they break all the rules. Right here. Right now.

Sweet, sweet Celeste. You're so dangerous. You have no idea what you do to me.

She cupped the back of his neck and drew him closer. He clasped one breast in a gentle grip, and she jerked back from his kiss and released him.

He jammed his fingers through his hair. Sun beat down on them, but it could have been twenty below, and he wouldn't have felt the frost. His heart triple timed, his chest heaved for breath. He couldn't remember the last time a woman made him this crazy to have her.

Yes, he could.

The last time he'd kissed Celeste during their encounter in the closet. *Jesus, God.*

Her slightly shocked expression didn't surprise him. Nothing about their scenario amazed him, short of realizing how wild he'd turned in the last few minutes. Just as she predicted, he'd lost control, out here in the open where anyone could see them.

"I'm sorry." He watched her wary expression for any sign of fright, but saw none. "This isn't the time or place for this."

She shook her head, rose-tinted lips parted, the sun bearing down on the freckles peppering her nose and upper cheeks. She looked younger than thirty, and his heart lurched. He sensed innocence within her, despite her years. Something unbroken, unmarred despite the rough life that had brought her to Gold Rush as a child. Maybe part of him wanted to protect that, too. Even from himself. Whatever innocence she possessed, he didn't know if he should try to enlighten her.

Then who? Some asswipe?

No way in hell would he allow *that* to happen. Possessiveness sucked the air from his lungs. No, damn it. He wouldn't become one of those assholes who thought a woman belonged to him.

Too late, bud. You can try and talk yourself out of it all you want, but you want her. She's mine.

"What are we doing?" Her voice came soft and dazed.

"Going crazy." His voice was rough and harsh to his own ears. "Look, part of you doesn't trust me. I'll admit that drives me insane. But pushing you into a sexual relationship won't change that."

"But I want it. I told you when I came to the gym that night I wanted to find out what good sex is."

"I know. But there is no way in hell I'll have sex with you when you think I'll turn into a monster." He put stuff back in the picnic basket. "So until that time, we're taking this real slow."

Her eyes widened. "How slow?"

"As long as it takes for you to trust me."

"I do...I mean, if I didn't trust you, I wouldn't be here with you now. I wouldn't have let you kiss me the first time. I couldn't have done what I did in that closet."

He watched her indignant expression grow deeper. Her pretty eyes sparked with defiance, cheeks heated to pink. Mick wondered if that tempting color would flush across her neck, her breasts, to her the soft folds of her sex. His cock jerked, still tire iron-hard from their encounter.

Letting his imagination explode made things worse. Whether he liked it or not, his libido ran ahead of him, visualizing the rest of her body with high-definition clarity. They'd made love in the semi-dark before, and he hadn't seen as much of her body as he wanted. Would her pussy hair be darker or lighter than the hair on her head? Would her nipples be as rosy as the flush across her cheeks, or a darker berry?

He leaned in closer, lips inches from hers, voice deepening with the arousal that still stirred in his groin. "Yeah, you'd let me take you. You'd get into bed with me right now if I asked. But something vital is missing. The same thing that was missing ten years ago when we danced, and you turned away. You aren't ready to go the distance." He jammed his ball cap back onto his head. "When I make love to you, it won't be just to get my rocks off. It'll be because you want me so much you can't see straight. And when I get inside you, your body won't hesitate to let me in."

Shit. That sounds arrogant, MacGilvary.

He didn't give a damn. It was true.

Her mouth opened in a small oh of surprise but then her lips formed a thin line. She didn't like the plan. Damned if he understood every nuance of why she wanted sex fast and hard and now, as if what flared between them would extinguish before she could savor it.

Why can't I give her what she wants? Many guys would take her without blinking an eye, without worrying whether she found true pleasure. They'd fuck her and turn away without a backward glance. And God help him, he *wanted* to fuck her. Deep and hard and nasty and with no inhibitions. It seemed he'd wanted inside her forever, even when they were teens.

"There's more," he said. "You admitted to me the other night that my job bothers you. I need to know you're fine with it before this goes any further."

"I'm past that."

He didn't believe her.

Before he could say anything, she said, "Why is this so important to you, Mick? A lot of men wouldn't care if I trusted them, and they sure as hell wouldn't care if I liked what they did for a living."

He couldn't keep his hands off her, and speared his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck. He kissed her forehead. "Because then I would be a grade-A bastard, Celeste. I'd be using you."

With that, he released her. As they tossed the trash in a garbage can nearby and gathered up the basket and blanket, she returned the big straw hat to her head. "So what's next?"

She sounded pissed. *Great.*

"We take this step by step. What kinds of sex have you tried? Nothing kinky, I'll bet."

Again a startled expression flickered over her features. "What? No...I..."

They started back to their cars, and she held the checkered blanket to her chest like a shield.

"We don't have to do anything kinky if you don't want." He couldn't help a small smile. "Plain old missionary sex can be mind blowing." He didn't give her a chance to comment. "How many lovers have you had?"

Do I want her to answer that?

"I could tell you to go screw yourself, Mick MacGilvary."

"That wouldn't be as much fun as making love to you. How many lovers?"

Breath left her in a gust of exasperation. "One."

"One? That's all?"

"What's wrong with that? How many have you had?"

Mick couldn't miss the resentful tone. "Four."

Her lips pursed and he couldn't tell if she'd liked his answer or not. "That's not as many as I would have thought," she said.

He laughed.

He stopped at her car, basket in hand. "Other men must have tried taking you to bed."

Celeste's fingers still clutched the blanket. "They did. I wasn't interested. My one

and only lover was a boy in college my freshman year. We dated for six months, and he finally made a move on me. It was uncomfortable and well, frankly, not that good. I didn't even..." Her nose wrinkled up.

"Come?"

She lowered her eyes to his chest, her thick, gold-tipped lashes shielding her eyes. "Yes."

"A man's never been inside you when you climax?"

Discomfort grew in her eyes, and he understood he pushed her limits of intimacy. At least he'd learned new things about her today. *Oh, man*. If he could make her hot enough, desperate enough... *Oh, baby*. What he wouldn't give to feel her come around his cock.

"No." Her lips quirked upward as she dared meet his eyes. "I only made love with Jeremy once and after that his interest waned." She shrugged and then laughed. A strained, humorless sound meant more to convey disgust. "He just wasn't that into me. No pun intended."

"He was using you, in other words."

She gazed into the distance, her eyes haunted by memories. "Probably."

"And later?"

"Men tried getting me into bed, but I never felt enough for them to want it. I have to have emotional connection."

He gently brushed her under the chin with his index finger. "No need for us to worry about that. You like me and I like you."

Mick considered kissing her again, then thought better of it. He'd want too much, and Celeste's eyes were wary.

He took the blanket from her, and she unlocked her car. As she slipped into the driver's seat and closed the door, he hoped he hadn't scared her so much she'd run from him forever.

She rolled down the window. "What's our next step, then?"

"Building your confidence in me. How about a regular date?"

"A date? Where?"

"How about The Rendezvous over on Main Street Friday night? Dinner, dancing, the works."

"That's a fancy place."

"The one and *only* fancy place in Gold Rush."

A warm smile broke over her face. "Okay, I'm willing to try it."

"That's all I ask." He looked at the date on his watch. "That's two days from now. I'll call you tomorrow night."

As she drove away and he headed for his car, instinct made him look across the park. A cream-colored sedan left the parking lot and flowed into traffic.

* * * *

Feeling tired and antsy at the same time, Celeste took a while to decide if she needed caffeine or a glass of wine as she stood in the kitchen. "Make up your mind. What is your drug of choice?"

She groaned. Yep, coffee sounded much better. After the coffeepot began to percolate, Celeste breathed deeply. Mmm, nothing like the smell of fresh ground coffee brewing to kick-start the brain. She listened to the coffeepot gurgling while she sponged

the kitchen counter with single-minded determination.

She analyzed what she needed to accomplish in home improvements. Her aunt hadn't left her with a pigsty, but busy and carefree Aunt Ginger also hadn't accomplished many upgrades on the large home over the last few years. Built in 1900, the home teetered just inside the Victorian era and tipped into the Edwardian style. Her aunt had believed in the motto "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." That meant the kitchen counter surface, an ugly green even in the seventies, was still hideous when first installed in the eighties. The refrigerator, stove and dishwasher worked like a dream, but each was about fifteen years old. The linoleum flooring, which threatened to curl at the edges, needed replacement before everything else. Hardwood floors required refinishing, and furniture needed reupholstering or other solutions to upgrade their appearance. So be it. Her budget extended to makeovers one project at a time.

As she rinsed the counter and twisted the life out of the huge sponge, she said, "If you would stop trying to do twenty things at one time, you wouldn't feel so damned jumpy."

Celeste concentrated on one task before moving to another, something she'd practiced only recently. Multi-tasking to excess was for the birds.

She'd spent the better part of last night feeling vulnerable for no reason she could decipher. She enjoyed this house and felt comfortable in it, but her mind wouldn't allow rest. Over and over her conversation with Mick in the park revolved in her head. The man played his cards straight-up.

No pretenses, everything black and white. At least that's what she used to think. Now she wondered if maybe ten years had altered him in more ways than she'd anticipated. Few men, in her experience, seemed concerned if a woman treated them as a sexual object. Sure, she admitted she couldn't judge all men by her limited sexual experience. Mick believed in his own sexual prowess—yet not for one minute had he sounded arrogant. Did the man have any vulnerabilities? What would it take to break his control? Her fervent imagination conjured an image of Mick's body deep inside hers, his face twisted in unrestrained ecstasy.

A flush heated her body until she grabbed a flier lying on the breakfast nook table and fanned herself.

Celeste yawned and glanced at the clock. Eight o'clock. As an admitted night owl, she never went to bed early. With her libido thinking about Mick, and worries on whether Darrell would continue his harassment, no wonder she hadn't slept well in two nights.

Time to take her mind off both men.

After pouring a cup of coffee and adding cream, she wandered toward the back door. She could sit on the chaise and enjoy the evening. Approaching night cooled the Rocky Mountains and maybe the fresh air would clear her cobwebs.

The phone rang.

She listened to the answering machine with trepidation.

Her message came on, followed by, "Hi, it's Mick. Call me back at..."

She rushed to place her mug on the coffee table and grabbed the phone. "Hello?"

"Hey, there you are. Still screening your calls?"

"Of course."

"Glad to hear it. Have you heard from Huntley?"

"No. Maybe your appearance on the scene the other day and talking to him on the

phone scared him sufficiently.”

“Maybe. Just keep the machine on and screen those calls.”

“Absolutely.”

Their conversation veered into more mundane topics; her plans for the kitchen, how he’d done on his promotion test, and his plans if he made it.

“You’ll get the promotion. Your confidence is staggering sometimes,” she said.

“In what way?”

“From the moment I met you, I always knew you could do anything you put your mind to.”

He laughed. “I wasn’t that confident as a kid.”

“In comparison to most teens you were. Justice and Arlene instilled such strength in you. It’s something I wish I’d had. It would have helped tremendously.”

She heard him opening a can and wondered if he’d picked soda or beer. “Come on, Celeste, you’re confident.”

“Not always.”

“Who is confident all the time?”

“You never falter.”

He gave a short laugh. “See, now that’s where you’re wrong. I could tell you dozens of times where I wasn’t sure of myself.”

“Do memories of your past interfere with the present?”

“I don’t think about the past that much anymore.”

She wished she could say the same. Not wanting to jump into forbidden memories, she asked, “When will you find out about your promotion?”

“The selection process involves higher ups. I should hear soon.”

“You’ll make it. I know it.”

“Thanks. Your belief in me is inspiring.”

“I mean it.”

She sipped her coffee and they chatted through the routine events of the day.

Eventually he asked, “So tell me what you’re wearing to The Rendezvous tomorrow night.”

Sensual promise flavored his voice, arousing the daredevil in her.

“I have four dresses to pick from but I can’t decide which one.”

“Oh, geez. Really? And here I thought it was simple enough to wear a sports jacket, tie and dress pants.”

“Humph. Well, you’re a man.”

“Meaning I don’t have much in my closet?”

“Do you?”

“No. Maybe I should have you come by and help me dress.”

“You can figure out what to wear. I’ve seen you in civilian clothes, remember?”

“Damn. And here I thought I could convince you. It could’ve been fun. We could’ve explored my closet.”

Heat filled her center as she imagined them trying the closet scene, but this time going all the way. “Mick, you’re a naughty boy.”

“What? I think you have a thing for closets.”

God, I just might combust.

“Mick, are you flirting with me?” She became braver by the minute as she pushed

herself to release her inhibitions.

“Could be.” A husky note entered his already deep voice. He laughed. “I would invite you over, but tonight is the last evening of my late shift. Starting tomorrow I’m off for three days, unless we have a call-out.”

“You’re saying we might make it through our date tomorrow night without a hitch?”

“It’s not like we’re a big city with SWAT action going on every time you turn around.”

She sighed. “Thank goodness.” She remembered something. “Oh, damn!”

“What?”

“Reservations. We forgot reservations for The Rendezvous.”

“I already made them for six o’clock.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Good.”

“On a totally different subject, I wondered if you’d like to try an experiment.”

“Experiment?”

“Ever tried phone sex?”

Chapter Seven

Heat shot up Celeste's body in a wild rush of surprise and excitement. "Um...no."
"Have time now?"

His blunt request also took her off guard. No sliding into this sensuality thing with a slow, measured ascent.

She grinned. "Maybe. How do we start?"

His soft chuckle reassured. "We start by taking off our clothes."

More heat bolted through her. "Oh."

"Does that scare you?"

"I'm moving to the bedroom."

She took the stairs with anticipation. When she reached the bedroom, the glow of moonlight coming through her window acted as a silver nightlight. "The moon is coming in my bedroom window. It's kind of atmospheric."

She heard rustling. "I opened the curtains. I see what you mean."

"Are you in your bedroom?"

"I am now. And I'm naked already."

"Holy cow." She winced. *Way cool, Celeste.*

He laughed. "I was about to take a shower when I decided to call you."

"So you've been walking around the house naked while you're talking with me?"

"Yep."

Fire sizzled in her middle. Imagining him naked created an urgency akin to a meltdown. "I'm putting the phone down for a minute."

She laid the phone on the bed and hurried to strip off her sandals, shorts, t-shirt and bra. "I'm naked and lying on the bed."

He groaned. "Damn." She heard his deep inhalation. "Wish I were there with you. But since I'm not..."

"Come over. We're practically across the street."

"No way. I want this slow. Remember, you don't quite trust me."

His reminder brought her back to reality, but she let out a settling breath. "Okay, what's next?"

"Close your eyes; imagine what I tell you. My hands are drifting over your body like a massage. First I'm tracing your face gently. Touching your ears. I'm circling my fingertips over your earlobes."

She sucked in a breath, but didn't speak.

"My fingers test the soft throb in your throat as your breath comes quicker. Over your collarbone to trace the delicate bones."

Her hands cruised along her body as he directed, and she wanted him to know. "I'm touching myself, following your fingers."

"Good. I'm cupping your breasts. Not hard, but softly. Can you feel it?"

"Yes." Her voice sounded breathy and excited to her own ears, and low in her belly a burgeoning tingle grew and spread. "Feels good."

"My palms rub in a slow circle over your nipples. How does that feel?"

She mimicked Mick's suggestion, her heartbeat quickening along with her breath.

Pleasure radiated. "My nipples are hard."

"I'm pinching them lightly."

"Oh."

"Now I'm moving down. Down to your ribcage and lower to your belly."

Feather-light touches over her belly brought her desire into sharp focus. She couldn't wait for his touch to travel lower.

"I'm touching between your legs." His voice roughened, his arousal irrefutable.

"You're wet. Hot. How does that feel?"

"Incredible." She dared test her intimate folds and dipped her fingers to find the moisture. "Oh, that feels nice."

"Wet?"

"Yes."

He moaned softly. "Good. Yeah." His breathing came quicker. "I'm slipping a finger into you. Deep inside, bringing your moisture upward until I touch your clit."

His explicit description had a triple effect. Excitement, amazement, the thrill of new territory. Without hesitation she touched, explored, moved to his bidding.

"Are you touching yourself, Celeste?"

"I am," she dared say. "What about you? Are you touching yourself?"

"Oh, yeah."

"Where?"

"I'm stroking my cock."

A vision of his hand slicking up and down hard flesh sent a bolt of swift arousal thrumming low in her stomach.

She stroked her clit, finding the right rhythm to escalate her pleasure. "What are you doing now?"

"I'm working down until my mouth touches you. Until I can lick you."

"Oh, God, Mick."

"Umm, yeah."

They went silent except for their hurried breaths and exclamations of delight. Writhing under her own touch, she quivered on the edge. More swiftly than she could have guessed, her body went wild.

"Oh, Mick."

"Ride it out." His voice betrayed his pleasure, harsh with need and rough with desire. "Let it go, honey. Just let it go."

She twisted, panted. She kept the phone to her ear, needing to hear his pleasure unfold. Quivering, she reached for the peak. A gasp escaped her throat, a swift upwelling that tortured until it broke her into tiny pieces. She cried out.

Through the phone she heard his moan as he climaxed. The animalistic elements in the sounds caused a renewed swirling sensation in her belly. A guttural groan roared from his throat. As if she'd lived in a dream, her thoughts floated on pleasure, on the momentary bliss that couldn't last, but she would never forget.

A smile broke over her face. "Was it good for you?"

Still panting he said, "Damn. Yes it was." He laughed. "How was it for you?"

"That was... I don't know what to say. Amazing. I never considered...well, I'm speechless."

His deep-throated laugh created vibrations within her belly and reminded her of the

climb to bliss short moments ago. She never thought she could respond to a man as easily as she did Mick.

“Being speechless is a good sign,” he said.

Pleasure continued through her body and mind, a heaven she refused to abandon.

“What happens next?”

“I have to get my ass in gear and take a shower.”

“Back to work?” Regret tinged her voice.

“Fraid so. But I’m looking forward to tomorrow night. I’ll pick you up at five-thirty, okay?”

“Okay.”

“I’d better sign off, Celeste.”

With a sigh, she said, “Until tomorrow.”

As she clicked off the cordless phone, she lay in the darkness, touched by the silvery moon glittering outside and throwing mystery into the night. One more layer of secrecy between her and Mick had separated and disappeared tonight.

* * * *

Darrell awakened in his hotel room from a long nap. Staying up late had never agreed with him, but what he needed to do in Gold Rush precluded sleep patterns. He planned accordingly, adjusting his slumber pattern as best he could. Lying flat on his back staring at the popcorn ceiling, his nose twitched once in disgust. A blot turned the off-white ceiling darker in one corner. The ring of discoloration was coffee-stain brown, and he didn’t think too long on what caused it. His observational talents worked for him, yet he shouldn’t waste them on ridiculous wonderings. He needed his focus on the task at hand.

Making Celeste Rice come to him for help.

She would come to him when she recognized the wisdom she’d worked so hard to ignore. These days she fornicated with that cop. He hoped the pleasure turned out to be worth it in the short term.

No. No he didn’t. He ground his teeth and shifted his gaze to the semi-darkness of early, early morning straining to find purchase under the dingy green curtains. The olive drab coverings hung like jail cell bars, and he longed to push them back and discover light and freedom.

Since he’d entered this hotel, or perhaps earlier before he even left Vermont and landed in Denver, he’d felt a change taking place. In his former life but a few weeks ago, his goal had been to help other people see their way through mental illness.

Now? He’d forsaken trying to enlighten those who refused to see truth. Other people in his profession claimed to have cures and remedies for madness, made their book deals and self-help tapes. They all lied. Now he understood this fact and reveled in it. If there was no light, no true escaping the darkness that hovered around every corner waiting for entrance—well, then perhaps it was best to succumb.

He planned to.

Open the curtains or not?

No. Light wouldn’t do. As a psychologist he’d wandered the minds of countless freaks, too many to remember, in fact. All of them had one aberration in common without fail.

They loved the darkness. Ate it up.

They often lived in quiet, isolated circumstances. Many of the crazies he'd treated found solace in drugs and alcohol to mask demons, not realizing they made themselves more vulnerable to evil under the influence of mind-altering substances. They soaked their head in gloom and doom and end-of-the-world thoughts. They didn't see the light waiting for them. He'd learned that darkness attracted like, and the evil he sensed within the motel stuck to it like superglue.

He'd told many of them to open the curtains and let in the sunshine, to breathe in the wilderness. Anything to return balance to their bodies and souls. Few listened.

So he knew now, without a doubt, that if he wanted to invite the darkness in, he must keep the curtains closed and absorb the shadows as they crept closer. Soon he would have a wonderful book at hand, one he'd created with his own thoughts. Last night he'd written dozens upon dozens of pages in his notebook. By hand. The old-fashioned approach freed his mind to allow the wee beasties of hell to emerge from the primal area of his brain. Ideas rampaged, screamed and shoved and jockeyed for position until they vomited on the page in a jumbled mess.

No matter. Once he'd allowed the venom to spew, he'd arrange and edit. When he finished his book no publishing house could resist what he had to say. They'd give him a contract without hesitation.

Awake enough to leave the bed, he hurried into his clothes. Tonight he would leave his darling a present and see how she reacted to the darkness he would visit upon her. He smiled as he left his motel room to find breakfast and eventually find a pawn shop.

After a long breakfast, he drove down Main and headed for Second Street toward a pawnshop he'd found in the phone book. He wasn't about to ask the scummy dilettante at the motel front desk how to get there.

As he glided in and out of traffic, staying under the speed limit, he savored the thrill pulsing like a live thing under his skin. Moments later he pulled into the pawnshop parking lot. He noted the lack of cars out front. Good. The less people who saw him the better.

The man clerking the small establishment gave Darrell a peculiar up-and-down look, as if he didn't fit in this place. As if Darrell didn't, that is. He would have agreed, had he given a shit. But to become scum one must go where other scum had touched and seen. Ignoring the salesman's intrusive questions, he pulled out his wallet and extracted a substantial wad of cash.

"I hear you have weapons for purchase," Darrell said as the clerk eyeballed the cash in Darrell's hand.

The balding man behind the counter scratched his forehead with dirty fingernails. Disgusting.

"Depends," the pond scum said.

Darrell counted out the bills one by one and plopped them onto the fingerprint-littered glass counter. "Depends on this?"

The man nodded. "That will do it. What kind of weapon you got in mind?"

"Something that makes a big hole."

The man looked skeptical. "How much money you got?"

Darrell handed the guy some bills.

"That ain't enough for something that makes a big hole," the man said. "Here's a

twenty-two caliber. That's good enough for most people."

Darrell suspected the man possessed uglier weapons, but maybe he didn't want to sell them to anyone who dressed as well as Darrell, or looked as ordinary. Damn it! He should have worn trashed clothes. The prick probably thought he was a cop.

He left the shop, pistol secured in a plain paper bag. Once in the car he stowed the weapon in the glove box away from prying eyes. As he turned on the car and pulled away from the shop, he praised the capitalistic fervor in the pawnshop owner. After all, it had given Darrell a tool of destruction.

Back on Main Street, Darrell laughed at his decline into evil. It hadn't taken long for him, but he knew the seeds had germinated from the beginning. He was born this way, and therefore found himself helpless against the evil.

He suspected given the chance, even Celeste's angelic SWAT cop could turn on the dark juice if needed. Since reaching Gold Rush, Darrell's excitement seemed boundless. How long could it take, he wondered? How much longer could he wait for the ultimate madness to emerge and take over?

* * * *

Mick's muscles burned as he pushed his body through the relentless grind of physical fitness required for SWAT officers. His breath came in bursts as he ran the treadmill, passing eight miles. Nearby, teammate Dace Banovic used the weight bench to push into another lift while another officer spotted him.

Craig came into the workout room, and Mick finished his last mile in record time. Panting, he turned off the treadmill. He traditionally completed his routine of weights and treadmill at the end of a shift rather than before. He found it worked well for him.

His brother Trey walked in wearing shorts and t-shirt, ready to put his body through the paces. "Hey big brother, what's up?"

"I'm finished. I'm going home, get some sleep, then I'm off to The Rendezvous tonight."

Craig put his hands on his hips. "You have a date?"

"Good guess."

"With who? Stacy Jackson?" Craig asked as he lay on a non-slip mat and went to work on stomach crunches.

"Hell no. That was over months ago."

"Yeah, I'd say it qualified as barely a blip on the radar." Craig's statement was banal, as if he was discussing the weather.

"I'm going with Celeste."

Trey did a double take. "What?"

Wiping his sweaty face with a towel, Mick threw his brother a sardonic look. "Celeste Rice is going out with me."

Trey's dark brows went skyward. "You never said anything about dating her for real. I mean, I know you're interested. Always have been."

Mick bristled. "No, I haven't always been."

Trey stepped on the treadmill Mick had vacated and started the machine. He broke into a light jog.

Craig puffed through his crunches, one after the other. "I thought you said she didn't want anything to do with you and your job."

Mick had said that but didn't want to admit it. "Part of her doesn't. The other part wants me."

Ah, shit, that sounded arrogant.

Trey laughed, arms swinging as he jogged. "Ego much?"

Mick slung his towel around his neck and held on to both ends. "It's mutual. The attraction, that is."

Crap, he'd never felt less eloquent in his life. *Christ, Mick, get a grip.*

"Is she a short-term kind of woman?" Trey's question held a dubious tone.

"Watch out, bro," Craig said.

"For what?" Mick asked.

Trey shook his head. "You're the last man I know to let a woman get under his skin."

"Celeste doesn't distract me that much." He heard his own denial and almost strangled on the words. He didn't lie. Or at least he didn't used to. Why, then, did the crap coming out of his mouth sound less like the truth with every passing moment?

Their pagers went off.

Craig sat up. "Shit."

"Balls to the walls, boys," Dace said as he stood up.

Trey groaned as he shut off the treadmill. "Didn't want to work out anyway."

Mick traveled to the door. "Fuck me. The timing is impeccable."

* * * *

Celeste's cell phone rang around three o'clock as she laid out two dresses on the bed, uncertain which one to choose.

She ran to her bedside table and grabbed her phone. When she answered, static crackled in her ear. "Hello?"

Static buzzed louder. Her skin crawled along with it. Darrell?

Mick's voice came on the line. "Hey, Celeste. It's Mick. We're suiting up for a call-out. I'm hoping the situation will be short, but if not..."

"Don't wait around?" She heard the sarcasm in her voice and flinched. She quickly softened her tone. "It's okay, Mick. I'll hang here at home and if you get the situation under control by five, I'll keep the dinner reservations. Sound fair?"

Sounding a tad surprised at her compliance, he cleared his throat. "Yeah. That'll work. I'll call you later."

She hung up and stared at the dresses lying on her bed. Well, at least now she probably wouldn't have to choose.

At first Celeste let disappointment invade. She closed her eyes. Once again, his job had crashed their plans. She drew in a deep breath and tried to rein in her tumultuous reaction.

Either accept what he does, or don't.

How did she manage it? She hated the confusion, especially when her feelings for him hadn't diminished one iota. What to do now? Did she fix dinner for herself and forget the excitement that had danced through her all day? Other women lived with the same disappointments if they maintained a relationship with a police officer. A woman in love with a man in law enforcement couldn't bellyache about his job and expect the marriage to run smooth as silk. She scrubbed her hands over her face.

Okay, what to do now? She hung the dresses in the closet and returned to the living

room. Reading a book and relaxing might diminish her angst. *I hope.*

She'd barely sprawled in her chair with a glass of tea when the phone rang.

Grabbing the cordless phone lying on the coffee table, she automatically said, "Mick?"

"No, my sweet,"

Darrell's voice rippled like an icy breeze over a calm, warm lake, disturbing her with currents so dark she shivered. "Darrell."

"You have to forget this relationship with the cop. He's pollution. You belong with me. Only me."

Anger soured her stomach and destroyed her resolve to stay silent. "Who screwed you up, Darrell? What turned a perfectly good psychologist with a brilliant mind into a sick son-of-a-bitch?"

His laugh went soft and relaxed. "You're assuming I needed help turning into something evil, my dear. Maybe it was there all along, waiting to be explored. Waiting to be let in."

She remembered a conversation she had with him at the beginning of their short relationship. "You mean your hair-brained theory that men and women have evil in them from the beginning? That they only need to open to the evil and let it through in order to use it?"

"You haven't forgotten." His laugh sent a shiver down her spine that reached straight to her most primitive fears. "I have new theories and they're all in my notebook. It's amazing how quickly I'm filling the pages. I'll show them to you soon."

"I don't want to see them."

"Why? Because you think it's endless, insane rambling?"

"Something like that."

"That's where you're wrong, Celeste. I'll prove it to you and the world. The world will pay attention to what I have to say. One way or the other."

Unease fluttered inside her, spurred by the awful thought he could be standing outside her door right now. She left the couch and rushed to close curtains on the lower floor. Tension tightened her muscles as she climbed the stairs.

"Are you there, Celeste?"

"I'm here." She stopped in the master bedroom and glanced into the evening outside the window. Darkness threatened, its silk intrusion turning green leaves to murky shades, and shrubs to indefinite, threatening shapes. "Where are you?"

"Close. Very close."

Feeling like a heroine in a slasher flick did not appeal to her. She straightened her spine.

Grow a pair, Celeste. Now is not the time to wimp out.

"You didn't think I'll tell you exactly where?" he asked. "Just know that I'm always near. Watching you."

He hung up.

She clicked off her phone and sat on the bed while undeniable anger pulsed inside her. She shouldn't have even said a word to him, damn it.

The phone rang, and she jumped.

She answered, a rush of pure venom bursting forth. "Darrell, stop calling me!"

"It's Mick, honey." Mick's voice, so deep and reassuring, came over the line.

“Oh, thank God.” Relief washed over her. “That creep called me again.”

“You all right?”

“Yes. I’m fine. I thought you were on a call-out.”

“It was cancelled. The guy gave himself up before we even got there. Now the question is, do you still want to go out to tonight? We can make our reservation.”

“Do I ever.”

Chapter Eight

When the doorbell rang, Celeste experienced a moment of pure trepidation that it was Darrell outside. She halted, heart banging against her ribs. She pushed back the curtain near the door and saw Mick. Letting out a breath, she opened the heavy wood door with relief.

Mick looked good enough to eat with whipped cream and an extra helping of chocolate sauce. Tall, dark, and devastating didn't cover his masculine attributes. His close-cut hair gleamed like dark mink under the light as he stepped into her house. Thick lashes made his already striking eyes mysterious. His brown tweed sports coat, white oxford shirt, brown tie, and dark slacks showed understated formality.

His mouth softened as he closed the door behind him and took her hand in his. Heat flooded his eyes as his gaze danced over her. She'd pinned up her hair in a chignon. Flowing and somewhat clinging, her simple red dress had short cap sleeves, a v-neck, and smoothed down over her hips to right above her knees. Mick's gaze approved.

"God, you're beautiful." Husky with sensual promise, his voice purred along her senses. He lifted her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss to her fingers. "Damn."

"Thank you. You're very handsome."

He snorted. "Right."

She gently pulled her hand from his grip. "Give me a break, MacGilvary. I'm not the first woman to tell you how good-looking you are."

A sparkle entered his eyes. "Yeah, you are."

"Unbelievable. The women in Gold Rush, in the world, must be nuts."

"Or maybe you're nuts for thinking I'm good-looking."

In a teasing spirit, she placed a hand in the middle of his chest. "Okay, you're not good-looking. You're interesting. Different." She took in everything that made him special to her. "Your nose is slightly crooked. I remember when you broke it falling off that big horse. Your lips can look thin when you're angry, but otherwise they're just right. Your cheekbones are high. Your hair is unruly when it isn't cut short. I like it short. It gives you an extra...edge."

He shifted closer, his height and size catching her between two emotions. Excitement and a feeling of protection surrounded her.

He grinned. "Wait until I tell my team members I've got an edge."

She answered his smile. He did have an aura of danger surrounding him. All she could feel now was burgeoning arousal, a need to feel him against her.

"You also have this bossiness that goes along well with being a cop. A commanding presence, etc., etc."

"All of those are heavy faults indeed." Mick slipped his hands around her waist. His mouth lowered to hers, and with a quick brush of lips against lips, he shortened her breath. Her heart banged like a trip hammer. "We'd better go."

The moment broken, she grabbed her sweater and purse from the couch.

They took his SUV to the restaurant and on the way kept conversation to mundane subjects. The restaurant sat on a side street, the rustic Tuscan ambiance worn by time and some neglect. Within its walls, though, lay a special Italian cuisine that ran circles around

other restaurants in Gold Rush. Cars filled the parking lot to the brim.

The true gentleman, Mick insisted on opening the door for her. She looked forward to a night with him and forgetting Darrell's call.

The hostess took them through the softly lit entryway into the restaurant itself. The interior enveloped Celeste in a sense of peace, of a past where calmness and peace might prevail; a Tuscan villa in dim lighting, warm colors, dark woods, and wrought iron. After the hostess led them to a large round booth, Mick sat close to Celeste.

A waiter took their drink orders, and they settled into comfortable silence.

"Something wrong?" he asked after a short time. "You're quiet."

"I'm relaxed." His gaze penetrated every defense until she lowered her attention to the white tablecloth to gain some distance. "I'm really happy that call-out was cancelled."

"Me too."

Peace surrounded her, a heady mix of slow, burning attraction to Mick and calm comfort. She wanted it to last forever.

She noticed the low-key background music, a blend of exotic classical and new age blends. "Nice music. Earthy."

"Sexy."

Her eyebrows went up. "I wouldn't expect you to like it."

"Why not?"

"You always liked retro music. Bon Jovi, The Rolling Stones."

"I still do. But the older I get, the more eclectic my taste." He concentrated on the flickering candle sconces in the middle of the table. "Maybe I'm growing up." A short time later he asked, "Why are you blushing?"

She gazed at him in amazement. "How can you see that in this dim light?"

"I'm very observant."

"I'll say." She twisted the napkin in her lap. "I remembered the last time we sat in a booth like this one."

"Mmm." His voice hushed, lowering to a secretiveness that invited intimacies.

"Don't remind me. Do you want me to get turned on right here? Let's save that for dancing."

Determined to tease him, she made sure she kept her gaze locked with his. Not an easy task when every glance from him started a riot of arousal. "You get turned on while dancing?"

"It's happened a time or two."

She didn't like imagining another woman arousing him and being the recipient of his attention. *We'll see, MacGilvary. I'll scorch you until you forget other women forever.* The imp on her shoulder, brave as hell, retreated. Could she make him forget other women? Did she really want to? *Oh, man.*

"Hey, you're quiet again. Something is wrong." He slipped his fingers to the back of her neck and rubbed. Pleasure whipped into a frenzy in her stomach. "Worried about Darrell's call?"

Before she could answer, the waiter brought her merlot and his diet drink. She ordered a favorite—penne with vodka sauce, and he went right for the lasagna. Once the waiter left, she took a sip of her wine and savored it. Mick returned his touch to her neck, and she shivered.

"Cold?"

“No. That feels...good.”

“Mmm. I was hoping it felt better than good. Now tell me about the call.”

“Can we skip it until later?”

His lips tightened in displeasure. “Celeste, this situation worries me. This guy isn’t going away.”

“I don’t know where to begin.” She related details of the call. “He believes humans are basically evil. He’s tired of trying to stop the evil from growing, so he’s giving in to it.”

“Any idea on when he started losing it?”

“Good question. I’m convinced he was that way when I met him. Of course, not everyone believes he’s a problem. While I was in Vermont, our mutual acquaintances thought I was overreacting. After all, he’s a psychologist. So what if his theories are so dark they verge on the arcane?”

“We’ll keep an eye on this, okay? If you’re scared at any time, you call me. Promise me, Celeste.”

Comforted, she nodded. His overwhelming masculine presence gave her a security she couldn’t deny. It might be false security, but she nursed it nonetheless. “I promise.”

Silence between them lengthened as she enjoyed her wine. Underlying tension always vibrated between them, and she couldn’t deny that. Anticipation of what would come later thrummed inside her. She couldn’t wait to see where they went from here.

When the quiet stretched, she gazed deep into the wine glass. “All these years have gone by and we’ve missed so much. Catch me up on your entire life.”

He smiled and tipped his diet drink to his lips. “I could say the same about you.”

“I asked first.”

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Start with...” She shrugged. “Your family.”

“You know all about my family.” He shifted closer. “You know our history, what’s there to tell?”

“More. What have Craig and Trey been up to?”

“Tell you what, when my mother has us over for dinner tomorrow, would you like to come? She’s told my brothers and I that we’re using her new grill, which means we’ll be putting it together for her. Craig and Trey will be there and you can quiz them.”

“Are you sure your mother won’t mind me tagging along?”

“Are you kidding? My mother loves you.”

Oh, if he only knew. Did she dare tell him? Would it ruin the quiet, deliciously relaxed mood? It probably would, but she’d made a pact with herself when she approached him in the gym. “Your mother said something to Aunt Ginger that makes me wonder. After you saved me from that jerk when we were kids, and the cops took you away, my aunt went to your mother’s house, and I insisted on going with her. I wanted to find out the verdict and my aunt didn’t want me at the hearing. I guess she thought I’d be traumatized or something.”

His face had hardened into implacable stone. “You were traumatized enough when that asshole tried to hurt you.” He stiffened, eyes hot with warning. “When I heard you scream and saw Cranston holding you down and on top of you...when I saw that creep going for his fly...” His eyes closed for a moment while he took a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, he covered her hand with his. Big and a bit callused, his palm and

fingers represented affection and protection as only Mick knew how to give. “The thing I regret is that I didn’t get there sooner. He wouldn’t have tried anything if I was there.”

The heat and reassurance of his touch warmed her heart. She lowered her voice.

“You couldn’t have known what he would do. No one could have.”

His lips moved into a soft smile. “You did a pretty good job of fending him off, too.”

For a second, for way-too-long a second, she remembered scratching at her would-be rapist, pulling his hair, kneeling him in the gut—

She shivered as memories blossomed into ugly life. Mick lifted her hand and kissed the back before releasing it. “Easy, honey.”

“I’m fine. I’m not one to keep thinking obsessive thoughts over and over until they’re all I’ve got. But I know I’ll never be able to repay you for what you did to help me.”

“God, Celeste. You don’t have to repay me. Any man would have done the same.”

“But not any man did. Just you. Now, on to other topics,” she said with relief. “I’ll come to your mother’s grilling party. Am I going to get grilled, too?”

He shrugged, a full blown smile now on his face. “You might. All’s fair in war. Mom’s a curious sort.”

“Humph.”

“And you evaded my earlier question. Why do you think my mother doesn’t like you?”

“Aunt Ginger said your mother warned me away. She didn’t want her son mixed up with a girl who caused trouble.”

Mick’s mouth opened but nothing came out, his eyes puzzled. “I can’t believe Mom would say that.”

“According to Aunt Ginger, she did.”

His frown deepened as he stared at the bread on his plate. “That’s crazy. You didn’t cause my troubles. Any problems I had were my own making. Maybe your Aunt misinterpreted what Mom said.”

“Perhaps.”

“Don’t worry. Mom will love having you there.”

Celeste wondered, uncertain.

After a short quiet, he said, “Tell me about Vermont.”

“It was beautiful. I loved the fall. But it isn’t Colorado. Colorado will always be my home.”

“I feel the same, but I’d like to travel more. My next vacation is a cruise to Alaska.”

“By yourself?”

“Yep. I’ve always wanted to see Alaska, and I’m not waiting for anyone else.”

“That sounds like fun. Kodiak bears and glaciers. When are you going?”

“In two months. Ever been on a cruise?”

“No. I’ve always wanted to go to the Mediterranean, though. I’m thinking about going next year.”

Mick turned toward her, his arm encompassing her shoulders. She dared look at him, excitement rising.

“Celeste.” Her name sounded like a prayer in his husky voice. His eyes, heavy-lidded, smoldered. Moving in closer, he whispered in her ear. “You make me crazy. I can’t stop touching you.”

Smiling with pleasure, she allowed her hand to drop to his thigh.

He tensed, and a soft groan left his chest. As his hot breath puffed into her ear, his tongue slid across her earlobe. His delicious scent, all male and subtle, wrapped around her.

“Don’t go to the Med without me,” he said.

“You want to see the Mediterranean?” She sounded breathless. Maybe even a bit excited.

“Not particularly.”

“Then why would you go with me?”

“To keep you safe.”

His primitive, very male statement sent delicious tremors dancing through her body. Her nipples tightened.

Despite her body’s primal reaction, her next statement came straight from independence. “I can take care of myself.”

He brushed his index finger over her jaw line. “I know. But there’s something you should know about me by now.” He leaned in to kiss her lightly, sweetly. “Since I first saw you when we were kids, there was something in me that wanted to protect you. It’s always been that way.”

“You’re protective of women in the first place.”

His lips quirked. “Yeah. But there’s a connection between us I don’t have with just any woman.”

Excitement bubbled up, but she also didn’t want to read too much into his statement. “Thanks for caring, Mick. You’re the best friend a girl could have.”

“But I still hate shopping and chick flicks.”

She laughed. “You do not hate chick flicks.”

“I’m indifferent to them.”

She poked him in his broad, immovable chest. “You liked Monsters, Inc.”

“Is that a chick flick?”

She wagged her eyebrows. “Well, I guess not.”

“I rest my case.”

“Mr. Die Hard fan.”

He winked. “Sue me.”

“I would, but I like the Die Hard movies, too.”

Conversation veered into more movies and current events, and she loved renewing her acquaintance with the man he was now.

Dinner came, and despite the delicious meal, her thoughts turned repeatedly to how right she felt being with him.

They skipped desert and headed to the bar and the dance floor where they found a secluded table. The bar thrummed with activity, the ambiance Old World, with low lighting and elegant touches of burnished brass and red velvet.

As they sat at the small table, they huddled close. Lack of room precluded anything else. One guy eyeballed her from a table not far from theirs. Mick saw the man at the same time, and something in Mick’s attitude or look sent the man away. Another couple took over the table.

“Did you know him?” she asked.

“Nope. I didn’t like the way he was looking at you, though.”

She grinned and tapped his nose playfully with her index finger. “Beating your chest, sir?”

His returning smile was unapologetic. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea, Celeste. I’m not one of those Neanderthal men who are so possessive I’ll punch a man’s lights out for looking at you. Are you still worried about that?”

Wariness in his tone and expression told her she tread a thin line. Fragility ruled their relationship until she came to terms with everything about him...or not. If not, the relationship would dissolve.

“You’re a police officer and you uphold the law, not break it.”

Relief filled his eyes. “Good.” A mellow song, slow and sensual, filled the air. “Let’s dance.”

As they stood and he took her hand, she said, “I thought you hated to slow dance.”

“Hell no. Where did you get that idea?”

“When you were a teenager you hated it.”

“I’m not a teen anymore.”

Boy, did she know it.

Mick and Celeste slipped onto the already crowded floor. His right arm embraced her around the back, and he cupped her right hand in his left. Their bodies brushed.

She clutched at his shoulder, feeling off balance. “Just a warning. I suck at dancing. I’m all feet.”

“I don’t believe it. Can’t be true.”

“I beg to differ, but thank you, kind sir.”

His soft laugh puffed close to her ear as he drew her closer. “You’re so pretty and smart, and damn, it feels good to hold you.”

His statement bolstered her confidence, and she couldn’t deny it felt wonderful. “Flattery, flattery.”

Sincere, his gaze warmed her. “Not flattery. I mean it all.”

Soft rhythms pulled them in with seductive and delicious sounds. Part of the time she kept her gaze over his shoulder, then his eyes would lock on hers, and the heat factor escalated into one heart-thumping, erotic moment. His arm secured around her and the firm but gentle grip of his hand kept her hips snug against him.

Oh, this is just too good. He’s so hard and hot and strong.

His erection pressed against her belly, sending answering heat through her body. Their bodies flowed together, and his expert movements aided her less tutored steps. At the same time, she couldn’t say the dance made her comfortable. No, indeed. Sound and texture and the wonderful smell of man—it all culminated into mind-blowing sensations. When she looked into his eyes, the heat simmering there assured her he felt every brush of hip against hip, of chest to breast. He snuggled her hand to his chest, and she caressed the texture of his shirt, and beneath that the steady, comforting thump of his heart. All that muscle sent tightening spirals of arousal swirling through her stomach. Before long another slow, sexually charged melody filled the air. They didn’t leave the floor or move away from each other.

Swaying in time with Mick, Celeste’s arms went around his neck, and the carnal flow rippled across her in waves of sweet delight. Her nipples went tight and hard, the heat between her thighs gathering into a deep ache for fulfillment. Her heartbeat throbbed in time with his—or at least it seemed as if it must.

He spoke softly in her ear. "Is it my imagination, or is it warm in here?"

Celeste leaned back far enough to look into his penetrating eyes. "The air conditioner is on full blast. I think it's just us."

He laughed softly. "Yeah, it could be."

She expected him to back away and lead her off the dance floor, but Mick threw her a curve. They moved into the next slow dance and the next. She noted females around the dance floor watching her and Mick with envy, as if they wanted him for a dance partner. She couldn't blame them.

Mick's whipcord body reminded Celeste of an ancient warrior, and she ached to explore with her touch, to see his body completely naked. He smelled uniquely male, a warm and spicy scent that teased her senses into ardent life.

What would it feel like to have every molecule of his attention on her in the bedroom? Though they'd started to make love in her bedroom that one night, she understood the difference between then and now. Then she'd fought the pleasure, her body holding back. In the closet the sheer forbidden element had sent her into climax.

She wanted to climax with him inside her. With nothing but understanding and openness between them.

They'd lost their table after several dances, and the crowded room became stifling.

He checked his watch. "It's almost midnight. I'd better get you home."

"I promise I don't have a curfew."

He leaned in to whisper softly in her ear. "Maybe I do. I'm off duty tomorrow but have to meet my brothers on the range at six a.m."

"Oh."

"Disappointed I can't stay longer?"

"Not that we can't stay here longer. It's getting too hot in here."

"I'll get you home."

Once inside his car, she sank into a comfortable silence. Night surrounded them, and all during the quiet ride a tension thrummed. She didn't mind that they didn't talk. This silence felt more intimate and special than any conversation. When they reached her home, he accompanied her to the door like an old-fashioned date.

She took a bolder step as she unlocked first the screen door and main door and clicked on the light. "Come in a second and say goodnight?"

"Sure."

Inside the house, she closed the door, a smile on her lips. Without hesitation, his arms came around her waist, and he dipped his head to take her mouth in a gentle kiss. Her arms went around his neck and she fell into the moment. His lips traced hers with honesty and warmth, but without aggression. She felt him holding back, unsure of her response. One sweet kiss after another started a deeper, more heated response. As her loins coiled with hot need, his erection pressed her belly like a long blade. Mick's hands coasted over her back with gentle, exploratory touches.

His tongue sank into her mouth with rhythmic plunges that drew her into deeper sensuality, swamping Celeste's mind until she felt nothing but Mick. Her heart pounded, breath coming quickly. The whole night had led up to this, every touch, word, look a prelude.

Mick drew back with a gasp, his arms holding her tight to him, still drawing response from deep inside Celeste's most vulnerable desires. Eyes hot with passion, he released

her. "I'd better say goodnight."

His chest rose and fell like he'd been running. Celeste knew Mick didn't want to leave, and yet he held back to give her the space he believed she must have.

"Mick..."

"Shh. Not now. Let's leave tonight like it is and start fresh tomorrow."

Exasperated, she said, "You don't know what I'm going to say."

"I'm afraid if you ask me to stay, I'll do it." He brushed his fingers along her hairline. "Hey, if Darrell calls again, don't talk to him. Hang up."

She nodded. "I know."

Frustration marked his features, every angle and plane a testimony to worry. "There isn't a hell of a lot we can do about this guy or I would. You know that, right?"

"Of course."

Once more he pulled her toward him and tasted her lips with a quick, tender kiss.

"Call me if you need me. Mom's dinner is at six tomorrow night. I'll call you tomorrow and check in."

He left and she locked the security screen door and the main door. Despite the heady sensations whirling around inside her, she didn't feel as secure as she'd like without Mick here. She shivered and rubbed her arms. Wide-awake, she hurried to turn on more lights.

* * * *

Darrell watched the cop maneuver his SUV down the driveway that led around the backside of his house. Celeste hadn't slept with the cop tonight. No, the cop wasn't the type to fuck and run—at least it didn't fit the profile of a man who protected her like a damned watchdog.

Too bad the prick lived so close to Celeste. Made things difficult. Fighting the man for Celeste would prove challenging. Adversity fueled Darrell's desires, though, and the thought of fighting the cop made Darrell's blood race.

Darrell had witnessed the cop's ability to defend himself at the gym during the martial arts demonstration. He'd stood in the back wearing a hoodie to hide his face and feeling like a rebellious teenager. He'd also observed the cop's expression when he'd embraced Celeste for the first time at the gym. Surprise, of course, and utter happiness. The deputy had it bad for Celeste.

Darrell left his position near the bushes and worked his way toward the side of the house. Cold seeped through his olive drab t-shirt. He'd ripped the sleeves off so it resembled the proverbial "wife beater" fleabags wore. The attire helped his convincing cover. Drab. Spotty. None too clean. He'd allowed his beard to grow, and because it came in uneven, the scruffy appearance added to the ambiance he wanted to project. No need to dye the beard—it was already considerably darker than the hair on his head.

Staying crouched, he continued making his way along the thick hedgerow toward the back of her house. People had told him all his life he had amazing poise for a big man. Where that muscular control came from remained his biggest pride outside of earning his doctorate in psychology. Mind-and-body fitness through Karate had prepared him for the coming battle.

Now, his mission was to convince Celeste she needed to share in his knowledge, that she needed to abandon her rigid definitions of right and wrong and humanity. Humans had a long way to go before they would embrace the evil in totality.

Superiority swamped him in pleasure.

That's why she needs to be with me. We will be one. A partner in my plan to erect complete evil.

As he made his way around her house, he didn't hear a dog barking. Good. Otherwise he'd be obligated to kill an animal, and he didn't want to do that. He liked animals well enough if they didn't get in his way; they reacted strangely to him. He recalled Celeste's little piss-ant dog and frowned. Jessie had been a handful for such a small runt. Killing the dog had given him no satisfaction, but no true pain either.

Moving around the back of the house, he checked each window to see if she'd left a curtain or shade up, but she hadn't. The house blazed with light on the bottom floor. Unfortunate. He doubted she had a security system, but at this point he couldn't say for sure. He didn't see any stickers on the windows that proclaimed she was protected. Good.

He wondered how long it would be before she shut off all the lights downstairs and went upstairs. He settled near a rose bush that would conceal him if she happened to glance outside. Before long he closed his eyes and dreamed what it would feel like when she gave into him, when she allowed her heart to open to the sin residing inside her. Pleasure hardened him instantly, and he gritted his teeth. He'd fuck her soon. Very soon.

Such enjoyment must wait until she came to see how right he was and renounced her need for the cop. Soon she would see the righteousness of his design for all the world.

Time passed in achingly slow measures. Before long only the wind rustling the pine needles and aspens gave any indication the night lived. Darrell didn't mind waiting. An hour passed. Then another. The lights still blazed on the bottom floor.

Irritation gathered inside him like an approaching tornado. What was she doing in there?

Three hours passed and the lights glowed. *Damn her.* Damn her to the hell she hadn't reached. Impatience battered at him. Perhaps tonight was too soon. He needed her feeling safe and secure in the false belief no danger could touch her.

He drew in one deep breath, than another, angry with himself for expecting too much too soon. As he worked his way back to the hedge, Darrell acknowledged he needed more patience.

Confident he'd wrestled the demons down for a short rest, he stepped onto the sidewalk and ambled down the street like a man out for an innocent stroll. Overhead the moon rose. When he reached the cop's house, the windows gazed back at Darrell like dark devil eyes. He shivered. Delicious anticipation danced inside him. The fight would grow, the need to kill would someday overwhelm his last shreds of decency. Eliminating the cop would prove easier then. Showing Celeste the way would prove sweeter after the cop's death left her vulnerable. He paused at the cop's house.

There was, perhaps, no time like the present.

Darrell hovered on the precipice between action and inaction, decision and indecision. Pleasure rolled over him in unbearable waves as he recognized the transition that occurred each time a barrier fell.

Maintaining the status-quo won his brief internal war.

He sighed as he continued walking.

Soon, cop. Soon.

Chapter Nine

“Is something wrong, Mick?” Arlene MacGilvary’s soft, concerned tone broke through his thoughts.

Mick jerked to attention, startled out of his daydreaming as he turned away from the sliding glass doors leading to the patio and toward his mother. She worked at the kitchen counter, moving with economy and swiftness, and evidently unconcerned her sons were making a muck of her new grill. Today she’d piled her long hair on top of her head, silvery strands interlacing the natural golden blonde tones. At fifty-five she looked younger than many women half her age. Yoga, exercise class and a carefree outlook kept her beautiful face glowing and her body slim. Men half her age hit on her, something Mick and his brothers found disconcerting. Today she wore denims cropped below the knees and a red tank top showing her toned and tanned arms.

She peered at him when he didn’t answer. “Mick, you all right?”

He shook his head even when he meant to nod. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

A clanging noise and a hoot of laughter from Craig and Trey signaled they found something amusing. Not unusual, but he wished he could feel the same ease.

She leaned forward and flicked back a butter-yellow curtain over the sink. “What on earth are those boys doing?”

“Setting up your grill. Or trying to.”

“As long as they don’t break it.”

He settled down on a barstool by the granite breakfast counter. “Have they ever broken anything of yours?”

“Not since they were teens. Remember that dining set they put together for me when your dad was out of town? They chipped the leg.”

Mick winced. He didn’t want to remember. “No, I don’t. I was in Bakersfield Juvenile.”

Her blue eyes clouded with memory, then just as quickly they cleared. She sighed. “I’m sorry, dear. I forgot about that.” Heaving another deep breath, she continued her work. “Now, tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing.”

“You’ve looked at your watch about ten times in the last ten minutes.”

“Celeste is late.”

“Did you give her a specific time to come by?”

“She said she could be here at five. I should have insisted I pick her up.”

“She had errands to run, right? She’ll be here any second. It won’t take her long to get here when she’s done.”

Mick nodded and followed his mother’s example by taking a calming breath. “You’re right.”

His mom winked. “Of course. I’m your mother.”

“Ha, ha.” He grinned. “You sure you don’t want help with...whatever that is you’re making?”

“Bean salad. Takes nothing to fix. Everything else is ready. Thanks for bringing the buns and burgers.”

“Any time. Be right back.” Impatient, he pulled his cell phone off his belt and stalked through the great room and out the front door.

Screw this. He opened his flip phone and called Celeste’s cell. No answer. He ended the call. Tension tightened the muscles in his back and neck.

He heard a car engine and saw Celeste’s car rolling down the street toward him at a sedate pace. All the worry rushed out, replaced by pure relief. Just as quickly, irritation erupted. As she smiled and waved and pulled into the driveway behind his car, he glared. His ire escalated. He wanted to be mad and right and didn’t ask where all this gut-wrenching angst originated.

She left the car, grocery bag in hand. The smile on her face vanished. “Hi.” She came to a dead stop in front of him. “Something wrong?”

“Yeah, something *is* wrong. You’re late.”

Welcoming light in her eyes disappeared. “I know. I’m sorry. Traffic was a bear and I underestimated how much extra time to build in.”

“You’re *never* late.”

Her eyes sparked, their depths cool with building aggravation. “Never is a strong word. Everyone is late at least once in their lives.”

Mick saw the train wreck coming, words threatening to leave his mouth that would heighten the strong edge to their encounter. He scrambled to recognize, code, and catalog his emotions so they’d make sense. He failed miserably.

He scrubbed his hand over his face. “Look, I—”

She walked right passed him as his mother opened the screen door. “Come on in honey, don’t let him keep you out there in this hot sun.”

The glower Arlene aimed at him said she’d either heard what he’d said to Celeste or guessed the content. Either way, he was screwed. Sometimes he wished he could squash his tendency to act rashly. Sure, he could wait on point for a hundred years during a hostage situation. Why couldn’t he do it with relationships? *Learn a little fucking finesse, MacGilvary, before Celeste tells you to take a permanent hike*

Hell, she might anyway. He followed Celeste inside as she greeted his mother with genuine pleasure.

After Arlene hugged Celeste and they chatted like old friends, Mick followed them into the house.

“What have you got there?” Mom took the bag from Celeste.

“Chardonnay and soft drinks.”

The patio door stood wide open and Trey and Craig entered with shit-eating grins on their faces. They greeted Celeste like they hadn’t seen her in years, Trey teasing her with his trademark smartass humor and a big smile breaking over Craig’s usually stoic face. Mick envied his brothers’ easiness with Celeste.

Mick stayed in the background as his siblings and mom monopolized Celeste. They took her out onto the patio, where Craig and Trey had finished setting up the grill. They gathered around the large rectangular table, shaded by a huge umbrella that minimized the blazing summer sun.

“Would you like something to drink, Celeste?” Mom asked.

“Water would be fine. I’m thirsty.”

Trey jumped for the cooler and whipped out a bottle of water for her before Mick could blink an eye. Mick wanted to strangle the jealousy following close on the heels of

other emotions that grabbed him in a vice. Damn it, he wanted her attention, wanted to stamp ownership on her with a fierceness that settled in his gut and wouldn't relent.

Where is this coming from MacGilvary? Get a grip.

He shouldn't be jealous of a polite gesture. Trey wouldn't move in on Celeste. Would he? Mick's equilibrium went haywire. He tried to recall if covetousness had ruled any of his female relationships before. *Nope. Never.* Okay, maybe as a teen, but sure as hell not as an adult.

Acting like an ass won't get you anywhere but in the doghouse, and you'll scare Celeste. More than annoyed at himself for allowing emotions to overrule stability, he realized something else.

He was scared shitless.

A woman never frightened or intimidated him as much as this fragile-looking, pretty female. He wanted to wrap her up, take her somewhere safe, and never allow her out of his sight. Jesus, he needed to have his head examined. A doc should do an MRI on him and learn why he teetered on the edge of acting like an A-number-one caveman in front of his family and Celeste.

It frightened him so much, he almost growled his next statement. "I'll get the burgers."

He stomped into the kitchen, aware everyone watched him with varying expressions of puzzlement or amusement.

Trey followed him and as they dug through the refrigerator for hamburger, hot dogs and chicken, Trey spoke up. "Hey brother, what the hell is up with you? You're grunting and growling like some old man. And what did you say to Celeste? She looks scared of you."

That did it. Celeste afraid of him?

With his hands full of food, Mick said, "I know. Just bear with me, all right? I need a few minutes. Can you take this stuff outside? I'll be there in a few."

Trey clapped a hand on Mick's shoulder. "Sure." Trey smiled. "If you don't watch out, it's going to be apparent to everyone what's going on with you."

Mick almost growled his next words, too. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You and Celeste. You're acting like a watchdog. She's a big girl, remember?"

Mick glared. "Yeah, yeah, I know."

"You all right?"

Mick forced a smile. "Yeah. I'm just..." He shrugged. "Give me a few minutes."

Trey's frown said Mick's answer didn't satisfy, but he took the meat out of Mick's hands and headed back to the patio.

Mick went into the bathroom, washed his hands and splashed cold water over his face. Time to find some perspective. After dinner he'd corner Celeste and apologize. If she accepted the apology he'd count himself damn lucky.

* * * *

"Do you know how to shoot a firearm?" Mick asked Celeste as they sat around the patio table sipping cold drinks.

Trey and Craig sat on either side of her, and Mick sat across from Celeste. Replete with dinner, they remained outside to enjoy the setting sun.

Mick's question threw Celeste off guard, but she hurried to answer. "No."

“We should get you trained.” Trey popped the top on a can of green tea drink and took a long swallow. “Mom knows how to handle a weapon.”

Celeste didn’t like the sound of this, her stomach knotting at the mere thought of touching a gun. “I don’t need to know how to shoot.”

There. A definitive no should disabuse them of the idea. *Uh, right.* When these three stubborn men got an idea in their head, they kept pounding at it until people around them gave in to the pressure.

“You should learn,” Craig said, his voice assured as a schoolmaster and as authoritarian.

Arlene lifted one tawny eyebrow as she stretched out on a chaise near the rectangular table. “Don’t let these guys twist your arm if you aren’t interested, Celeste. They’re too pushy sometimes.”

“Sometimes?” Celeste asked.

“Us?” Craig’s face twisted in disbelief. “We are not.”

Arlene’s lips pursed. “All three of you expect a tremendous amount of yourselves and as a result, you think everyone else should hammer home the same ideals.”

Trey slipped low in his chair until his head rested on the back. “Guilty as charged. I still think she should learn to shoot.”

Celeste squirmed, aware of Mick’s careful observation of her every move. “Guys, you’re cops. You’ve heard the stats that say a lot of people are killed with their own guns during a home invasion or robbery.”

Mick stood, stretching his arms high and lengthening his already tall torso. He groaned as he worked out a kink. “She has a point.”

She hadn’t expected Mick to agree with her, and Celeste turned toward him with a smile. “I rest my case.”

Mick shook his head as he lowered his arms. “But my brothers are right. Come out to the shooting range with me and take some lessons.”

With a scoffing noise, Celeste said, “I don’t think so.”

Arlene lifted her glass of white wine in a salute. “Stick to your guns, Celeste if you don’t want to do it.”

Trey made a point-and-shoot gesture at a pesky fly that landed on the table in front of him. “You could get a twenty-two caliber and take one lesson just to make sure you have a working understanding of guns.”

Celeste resented the pressure and folded her arms in defiance. “I’m not spending money on a firearm. I need all my extra pennies for renovations on the house.”

“Not a good enough excuse,” Craig said. “Mick, don’t you have a twenty-two she could borrow?”

Mick’s eyes lit up. “No, but I know someone who does. Dace’s wife Mary learned on a twenty-two—”

“No.” Pressure rose in Celeste’s throat. “I’m not doing it.”

“Guys, that’s enough.” Arlene’s voice rose slightly. “Leave her alone.”

Like chastened school boys, they backed away from the topic, and none too soon for Celeste.

Later on, as she helped Arlene wash dishes, the men cleaned the grill. Arlene’s bright chatter ensured Celeste didn’t obsess too much on how Mick had pinned her with a disapproving glare earlier and how the men insisted she learn to shoot. Mick’s initial

irritation had disappeared—he seemed more at ease, more cheerful. She was more than happy he'd lost the 'tude.

She wouldn't put up with temper tantrums or moodiness in any man without an explanation. Especially not from Mick, who always showed a rock-hard stability in the face of conflicts and uncertainty. If she couldn't count on Mick to keep the boat from rocking, whom could she count on?

"Are you all right, honey?" Arlene's crystal clear voice asked.

Celeste took the glass from Arlene's hand and dried it with a fluffy towel. "I'm good."

"You looked a bit day-dreamy. Is everything okay?"

Celeste settled the glass inside the cabinet where it belonged. "Absolutely. This has been so much fun. Thank you for inviting me."

"You're welcome any time."

"I have to admit I was a little...afraid to visit." *There, you said it.*

"What?" Arlene's eyes narrowed with concern. "Why?"

"Do you remember way back when Mick was arrested for beating up that boy who tried to..." A lump returned to her throat. The one that always tried to sabotage her when emotions became too entangled.

Arlene removed her rubber gloves and placed them beside the sink. She turned her attention on Celeste. "How could I forget?"

"I'm sorry, that was a dumb thing to ask. Of course you remember. Aunt Ginger told me you didn't want Mick to see me anymore."

Arlene sighed, the truth there in her eyes for anyone who cared to look. "No, Celeste. I didn't say that. Though I couldn't condone my son beating a man within an inch of his life, I understood why Mick did it. Justice understood, too. We both realized that if Mick hadn't been there to pull that boy off you..." Her voice faded.

"Mick used such violence. He was so out of control."

Arlene's eyes softened as she squeezed Celeste's shoulder gently. "Honey, that's just it. Mick stopped himself. He regained control. The same phenomenal control he uses now to do his job. I think the desire to serve and protect was in Mick from the beginning. Justice had a lot of influence on him, though. It may be part of why Mick could stop beating the boy before it was too late."

Celeste could see that. "I have no doubt. Justice was a good man."

"Justice recognized all the great qualities in Mick and the other boys. They needed a little guidance to mold them into real men."

Celeste pressed the older woman's shoulder in return, then they released each other. "I don't know why my aunt lied to me about what you said."

"Maybe she thought my son was a bad influence on *you*."

"How could she? He saved me from a rape."

Arlene drew her bottom lip between her teeth for a moment. "I did say something else and maybe that's why Ginger felt she had to lie."

Trepidation wound a strong path through Celeste.

Arlene leaned back against the countertop. "Your aunt was terribly distraught about what happened to you, of course. I told her you'd need counseling after something like this. That she needed to get you some help."

"I did. Aunt Ginger made certain of that."

"I'm glad." A haunted expression entered Arlene's eyes. She glanced out the window at her sons, who talked and laughed as they cleaned up. "There's something I should have told you years ago, before you moved away to Vermont." Arlene lowered her voice. "Let's sit down."

They settled on the big blue sectional couch in the family room off the kitchen and tension rose inside Celeste.

Arlene cleared her throat. "There's no easy way to say this, so I'll just spit it out. When I was seventeen I was date raped."

Celeste put her hand to her mouth as shock hit her. "Oh, my God."

Tears glimmered in Arlene's eyes. "We told Mick what happened to me when he was about twelve. We wanted him to understand it was never right to treat women that way. I'm sure it added to his rage when that boy came after you. I think it fueled his fists. I kick myself all over for not telling you this years ago, because I see something in your eyes when you look at Mick." Arlene leaned toward Celeste, the truth in her features clear to see. "I'm good at reading people. I saw how you looked at my son when you were just a teen. I know you had a crush on him. I know you have feelings for him now."

Heat rose in Celeste's face; denying Arlene's assessment served no purpose. "I did have feelings for him then. I still do."

"Believe me, I normally wouldn't interfere in my sons' relationships. They're grown men with full lives of their own. But I see the way Mick is with you. Something is eating him up. He told us there's a creep stalking you so we'd know the lay of the land. I guess what I'm trying to get at is... I told you about my rape because I want you to know you can talk to me any time. Plus, I think there might be a part of you that fears Mick."

Celeste wanted to deny the fear. She wanted to embrace Mick's sexuality and her own without a backward glance at the past. "Maybe I do, as irrational as that seems."

"He's very aggressive in a situation where it's life and death, and he's trying to protect the public. But you have to know he would never hurt you."

Celeste nodded emphatically. "I know. His job sometimes frightens me more than anything." She turned her gaze to the front windows, where the sun slanted in a last bid to illuminate the room before night engulfed the house. "How did you stand it? How did you endure it when Justice went to work every day for SWAT and you didn't know if he would..."

Arlene's sad expression cleared as she took Celeste's hands in hers. "Justice died doing what he loved. Yes, I wanted more time with him. Many, many more years. But I wouldn't have traded the time I did have with him for a life without ever knowing him."

A treacherous lump swelled in Celeste's throat until it grew too big to withstand. Two tears leaked onto her cheeks, and she slipped her hands from Arlene's. Celeste brushed at the pesky tears and sniffed as she smiled. Something bright and hopeful expanded in her heart that hadn't resided there a minute before.

"Thanks for telling me all this. I may take you up on the offer to talk some time."

Arlene squeezed Celeste's hand. "Any time."

The men wandered into the kitchen and the great room and silenced the conversation.

"Why the long faces?" Trey asked, his smile a tad too wide for sincerity.

"Everything all right?" Craig asked.

Celeste and Arlene stood almost in tandem.

Arlene slid an arm around Trey and squeezed his waist. Though she wasn't a short woman, Trey's strength dwarfed his mother. "We're great. Thanks for the clean up." Arlene slung her other arm around Craig, but her attention turned to Celeste. "We'd love to have you at our monthly family dinners, Celeste."

Celeste's mouth popped open. No one could have missed her dumbfounded silence.

"Unless," Arlene said, "you have other plans on those days. But just know you're welcome any time. Right boys?"

Craig and Trey quickly acknowledged with an "absolutely" and "of course." Mick chimed in third with a grin and, "You bet."

Celeste reached for her purse lying on the sectional couch. She slung the hobo bag over her shoulder. An old urge to sink through the floor arose. "I'd like that. I'd better head out now, though. I have one last interview with the school principal tomorrow about the teaching job."

"I'll follow you home," Mick said.

Arlene gathered her in a hug that Celeste returned without hesitation.

Waving goodbye to Arlene, Craig and Trey, she jumped into her car and Mick followed close behind in his SUV. Celeste wondered what Mick would have to say for himself after acting the "General" earlier.

When they pulled into her driveway and stepped from their cars, Mick walked toward her.

"I could have driven home by myself," she said softly.

"I needed to talk with you."

Once at the top of the steps, she fumbled with her keys and unlocked the door. "Come inside." She turned on the lights and they entered her living room. She tossed her purse on the couch. "Can I get you anything to drink?"

"No thanks. Can't stay long."

Of course not, she wanted to say. Cops ate and ran, worked and ran, didn't stay long anywhere. She almost grimaced at the cynicism in her thoughts. She stayed standing with her hands on her hips.

When he returned her gaze, nothing but sincerity beamed back at her. "I apologize."

"For what?"

"It isn't obvious? I've acted like a jerk all evening."

"Well, not *all* evening."

Her irreverence earned a chuckle. "I shouldn't have snapped at you when you came in late."

"Everybody has moods."

"They shouldn't take them out on other people."

"No, but it happens anyway. People lose control and things slip out."

"*You* don't lose control."

A revelation came to her, one that hadn't entered her radar before. "Is that what you believe?"

"Even after I pulled that asshole off you when you were a kid, you were eager to kick that guy's shit. I never saw you cry."

"That's because the cops were hauling you off and putting Cranston in an ambulance." She shook her head. "I bawled like a baby after that in front of everyone. When I think what you went through for me...when I got home I curled up in a ball on

my bed and bawled my eyes out some more. I made sure my aunt didn't hear me."

"Don't feel guilty."

"Sometimes I do."

"Don't."

"Guilt is often there, even when someone tells us not to have it."

He stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets. "Yeah. Still, I'm sorry I was an asshole. You're always on time, and I'm concerned that Huntley is lurking around. It put me on edge, and I took it out on you."

His apology rang with truth, and her heart lightened. Mischief emerged. "Worried about me?"

He brushed his fingers over her cheek, as if he wanted to make sure she was real. His voice held a husky tone that filled her stomach with heat. "Of course."

"Thanks, Mick. I appreciate that."

"Forgive me?"

"Of course."

"Good. I thought for sure I'd be in the doghouse."

"No doghouses here. You didn't know how to say what you meant or how you felt." She made a little scoffing sound. "I know that feeling very well."

"Do you?"

"It seems like I'm that way with you all the time."

One corner of his delicious mouth turned upward. "That bad, eh?"

"Most of the time. Mick, your mom told me what happened to her when she was seventeen."

Mick's eyes conveyed an urgent message of sorrowful past memories. "When my parents told me what happened to Mom all those years ago, I felt this tight sensation right in my gut and my heart felt squeezed. When I heard you scream and ran into Mrs. D'Angelo's maze and saw Cranston...hell, it was the same sensation. It cemented my commitment to become a police officer. Even as my butt was hauled into juvenile hall for beating Cranston, I knew I wanted to protect people who couldn't protect themselves."

She rubbed his arm from shoulder to elbow, enjoying the heat of his flesh, the warmth that signified strength and life. "That's why you're such a great guy, Mick."

He rolled his gaze. "Yeah, yeah."

"Okay, Mr. Modest." Their gazes tangled as the moment drew out. "I just wish Aunt Ginger hadn't lied about what your mother said...about wanting me out of your life."

"I'm glad Mom confirmed the truth."

"I wish I could change things, turn back the clock and ask Aunt Ginger why."

"There are a lot of things I'd do differently if I could go back in time."

Somehow she knew he meant their relationship.

Mick closed the gap between them and leaned down to place a slow, soft kiss to her lips. She responded, the meeting of lips more comfort than passion. Though sensuality simmered beneath the surface, it would wait.

Mick drew back, his expression filled with genuine tenderness. "Goodnight."

As he left the house and she locked the door, she kept the porch light lit. She drifted upstairs, her mind filled with possibilities and questions. She didn't know when or how her relationship with Mick would grow and change, and the unpredictability was disconcerting. Realistically, she expected relationships to alter, but Mick's friendship

challenged her more than any other. She would take their situation one day at a time. Obviously Mick meant it when he said she had to prove to him she was ready for a relationship, sexual or otherwise.

As she trudged upstairs, she wanted to tell Mick they'd been right to slow down and reflect.

Damn him for being so wise.

Chapter Ten

"There's something you need to know about Celeste Rice," Darrell said to Thomas Lenderson, School Principal, over the phone Monday morning.

"Who are you again, sir?" Lenderson's controlled, professional voice asked.

"Darrell Huntley, Ph.D. I'm a counseling psychologist. Celeste Rice was a patient of mine while she lived in Vermont. She came to see me for a variety of reasons, including OCD."

"OCD?"

"Obsessive compulsive disorder."

"Oh, I see."

The man really didn't. Darrell was sure of that.

"I see." The man said again, voice now uncertain, but not suspicious.

Darrell's confidence increased. This man would prove easy to manipulate.

"What types of problems does a person encounter if they have this...OCD?" Lenderson asked.

"It's different with everyone, of course. For many people it is things like repeatedly checking to see if they've locked a door, or closed a window. In her case she had to walk in a certain pattern through her living room. She also washed her hands excessively. Sometimes as many as thirty times a day."

"Oh, my."

Darrell smiled. "Indeed. Such behavior can become very damaging to everyday life. You can imagine how that would impact on a person's work performance."

"How would this rub off on other people or children?" The man sounded highly skeptical.

"You mean is it catching?" Darrell put the right amount of condescension in his tone. "Of course not. Oh, I see what you are asking. Would her behavior hurt the children? Could they pick it up?"

"Yes."

"Not likely. Her compulsive behavior has taken over so she's not able to focus on the tasks she needs to complete. I'm not saying the children would be harmed. She just wouldn't be an effective, efficient teacher."

Seed planted. Satisfaction filled Darrell as he celebrated his manipulation. He knew his own psyche, after all. Working to form minds was something he'd done his entire professional career. Now that he'd added doubt and fear to his repertoire, his own happiness increased. How freeing and wonderful things had become since he'd just let go. If he could get Celeste to see how valuable this concept was...well, what bliss would he experience then?

"So you're calling us to warn us about Celeste?"

"I hate to use such a harsh estimation on a fine woman. Celeste is a good person, but my main concern is that her problems could influence the quality of her work and cause her more stress than she is capable of dealing with right now."

Darrell lay back on his bed, amusement building as he enjoyed perplexing the man. Making the man uncomfortable added to his enjoyment as much as fucking up Celeste's

life.

"It's rather complicated, but as a professional, I felt obligated to call and let you know Celeste's frame of mind before you considered hiring her. Celeste told me I should clear any doubts you could have about her...but in all good conscience I couldn't."

He heard Lenderson's indrawn breath, the pause that filled seconds while the administrator tried to decide what to say. To get over the unexpected and perhaps shocking statement.

"I see." Lenderson cleared his throat. "And how did you find out Celeste is applying for a job here?"

Good. The man wasn't a complete pushover. A challenge would prove nice in this town. Most people in Gold Rush were backward.

"She told me before she left Vermont. She was in treatment for a variety of issues, and I was her counselor."

"Yes, well, doesn't this fall under doctor-client confidentiality?"

Very good, Lenderson.

"Normally it would. When she was my patient, though, she displayed attachment problems."

"Attachment?"

Darrell sighed, adding on the discomfort he didn't feel. "She became inappropriately attached to me."

"I see."

There is so much you don't see.

"When she called to tell me that she'd had the interview at the school, and she thought she'd nailed the interview, I knew I had to say something to the school."

Lenderson cleared his throat again. "Dr. Huntley, could you give me your phone number for clarification? In case I need to call you back?"

"I'm on vacation right now, so I'm giving you my cell phone number. You must understand I'd never have called, except for a disturbing tendency she has."

"Which is?" Lenderson's breath sounded slightly off.

"She often thinks she's being persecuted when she's not."

"A persecution complex?"

"Yes."

Pile on the doubt.

"Dr. Huntley, how do you feel this affects her ability around children? Give me more details."

The man didn't take his statements at face value, but Darrell had prepared for that. He stretched his legs and tried to get more comfortable on the lumpy bed. "You can imagine how unreliable she'd be if she spent all morning trying to get out of the house with her OCD tendencies. Then the breaks she'd need to take every day while school was in session just to wash her hands."

"Dr. Huntley, I don't know what to say. I'll be checking with Celeste about what you've told me."

"Yes, I think you should ask her if she was involved with me and what I do for a living. I really hated calling you about this, but I also saw her engaging in some behavior the other night that takes her morals into question. You can never be too cautious when children are involved. I suggest you should ask Celeste about her behavior one night in a

bar...she was with a police officer.”

“I understand. You’ve given me a lot to think about. Thank you.”

“That’s all I ask. If it were up to me, I would *not* recommend you hiring her.”

“Thank you again, Dr. Huntley. I’ll take that under advisement.”

They ended the call, and Darrell sat up. He could feel his own smile curving wide. Eager for exercise and to see Celeste’s reaction to his creation, Darrell stood and decided to head to her house. Whether she’d be home when he arrived, he didn’t know and didn’t care.

One nice thing came with chaos. Freedom. Freedom to do and see and be and want whatever at a moment’s notice. He stopped in the bathroom and stared in the mirror. The spot was there again, growing this time in the center of his forehead. He frowned and reached for the shaving kit again. His breath accelerated as he watched the spot grow faster than it had the previous morning.

He hated this insanity thing.

Because just as he had diagnosed himself, he knew he was perfectly, terribly sane.

Did the darkness plan to overtake him before he could execute all of his plans with Celeste? No. He didn’t want that. Too soon and he wouldn’t know what to do, wouldn’t have the wherewithal to show her the error of her ways.

* * * *

Celeste finished a yoga DVD, her body far more relaxed and flexible than it felt earlier that morning, when she saw the lights on her bedside cordless phone light up. She let the machine pick up, half expecting Darrell to call. He hadn’t left any messages lately, and that surprised her after his earlier flurry. She left on the “do not disturb” button, ensuring she couldn’t hear either her message or the caller’s. She ignored the phone and went into the bathroom.

By the time she’d finished a shower and washed her hair, she dared peek around the bathroom door. The light on the phone blinked steadily.

One call.

One message.

Trepidation halted her from checking the call right away. Better to finish puttering around the house. She dressed in Bermuda shorts and a form hugging three-quarter sleeve green shirt. Her mineral makeup took no time at all to apply. There. As ready as she’d ever be. Today she’d look through a few magazines on kitchen design and try to formulate ideas for renovation. She also anticipated a call from Mick. While he hadn’t said when he would call, his reliability assured her he would. She liked the dependable side of him, but refused to dwell on the idea of him calling one way or the other. She didn’t cherish experiencing needy feelings.

After tinkering around here and there for several minutes, she filled a water bottle and wandered to the living room. She took the “do not disturb” off the phone long enough to play the message.

“Hello, Miss Rice, this is Thomas Lenderson from Copper Rim Grade School. Please contact me as soon as possible.” He left his number.

Anticipation rose inside her. He must be calling to say they’d hired her.

When he answered the phone, he said, “Ah, Miss Rice. I’m glad I caught you. I received a strange call this morning I felt you should know about. It has me deeply

concerned.”

Dread cramped her stomach. What now? As he related that Darrell had called, anger overran her worry.

Her voice sharpened. “My God, I can’t believe he’s going this far.”

Lenderson’s voice calmed even as her voice rose. “So you do know him? He was your counselor?”

“No...I mean, yes, I do know him. But he was *never* my counselor.”

“You’re saying he’s lying.”

Shaking from the inside out, she sank onto the couch and took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Yes, he’s lying. Mr. Lenderson, he’s stalking me. We were dating in Vermont, and when my aunt died and I moved here, I told him the relationship was over. He turned up in town and has been calling me.”

“Oh, my.”

His voice said he didn’t know what to believe. *Damn it. Damn it.* No matter what she said, Darrell had placed doubt in the school administrator’s mind. While she always believed in positive outlook, she knew in her gut she was in the fight of her life to get this job.

“You have to understand how unsettling this is to us,” he said.

“Of course. It came out of the blue. Anyone would find it disconcerting.”

“I have a few more questions.”

Her throat tightened as if the noose had slipped around her neck. A noose as unforgiving and rough as a hair shirt over sensitive skin.

“It seems odd to me that a psychologist would say these things. I mean, they don’t make wild and ridiculous comments like this.”

Queasiness swirled in her stomach. “They do if they’re trying to ruin someone’s reputation.”

“That’s what you think he’s doing?”

“I don’t think it, I know it.” She closed her eyes and put her hand over her eyes.

“Look, if you want more references, I have plenty that will outweigh anything Darrell has said.” She shifted gears and tried to sound less defensive, hearing the desperation in her tone. “There are people in town who will vouch for me, including three members of the El Torro Sheriff’s Department SWAT team and some other friends such as Maria D’Angelo.”

“Dr. Huntley also said something about inappropriate behavior in a bar?”

Her mind flew around in circles. *What?* Was he talking about the first night she’d reunited with Mick? The night they danced like lovers in Rendezvous? “I don’t know what he’s talking about. I’ve been out with Deputy Mick MacGilvary, but we haven’t done anything untoward.”

“That’s good to know. Can you give me Mr. MacGilvary’s number?”

She quickly provided Mick’s name and the department number. “He’ll vouch for me without question.”

“Good. I’m sorry I had to bother you with this, but the school has to cover all bases.”

“You’ve done the background check on me, too, right?”

“Absolutely. You come out clean as a whistle. If you could give me other references beyond what we already have, that would be wonderful.”

She provided him with several more names and numbers.

"I'll have to check into this before a hiring decision can be made," he said.

"I understand." She did, but she didn't want to understand. Not when this one thing could chip away at her job prospects.

She glanced out the front window and saw a figure standing across the street on the sidewalk. Something familiar about the dark-haired man gave her pause. She heard Lenderson's voice but didn't register the words.

"Miss Rice?"

"I'm sorry." She stood and eased toward the window, her gaze snagged on the figure. "What did you say?"

"I'll be in touch as soon as we've made a decision."

The man across the street wore a white baseball cap, oversized red and white checked flannel shirt, and baggy jeans. She stared at the man, and he stared right at her. Her heartbeat increased, her pulse skittering.

"I'm sure you'll want to know what our decision is in a timely manner. We were supposed to have decided by now, but you know how these things can be sometimes."

"Yes." She didn't, but what purpose would she serve in saying that? "Are you thinking this one phone call will hurt my chances of being hired?"

A progressive sensation of doom hovered over her. The man outside had the same features, she thought, as Darrell. But he didn't dress anything like Darrell would, and he slouched. Darrell had blond hair, not dark.

"Of course not, Miss Rice. With your excellent references from your previous work, plus these new references, I'm sure it'll be fine."

The false cheerfulness in his voice didn't comfort her. After they ended the call, she clenched the phone and watched the man turn to the north and parade down the street with slow, deliberate steps. It had to be Darrell. Or was she imagining the bogie man? Even if the man wasn't Darrell, why would he watch her house? Her skin crawled as goose bumps marched over her body like a swarm of ants.

She snapped the curtains closed and the room plunged into semi-darkness. Standing at the window, she rubbed a hand over her forehead and scratched her nose. As it often happened when nerves got the better of her, her skin would itch.

I'm letting this whole stupid thing get to me. Shrug it off.

How could she? Suddenly the whole world seemed darker. Dark wood furniture and green painted walls added to the room's gloom. She'd always liked these colors before, but worry about Darrell had her closing off like a paranoid. Fulfilling exactly what Darrell wished to accomplish. Anger replaced her fear.

"Damn you, Darrell. Damn you." She hissed the words, half tempted to throw the phone across the room in a fit of temper.

The phone rang.

She jumped, a startled gasp leaving her throat. "God." She clicked the phone on without considering who would turn up on the other end. "Hello?"

"Hey, it's Mick."

Relief weakened her legs, and she wandered to the couch and sank down. "Thank goodness."

"Everything all right?"

"No. Darrell has started a smear campaign and I just saw a man across the street staring at the house. He looked like Darrell and yet he wasn't wearing the clothes he

would normally wear. And his hair was dark.”

The words rushed out, and she cringed, wondering if she sounded as loony as Darrell wanted to portray her.

“Shit.” Mike’s voice held genuine anger and concern. “Are the doors and windows locked?”

She remembered the kitchen windows. “The kitchen windows aren’t. I opened them a while ago to air things out.”

“Lock them now and stay on the line with me.”

She hurried to the kitchen and fastened the two windows. “They’re closed.”

“Good. Now tell me about this smear campaign.”

“Well, you should get a call very soon from Thomas Lenderson at the grade school. I’m using you as one of my additional references. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course.”

“Good.” Celeste explained Darrell’s treachery, and as she relayed the details, her body remained tense. She rubbed at her neck as the muscles throbbed with a relentless ache.

“It’ll be fine,” Mick said. “This won’t make any difference to your work.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“With those great references? How could they refuse you?”

She snorted softly. “When it comes to the safety of children, most administrators take every angle into serious consideration. If they think parents will get wind of this, they’ll drop me like a hot potato.”

“Guilty until proven innocent?”

“Something like that.”

“Fuck.”

“Exactly.”

“Listen, I still have a few hours on duty, but I can swing around the neighborhood and make sure Darrell isn’t lingering anywhere around.”

“No. I’m fine. I have to be. I can’t let Darrell unnerve me like this.”

Too late. He already has.

“Are you going anywhere?”

“I hadn’t planned on it.”

“How about tonight?”

“No, I was going to stay in with a DVD as a date.”

“Now why would you want to do that, when you can date me?” His voice, rich with insinuation, purred over her skin.

She puffed out a brief laugh. “Why indeed? What do you have in mind?”

“I could watch the DVD with you.”

“Sounds good.”

“Is it one of those chick flicks?”

“You’ll be pleased. It’s an action movie with plenty of guts and glory.”

He laughed. “Bloodthirsty wench.”

His lightheartedness turned her mood, and she laughed with him.

After they agreed he would come by around seven, and she’d feed him pizza, they signed off. Sure the call from Lenderson had fried her cookies, but at least she had Mick’s evening visit. In the meantime, she would clean house, since she’d avoided

vacuuming far longer than she should have.

Before that, though, she had one more must-do. Something she'd tried to employ a long time ago when unknown fears threatened to sneak out of hiding and ground her.

Celeste took the cordless phone with her as she peeked between the curtains. No sign of the flannel man. She unlocked the front door and security screen door and walked outside onto the wraparound porch. Wind stirred the bushes near the porch and blew through the weeping willow by the circular drive. It also stirred hair along her arms and brushed through her hair. Though her heartbeat threatened to accelerate, she walked down the steps and into her large front yard. All around her signs of life brought her fear down to manageable levels.

Two preteen boys walked a big mutt on the sidewalk and continued by without looking in her direction. A mother loaded her minivan across the street with a trio of kids and some helium balloons. Dogs barked in the distance. She could smell roses from a neighbor's front yard. The man in the yard to her right yanked the cord on his lawnmower and it roared to life. All signs of a normal and bucolic neighborhood.

No sign of the man who'd lurked across the street.

Somewhat reassured by neighborhood activity, she returned to her house and locked the door. She couldn't, though, convince herself to open the curtains on the front window.

Chapter Eleven

“That asshole is trying to ruin your girlfriend’s chance to get a job?” Dace said as he and Mick as they entered the Sheriff’s Department after an afternoon of traffic stops. Everyone in the county was speeding today as if the world was on fire and they would miss the show.

Girlfriend? Mick didn’t know if he wanted to call Celeste that. Would she want to claim that spot in is life? He didn’t figure Dace would care, so he moved to a neutral enough answer. “Seems so.”

“Maybe she could sue him for defamation of character if anything bad comes of it.”

Slow burning anger twisted in Mick’s gut. “She might have to if this costs her the job.”

Mick found a message from the school administrator on his desk and dialed the man right away. Mick hoped to help Celeste put this annoyance to bed.

When Lenderson picked up, Mick launched into reassuring the man that Celeste’s character was impeccable, and she was perfectly stable. Mick explained that Huntley planned to discredit her.

“I’ve known Celeste since we were teenagers,” Mick said. “She’s reliable and works hard.”

“Well, was she a good kid? No drugs or drinking?”

“She didn’t drink or take drugs. And yes, she was a good kid.”

“Well, deputy, I appreciate your feedback. It’s just that this situation has the staff a bit worried.”

“In what way?”

“Well...”

Mick wished the guy would stop using that word.

“I’ve talked with a couple of teachers at the school who grew up here,” Lenderson said, “and they told me what happened to Celeste when she was a teen.”

Ah, shit. Mick could see the writing on the wall and didn’t like it one bit. “Such as?”

Mick heard the man swallow. “The near rape. A horrible thing for a young lady to go through. Perhaps it’s a given she has some issues.”

Mick tried regulating his voice, but he knew it came out cold. “It would give any woman issues, but that was a long time ago, and she’s perfectly fine. It doesn’t impact her qualifications to teach. You’ve got to remember that the man who told you this crap about her is a stalker.”

“And you said he is here in town?”

“Yes.”

“That worries me even more than before. It could add another dimension to this situation.”

“What kind of dimension?”

“What if this stalker came into the school with a weapon? I’ll have to consult with the board.”

Oh, Christ. Shit was rolling downhill fast.

“Celeste Rice is a competent, wonderful woman. There’s nothing Huntley can say to

make any difference in her selection for a position at the school. The chance of him coming into school with a gun isn't likely."

"Well...that's to be determined."

Mick ran a hand over his face, his temper coming to a boil. He reached for the foam ball sitting on his desk and squeezed. "You think because Huntley is a psychologist his opinion ranks over mine?"

"Possibly. No offense."

Right, you peckerwood. Do you think I'm going to keep a watch out for your car and give you a ticket first chance I have? Might not be a bad idea. No, he'd never do that to Lenderson simply because the man had no balls, but it was damned tempting.

Mick was glad that hadn't slipped out. He didn't need to add to her problems.

"Thank you for your help, Officer," Lenderson said.

Once Mick hung up, he muttered under his breath. "Peckerwood."

Trey was walking by Mick's desk, and his eyes were concerned. "That bad?"

"Yeah. That bad."

Before Mick left for the evening, he'd formulated an idea he hoped would help Celeste. She had to agree to it first.

* * * *

The phone rang and Celeste halted halfway down the hallway to listen to the machine. She hoped it was Mick.

No such luck.

Darrell's snide voice, rumbling with enmity and hostility, came over the line. "Pick up, darling. I know you're there."

Anger directed her headlong flight down the staircase.

"I know you're there." Darrell's voice returned in that condescending tone.

She snatched up the phone in the living room. "Fuck you, Darrell."

The words rushed from her, anger driving away common sense like a stiff breeze blew around a pile of leaves.

"Darling, how nice to hear your voice."

"What do you want, Darrell?" *Maintain. Don't allow him to ruffle you.* She peeked around the side of the curtain on the front window.

"Your surrender to the shadow self, that's what I want."

"Never."

"Never say never, Celeste. If there's one thing I learned in psychology class, it's that *never* is about as useful as *always* when it comes to mental illness. I want you to fall off the edge with me. Explore the evil living within you. I'm a sociopath, Celeste, and I need you to understand how I feel. What it is like."

She'd never heard him say that before, and it stunned her. "You're a what?"

"Come now, you know what a sociopath is."

She did, and the idea frightened her more than if he'd been technically insane. "I know."

"Then you know I don't feel remorse. You know I could do whatever I want to you or anyone else and I could care less. It's always been that way. I realize it's very unusual for a sociopath to admit to being one." He laughed. "Even weirder to analyze and diagnose themselves. But I find it easy and very freeing to know the truth."

Her stomach coiled in revolt, the nausea from earlier returning mercilessly.

"I want you to understand the darkness and all it can give you," he said.

"It doesn't work like that, Darrell. You are born a sociopath or you're not."

"You really did learn something from your college courses. I'm proud of you."

"No you're not."

She clicked off the phone. Enough was enough. She tossed the phone on the couch.

She put her hands over her eyes and realized that her fingers trembled. "God. So stupid Celeste. So stupid. You shouldn't have talked to him." And even worse, she should have recorded the whole conversation. Darrell's words would have cemented her position, both with the police and Principal Lenderson.

The doorbell rang.

She let out a startled yelp and jumped. She returned to the window and peered out. Mick's car sat in the driveway, and complete relief slowed her banging heart. She couldn't start acting like a hapless female in a slasher flick and scream at every clichéd scare.

Celeste headed for the door and peered out the peephole. Mick stood there with flowers in hand. Flowers? A different type of excitement pumped into her veins. Wow. She couldn't remember the last time a man bought her flowers.

She opened the door. "Mick."

"Hey." He held the flowers out like an old time suitor. "I brought these."

As she clutched the wild assortment of blooms, their brilliant disarray of colors dazzling and delighting, she inhaled their fragrance. She peered at him over the top of the fragrant blooms. Her body went from remembering fear to feeling stark lust in about two point eight seconds flat. Tonight he wore a navy blue t-shirt that molded over mile-wide shoulders and broad chest. Jeans hugged his thighs with loving, but not tight attention. Usually by this time of evening he had a five o'clock shadow, but she could tell he'd shaved. His gaze swept over her top and centered on her breasts with obvious heated male interest.

Then his gaze turned worried. "Honey, I'd like to stand out here all day with you checking me out, but can I come in? Or am I in the doghouse again?"

She sniffed the bundle of flowers, embarrassment crawling into her face. She backed away from the door and mumbled, "Oh, um...I'm sorry. Thank you for the flowers. These are so nice and they smell wonderful." She headed to the kitchen with him in tow. "And I was not checking you out."

"Yeah, you were. But that's okay. Because I was checking you out, too."

Heat redoubled its efforts and crawled right to her hairline. She released a small laugh, genuine amusement finding its way through her poorly veiled attempt at a cover for her feelings. "Mick, you are such a teaser."

"I'm not teasing." He threw her a genuine smile so full of acceptance and obvious male interest, she had to admit he meant business.

"Okay, you mean it."

"Good." He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss to her lips.

Flustered, she moved back. "Thanks again for the flowers."

"You're welcome. I stopped by that shop not far from the sheriff's department. You know the one painted a violent pink?"

"I know the one. It's run by that old lady with the blue hair?"

“That’s the one. Only today there was a young pretty blonde behind the counter.”

An unexpected reaction slashed through her. The green-eyed monster. She winced. *Oh, God.* She did not need this. Didn’t want to be jealous of any other woman over this man, period. No matter how much she cared for him, jealousy like that would earn her nothing. She doubted Mick would appreciate a woman’s possessiveness.

She placed the flowers on the kitchen counter and opened the cabinet where her aunt had kept the vases.

As she worked on finding a vase, she realized the right size for the huge bunch of flowers resided on the higher shelf. She pulled over the stepladder and took the three steps upward.

“Wait, I think I can reach that,” he said, walking toward her.

She wrapped her fingers around the crystal vase and started down. Her foot slipped, she grappled for balance and the vase went flying. Crying out in dismay and anger, she heard the vase shatter as it hit the floor. Crystal shot in every direction as she fell backward. It all took a few seconds, but she could have sworn it lasted three lifetimes.

Mick cursed and lunged for her. She fell against him, his arms wrapped around her waist from behind, and he staggered back a step.

“Damn it!” She growled her anger.

Mick’s arms tightened around her waist. “Hey, you all right?”

For a few seconds she did nothing more than absorb the bone-melting sensation of hard man. From the top of her head to her ankles, he seemed to embrace her in protection. Power. And undeniable sexual awareness.

She swallowed hard and turned in his arms to face him. “I’m fine. Thank you.” She puffed out an exasperated breath. “I’m so clumsy.”

He didn’t release her as she expected. Instead, his arms tightened around her waist. “Accidents happen.”

Her fingers spread out over his pectorals, and his nipples hardened under her touch. He smelled earthy, man and a warm subtle scent. Their gazes clashed. Held.

Before she could blink, he kissed her.

As his mouth shaped hers, her eyes shut in dazed pleasure. It wasn’t as if he hadn’t kissed her before, but something new, a raw, deep emotion powered the subtle, seductive movements of his lips over hers. As if he soothed her into passion rather than forcing the issue. His big palms spread over her back, caressing and shaping as her breasts pressed to his chest and her nipples went tight with a sweet ache. She involuntarily twisted against him, her breasts rubbing, her hips moving. As if she’d turned on a switch, he groaned softly, and his tongue plunged into her mouth. His cock hardened against her stomach. She responded wholeheartedly and forgot the shattered crystal at their feet. Hot need coiled in her belly as Mick’s hands slid to her butt and clasped each cheek with a gentle, but proprietary squeeze. Her hands slid around his neck as she responded to the drugging passion that swamped her.

He gently broke off the kiss and before she could say a word, he lifted her in his arms and stepped around the broken crystal.

Her arms automatically went around his neck, a surprised question coming out of her. “What are you doing?”

“You’re barefoot and there’s broken glass everywhere.”

Made sense, and the way his arms cradled her did funny things to her breathing. “I

can't remember the last time a man picked me up."

Doofus. What a thing to say.

His crooked grin held male cockiness and satisfaction. "Yeah? Do you like it?"

She could say no. But with Mick's innate ability to ferret out a lie, she told the truth instead. "I do."

His grin grew wider as he placed her on her feet. She danced away from him. "I'll grab my sandals."

It didn't take them long to clean up the mess.

"Was that an antique you dropped?" Mick asked as he rolled the vacuum cleaner back into the utility room.

"No, thank goodness."

This time Mick used all of his six-foot-three height to grab another vase. After placing the flowers safely on the coffee table, she offered him a drink and he declined.

"It's cooled down outside. Want to go sit in the hammock?" he asked.

"You noticed that old thing? I'm not even sure it's safe."

"Let's test it."

The backyard needed work, and she was reminded of that the minute they stepped out the back door and onto the covered patio.

"Man, this place needs help." She put her hands on her hips and stared at the tangled vines and overgrown bushes.

"Give yourself time. You'll get it taken care of."

"Gardening isn't my strong suit."

"My mom can give you tips. She loves to garden."

"Your mom is one of the most talented ladies I've ever met."

"And you're not?"

"Yep."

He leaned forward and brushed her forehead with another one of his trademark, tender kisses. "Bullshit. You're beautiful, hard working, creative, and talented. You've got to give yourself more credit, Celeste."

"Okay MacGilvary. What gives? You bring me flowers and now you're praising me up and down."

He frowned. "I don't have an ulterior motive other than to please you. I hate it when you put yourself down. There's no good reason for it."

"It's a force of habit." She shook her head. "I'm trying to build confidence, but sometimes I'll get into a pattern of putting myself down."

He brushed a finger over her nose. "I'll help you build it. But it has to come from inside you."

She hadn't expected that answer and it took the wind out of her sails momentarily. "You're right. It does."

She stepped down the porch steps and toward the huge hammock. The ragged thing didn't look capable of holding two of them. They brushed leaves and other stuff out of the hammock before she dared test it.

She eased into it and lay down. It swung gently between two huge old oak trees. "Seems solid enough."

"Scoot over."

"What?"

“It’s big enough for both of us.”

Chapter Twelve

Celeste made room, wriggling around and he slid in next to her.

"Here," he said. "I have an idea. Get out a minute."

Wondering what in the heck he had in mind, she left the swinging contraption.

He shifted up higher on the hammock and parted his legs. He pointed to the V they made. "Sit between my legs."

She hesitated. "Sit between your legs."

"We can both sit in it that way. It's certainly strong enough."

Did she dare? "What if it breaks?"

"It's not far to the ground. Besides, if we break it, I'll buy you another one."

"Deal."

She climbed in the hammock and soon found her butt cradled by his strong thighs, his arms wrapped around her waist. The strength of his body behind her, the warmth...all of it made her breath quicken, her insides melt with female awareness. Hard muscle bunched against her, rippling with a power that made her want to undo his clothing and uncover each inch of his chest, arms, thighs...

Holy cow. Now that was an image. She inhaled slow and deep. Hyperventilating was not an option.

He cupped her shoulders and massaged. "You're tight. Are you nervous?"

"About what?"

"I don't know. Sitting this close to me?"

"I've been this close to you before."

"Doesn't mean you're not nervous."

She made scoffing noise. "You're full of cheek today, aren't you?"

"I'm always full of cheek."

Slow, kneading pressure into her muscles felt exquisite. She sighed, a low purr leaving her lips.

He shifted behind her. "Lay back."

Wouldn't you know this hammock would be big enough to not only hold them both, but assure he could lean back and still hold her?

As she nestled back with a small wriggle, he groaned softly. "Don't do that, honey."

"Just trying to find a soft spot." Her impish side came out. She placed her hands over his forearms and squeezed a bit, testing. "With all this muscle, it's difficult."

He lifted his hips a bit and his fully erect cock pressed into her backside and waist. "Yeah, well, there's something else hard now."

She cleared her throat. "I noticed that."

Wild heat burst in her center, building anticipation and excitement. Amazement and chagrin warred for supremacy inside her. Amazement that she could turn him on that quickly. Chagrin that she could be amazed. She wanted to revel in her ability to disconcert him, but not be surprised when she did. Damn, wouldn't it feel good to own confidence like that?

"What are you thinking?" he asked.

"I got another call from Darrell. I made a mistake and picked up the phone."

“Celeste...”

“I know, I know.”

“What did he say?” She gave him the lowdown, and his arms tightened around her waist. “Shit.”

“So, my job is probably in jeopardy.”

“Maybe not.” Mick told her about his conversation with Lenderson. “I hope I cleared the man’s worries.”

“I have a bad feeling about it in the pit of my stomach.”

“Think positive.”

“People always say that, but it’s hard to do when there’s a creep calling you day after day trying to make your life hell.”

His palms spread upward to just under her breasts, cupping her ribcage. Heat spread upward from her stomach. “I won’t deny it, but if you let it take you over, then he wins. You’re not alone, you know. You’ve got family.”

Okay, now she knew he’d lost it.

“Everyone in my family is dead.” Though she’d known it for some time now, after Aunt Ginger died, saying it out loud made a lonely spot grow in her stomach. A ball of lead, as a matter of fact.

“You have me, mom, and my brothers. Our family takes in strays.”

She chuckled. “Gee, thanks.”

“I mean that in a good way.” His hands moved, this time up and down her arms with a soothing, protective reassurance. “We figure since all of us were strays at one time, if there is someone in need of family connection and we care about them, then they *are* family.”

“That’s...it’s very Waltonish.”

He made a scoffing noise. “Waltonish? What do you know about them?”

“I’ve seen reruns.”

“Uh-huh. So have I. My mom hates the Waltons. I can guarantee we aren’t like that. You should know from all the time you’ve spent with my family.”

“I do. But...”

“But what?”

She squirmed internally, uncertain how to explain without coming off priggish or ungrateful or spiteful. “I’ve never had that life, Mick. You know the whole story. Even before the robbery...”

“You don’t have to talk about it unless you need to.”

Did she? “Mother and father didn’t give me that much love. At first I told myself they did.” She fumbled for the right words. “They were self-absorbed. Mom was always at the firm drawing up plans for this and that. Dad always on a job site engineering this or that. Our lives were a facsimile of togetherness. A façade of a good life. The shooting disrupted even that. It severed the connection...what little connection I had to them.”

His hands rubbed over her arms one more time before settling on her shoulders, and that’s when she noticed her muscles had tightened once more. He massaged, and she wondered how he could feel her tension without effort.

“Your father pulled away, after he was shot in the robbery and your mother killed.”

She nodded in agreement. “He was already closed off to me, and when he gave me up to Aunt Ginger, it was like I didn’t exist anymore. No cards, no phone calls. Nothing.”

Her throat tightened. "I spent many years getting over what he did. I can't believe it feels so sharp after all this time. It's a double rejection. First he doesn't pay attention to me, then he tosses me out of his life all together."

"His grief over your mother ate him alive."

She nodded as the ache of that knowledge spread through her, a twisting in her gut as she allowed the pain to surface.

"It feels sharp because of what you're going through now," he said. "Stress sometimes brings this shit back with a vengeance."

"Does it for you?"

"Always."

"I never saw you that way. You're strong physically and mentally."

"Yeah, but I'm human. You're back in my life and everything about you affects me. As for your father, I'm sure he loved you. He didn't know how to show it other than to let you go. He figured since he was stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of his life, he couldn't be a good father to you."

"That's crap. He could have."

"Of course. But that's probably not what he believed at the time. He thought he was so messed up that Ginger would do a better job of raising you."

On a roll, she wanted to rage against unfairness. "Life dealt me some pretty ugly cards back then."

"Was everything bad? You came to Gold Rush and that ended up being a great thing, right?"

She smiled weakly, knowing he couldn't see it from where he sat or in the encroaching darkness. "You always understand how to bring perspective into things."

"I try."

"Coming to Gold Rush when I was a teen was fantastic. You and your family. I always remember the good times I had."

"And now?"

"Now...now it's a mixed bag."

His arms slid up until he embraced her around the shoulders. His lips touched her neck, and she shivered in pleasure. "Don't count Darrell as a part of Gold Rush. He doesn't belong here like you do."

As sensual desires tingled across her skin and into her belly, she knew the right answer. The correct one. "I'm still trying to decide where I belong."

He nodded, and his mouth brushed over her earlobe. "Just remember, you can count on me and my family. We're here to help."

She didn't know how to feel. "I need time to absorb all this. To believe it's real."

"Oh, it's real all right. So is this."

His hips shifted and his cock pressed into her backside, as if seeking a place to nestle. Hot sparks ignited as his tongue brushed her earlobe, and Mick's hands started to travel. She moved, half out of orneriness and the other from wanting more of his hot cock pressed against her.

They lay in twilight, a cool breeze floating over them like a lover's caress, yet her body knew fire and melting desire at the core. Like a volcano, her senses exploded, taking in his every stroke with eagerness and fire. Her eyes closed and she sank into whatever heaven the present could bring. Mick's touch glided to her neck and found the

throbbing pulse at the base. He must note the beat, how much it fluttered and hesitated with excitement. Tingling, she allowed the excitement to catch her off guard, to sweep away inhibitions that might otherwise threaten to suck her into reflection and doubt. She'd always doubted. Always hesitated until time rushed by and took every chance from her. She waited for fear to overtake her and found none.

She wanted to change. She wanted to know the positive, to bring it into her life and stop expecting only bad things to come. Maybe, with Mick's guidance, she could relearn with baby steps until the night no longer held demons and her heart ran free.

Mick's lips found her ear again, hot breath swirling in an erotic puff against her sensitive skin. His fingertips grazed, light as a feather over her breasts. Desire melted her loins even though material barred him from her naked flesh. His palms cupped her breasts and held them, thumbs coming up to test her nipples. She gasped. The padded bra added a frustrating barrier. Nipples peaked, hardened and stung. She arched into his hold, wanting more as her lower body pressed into his. Surging and lifting, her body reacted, sensing a rhythm in tune with his. Cupping, caressing, his hands kept up the torture. Her breasts felt sensitive, larger, her nipples longer. After he'd tormented her for an eon, his hands slipped under her shirt. With a quick movement, the front closure on her bra opened. Mick's palms, so hot and slightly callused, cupped naked flesh.

"Oh, God." The words escaped her on a tiny gasp.

"Mmm." He murmured into her ear, his own breath coming quicker as he palmed and stroked her flesh. "So round and soft and beautiful."

When he clasped her nipples and tugged gently, she moaned. "Oh, that feels..."

"Good?"

"Oh, yes." She sounded breathy and excited, and damn it, she was. "Yes."

He stroked, working her flesh with slow pulls that lengthened each nipple and sent sparklers through her veins. She wanted and needed his touch and reassurance more than she'd wanted anything in a long time. How could she ever think this man held violence within him? How could she ever have feared him?

His whisper puffed soft and hot into her ear. "Let me give you this."

Mick's touch slid down her waist and palmed her stomach. Heat swirled like a whirlwind. Her breath caught as his lips traveled down her neck, kissing and gliding with feathery touches. Warmth tickled in her belly and traveled straight to her core as he found his way under the elastic waistband of her shorts and panties. When his touch skimmed naked flesh, she almost held her breath. Every sense concentrated on the moment as he arrowed down, down, tangling in her curls until he inched between her folds and caressed. The moisture there eased his way.

"Oh." The syllable escaped her, her breath quickening.

She parted her legs further, and just as she remembered, he took his time. Torturing her as he eased one finger with a slow push deep into her center.

"Mick?"

"What is it?"

"That feels..."

"Yeah?"

"Incredible."

"Then I'd better keep doing it."

As he pumped his finger inside her, he touched a place high inside. Her G-spot?

She'd heard of it, wondered about it, but never experimented to see if she could locate it. He drew back, eased inward, caressed her warm wetness. Her sheath contracted around his finger. Mick clasped one nipple and rolled as his finger rubbed that spot inside her with a relentless movement, a stunning touch that made her hips move, her breath come sharply, her eyes close tightly. Sensation piled upon sensation as he eased away and then thrust two fingers in.

Pleasure increased tenfold, and her fingers clasped over the hand that held her breast.

"Come on," he whispered. "Feel it. Feel me."

She heard the agony in his plea and knew it came from somewhere deep inside. She knew he wanted her writhing and crazy in his arms, longed for her to release the concerns she'd built until climax was not a question but a certainty. As a sweet, burgeoning release hovered on the edge, she heard her own breath rasping, the tiny moans that escaped.

Once more it hit her where they were. Outside. In the back yard. Yet night now covered them, making detection unlikely. She undulated, writhed, reached for the sky. Mick anchored her with one arm around her waist, his touch exploring her heated center. Deep inside his fingers brushed, caressed, eased through soaked folds. The sensation was unbearably good, and as she tried to hold back her whimpers, the pleasure reached for her.

She turned her head to the right as she quivered on a cliff edge. "You're torturing me."

"Tell me what you need."

"I can't."

"You can."

"I need—" She broke off, grabbed his hand and drew his fingers upward. They brushed over her clit and she gasped. "Yes. There."

His tongue darted into her ear, his whisper rough and masculine. "Don't hide it from me. Give it to me now. Tell me what you want."

"Play with my clit," she whispered in desperation.

She didn't need permission as the heat inside rose to a pitch. As he manipulated her nipple, relentlessly tugging and tweaking, he brushed with soft strokes over her clit. She held back a plea and fell in. Just let go.

Orgasm drove Celeste the final inch.

Moaning softly, a startled sound of bliss so exquisite it almost couldn't be borne, issued from her throat. She trembled, breath suspended as deep inside muscles contracted, then rippled. Wildfire seared her as her muscles tightened, the bliss so beautiful tears came to her eyes. His fingers continued to manipulate her clit and nipples. Scorching bliss wracked her in waves of mind-blowing pleasure. Even the orgasm she'd had in the closet hadn't been this strong, this powerful. She shivered, moaned with delight.

As Celeste came down from the plateau, Mick said, "God, that was beautiful."

She shifted, rubbing along a hard-as-a-spike erection. She sighed. "That was."

Celeste knew what she wanted to do, pulling away from his arms.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"Nowhere. Do me a favor?"

"Sure."

"There's something I want to give *you*, and this hammock isn't a good place for it."

In the almost darkness, his smile flashed cocky and certain. “Oh, yeah?”
“Let’s go inside.”

Chapter Thirteen

Mick sat on the couch, his cock aching and so hard he wanted to scream with the need to fuck Celeste. But he also knew if he tried to get her clothes off now it wouldn't be the delicious, slow lovemaking he'd envisioned for them. Nope. He'd want to lay her down on the floor, the couch, prop her against the wall...anywhere he could drive his cock up that sweet pussy and fuck her until he didn't know where he ended and she began. He didn't want to come on like a relentless animal even though he felt like one.

He wanted, in the most elemental way, to possess her body and soul.

Celeste watched him, her hair mussed, shirt askew, lips parted with a drowsy sexiness. "Open your pants."

Oh yeah. He could get into this. He opened his fly and lifted his hips so he could shove jeans and briefs down enough so his cock sprang free. Her gaze snagged on his arrow-straight cock. He wasn't arrogant enough to think his cock was extraordinary. Okay, it wasn't exactly small, but he knew he wasn't that much bigger than average. But she gazed at him as if he'd revealed the Hope Diamond.

Engorged, thick, and dying for her, his cock jerked. He licked his lips.

She settled down on her knees in front of him, and he smiled. *Thank you, God.* His balls felt like they could explode any minute. She'd worked him into a frenzy with her response to his touch out there on the hammock. Thinking about the way her body had throbbed around his fingers, how hard and responsive her clit had felt made him want to beg. *Jesus, he couldn't take this.*

Her small, pale hand reached for him, and she laced long fingers around the base of his cock. Enjoyment spread through him. Maybe he'd broken through her barriers and she'd slowly but surely give into the desire that hummed between them. He wanted that satisfaction, wanted her writhing beneath him, her legs wrapped around him as he fucked them both into the next universe.

Whoa, boy. Getting ahead of yourself.

When his cock surged in her grip, she glanced up at him and smiled. "God, Mick, you are so hard. So...big."

He gulped. *Holy. Fuckin'. Shit.* "Honey, if you say stuff like that to me, I'm going to come."

Celeste's beautiful eyes went sultry with promise. "I want you to."

Then she did the most mind-warping thing of all. She leaned forward and brushed her tongue over the tip of his cock. His hips jerked as gut-clenching pleasure drove hot blood toward his loins. He didn't think he could become any harder, but boy was he wrong. Mick's fingers clenched into fists, and he gritted his teeth.

As her hand smoothed upward, her mouth encompassed his tip and smoothed downward with a combined motion of lips and hand that drew a guttural moan from his throat.

He arched into her touch. Sweet bolts of pleasure clawed at him. "Don't stop."

She laughed softly, and the vibration electrified the already toe-curling pleasure jolting his body. Her tongue licked, her lips stroked, her hand squeezed and glided. She closed her eyes, but he watched her devour him with long licks, wet heat, and stomach-

clenching strokes that threatened to shake his control into dust. Heat built in his loins, threatening to explode.

“I can’t take this much longer.”

He couldn’t. He didn’t remember the last time a woman’s touch and tongue had driven him this close to the edge this quickly. His head dropped back to the couch as his eyes drifted shut, and he resigned himself to the ecstasy.

By now he couldn’t keep the excitement out of his breathing, or the pleading from his voice. “That’s it. Oh. God. That’s it.”

Her hand moved rapidly, her mouth following up and down, up and down. He had to warn her—

She hummed in her throat, and the vibration went straight to his cock until he couldn’t think of anything but the way her lips felt caressing his flesh.

Hot.

Tight.

Pure womanly silk.

The wet slide of her lips and the stroke of her palm drew him into a madness he couldn’t resist. Heat arched through him like a supernova. Sweet bliss overtook him, wracking his body. His fingers clenched the seat cushions. Heat exploded as he growled low in his throat and erupted in one bliss-filled blast that seemed to go on and on until he felt lightheaded with pleasure.

As he released his seed into her mouth, she swallowed every drop, and the eroticism blew him away. His body screamed with pleasure, jerking and groaning as pure ecstasy scalded him. As he panted and shook, Mick floated on a dream. Yeah, a damned dream he never thought would happen in reality.

He’d dreamed for years of seeing her this way, taking him into her without hesitation.

Celeste smiled up at him and sat back, her beautiful hair tumbling about her shoulders in golden flows of silk. She embodied every fantasy, every memory of what he’d wanted as a teen.

He held out his arms. “Come here.”

With a shy smile, she crawled up to the couch and into his arms. He held her close and as they sat there, silent and still. He expected her to chatter, though he should have known better. Other women he’d bedded liked to talk after sex. But this wasn’t exactly sex was it? It was half sex. The beginning of sex. Who was he fooling? This was sex, pure and simple.

As he absorbed the silence, the single lamp illuminating the living room glowed on her hair. He inhaled deeply and caught her scent. She smelled uniquely Celeste. An old fashioned yet feminine scent that comforted him in a way he couldn’t identify. He shifted and enjoyed her weight nestled with such trust in his arms. The knowledge settled deep into his bones. She might not feel safe enough to have full-on sex with him, but for now this proved enough.

He kissed the top of her head. “You okay?”

“I’m wonderful. How about you?”

The smile in her voice made him grin. “I haven’t felt this good in a long time.” He rubbed her arm. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

"For the best damn blow job ever."

She giggled, a girly-girl sound that he liked and didn't expect.

"It's true. A lot of women won't..." He shrugged.

"Give blow jobs?"

"That and they sure as hell don't swallow."

She sat up and slipped from his arms. "I wanted to please you."

She had, more than she could know. He reached for her hand and held the delicate shape. So damned small and fragile yet strong. "I'm worried about you."

Her fingers twined with his. "What? Why?"

"This jerk off...Huntley."

She shrugged. "He's doing a number on me, but you helped negate the damage. Lenderson couldn't be stupid enough to believe Darrell, could he?"

"Damned good question."

"I guess there's nothing more I can do right now but wait and see."

"Be right back." He went into the bathroom and when he came back she still sat on the couch, a forlorn, lonely expression firm in her eyes and on her lips.

He sat down beside her. "I've got another session at the range at six a.m."

"With your brothers?"

"Nope. Another guy on the team. Dace Banovic."

"How many men are on your SWAT team these days?"

"Dace, Craig, Trey, Kelso, ten others. Why?"

"Just interested to know how many people are watching your back."

"Worried about me?"

"Of course."

That made him feel strange. He liked that she cared.

"You're thinking too much," he said.

Her eyebrows twitched. "I am? About what?"

"Everything. I can't say I blame you, though. Huntley is a piece of work. But hang in there. We aren't going to let him win this."

"We?"

"Yeah. I've got a plan."

Her eyes widened.

He didn't give her a chance to speak. "You need a security system on this house."

"That's an expense I'm not sure I want right now." She stood as he walked to the front door.

"It's the smart thing to do." His arms came around her waist.

"You want me to have peace of mind, don't you?"

"Yes. Let me call someone about the security system."

Her mouth quirked. "I guess I didn't want that new flooring in the kitchen anyway."

"I know a man at Hyperion Security in town. I've seen the layout of this house, and I'm pretty sure what you'll need. He can come by and make certain I know what I'm talking about and install the same day."

A smile turned up her lips, and he couldn't help grinning back. "You're something else, MacGilvary. Are you my guardian angel?"

"For now I am."

Defiance lit her eyes as she shook her head. "I need to rely on myself."

That damned feminine defiance again—she thought he pushed too far. Maybe he did. “I’m not trying to bully you into anything.”

“Yeah, you are.” Another bright smile broke over her face. “But in this case I think I appreciate the wisdom of it.”

He brushed his fingers over her nose. “Good.”

He kissed her, and she took control, her tongue teasing his lips until he opened. As her tongue caressed, he groaned and his cock threatened to turn into a spike again.

He groaned and pulled back. “I’ve created a monster.”

She sniffed and slipped from his arms. “Don’t take credit yet. This has always been inside me. You just haven’t seen it until now.”

“Damn. I think I’m going to like discovering this side of you.”

Another deep kiss included her palming his pecs until he hissed in a breath. What he wouldn’t give to see her lips teasing his nipples, roaming over his body with abandon.

He disengaged slowly from her arms. “Let me know what the Hyperion guy says, okay?”

Once on the road, he stared into the night with certainty. Inch by inch he’d keep her from harm. Though he knew common sense and intelligence ruled her, Mick couldn’t help worrying. Part of him wished she’d asked him to stay the night. But if he had, the temptation to fuck her senseless would have overwhelmed him. She would have given into a seduction; he knew it the way a man knows his own name. Yet he didn’t want it that way. He wanted her only when she *took* it from him, when her passion showed she owned no hesitation and would have no regrets. Sex with her had to be genuine, or he didn’t want it at all.

He wanted something with her he’d never experienced with another woman.

Damn, that was a contrast from the night of the martial arts event. He’d been ready to fuck without a thought to consequences, to why she wanted him, to what it would mean to them in the future.

Mick wanted Celeste when she surrendered completely and nothing less than having him inside her would do.

“Shit.”

Mick doubted he’d find much sleep tonight.

Chapter Fourteen

"I see." Celeste couldn't think of another thing to say into the phone. "The board feels this is the right decision, even though I am innocent of the charges Huntley made?"

Lenderson cleared his throat. "Well...yes."

"Even though my previous employer said they had seen no signs of obsessive compulsive disorder or mental illness in me during my work there?"

"Yes."

Anger surged higher, as it had ever since she'd picked up the phone and Principal Lenderson began to justify the board's decision. There *was* no justification for it in her mind.

"There's no way I can appeal this decision?"

"I'm sorry, Miss Rice. The decision is final. I wanted to call right away and make sure you knew."

"Thank you, Mr. Lenderson." *For nothing. Thank you for nothing.* "Goodbye."

Her hand shook as she placed the phone back in its cradle. Celeste stared at the phone, half expecting it to ring and hear Darrell's triumphant voice saying *nanny-nanny-boo-boo*. He seemed to be everywhere, invading her privacy, trying to destroy what she'd worked for her whole life. Stability and peace. Safety and security. It flashed into her mind that two men she knew rocked her life. Mick kept her off balance, made her life ripple with undercurrents and uncertainties. With affection and protection, with wild sensuality and uncertainty.

Darrell terrorized her, subtly and not-so-subtly, and filled her with other types of doubts. No matter what she did, she couldn't say for certain where each day would end. No matter how much sanctuary and refuge she wanted, it seemed out of her reach. Ripped from her tight grip.

Damn them both.

She reached for the phone and dialed Mick's cell, but received his voice mail instead. She left a message.

After reaching into the refrigerator for a diet cola, she retreated to the living room and retrieved the phone again. It didn't take long to reach Leigh Strong on her cell.

"Hey girl," Leigh's upbeat voice came over the line. "What's up?"

"Nothing good. Say, do you have some time this evening to share a bottle of wine? I really need girl chat and brainstorming."

"Uh-oh."

"You've got that right."

"You okay?"

"I'm splendid. Okay, I'm not. It's my job...or what I thought was going to be my job."

"Oh, crap. Tell me all about it," Leigh said.

"Not while you're at work."

"Okay, but I'm finished for the day anyway. When do you want me to come over?"

"As soon as you're free."

"I'm free now."

“Then let’s have that bottle of wine.”

“I’ll make a stop and pick up other provisions.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“What? And pass up a chance to snack? I’ve been damned good lately not munching on things that are bad for me. I have to have an excuse once in awhile.”

They hung up and Celeste contemplated starting on the adult beverages early. Nope. She rarely drank alone and never when depressed or under significant stress. Celebrations and dinners with friends qualified as wine drinking time, but not much else.

Except she would drink under stress this time, wouldn’t she?

Screw you, Darrell Huntley.

She gritted her teeth and lay back on the couch. Barely thirty minutes later the sound of a car pulling into her driveway made her leave the couch.

She peered out of the big window and saw a sheriff’s department cruiser in the driveway. At first glance she couldn’t see the officer inside and her heart started to pound, then the driver’s side opened and Mick stepped out.

Two parts thrill and one part curiosity zinged through her blood. Why would he stop here while on duty? She opened the door and as he strode up the porch steps wearing his short sleeved dark brown sheriff’s department uniform, including the brown cowboy hat, her heart did a triple flip and her loins reacted in primitive, melting need.

Whoa. He looked positively ...*hot*. She’d never seen him in his full sheriff’s department uniform. The hat looked awesome on him. Come to think of it, she’d never seen him in his SWAT gear either, and the idea sent fresh excitement whirling through every female blood cell. *Oh, yeah. I’d like to see that.*

She expected his smile, but instead caught his frown. “Hey, something wrong? Your message was really cryptic.”

She let him in the house and closed the door. With his hands on his hips, towering over her, Mick represented raw male authority.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Sorry...yes, I’m fine. I should have left a clearer message. I figured I could call back later and explain.”

“Next time tell me what’s going on. When I hear “Hey, Mick, bad news. I’ll call you later,” comes over my phone, it worries me.”

Instinctively, she step forward and touched his chest. “I said I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking clearly.” She heaved a sigh. “It’s...”

Another car engine sounded in the driveway, and this time she recognized the distinctive Volkswagen Golf.

“Who is that?” he asked.

“Leigh Strong. She’s a friend. I asked her to come over and share a bottle of wine.”

Before he could ask more questions, Celeste opened the door. Decked out in a bright turquoise business suit and cream and turquoise high-heeled pumps, Leigh headed for the porch carrying a grocery bag and clutch purse. Her expression twisted into a frown as she glanced at the cruiser also parked in the circular drive.

“Don’t worry,” Celeste called down the steps to her friend. “It’s just Mick.”

Mick grunted, as if refuting the “just” part.

Leigh’s dark brows pinched together as she took the steps. “Good way to scare me out of ten years growth, girl.”

Leigh sauntered into Celeste's home, her sparkling green eyes and swingy shoulder-length brandy hair so refined and classy most men did a triple take. Mick, in contrast, didn't look bowled over.

Leigh had a petite, perfect body that screamed sultry sexuality even when she wore flannel pajamas or an oversized t-shirt and cut offs. She also looked delicate and fragile. No one who knew her well believed that, though. Leigh Strong had balls of steel, and she didn't let anyone forget it.

Leigh's sharp gaze pinpointed on Mick, and she held out her hand. "Hi. I'm Leigh Strong. Pleased to meet you."

Mick took her hand, his big paw swallowing the woman's small digits. His serious expression dissolved into masculine charm with a warm smile. "Pleased to meet you. Mick MacGilvary."

Leigh's grin also returned, her trademark sparkling eyes and genuine friendliness clear to see. "So, what did my friend do this time? She's always getting in trouble with the law."

Celeste made a scoffing noise and thwacked her friend on the arm. "I am not."

"Let me put this bag in the kitchen while you finish talking," Leigh said as she grinned headed for the kitchen.

Mick's cop face returned as he centered his attention on Celeste. "What were you about to tell me before Leigh arrived?"

Celeste blew a stream of air between her lips, her sigh sounding weary and resigned to her own ears. She relayed what Lenderson had told her.

Mick's mouth hardened. "That's crap."

"What's crap?" Leigh asked as she returned from the kitchen.

Celeste repeated the tale about Lenderson's call.

"How awful." Leigh circled Celeste's shoulders and gave her a squeeze. "Are the people at that school insane? I can't believe they'd do this."

"I believe it." Celeste sucked in a deep breath as reality crashed inward. "I needed that job."

Mick's obvious anger for the situation boiled in his eyes. She'd seen that indignant, 'I'll do something about this' look before.

"I'll have a talk with this Lenderson." Mick crossed his arms. "This isn't right."

Celeste grasped his forearm. "No. Don't. It won't make any difference. You already talked to them."

Mick's shoulder radio hissed, crackled and a female dispatcher's voice called his unit number and asked if he could back up another deputy.

He responded in the positive and said to Celeste and Leigh, "Gotta go."

Mick surprised Celeste by gently gripping the back of her neck and pressing a quick kiss to her lips. Just that fast, Celeste's body reacted with a hot flush in her cheeks.

"You ladies keep things locked up, okay? I'll call later. Nice to meet you, Leigh."

Leigh waved. "Take care."

After Mick left, Leigh released a slow whistle. She fanned herself. "Ohhhh doggie. That is one mean, lean, gorgeous man." She wriggled her eyebrows. "I mean...whooohooo."

Celeste laughed. "I'm glad you think so."

"No you aren't. You want him all to yourself. But if you *didn't* want him, I'd be

interested. He's hot."

Celeste rolled her gaze to the ceiling. "God, Leigh, we need to find you a date and quick."

"I wish. Too much work to do. I suppose I should get used to seeing his car in your driveway a lot? After all that kiss was, well, mama mia."

Celeste groaned at Leigh's teasing and they headed to the kitchen. Celeste rummaged in the grocery bag her friend had placed on the kitchen island. "What have you got in here? Chips. Dip. More chips. Are you trying to make me fat?"

"Yes." Leigh winked. "Just kidding. But it sounds like you could use a good junk fest for a change." She patted Celeste on the shoulder. "Tell Mama Leigh what's going on."

Celeste worked on opening chip bags and wine. Leigh placed one hand on the back of a chair and balanced on one foot. She plucked off her white high-heeled pumps and let them fall to the floor.

"Are you working tomorrow?" Celeste asked.

"Actually, no. The shop is being painted. We tried to get someone to do it on the weekend...correction, I tried to convince Delilah to do it on the weekend and she said it would be too expensive." Leigh groaned. "I don't know about her. She'd rather lose the revenue on the shop one day than pay a bit more to have the painting done in the evening when the shop is closed. It takes a while for that paint stench to air out." Leigh sighed and accepted the white wine Celeste handed her.

Celeste had placed both open bags of chip and dip on the kitchen table when the phone rang. Celeste ran into the living room to grab it, then remembered her vow to let the answering machine take all calls. When she heard it was the security company returning her call with an appointment time, she answered. It took only a few minutes to set up a time for tomorrow.

Back in the kitchen, Celeste said, "I don't know if I should do this security system."

Leigh's eyebrows lowered in obvious disapproval. "Why not?"

Celeste sank into a chair and dug around in a bag of chips. "Because it's expensive, and I don't have a job."

Leigh crunched a chip and chewed before answering. "Mick suggested it, right? And it's a discount off the regular price because you were referred, right?"

"That's what they said."

"Then do it. There's no time like the present."

Leigh, queen of quotations, could pop out a saying faster than anyone Celeste knew and no doubt would have more before the night finished.

Celeste grumbled. "Do or die?"

A chip stopped halfway to Leigh's mouth. "Don't say things like that. It scares me to think you're in this house with flimsy locks anyone could break."

"Is your house any better?"

"Not much. But I'm moving to that gated condo unit soon. It's more secure. Of course, I don't have a hot SWAT guy to protect me, either."

Memory of Mick's kisses sent a fresh surge of heat to Celeste's face.

Leigh grinned and pointed a chip at her. "Aha! There it is. Evidence you've got it bad. Are you in love with Mick?"

Celeste almost choked on her wine. "What? Of course not."

“Of course not? *Why* not?”

“Well, he’s...”

“Yeah, spit it out.”

Celeste leaned back in her chair. “Our relationship is pretty much physical. Once I’ve...” Celeste couldn’t say it, even to her best friend.

“You haven’t slept with him yet, have you?”

“God, you are so blunt.”

“I’ll admit it. I’ve always been that way. Cut-to-the-chase Leigh. Takes a lot less time to get to the truth. What’s holding you back from sleeping with him?”

Celeste took her time answering by eating another chip and sipping wine. “It’s not me. It’s him. Sort of.”

Leigh screwed up her little nose. “Eh?”

“We’ve been...intimate in some ways. But he says he won’t sleep with me until he knows I feel safe.”

Leigh’s devil-may-care expression cleared to soft understanding. “Oh, I see. He’s worried that you’re hanging on to what happened when you were teens, right? The near rape?”

Celeste saw no point in trying to keep it private. Leigh would drag it out of her one way or the other. “Yes.”

“Wow. He really is a keeper, then.” Leigh’s irreverent grin held teasing. “That could be good, though. His restraint, I mean. Just think what it’ll be like when he lets all that passion loose.”

“Jeez, now I know we need to find you a man. It seems like you have some lust to burn off yourself.”

Leigh shrugged. “Not anytime soon.”

Celeste felt a tug in her midsection, a realization that her serious case of lust for Mick edged toward—dare she think it—love. “I could maybe fall in love with him if I let myself.”

Leigh grunted. “How do you do that? How do you *let* yourself fall in love? You either do or you don’t.”

“It’s more complicated than that.”

Leigh seemed reflective, as if she wanted to work out possibilities in her mind. “I fell hard and fast for a guy once, and it was mega disastrous. I understand how reluctant you are to build something meaningful with Mick.”

Celeste pondered her friend’s surprising statement. “Why was your relationship a disaster?”

Leigh’s eyes were sad as she shrugged. “He was after my family’s money. Long story.”

Leigh had hinted to Celeste in the past about her family’s Prada lifestyle near Los Angeles, and how she’d fled to Colorado to start over after a bad relationship. But Leigh had never revealed the whole story and said she’d much rather forget.

Celeste hadn’t seen such unhappiness on Leigh before, and it sobered her. “I’m sorry.”

Leigh’s cheerful expression returned. “Hey, tonight is all about you.”

Celeste rubbed her hands over her face. “What do I do next?”

“About?” Leigh popped a chip into her mouth and crunched away.

“I’m without a job.”

“You had a back-up plan, right?”

Celeste shifted in her chair, weariness eating away at her resolve. “My administrative assistant experience is my back-up. Lenderson said I was a shoo-in when I first interviewed, and everything looked so promising I didn’t make preparations to find a job as an administrative assistant.”

“They convicted you on superficial evidence.” Leigh’s heart-shaped face screwed up in contempt. “Wankers.”

Celeste laughed at Leigh’s cheeky word choice. “I suppose I can see their side of things.”

“You could. But why *would* you?”

Celeste swirled her wine glass and sniffed the heady bouquet. “Right now I can’t forgive them. Maybe later.”

Leigh lifted her glass in salute. “That’s the ticket.”

Celeste realized she’d chowed down on too many chips and shoved the bag in Leigh’s direction. Leigh murmured thanks and punctuated it with a grin.

After taking a healthy swallow of wine, Celeste said, “I’m afraid I’m turning into a whiner and I don’t want to become one of those people who only whines and never do anything about their problems.”

“Of course not.” Leigh patted Celeste’s hand. “I’m sorry you’re going through this.” Leigh’s warm eyes grew concerned. “It sucks. There’s no better way to put it.”

Leigh’s matter-of-fact statement clarified what Celeste already knew. “It bites. Big time. But wallowing won’t cut it. Darrell may have put a dent in things, but I can’t let him beat me.”

“That’s a great outlook. What’s the first step?”

“Maybe my first step is to percolate on this overnight, and right now to enjoy chips and wine.”

Leigh’s eyes widened, and she snapped her fingers. “I’ve got it. I can’t believe I didn’t think of this earlier. Delilah said she needs someone to handle the paperwork for the wedding boutique. Things are pretty busy for us since it’s the good ole wedding month of June, and she’s always complaining we don’t have enough time to keep up with the paperwork. Maybe she’d at least like temporary help. What do you think?”

Celeste pondered, uncertain. “Let me think about it overnight.” Another unpleasant scenario came to mind. “You don’t think your boss would object to my circumstances with Darrell and not want to hire me?”

Leigh’s gaze went thoughtful. “I doubt it, but I’ll double check for you tomorrow. She’s not easily scared.”

Pumped up with conversation, chips, and wine, Celeste and Leigh enjoyed their time. Celeste found herself laughing, straight-from-the-deepest-part-of-the-belly humor.

A long time later, Leigh glanced at her watch. “Oh, no. It’s almost ten o’clock. You look like you’re ready to pass out. How many glasses of wine did you have?”

“Two. How many did you have?”

“Three.” Leigh frowned as a perplexed look came into her eyes. “Damn it. I can’t drive like this. I’m a lightweight when it comes to wine, and I wasn’t thinking.”

“You could crash here, tonight. There’s plenty of extra bedrooms upstairs.”

Leigh stood slowly. “I’d love to, but I promised Delilah I’d haul some stuff out of

the store tomorrow morning before the painters get there.”

“I thought you said you weren’t working.”

“We’re just moving stuff around, then Delilah is staying there with the painters.”

Leigh pinched the top of her nose. “What was I thinking?”

“A cab for you, then.”

Leigh went into the living room to use the phone while Celeste stowed the last of the wine and chips and dip.

A tremendous crash startled a gasp from Celeste and a scream from Leigh.

Chapter Fifteen

“Leigh!” Celeste raced into the living room.

Glass from the front windowpane had shattered, and a rock lay on the floor near Leigh.

“Oh, my God.” Celeste shoved the words past her throat, her throat tight.

Leigh touched her face and blood reddened her fingers. She cursed vehemently.

“That hurt.”

Celeste raced to her friend and saw the cut under Leigh’s left cheekbone. “Oh, damn. Hold on.”

Celeste hurried to the powder room off the kitchen and delved in the medicine chest over the sink for first aid supplies. She grabbed them, hurried back to the living room and found Leigh sitting on an overstuffed chair, her face pale.

Leigh smiled, then winced as she took gauze from Celeste to hold against her cut.

“The wind didn’t send that rock through the window.”

Celeste grabbed the phone from the table and punched in 911. The operator said they’d send someone over ASAP. After Celeste hung up, they retreated to the powder room where Celeste helped Leigh bandage the cut.

“This might need stitches,” Celeste said.

“It’s just a scratch. It’s not even bleeding anymore.” Leigh smiled and then winced.

“It’s not that bad.”

The doorbell rang, and they both jumped.

Celeste headed for the door and peered through the peephole. “It’s Craig MacGilvary. I didn’t expect that he’d respond. This is in the city limits. There’s another cop car...a city one pulling up. Looks like we’ve got more cavalry than we need.”

Celeste opened the door to Craig. “Hey Craig. Thanks for responding so quickly.”

He came into the house, his uniformed presence filling the room with an instant sense of safety. “I heard the call come over the radio and recognized the address.”

His gaze cruised passed Celeste and landed on Leigh. His eyes went laser sharp, darting between them with serious concern. “What happened? You ladies okay?”

Leigh snorted a soft, sarcastic laugh. “If you can call having a rock thrown through the window ‘okay’.”

Celeste noted the way Leigh went all bristly with Craig, as if she’d adopted a ready-made attitude the minute Mick’s brother entered the house. *How odd.*

Celeste gestured at Leigh. “The rock came straight into the living room and hit Leigh in the face.”

Craig marched forward until he towered over Leigh’s petite body. “Do you need a paramedic?”

Leigh’s gaze seemed cool to Celeste. “It’s a scratch.”

The city officer arrived at the front porch and Celeste let him enter. Under Craig’s watchful eye, the officer investigated the incident.

“Do you know anyone who has a grudge against you, Miss Rice?” Officer Jenkins asked.

“You could say that.” Celeste explained her difficulties with Darrell.

Celeste's cell phone, which she'd left connected to the charger in the kitchen, rang. Leigh headed for the kitchen door. "I'll get that."

Few seconds passed before Leigh returned with the phone. "It's Mick."

Celeste spoke into the phone. "Mick?"

"I heard the call on the radio. Are you okay?" Mick's voice sounded urgent, rough with worry.

"We're fine. Leigh is here and Craig stopped by because he heard the call and recognized the address."

"I'm clear across the county, but I'm on my way."

"No, no. Don't worry about it," Celeste said automatically.

"I'm coming over."

Before she could protest, Mick signed off. She stared at the phone, then smiled at Craig. "Your brother can be one pushy man."

Craig's cool demeanor melted into a genuine smile. "That he is. I think it runs in the family." When his gaze ran over Leigh once more, it held genuine curiosity. "You can depend on Mick for anything, though."

After the city officer finished his report and left, Craig volunteered to nail a board over the shattered windowpane and went outside to fix it. He returned a short time later.

"Mick's here," Craig said as Mick's cruiser entered the circular driveway and pulled up behind Craig's car.

Celeste scooped up the major pieces of glass with a dustpan and broom. "The entire neighborhood is going to think a major crime was committed here."

Leigh rolled Celeste's vacuum cleaner into the living room and plugged it in. "Probably the most excitement they've had in a decade."

Though Celeste didn't see the genuine amusement in the situation, a joke left her anyway. "People will think we're real criminals if the sheriff's department keeps sending more law enforcement to my house."

Craig erased his hard-ass expression and smiled. "Tell that to my big brother."

Mick charged in when Craig opened the front door. Mick's gaze pinpointed on Celeste as he stalked into the living room. "What the hell happened?"

While Mick hovered over Celeste, and as she gave him the answers, Craig helped Leigh with more clean up. The two of them seemed extra quiet...almost stiff. Celeste couldn't put her finger on the weird vibe. They kept a professional distance, which wouldn't have seemed strange, but for one thing. Hostility seemed to simmer between them, but as far as Celeste knew, Craig and Leigh had never met. *Interesting.*

"This has got to be Darrell's handiwork." Mick's gaze landed on the now boarded-up window. "You're getting the security system set up tomorrow, right?"

Celeste allowed her temper to escalate. "Of course."

She knew she sounded peeved, but couldn't seem to stop the reaction. She'd had enough of imperious, macho men for the night, even those trying to help her.

Mick's gaze went cop sharp, and she felt the sting of that look clean through. "You're not staying here tonight."

"Yes, I am."

"Um...I'm going to call that cab," Leigh said, light-hearted amusement evident.

"Why do you need a cab?" Craig asked.

Leigh had slipped on her pumps and reached for the cordless phone on the coffee

table. "Because I had three glasses of wine. I'm not driving."

"We were having a girl party." Celeste answered Craig's curiosity.

"I'll take you home," Craig said to Leigh.

Leigh frowned as she flipped through the phone book. "That's not necessary."

Leigh's response was so adamant even Craig didn't argue. He shrugged. "If you insist. I'd better get back on the road."

Once Craig left, some of the stiffness seemed to leave Celeste's shoulders and the hard-to-define tension in the room dissolved. That is, until Mick insisted on pushing the issue of Celeste staying at home.

"You can stay at my place," Mick said.

"No." Celeste decided she'd take a lesson from her best friend. She tilted her chin up. "I'm not letting Huntley or anyone else run me out of my house. And that's final."

Mick took Celeste's arm and edged her through the kitchen door. He lowered his voice. "Why are you being stubborn about this?"

Celeste's skin prickled, nerves dancing and snapping. The rock incident had shaken her up more than she wanted to acknowledge. "Because this is just the sort of havoc Darrell hopes to create in my life. He's not a stupid man, Mick. He's a psychologist, remember?"

Mick nodded, but he didn't appear ready to back down. "Staying in my house just for tonight until you can get the window fixed tomorrow is no big deal."

It was a big deal, but maybe she'd made more of it than she needed to. Mick didn't perceive this as an intimacy issue, but a safety one.

"Do this for me, okay?" Mick asked. "My house has a security system already. Let's get your stuff and head over there."

"He's right," Leigh said as she tucked her purse under her arm. "Better safe than sorry."

Celeste headed across the living room and sank into the cushiony security of her wingback recliner. No matter what happened, this chair always provided a sense of hide away. "This might have just been a freak thing. Like the city officer said, it's probably a prank."

Leigh gave a soft, doubtful laugh. "*Right*. Do you believe that?"

"I don't," Mick said.

Outnumbered two to one, Celeste groaned. "All right. All right. I'll get my things."

Celeste headed upstairs. She didn't want to do this. She couldn't succumb to the fear threatening to send her rushing into Mick's arms every time Darrell made an insane gesture.

Besides, Mick had already sacrificed months of his life to her well being all those years ago. She couldn't ask him to keep doing it, no matter the different circumstances. Mick's arms represented sturdy safety. More than physical security threatened to dissolve in this situation, though. Her autonomy was at stake. She couldn't allow one man to fix the mess another tried to make or allow Mick to put himself in danger for her.

As she packed her suitcase, she resolved to make sure Mick understood that.

* * * *

Celeste jerked from a sound sleep the next morning, her heart hammering. She sat up and peered around the Spartan bedroom. Light filled the room even though the navy blue

Roman shade covered the single large window. She lay back on the bed and listened for any sign of Mick moving around the house. Not a peep out of him so far as she could tell.

After Leigh had taken the cab, Celeste had driven her car to Mick's and he'd followed behind. To her surprise, Mick had maintained a business-like demeanor when he'd showed her the house in a quick tour of where she'd find everything. Maybe her own bristling anger over her situation dictated Mick's attitude. He'd turned cool. Impersonal. He'd left her with an admonishment to keep the doors locked and the security system armed. Keyed up from the evening's events, she couldn't sleep right away. She tried reading in bed but her mind wandered back to the loss of her job opportunity and the rock-throwing incident. Her mind bounced from irritant to irritant until she fell asleep two hours later.

Amazing that she hadn't heard him come home, even though he should have returned from his shift by now. A tiny flicker of panic darted through her. What if he hadn't returned because something had happened to him on shift? *Oh, God, Celeste. You have to get over this. You have to stop thinking about him this way or you'll never have a relationship with him. Worry-itis won't solve a thing and will give you an ulcer.*

As she stripped off her short nightshirt and hurried through a shower in the attached bath, Celeste knew telling herself not to worry about him would fail. No way could she care about him and not feel concern one way or the other. Maybe her desire for a full-on physical relationship with him had proved misguided. A big fat mistake she needed to retreat from as fast as possible.

As soon as she opened the bedroom door she smelled coffee. Okay, he *was* home. Her heart did a little skip and jump of happiness. Damn her resolve anyway.

* * * *

When Celeste wandered into the kitchen, fully dressed and her hair coiled into a demure bun on the back of her head, Mick thought she looked seven kinds of sexy.

No. Sexy didn't quite cut it.

Edible.

Fucking...well, fuckable.

She wore a vivid pink tank top that molded her full breasts and showed her well-toned torso to full advantage and low-rise jeans that flared at the hems and gave her shapely legs even more length. Man, she looked good. He laid his newspaper on the breakfast bar and took a long, deep drink of his orange juice. He couldn't speak coherently yet.

Her wary expression didn't puzzle him. He figured he wore the same look. Last night the tension between them had perturbed and confused him. Heat still bubbled in his veins for her, but maybe she'd decided this whole 'sex' thing should disappear. Be gone. Nada. *She has the right to tell you to fuck off, sport. Deal with it.*

That small kiss he'd given her last night with her friend looking on had occurred involuntarily. It felt right and he did it because he wanted to reassure himself she'd come to no harm. Making contact, showing the affection he felt was the only way he knew how to express his caring short of other gestures like letting her stay in his home.

Yeah, you wanted this for your own peace of mind. You wanted her safe. He still did.

"Hey," she said softly, standing at the opposite side of the kitchen with her hands tucked into her back pockets. "I didn't hear you come in last night."

"I was late. Last night was busy. I had a DUI traffic stop, speeding tickets, a trespassing complaint...you name it, it all happened last night. And it isn't even the full moon."

She smiled. "You believe the full moon makes people do nutty things?"

"Happens once a month. Some cops don't believe it, but I do."

"Hmm." She wandered forward like a hesitant kitten approaching a savory bowl of milk. "Why are you up already?"

"Couldn't sleep." *Yeah, I kept thinking about you lying in the next room. Out of reach.*

He slid off the breakfast barstool and headed for the coffee pot. As he brushed by her, he couldn't avoid looking deep into her eyes. Something sweet and hot burned there.

"Are you hungry? Want coffee?"

She pulled her gaze from his and stared at the tile floor. "I should get home and call a glass repair person."

"You still need breakfast don't you? Even if its yogurt?"

Her grin sent shards of red-hot warmth to his cock. And just like that, her smile did it to him on so many levels. He wanted *her* for breakfast. Wanted her spread out beneath him. A vision of her naked, her ass planted on the kitchen counter, her legs parted, her pussy under his devouring tongue—

Oh, Lord.

"You eat yogurt?" Her voice cut through his fantasy.

He cleared his throat and grinned. "It's good for my stomach. I eat it before I dig into a bowl of Grape Nuts every morning. Why? Are guys that eat yogurt too girly for you?"

"I don't know any man who'd admit to eating it."

"You must know a lot of guys that aren't secure in their masculinity."

"Or maybe they just don't eat yogurt."

Okay...she wanted to start the morning off on a contrary level. He'd be damned if he'd spend hours trying to understand her cryptic words. "If you aren't hungry, just say so."

Her eyes cooled again, and her lips pursed the slightest bit. He left his coffee mug on the counter, breakfast holding as much appeal to him as a jump over the Grand Canyon without a parachute. Ready to play with fire, he took his chances and approached her. She'd leaned one hip against the counter. He stood close, wondering if she would back away.

When she didn't, he captured her attention by looking deep into her eyes. "Out with it. Ever since Huntley threw the rock through the window, you've had an attitude. What are you thinking?"

"We don't know it was Darrell."

"We don't have proof, but you and I both know it was him. Are you afraid? You can stay here with me as long as you want. I mean that." He did. If she wanted to move in wholesale for however long it took for Huntley to get a clue and leave, Mick would want her here.

She propped her back against the counter and folded her arms. "Thanks, Mick. But the attitude, as you call it, is because I don't *want* to be here."

A jolt hit him in the stomach. "What?"

"It's not that I don't appreciate the hospitality. Thank you for letting me stay last

night.”

“You’re welcome. If it’s not that, what is it?”

Words came from her flood. “You’re a strong-minded, strong-willed man. I can understand why. You need it for your job. But I need to make my own decisions and having some man tell me how and when I’m going to do something doesn’t work for me.”

He wanted to retort but strangled a response. Instead he leaned nearer to her. Her warm, female scent teased his nose. Fresh. Soft. Delicious. His cock turned hard—it didn’t give a flying frig when or why—it wanted her now. “You think I’m overbearing?”

“Last night you did quite a bit of ordering around.”

She might try to hide it with less confrontational wording than he’d use, but he saw the spark of anger. “You seemed a bit cool last night when I left you.” He reached up, unable to stop, and cupped the side of her long neck. Her skin was soft under his touch. “You think I’m too bossy?”

“When you’re in cop mode.”

There it was again. Her reference to what she didn’t like about him. He *was* a cop. His displeasure rose. “We’re back to that. Being a cop is who I am, Celeste. That isn’t going to change.”

She drew in a slow breath and let it out just as slowly. Her chest rising and falling caught his attention. Those sweet nipples beaded and pebbled. “You can be a cop at work and not be bossy with your family and friends.”

Despite the fact she was pissed at him, he couldn’t restrain this purely physical reaction to her. “I was worried about you when that call came in, Celeste. I heard it, heard Craig say he was responding, and it scared the shit out of me that something bad had happened to you. Sue me if I was a little bossy. I wanted you here in my house afterward. Safe.”

He thought he saw a flame of something different in her gaze. Her eyes warmed, opened wider. “Mick, I…”

“Yeah?” God, she smelled good. Delicious. He moved in, unable to keep his hands to himself. Or his lips.

He cupped her head and pressed a kiss to her forehead, then her nose. “Say it, honey. Whatever it is just, say it.”

“You make me *so* mad.”

He laughed, and her hands came up to press against his chest. If she shoved him away, he’d go. He wouldn’t demand anything of an unwilling woman when it came to sex. “You piss me off, too.”

She gasped, then a grin spread over her mouth. “You are the most maddening, pain in the ass man—”

He kissed her, angling until their mouths sealed tight. His tongue flirted with her lips, teasing and taunting. When she took over, she exploded into the need, her tongue searching for his and tangling together in a fire-filled dance. He gathered her tight to him, her softness sliding along his body with a vulnerability that kick started everything primitive inside Mick to critical mass. When he cupped one cheek of her ass, she gasped into his mouth and her right leg came up to hook around his thigh. *Oh, shit. Oh, yeah.* He bent his knees until her pussy aligned with his cock and he could feel her heat burning him through the denim. Again and again they kissed, bodies moving in a sensual rock and

roll concert that screamed for more.

Heat blossomed all over his body, tingling in his loins and traveling down his legs, into his belly, upward into his chest. He didn't know how he could stand much more of this without peeling her clothes off.

Her fingers stuffed into his hair, and she tugged his head down for a closer fit. Arching her hips into his, she writhed in his arms and showed how much she enjoyed the frantic quality of his caresses. Delicious and hot, her return touches drove him to the edge. Whenever she twisted, shifted, touched, he thought his mind would melt. Simply dissolve until no more of him remained. She would destroy him, but in the most blissful, exciting way he could possibly imagine.

Celeste shoved his t-shirt upward and her hands landed on his pecs. She smoothed her fingers over his nipples, and the stinging pleasure made him to groan. Then she did something he sure as hell didn't expect. Celeste shoved his polo shirt upward far enough to bare his chest, and placed her hot lips right on his chest between his pecs. He moaned again as his cock went so hard he was afraid he'd lose control. She licked one nipple and he jerked as it went hard under her tongue. He clutched her head gently to his chest, his fingers kneading her scalp. Each swirl, each taunt of her wet, warm tongue threatened to send him into oblivion. He imagined her tongue on his cock again, swirling around the head, licking him. Sucking him.

"Oh, baby." The words left his mouth, he could hear himself saying them, encouraging her, threading his fingers through her hair as she kissed upward until her lips met his again.

"Mick." Her voice was raspy with desire, and when he opened his eyes, he saw the message. She wanted the same thing he did. The heat simmered, rising one more degree until it threatened to boil over. "Mick."

He cupped her ass cheeks and lifted until he could sit her on the counter. He dove in for another kiss, tongues meeting in a concert of stroke after fiery stroke. He worked under her tank top, cupped her over the sports bra. Found her nipple and pinched gently. She jerked, gasped into his mouth. A moan vibrated from her throat.

He knew where this might end if he didn't stop.

He gasped and gently slipped from her arms. "Whoa, honey. We've got to stop this now. You have an appointment with the security company in about thirty minutes, right?"

Glassy-eyed, she nodded. Her fingers went to her lips, her eyes filled with a startled expression. "Right."

She slipped slowly from his arms, her eyes still reflecting the impact of their kisses. Before he could think of another thing to say, she left the room.

Chapter Sixteen

“You’re distracted,” Trey said as they walked toward Mick’s squad car. “Craig said something to me about it yesterday. What’s up with you?” Trey wriggled his eyebrows. “Is it Celeste?”

Mick grunted as he stopped by his vehicle. “Celeste isn’t a distraction. She’s a...” He snatched his hat off and scratched his head before replacing his Stetson. “She’s a good friend.”

Trey snorted. “Yeah...um...right.”

“Fuck off,” Mick said cheerfully.

“You’re acting like a man who hasn’t got laid in months.”

Mick glared. “What is it with you and Craig these days? You’re like mother hens. I’ve got a mother already, thank you very much. I don’t need another one.”

Trey patted him on the shoulder. “You’re right. We’re just worried about you. You’re strung up tighter than fish wire. You need to work off some of this steam before you bust a gasket, man.”

Mick grunted again. “What are you saying? That she’s gonna keep me from getting my promotion?”

“Only if you don’t concentrate because you’re worried about her.”

“You’re right. I am worried. And it’s pissing me off.”

Trey frowned, shifting until his leather gun belt creaked. “Why?”

“Because I can’t get her out of my system. If she and I are supposed to have some sort of superficial relationship based on sex only, I shouldn’t be feeling this way. Ah, shit. Did I just say that out loud?”

Trey grinned as he walked away. “Sure did, buddy. I think the old man is losing it.”

Mick frowned. “What the hell does that mean?”

“Listen, far be it from me to tell you what to do, but it seems like both of you are holding on tight but not doing anything about the sexual tension. You need to bleed it off a little before you explode and it ends up affecting your work. I think you’re falling hard and fast, brother. Hard and fast.”

“Am not.”

“Are too.”

As his brother vanished around a corner, Mick groaned. “Shit.”

* * * *

Celeste rolled over on the bed and moaned as a dull, throbbing headache pulsed behind her temples. She managed to shift onto her right side and opened one eye. Even the watery sunlight sifting through the wooden blinds sent shards of pain through her. She spied the small clock on her bed stand. Six p.m.

She jerked full awake. Her nap had lasted two hours. She’d meant to take a twenty-minute power nap.

After Mick assured a friend of his in the glass business had repaired her front window at a discount price, Mick received a call-out to serve a drug warrant at the edge

of the county. He'd left her with the security guy to install the system. By the time the guy finished several hours later, and she understood how to use the system, she needed a nap to repair her synapses.

She winced and placed her hand over her eyes. Her stomach roiled and pitched. She could stay in bed, but she needed to—

Call Mick. He'd told her to call him when her security system was in so he wouldn't worry about her anymore. Yeah, right. She knew he'd worry anyway. The man seemed determined to find her personal competence lacking, and therefore he had to baby sit her.

The doorbell rang downstairs. She eased from bed and her head protested. She took her time making it downstairs, ginger with each step. The doorbell rang again, and then the interloper knocked as well, as if that would speed her progress.

"Coming!" She heard the irritation in her own voice. She peered through the peep. Mick. Of course. She opened the door.

Mick stood there in full uniform, hat and all, as severe in countenance and attitude as an authoritarian cop. "Hey. What's up? It took you a long time to answer the door."

"I just woke up from a nap, and I was upstairs." She stepped back to let him inside. "What brings you here?"

He glanced at the big black watch on his wrist. "You said you'd call and when you didn't..."

"I fell asleep and now I've got a killer headache."

Mick's eyes narrowed as he assessed her from head to toe like a drill sergeant eyeballing a recruit. "Are you sick?"

"Doubt it." She moved away from the door, and Mick closed it behind him as he followed her toward the kitchen. "Could be my caffeine addiction caught up with me. I haven't consumed my daily intravenous coffee and missed lunch."

"Jeez, no wonder you look like crap."

"Gee, thanks." She threw him a glare as she headed for the coffeemaker.

"I didn't mean it like that. You just look as if you don't feel well."

As she ground beans and set the machine to work, she dug around in her refrigerator for a cheese stick and started to snack. She stood on the opposite side of the kitchen island from him. "Thanks for stopping by, but I'm fine. The security system is up and running. I've got it handled."

The phone rang, and rather than let the answering machine grab it, she answered it out of sheer defiance. Defiance at Mick, defiance at Darrell. At the world, for that matter.

"Hi!" Leigh's cheery voice came over the line. "How's it going?"

"Leigh. It's going fine. The security system is in and all is right with the world. Mick is even here to check up on me."

Leigh's laugh held disbelief. "Uh-huh. You sound half-peeved. Everything okay?"

"Peachy. How's your cheek?"

"My cheek is barely scratched. It's fine."

Celeste tossed an irreverent grin Mick's way and saw his eyes narrow with curiosity. "My head is pounding. I'm about ready to take some caffeine straight into the vein."

"Ah, java. That'll cure anything. Sorry to hear about the headache. Have Mick give you a neck rub. I'll bet it's not only caffeine but tension. You've had a lot going on in the last few weeks."

"I'll take that under advisement."

“Listen, I called to tell you Delilah said she’d be delighted to hire you so we can get the paperwork under control. It’s only a temporary job for as long as it takes to get us caught up. At least that’s what she said. I think it could work into a permanent position if you like it.”

A sliver of tension eased from Celeste at the good news. “Thank you. That was so nice of you to ask her.”

“No problem. I think it’ll be great to work with you. Could you start Monday since this paint job is going to need to dry over the weekend?”

“Most definitely.”

“Good.”

“Well, I’d better go. I’ll talk to you again on Monday, or sooner if you need me, okay? Get some rest, and take care of the headache.”

“I promise.”

When she hung up, Celeste went for a mug. Time for that caffeine.

“How is Leigh?” Mick asked. “She was a bit prickly last night.”

“She sounds like her old self. Leigh’s not usually prickly, but getting hit with a rock would make me mad, too.”

“She seemed to have a ‘tude about my brother.”

“You noticed that, too?”

“She ever met him?”

“I’m not sure.” Curiosity would kill her until she next saw Leigh. “Do you want coffee?” She held up the stainless steel carafe. “Freshly made.”

“I need to get back on the road.”

Coffee in hand, Celeste headed for the living room and he followed. “Walk this way.”

“If I walked that way, my brothers would have serious concerns about my masculinity.” The humor in his voice gave her hope his darker mood wouldn’t return. “It looks sexy on you, though.”

She smiled and warmth filled her entire body at his compliment. Ridiculous to feel this content when life seemed to bite her on the ass lately with every turn. She sipped the hot, strong liquid. “Flattery will get you everywhere, MacGilvary.”

“Promise?”

“Well, I suppose it depends on what you want.”

“Conditions?”

“A girl has to have conditions.” She took another sip of coffee. “Thank God for coffee. Just what a body needs. I can feel this headache easing already. Leigh said her boss Delilah wants to hire me temporarily to be their administrative assistant starting Monday.”

“Excellent news.” He sighed. “Look, I need to go. Call me if you need anything, all right? I hope you feel better soon.”

She placed her mug on the coffee table and followed him to the door, her heart heavier than she expected. “Thanks for checking on me, big brother.”

He grimaced. “I am *not* your big brother. Not even close.”

She couldn’t help teasing him. She snatched his cowboy hat off his head. “You’re certainly as protective as a big brother.” Despite the headache, she felt playful and buoyed by the prospect of a new job. She danced away with his hat.

“Wench. Give that back.” Mick growled the words softly, sensual threat in his tone.

“What are you gonna do if I don’t?”

It was no contest.

He caught her halfway across the living room, halting her escape as his arms enclosed her waist.

His mouth nuzzled her ear from behind. “God, you’re maddening. Damn maddening.” His tongue flicked out to touch her earlobe, then he pressed a heated kiss to the sensitive skin on the side of her neck. She quivered all over at the delicious sensation. His palms flattened over her belly, one above her mound, the other at her waist. “Do you know what happens to bad girls who resist arrest?”

An unexpected thrill danced through her midsection. “No, but I think you’re about to tell me.”

His hands moved upward with possessive strokes until they cupped her ribcage. Celeste wriggled backwards and his hips pressed into her. His cock lay long and thick against her lower back.

“Resist arrest later and I might show you.” His breath purred into her ear.

Warmth spread like wildfire through her veins, licking at her senses until the heat became an immediate torch and the headache smothered in a sensual wave. Celeste moved in his arms, sinuous and flowing, her heartbeat gathering speed as she gave into a primal urge. She wanted him out of control. She wanted him unable to resist her the way he’d been resisting her for too long.

“You planning to handcuff me, deputy?”

“Is that what you want?”

“It might be interesting.”

His breath still brushing over her ear, he cuddled close. He groaned. “I can’t do this now. I’m on duty. And you’re not feeling well.”

“Come back tonight.”

“Can’t. I don’t get off until really late.”

She ached in more than her head. The game they played started a crazy firestorm in her blood. “Pity.”

“Besides, I’m not taking advantage of a woman who needs TLC.”

Excitement flared low in her belly at his protectiveness.

Mick’s embrace changed as he turned her about in his arms and brought her to his chest. “I’m working all weekend.”

She sighed. “Such is the life of cop.”

“What are you planning this weekend?”

“Finishing some projects around the house, laundry, and maybe relaxing a bit.” She clutched his shoulder with one hand while the other balanced his hat on his other shoulder.

“Good.” He cupped her face. “On a different subject, if my promotion goes through, I’m having a celebration.”

“What’s on the menu for the celebration?”

“My brothers and Mom said they’d take me out to a big dinner. Want to come and help me celebrate?”

Feeling cheeky, she trailed her hands over his chest and hard stomach and encircled his waist. “Only if you promise me a demonstration with the cuffs afterwards.”

Feral desire ignited in his eyes. “Depends on how bad you are.”

Then, with a sweet, tender kiss that came and went in a heartbeat, he released her. He walked away so quickly she knew she’d had a serious effect on his control. “Lock up behind me.”

“Yes sir, Deputy.”

He turned on her just enough to send an exasperated look filled with promise of things to come. Then he was gone.

As she’d promised, Celeste locked the door and set the alarm. She sighed and leaned back against the door. She couldn’t believe what she’d said and what she’d admitted to wanting. At the same time, she marveled at Mick’s control. When they finally came together—if they ever did—they’d explode.

But she knew without a doubt she did want it. Handcuffs and all.

* * * *

Celeste shifted on the uncomfortable metal chair in The Bridal Boutique. Her butt was paralyzed, and she wondered how either owner Delilah Willow or Leigh managed to stand working at this desk. She couldn’t complain, though. This position could prove a blessing in disguise. She’d always liked bridal shops, and found Leigh’s enthusiasm for the business contagious. While this job didn’t pay as much as the teaching position would have, Celeste figured it would do until she formulated another plan. Like trying to convince the school board Darrell’s assertions shouldn’t have disqualified her from the job. Fat chance, but she decided this weekend she’d give it a try.

Air conditioning blew over Celeste’s shoulders, and she shrugged into her lightweight cardigan. The flat screen monitor blurred a second as she yawned, then she returned to the numbers on the spreadsheet. While she didn’t qualify as a full-fledged accountant, her bookkeeping skills would take care of their problem. They were behind, though, and Celeste started to see some trends that made her wonder how Delilah kept the shop in business. She had a lot to dig through and it would take several days to excavate the mess. She wondered if Leigh understood her employer’s potential business problems.

Leigh and Delilah had rearranged the store after having it painted a light pink. Although the store wasn’t huge, it had dresses of almost every type and size, plus shoes, purses, veils and other accessories. As a seamstress, Delilah performed much of the resizing on premises.

The phone rang, and Leigh picked up—she’d learned that would be part of her duties as well.

“Hello, beautiful.”

Celeste’s heartbeat shot up in alarm. “Darrell.”

“That’s right. Surprised I found you?”

Not surprised. Pissed. Her mind whirled. A second later she slammed down the phone.

Leigh popped her head in the open door. Concern lined her face. “Who was that?”

“Darrell.”

Leigh stepped inside. “Oh, crap.”

Celeste took one deep breath and then the other. “How did he know I’m here?”

“Must have followed you. Should we call Mick?” Leigh’s nervous tone surprised Celeste.

Celeste shook her head. “No—”

The phone rang and Celeste picked up.

“Baby, you should never hang up on me again.”

Celeste hung up. Her breath came quicker, her heartbeat tapping away as annoyance gathered. “That was him again.”

Delilah stuck her head into the room. “What’s going on?”

Almost six feet of glamorous brunette, Delilah Willow’s slim elegance showed a stunning runway model bod. Almond-shaped cat green eyes surveyed Leigh and Celeste with cool skepticism.

Leigh turned to her employer, wariness crossing her features. “Celeste’s stalker called her.”

Celeste winced. She hadn’t hid the fact that Darrell might locate her here, but only Leigh’s encouragement had kept Delilah calm about the idea.

Delilah’s coolness turned a degree frostier. “Already?”

“Already.” Celeste sighed. “Look, I’m sorry about—”

The phone rang. Leigh stepped forward. “I’ll get that. The Bridal Boutique, Leigh speaking.” Leigh listened. “Hello?” Leigh hung up. “If that was him, he obviously doesn’t want to talk to the rest of us.”

Celeste’s spine stiffened with trepidation. “Delilah, I’m sorry about this.”

Delilah sniffed, her eyes losing a smidgen of icy contemplation. “Did I hear you say you know Mick MacGilvary?”

“Yes,” Celeste said. “He’s a friend.”

Delilah leaned one slim hip against the doorframe and crossed her arms. “Then call him and let him know this creep figured out where you’re working.”

“He already knows.” Celeste stood. “We know Darrell’s in town, but we don’t have any idea where. As long as he does nothing more than call me once in a while there’s little we can do. We tried a telephone company tap but he calls from somewhere different every single time.”

“I’ll call Mick, then, if you won’t.” Delilah left the area, making her elegant way to her office around the corner.

Threads of jealousy wended through Celeste. Delilah knew Mick *that* well?

Leigh threw Celeste a look, rolling her eyes.

Delilah’s voice came through the doorway of her office, words as clear as daylight breaking on a horizon. “I need to speak with Mick MacGilvary please.”

Delilah’s office door went shut and her voice muffled.

Leigh moved closer to Celeste’s desk and whispered, “I can’t believe she’s doing this.”

“Does she know Mick that well?”

Leigh shrugged. “Guess so. This town is small enough.” Leigh smiled. “Is that the little green monster I see peeking over your shoulder?”

Leigh would ferret out the truth soon enough. “Yes, it is.”

“Not to worry.” Leigh’s voice lowered to conspiracy level. “She doesn’t stand a chance with him.”

“How do you know? She’s a beautiful, smart woman.”

Leigh cupped her hands around her mouth. “Yeah, but she’s a bit too much of a viper. Mick doesn’t seem like the kind of man who would go for her.”

Celeste grunted. "Isn't tall, dark and beautiful any man's type?"

Leigh wrinkled her small nose. "I suppose that's true. But Mick's already head over heels for you."

Celeste didn't count on that, even if the idea sent a thrill through her. "I wouldn't go that far."

Leigh crossed her arms and smiled. "Uh-huh."

It wasn't long before Delilah returned from her office. "He'll be here in less than an hour."

Celeste's stomach did a two step and a flip. *Oh, brother.*

When Mick strode into the boutique within twenty minutes of Delilah's call, Celeste heard the commotion at the front. Delilah and Leigh greeted him, but Leigh had a customer. Determined not to leave her office, Celeste continued working. Other than closing the door, she couldn't avoid hearing Delilah's conversation with Mick. Still, Celeste concentrated on the spreadsheet as best she could. Mick sounded professional and so did Delilah, but they also talked as if they'd met a few times before.

Mick eventually asked if Celeste was here and Delilah answered in the affirmative and they came her way. Nervousness filled Celeste. *Time to put on your game face.*

Delilah stepped in first and then Mick.

Mick nodded and smiled, holding his hat in one hand. "Hi."

Celeste plastered on her brightest smile. "Hey."

"Delilah said you've gotten some calls from Darrell today?" Mick asked.

"Two."

"Three to be exact." Delilah said. "Someone hung up on Leigh."

Celeste nodded. "Right. There's a good chance that call was him and as soon as he realized—"

The phone rang. Celeste snapped up the receiver. "The Bridal Boutique, this is Celeste."

"Celeste, you've been a very naughty girl. I think it's time you paid for your insolence. I think you should die."

Chapter Seventeen

Celeste's heart froze. She cupped her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's him. He just said I should die."

Mick's face clouded with anger. "Give it to me."

She handed it over and Mick spoke. "This is Mick MacGilvary from the El Torro Sheriff's Department. You're mine now, Huntley. I'm going to shove your boxers down your throat and make you choke on the elastic. If that's not enough, I'll kick your balls so damn hard, they'll be shoved up your ass permanently. And I'll do all that legally." Mick jerked the receiver away from his ear. "Son of a bitch." He replaced the phone in the cradle. He took a deep breath and put his hat back on his head. "I'm going to kill him. We're going to put the screws to this sick bastard."

Leigh showed up at the doorway, expression wary. "What's going on?"

"Darrell upped the ante with a death threat," Mick said.

Leigh's face turned into a thundercloud. "That bastard deserves to be roasted on a grill."

Delilah's face paled. "What if he comes in here?"

Celeste could almost hear Delilah's cogs rolling over and over, just the way Lenderson's had. She knew where this would end.

"We need to talk in private, Celeste," Delilah said.

Celeste's heart sank. "Of course."

Mick pinned Celeste with a solid stare, concern evident in his sky blue eyes. "What time do you get off work today, Celeste?"

Probably permanently in one hour.

Celeste picked up a pen and twirled it between her fingers, trying to keep the nonchalance in her tone. "An hour."

Mick turned to Leigh. "I'll see if a squad car can follow you home. Delilah, I'll take this down as a report before you talk to Celeste."

Reluctance marred Delilah's expression. "Leigh, let's get to work at the front."

Mick took the report, then came around the desk and crouched beside her. He took her hand in his, and warmth gathered in her stomach. "I know this is tough. Hang in there, okay? I'm coming over tonight."

"I'd like that."

"It'll be all right." He didn't sound convinced, and with a man as strong and confident as Mick, that frightened her.

"How can you be sure?" Tears filled her eyes but she blinked hard and fast to keep them from spilling over. "He's never threatened to kill me before, Mick."

He tipped her chin up with a brush of his index finger. "I know. When you get home, make sure the security system stays on. I'll put the word out at the department. The whole SWAT team can check on you and anyone else who can swing by will make a patrol if they're out, okay? I'll put in the word with the city police I know. I'm good friends with many of them. They'll keep an eye out."

She took a huge breath and tightened her fingers around Mick's hand. "Thanks, Mick."

“Your safety matters more to me than anything. I don’t want you alone when you go out, understand? Darrell’s less likely to do something if you’re not alone. Your security system at the house is a good one. He’s not getting in there.”

Fear ran up her spine in shivery tingles. “Promise?”

Mick’s eyes burned with conviction. “I promise.” He kissed her hand and released it. “I’ll call you later. Be careful. If you need me for anything, call my cell, all right?”

“I will.”

When he left, Delilah came in right away and closed the door. “We have to talk.” Delilah sat on the edge of the desk, one long leg dangling, eyes serious and hands clasped. “This is a complicated situation.”

Here it comes.

“I’m not sure if I’m comfortable with you working here now that this Darrell character has upped the stakes.”

Celeste leaned back in her chair, a mixture of feelings warring for position inside her. Fear. Anger. Frustration. “I can understand how you feel. You don’t want to be collateral damage.”

Delilah’s finely sculpted features didn’t alter beyond her typical calm. “In light of all of this, I can’t keep you on.”

Just what you expected. She could fight for the job, but how? “I need this job, Delilah. I was up front and honest with you. I told you how Darrell ruined my chances at the grade school.”

Delilah’s fashionably shod foot swung back and forth. “I understand that. It doesn’t mean I have to take chances having you here.”

“That’s your right. I’m asking you for your understanding, though.”

Delilah’s eyes didn’t warm in the slightest and Celeste wanted to scream with frustration. “I can’t. Finish out today, and I’ll give you a paycheck.”

Celeste took a steadying breath and decided she’d give Delilah advice whether she wanted it or not. “I’d suggest that you hire someone quickly to take my place. Your books need substantial work.”

Delilah stood and paused at the door, lips tight with displeasure and a coldness that chilled Celeste. “I will.”

* * * *

“She did what?” Mick’s voice held stringent disbelief.

When Mick called Celeste’s cell phone at ten p.m. that night, Celeste was happy to see his name flashing on the phone. A familiar face to ease the ache. He’d gotten a call-out and hadn’t been able to come over. Even worse was the fact the restraining order they’d requested had been denied. If she’d had the foresight to tape any of Darrell’s threats, it would have been a different story. As it was now, it was her word against his.

“Yes,” she said. “She did.” Celeste smiled despite the disappointment that threatened to spill over. “Leigh said she’s going to reason with Delilah, but I can’t say I blame Delilah for letting me go. Delilah has even more reason to fear having me at her workplace than the school did. This has to be a record, though. Losing two jobs in about a week.”

“Damn it. Delilah always was a bitch.”

“I’m glad to hear you say that.”

“Why?”

“She seemed sort of...I dunno...cozy with you?”

“We’ve met at a couple of charity events in town. She was at last year’s martial arts demonstration.”

Celeste continued to pace her living room. “She has the hots for you. I saw how she was eyeballing your butt.”

He laughed. “What? Are you jealous?”

She sputtered. “Well...I...no.”

Mick chuckled again. “We went out once after the martial arts exhibition last year. All it took was one dinner date for me to figure out that even though she’s an intelligent woman and beautiful, I wanted nothing to do with her. We didn’t have anything in common, and her arrogance was over the top.”

He thinks Delilah is hot. Ahem.

“I see.”

“You don’t have anything to worry about, Celeste. Delilah Willows is never going to be on my menu. The only woman I’m interested in dining on is Celeste Rice.”

Celeste sank onto the floor in front of her couch. “Oh, Mick, I can’t believe I went on and on about today. I forgot that you found out today about your promotion. How did it go?”

“I’m golden. I got the promotion.”

“Congratulations. That’s excellent. When’s your promotion dinner?”

“Sunday night I’m off. That’s the only time we can all get together at once. We’re eating at seven at the Steak Emporium.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“No way. I’m picking you up. Remember what I said. You aren’t going anywhere without me.”

“It feels as though two men are controlling my life. Darrell wants me and wants to screw up my life. He’s doing a pretty damn good job of it. And as much as I don’t want to, now I’m giving into your bossiness.”

Mick sighed over the phone. “I’m worried about you. If it was up to me and I didn’t think you’d balk, I’d suggest you move in with me. And I’m not suggesting this because I want you in my bed. I do want you in my bed, but only if it’s what you want, too. Please don’t be afraid I’m trying to control you. I just want you safe.”

She closed her eyes as she stood in the middle of the living room. “I know you’re not like Darrell. Sometimes it’s hard to see other men as only trying to help.”

“I understand. You can always count on me. I’m in your corner. All the MacGilvary’s have your back.”

Weariness mixed with a bone deep worry. “This situation is going from bad to worse, Mick. I don’t know what to do about Darrell. I’m a sitting duck.”

“Don’t *ever* think that. You’re not helpless.”

“Intellectually I know that, but emotionally I don’t always remember.” She stopped pacing and dropped onto her couch. “How can I explain this to a person who’s never had a moment of self-doubt in their life?”

He snorted. “Who? Me?”

“Yes. You.”

“You don’t know me as well as you think, if you believe that.”

“When have you ever been paralyzed by uncertainty?”

“When you walked into that party ten years ago, and I knew right away I wanted you. That I had to have you. When you rejected me, I wondered if it was just me you didn’t want to touch, or if it was the trauma you’d suffered at that creep’s hands all those years ago. You ran away and I never knew the answer.”

Celeste stilled. “I’m sorry. You’ve always seemed so certain with every choice you’ve made in your life.”

“Hell, no. I’ve made a ton of wrong decisions. Like right after you left me at that party, I should’ve contacted you and asked what was wrong. Instead, I wimped out. I tried to tell myself I didn’t care, but I was fooling myself. I did care. Just like I care now.”

She went silent, unable to express the depth of amazement and understanding pouring through her at his explanation.

“As for your safety, we have you covered. You have the security system. Plus, I’d like you to learn how to shoot a weapon.”

Utter denial roared upwards. “We talked about that already. No.”

“There’s a twenty-two caliber I could borrow from Mary Banovic, Dace’s wife. You could learn how to use it easily.”

She headed upstairs. What she need was to lie down and relax, and speculating on a weapon made her uneasy.

You have to banish the fear. You know it. What better way to destroy the albatross around your neck? “So when did you want me to try shooting this weapon?”

“Friday afternoon.”

She surprised herself, ready to embrace the fear with both arms. “Okay.”

He let out a breath. “Wow. That was easier than I thought it would be.”

She opened her bedroom door and flipped on the light. The warm interior promised to envelop and dissolve her apprehensions. “Saying yes instead of no is easy enough. Getting to the range and holding the gun, much less shooting it, well, that’s another story.”

“Tell me more about what happened when your mother was...”

“Murdered?”

“Yeah.”

“You’ve heard it before.”

“Only bits and pieces. Never the whole thing.”

She lay back on the bed and closed her eyes. “Mom and Dad and I had just entered Gold Rush Savings and Loan. Dad hated to use drive up. If we had used it that day...well, we didn’t.” She waited for the tears, but they didn’t come. “It was Wednesday afternoon and few people were in the bank. It was ideal for Dad. He used to complain about waiting in line. Mom would get mad at him for being grumpy. Anyway, we were there less than five minutes when this guy walks in with this gun and holds up the bank.” Celeste put one hand over her eyes as the memories grew more intense. “My parents looked grim, but calm. Maybe they believed if they waited it out everything would be all right. After the teller filled the bag with cash from the drawer, the robber turned to us. My eyes fixated on the gun. It looked big and black and mean. The guy had on a baseball cap and a ski mask. He pointed the gun right at me. Mom...she...”

“Stepped in front of you,” he said softly.

“Yes. There was this loud bang and then Mom fell to the floor. Dad reacted, screaming at the guy and the bastard popped Dad, too.” Her throat tightened, her heart jumping and reacting as if watched her parents dying in front of her right now. “I couldn’t stop screaming. The man ran out of the bank without a backwards glance. The cops caught up with him a few days later.”

“The car chase, right?”

“Right. He hit a guardrail and flipped over the side into a ravine.”

“Good damn riddance.”

She wiped her face and realized it was damp with tears. “I suppose. Maybe life in prison would have been worse than dying.”

Her confession seemed to stun him into silence. Then he said gently, “If you go out to the range with me, it’ll drive that terror out of you bit by bit. You’ll learn to lessen the fear.”

Though part of her wanted to argue, the other part knew he spoke the truth. She could discover for herself if she had it in her to banish her deepest fear once and for all.

“Will you try?” he asked.

Though he couldn’t see her, she nodded. “I will.”

* * * *

Celeste didn’t want to be here.

Friday afternoon came quickly. As Mick drove them into the gravel parking lot of the gun range, her nerves danced and twitched. No, she didn’t like this one bit. Running away like a yellow-livered coward wasn’t a choice, and neither was charging in like Rambo. Success would lie somewhere in between.

Leaving the engine running, Mick put the SUV in park and reached for her hand. “You all right?”

“No.” She caught the worried glimmer in his eyes.

“Can you breathe through it?”

Breathe. Breathe. That’s a concept. She inhaled slowly and deeply. *Let it out. Pull it in. Let it out.*

Beyond the shelter of the SUV windows, the pop, pop noise of gunfire sounded different than she expected. Not as loud. Memories rushed in. Hair prickled on the back her neck.

Mick’s fingers tightened on hers. “What are you thinking?”

She didn’t look at him as a lump rose in her throat. She shivered. “Remembering the day in the bank.”

“Will it keep you from shooting?”

“Maybe.” She waited, and so did he. His patience amazed her, made tears rise. “Like I told you, it’s not a matter of forgetting it...”

“You won’t ever forget it.” He lifted her hand and kissed it. “Just work through it. Making sure the fear doesn’t rule your life. You’re strong.”

Right in that moment, fear eased away with a smoothness she wouldn’t have expected. Mick did this for her. He supported, he cared, his affection a balm for overwrought nerves.

“Thanks, Mick.”

“For what?”

“For giving me the tools to see my way through this fear.”

He shook his head. “I’m not doing a damned thing, honey. It’s all you. You could have told me to go to hell.”

She smirked. “I did, remember? Once.”

He laughed. “Yeah, you’re right. Are you considering telling me to piss off now?”

She squeezed his hand. “Nope. Let’s get this show on the road.”

After they exited the car, he went to the trunk and removed the small case that included the small pistol. In the background the explosive sounds made her flinch. She figured she’d become used to the sounds soon. Mick placed his arm around her shoulders and they continued to the booth. The check-in process went by in a blur. Concentrating on regulating her breathing and not panicking took up a huge portion of her thought process.

The concrete walkway stretched before her like a long trip to the gas chamber. She stopped halfway. “Oh, crap.”

Mick slid his arm around her waist and squeezed her tight to his side and kept walking. “It’s all right. You’re doing fine.”

From that point forward, she concentrated on taking one step at a time. Mick placed the gun case on the stand and opened it. Eyeballing the weapon gave her pause, but she kept her gaze on it and told herself she would overcome this apprehension if she did nothing else today.

Mick removed the gun and held it out. “Try the feel of it first.”

She balanced the cold object in her palm. “It’s not so bad.”

Still, she handed it right back to him and saw the doubt grow in his eyes. Part of her didn’t want to disappoint him, but she also knew this wasn’t about Mick’s approval. At the core, she needed this confirmation that she could endure anything life handed out to her. That violence, or the fear of it, couldn’t destroy her.

After he loaded it, he held the weapon out to her once more. “Here. Take it from my hand and try the weight.”

She hefted it slowly, and it didn’t feel as heavy as she thought it would. “Dace Banovic’s wife carries this gun?”

“She doesn’t carry it but she knows how to use it. He taught her after the hostage situation at the auto garage. She was like you that way...afraid because of the situation. She wanted to get over it.”

She held the gun and expected to tremble, expected to shiver with dread. “Did she?”

“After she’d had enough practice. How does it feel in your hand?”

“Not as heavy as I thought. Dangerous. Odd. Uncomfortable.”

He smiled and crossed his arms. “That much, eh?”

Celeste placed it on the stand, eager to release it one moment before attempting this next monumental step. “That much.”

“Like I said, we’ll go slow. We’ll only do as much as you want today. Then we’ll keep coming back until we get through the entire process.”

Coming back here day after day? She inhaled deeply. “I want to get this all done today. I want to be free of this fear today. I’m not trying for some Girl Scout marksmanship badge.”

He chuckled. “Okay.” Mick’s eyebrows arched upward. “You’re sure? I mean, that you want to do it all today?”

"I'm sure. I've been this way too long. I've let it rule me too long. Let's do it."

After he readied the weapon, he stood behind her. He showed her the stance, the angle of her body. Where her feet should be, how to position her arms and where her fingers should rest. Her confidence rose, and with it her apprehension. She couldn't recall the last time she felt this dorky, this uncoordinated and unable.

Caution must have shown in her eyes, because when Mick handed her the earmuffs, he said, "If this is all you want to do today, it's all right. Don't push yourself."

"I've got to do it now, or I'm afraid I'll never come back."

He nodded and didn't say a word. When he handed her the gun, she brought it up.

"Stance is good," he said. "Feet a tad farther apart for balance. Now before you point, be sure you're relaxed as can be."

"I wouldn't be relaxed if I was shooting to save my life."

"You'll have the experience of knowing what it feels like to pull the trigger without tension."

She did as told, relaxing her grip enough so her fingers didn't ache.

"Squeeze off one shot."

She closed her left eye, concentrated on the white bull's-eye and—

Bang!

The gun kicked, but not much. Just enough to make her jump.

"Good one!" Mick smiled. "I wouldn't be surprised if you got a bull's-eye right off."

"Yeah, right."

"Try it again."

She did. And a second and a third time, until the power behind each of her shots carried her away to a more comfortable place in her mind. She expected to feel appalled, uncomfortable, uneasy. Instead she felt elated. Rejuvenated. Her breath no longer came tight and fast, instead her heartbeat was steady and slow. The exhilaration inspired her into pulverizing more of the target. She put the gun on safety and laid it down.

Pulling off her earmuffs, she said, "I can't believe I did it. It was so easy."

"Beginner's luck is common. Today we lowered your anxiety level and if you ever have a weapon in your hands under stress, you'll know what to do. I still recommend more practice later."

She knew her smile stretched ear to ear.

Before long the noise of the other shooters, the sun blaring down, the threat of rain in the distance faded under the knowledge of what she'd accomplished. Finally she finished.

Mick took the empty weapon and placed it in the case. When they looked at her target, her mouth dropped open in astonishment. She'd hit the bull's-eye more than once and her grouping was tight.

His grin grew wide. "This is fantastic."

"Talk about beginner's luck."

"Hey, don't diminish your accomplishments. You did far better than I did the first time I shot."

Thunder rumbled, and he glanced at the coming clouds.

"You're kidding, right?" she asked.

"No, I'm not. You're a natural."

She froze at the thought. "A natural? I'm not sure this is something I want to come easily."

He cupped her shoulders. "If it's a fluke, you'll know the next time you shoot."

"If I shoot again. You said to take it slowly."

"Let's get out of here. I say a celebration is in order. I've got a bottle of Glenmorangie waiting for a special occasion."

"You remembered that I like Glenmorangie?"

As he picked up the gun case, and led her toward the exit. "You were drinking some that night ten years ago. Before we danced."

At the memory of that night, her lower stomach tingled. "I haven't sipped any Glenmorangie in I can't remember when. Let's do it."

Chapter Eighteen

Black clouds lowered over Gold Rush, the power of their threat evident as forks of lightning lit up the gloom.

“Good thing we’re almost home,” Mick said.

As if he ushered in the mess, the roiling thunderheads released their burden as they came to their street. Rain fell in heavy sheets that obscured everything in seconds. Late afternoon turned to almost evening as the violent storm took hold.

He flipped on the wiper blades, and Celeste laughed. “We couldn’t have timed this more perfectly.”

“No way around it. We’re getting wet.”

Mick’s house didn’t have a garage, and as he took the driveway that led alongside the house and close to the back door, she knew they’d have to make a run for it.

They made a dash for the house, but pulverizing rain drenched them in seconds. Despite the violence of the tempest, she shrieked with the joy of a young girl released from a prison. For today, she’d removed a fear she’d fought with for so long. Triumph made her heady.

Mick slammed the back door and locked it. They stood in the utility room and dripped.

“Oh, man!” Mick wiped his face with one hand. “I suggest we get rid of our clothes right here and either wash them or hang them to dry.”

“Get rid of our clothes right here?”

He raised one eyebrow. “Honey, there’s no need to be shy with me. I’ve seen most of you naked before, remember?”

She blushed; it didn’t seem to take much around him. Without fanfare, she shrugged and agreed. “Okay. Let’s do it. Do you have a robe I can use?”

“Yep.” Mick stripped his t-shirt over his head and bared that delicious chest. He removed his athletic shoes and socks and tossed everything on the washer. He shucked his jeans in record time and stood in only black briefs.

She caught herself glancing at the bulge at the front of his briefs. *Oh, my God.* He was so manly and gorgeous he took her breath away.

She hurried to undo her jeans, then felt foolish when she remembered she still had her sneakers on. She stripped away her shoes, t-shirt and jeans. His gaze unabashedly chased her movements. Pleasure filled his eyes.

“Robe?” She put her hands on her hips, trying to stay unaffected while his gaze ate her up.

“Oh. Yeah. Just a minute.”

She stood in the laundry room, cold and in nothing but blue panties and matching balconet bra. When he returned a few short moments later with a towel and long, blue terrycloth robe, she took the items and smiled her gratitude. He wore a pair of low slung blue cotton workout shorts and appeared comfortable with his near-naked state.

She wrapped the robe around her and blessed the warmth. It was way too big for her, the sleeves hanging over her hands, the hem long. As she rolled up the sleeves, Mick said, “Let’s get those drinks.”

Oh, I wish you'd put on more clothes.

And she also didn't.

What woman with any red blood cells wouldn't appreciate the way the muscles in his back moved, the tight, sculpted ass, the six-pack stomach? His powerful chest, biceps and forearms. No man before or since she'd met Mick could measure up to his delicious masculinity.

Thunder continued its relentless rumble and the rain came down even harder.

Mick wandered into the living room and opened the liquor cabinet. He extracted the bottle of liquor and two lowball glasses. She settled at one end of the couch and tucked her feet under the long terrycloth robe. After pouring a couple of measures for her and one small bit for himself, he sat in the middle of the couch, not far from her.

Celeste allowed the liquid to soothe her, to put her in a place of relaxation. Mick threw back his whiskey in one gulp, then put his glass on a coaster on the coffee table. She preferred sipping over a slam dunk. The fiery character of the dram took hold of her much faster than she expected. She felt lovely, languid. Lazy. Accomplished.

"How do you feel after your first day of shooting?" he asked.

"Pretty good. I can't believe I did it." The grin spreading over her lips made him smile as well. "I feel like I could do it again. Maybe."

"Sleep on it and tell me what you feel in the morning." His voice, soft and husky, made her body warm.

Morning.

Somehow his word held an intimacy. A promise.

Outside the thunder rolled and rain continued to pound the earth.

"You're remarkable," he said suddenly.

While his praise warmed her, she had to know what prompted the sudden praise.

"Thank you. But why do you say that?"

"You survived a bank robbery when you were young. You survived estrangement from your father. You survived a near rape. Not many people have that many bad things happen to them without it scarring them for life. Have you ever noticed that there are some people who are magnets for crap happening to them? You're *not* that person."

"Are you sure? I have my own stalker, and I've lost two jobs in short order. Don't you think that qualifies as bad luck?"

"You have a positive outlook on life. You draw good things to you."

She put her drink on the coaster to her left and shifted around toward him.

"All these years you've been afraid," he said.

It wasn't a question. She knew that he knew the truth. She nodded and tears welled in her eyes. "I'm glad to say that going out to the range helped a lot. I can't say I'm not afraid of what a gun can do, but I overcame most of the fear. That's something I thought would never leave me."

Tears trickled over, and she hurried to wipe them away. A gentle smile curved his mouth. He lifted her hand and kissed it. "You should be proud."

"I'm amazed more than proud. Amazed I came this far."

Mick tilted his head to the side. "I think you could challenge yourself. Get out of your comfort zone more often like you did today."

"That's what I've done all these years, Mick. Tried to stay in the box I built around myself. The one that kept me safe. After the bank robbery, and then the assault, I wanted

to run as far from violence as I could get. But being near you has taught me an important lesson.”

“What’s that?”

“Violence can happen anywhere and any time. Hiding from it doesn’t work. Facing up to the fact it exists works. You’re…”

Doubt darkened his eyes until they held a storm inside. “A part of the violence?”

“No.” A vehement shake of the head gave conviction to her answer. “A part of the solution. You put your life on the line every day for men, women and children who need your skills and strengths to survive. It takes a special person to face violence every day and still remain a gentle person. Not everyone can do that.”

He leaned his elbow on the back of the couch and rested his head in his hand. “You finally trust me?”

She knew the answer without hesitation. “Yes. Do you think I should carry a gun?”

“A twenty-two?”

“Any kind of gun.”

His brow creased in genuine consideration, eyes darkest lapis and serious. “Only if you want to.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think I do.”

“Then don’t.” He leaned forward slightly and touched a curl that fell from the topknot she wore. “I want you to feel safe. Whatever it takes.”

She reached up, loosened her hair, and allowed it to fall in a cascade. He tangled one finger in a ringlet. Temptation swallowed her whole. She felt fire and need and she saw its equal in his intense eyes.

“I do feel safe with you.”

“Are you sure?” Mick quirked one thick dark brow. “Remember, I’m a cop.”

She gently chucked him under the chin. “You’ve done so many things to help me, Mick. You could have told me to get help somewhere else.”

“I’d never do that.” He traced the bridge of her nose down to the tip, then skimmed her jaw. “All the years that separated us, I never stopped caring.”

“Weren’t you angry at me for running away from you?”

“At first. Then I told myself if you ran away, it wasn’t meant to be. Now you’re here, and I’m wondering what this is between us.”

“It’s wild and intense.”

“No doubt about that.”

“It’s crazy,” she said.

It seemed she imagined it—was he closer? Nearer and nearer?

“Stay with me,” he said. “There’s a guestroom. I’ll feel better if you stay here.”

Her breath caught. “Tonight?”

“Every night until we know Huntley’s not a threat.”

“But that could be months. It could take a long time…” She shook her head. “Things would get complicated.”

His fingers rubbed her nape until the hot warmth of Mick’s skin sent pleasure curling through her body. “They could. Quickly. But I think it’s too late. It’s already very complicated.”

More heat poured into her as his fingers played magic upon her sensitive skin. She swallowed hard. Lightning illuminated the curtains and thunder rattled the house, but she

barely heard it.

She broke out in a grin, unable to resist teasing him. "Do you have those handcuffs?"

For a few seconds he looked perplexed. A smile crossed his mouth. "Ah, those handcuffs. Yeah, I do."

"You promised to show me if I was good."

He teased her ear with his index finger. "No. I promised to show you if you were bad."

She chuckled. "I'm planning something bold and bad right now."

"More bold than the first night we met again after ten years?"

She nodded and took the plunge. Though the robe covered her from neck to toe, she shifted it out of the way enough to straddle him. She settled her warmth down on his cock and her arms around his neck.

"Ah, God." His eyes closed as he clasped her waist. His fingers tightened on her, his strength reminding her of the male power he held in check. "Don't push me, honey. I can't take it."

Feeling daring beyond anything she'd experienced before, she gave him a touch of his own medicine. He'd teased her before, now he'd know how it felt. "What will happen if I do push you?"

He shifted his hips, lifting them until the hardening length nestled into the notch between her legs. His voice turned rough, harsh with need. "You'll get fucked."

Eyes blazing with unrequited passion, his look promised serious retribution if she teased him. Serious sexual torment. Could she abandon herself to passion without reservation? Celeste knew a trigger point lay inside her somewhere, she just didn't know where or when that point would come.

She reached up to touch his face, to feel the smooth masculine skin where he'd shaved recently. "Why do you put up with my baggage, Mick? Wouldn't it be easier to just forget me? To let me go?" She held her breath, waiting for the answer.

He blew out a puff of air. "Who said I do anything the easy way?"

She gasped as he thrust against her again, riding it out in a rhythm of heat and promise. Urging him into motion didn't take much. Celeste undulated her hips, her pussy bumping and grinding his erection. And he did have an erection already. A huge, intimidating one. She already knew how large he could get when aroused, and wanted to feel him thrusting inside her urgently and without restraint. She leaned forward and brushed her mouth over his upper lip, then his lower, tasting him delicately. Much more of this and she wouldn't last, wouldn't restrain feelings she'd withheld for so long.

As thunder rolled in the heavens and the rain battered the house, her self-discipline shattered.

Moving her body against his, she delighted in sensation after sensation. His shoulders so hard and taut with muscle, their mingled breath arousing her as much as the thick bar pressing between her legs.

Cupping her face, he brought her lips into deeper contact with his, but she pulled back enough to leave nothing more than a tease. He groaned, a feral sound that belonged to a beast that had hungered too long. The pulsing ache between her legs turned molten and desperate. She wriggled as his hips pumped upward. Her body moistened in preparation for mating. She flew straight into the fire without a parachute. She didn't care. All that mattered was finding ecstasy at the end of the road.

Mick groaned as she threw her head back and gasped. His mouth touched her throat, testing vulnerable flesh. She ached so deep, wanting to free his cock from confinement and ride him into the biggest oblivion she'd ever experienced.

Mick's hands spanned her waist, toying with the belt robe as if he might rip open the terrycloth sheltering her and show her how much he wanted her right here, right now.

Yes.

Heat coiled in her loins, her clit aching with the need to find release. Once more she rubbed along his erection, driving her body along his cock until the movement caught her up and wouldn't let go.

Plunging his fingers into her hair, he melded their mouths in capitulation. Her touch found his chest and toyed with his nipples, delighting in naked skin, in the planes and angles that defined pure male animal. Thrust after thrust, his tongue met hers in fiery union. All worries disappeared, blanketed by the sensual song they created. Their mouths came together again and again, making new music, and she loved it, every moan, each moment heightening her arousal to a fever pitch. She felt hot, greedy. She searched his body, savoring, stroking, tracing flesh with eager appreciation.

Celeste pumped against him, reaching for it...reaching for it as the fire bloomed in her loins, and she felt so wet, so very, very wet. She moaned without thought, relieved of inhibition by stark and undeniable need for release. As his tongue mated with hers, his hips arching, the burn rose higher. His hands were everywhere, caressing her face, her neck, reaching under her robe to clasp her butt. His palms tightened over her ass, squeezing and caressing, urging her to move on him. Celeste came unglued, bravely leading him on a dance.

She'd thought she could make him crazy. Had planned to show him how untamed she could be.

He reached between them, and his thumb passed over her clit through her silky panties. She gasped and her eyes flew open to stare into his. A triumphant smile, filled with desire, turned up his lips. Heat raced up her throat and into her face. She closed her eyes and fell into the excitement. Strum after strum, Mick smoothed his thumb over her flesh. He parted her robe quickly and unclasped her bra. He shoved aside the material, and the sudden lash of his wet, hot tongue on one nipple made her gasp. Anchoring her close, he feasted with slow licks and gentle sucking while his thumb tormented her clit. Excitement winged through her until she dissolved into the pleasure, sure she wouldn't resurface until her body exploded in delicious ecstasy.

His thumb flicked, the movement faster as he sucked her nipples one after the other in a maddening rhythm designed to drive her crazy, then took her mouth. Deep inside her, the tension coiled, heightened. It built like a firestorm as she panted, almost begging for completion.

Exploded.

She cried out into this mouth as her body shook with staggering pleasure.

He tore his mouth from hers, panting. "As I stand up, put your legs around my waist."

As he stood, she did as he requested, her thighs wrapping around his waist. He kept his eyes locked with hers as he walked them straight upstairs.

"Mick, I'm too heavy.

"Honey, you're light as a feather."

And she discovered that his strength, the muscles that turned her on, could easily carry her upstairs in this position without him even puffing in exertion. *Oh, wow.* When they reached his room, he left the light off, and for this first time she liked the idea. She needed that little bit of privacy. That smidge of security—

He lowered her to her feet and a nightlight in the hallway gave his tall, stalwart body form and shadow.

Celeste breathed deeply, and his scent, a musky clean male, drove her to the next step. She eased the robe off her shoulders and it fell to the floor. She untangled the bra from around her neck and let it fall to the floor. Then, with a sense of freedom she'd never felt before, she slipped her panties down her legs and kicked them away. She stood naked. Vulnerable. Excited beyond anything she'd felt before.

Mick leaned over and came up with the tie from the robe. "Lie back on the bed. "What are you going to do?" Her half breathless question sounded unsure. "Wait and see."

Chapter Nineteen

Excited, Celeste lay back on the bed sideways. Mick tossed the tie on the bed, and then stripped off his shorts. In the dim light she saw his cock, hard and ready. Thick, long and oh-so beautiful. All that raw masculinity was for her. Just for her.

“Put your hands above your head,” he said quietly. She did, and he straddled her long enough to tie her wrists together above her head. “Keep them there.”

Liking his bossiness in this case, she smiled. Mick straddled her, and his cock brushed against her belly. He leaned over her and kissed her, restraint lost in a deep, devouring kiss that plunged her head over heels straight into the waterfall.

His hands brushed over her shoulders, their touch feather light. He smoothed his fingers down to her breasts, where he leaned in and licked with tiny swirls over the tips of her nipples. He settled in to dine and approached the feast with a gentle persuasion that stirred her with languid arousal. Tension coiled in her belly, and the excitement she’d felt under his touch earlier rose once more. She groaned as he toured her body, his tongue finding her navel as his hands smoothed over her waist, to her hips, then to her thighs. Eager to know where this would take them, she parted her legs and drew up her knees.

He circled her thighs with gentle touches until his fingers parted the protective flesh over her clit and bared the small nub to a long, wet sweep of his tongue. She gasped and squirmed in his hold, rapidly firing toward another orgasm.

Celeste cried out as he plied her body with steady attention, his tongue thrusting into her core while her arousal heightened. Mick loved her with strokes that alternated between clit and pussy. She kept her arms above her head, liking the slightly helpless sensation as it added to her excitement. She trusted Mick with her life, with her feelings and her body.

“Please, Mick.”

“What do you need?” His breath wisped over her skin, setting new tremors dancing and sparking in her over-stimulated flesh. “Tell me.”

“You. Please. I ache.”

He eased two fingers deep and slow into her, pressing upward on a spot high inside her as he fluttered his tongue over her clit. She started to writhe under the not-so-subtle torment, dying to discover what he’d feel like thrust into her. Mick left the bed and headed to the bathroom. He returned quickly, sheathed with a condom. He released her arms from the ties, and as she drew her legs upward, he lowered his hips between her thighs and the swollen tip of his cock teased between her folds.

“I wanted this to go slower, but I can’t stop now,” he said, voice raspy with arousal. “I want you so much.”

In the dim light, his eyes glittered with unmistakable desire, his body wreathed in the golden light, a god with bulging, glorious muscles. He lowered himself upon her, tangling their limbs as his arms embraced her. Mick’s cock eased inside and then thrust deep.

She gasped as his thickness penetrated, tilting her hips upward to accept him. He inched inwards, drew back. She groaned and clutched at his shoulders, her eyes closed tightly. Again he flirted, dipping into her, drawing back, thrusting, teasing. She wanted

him hard and sure within her center until there was no doubt who he possessed and what they intended to do.

“Mick.” She burrowed her fingers into his short hair, bringing his head down for her kiss.

With a low, almost agonized groan, he seated to the hilt with a hard push. She moaned in stunned pleasure, her body well-primed and accommodating his length and breadth.

“I can’t wait any longer. I need you so much,” he whispered.

As his mouth found hers and his tongue invaded and caressed, their hips swayed together. His tongue was bold and aggressive in her mouth. Whimpers of delight escaped her as deep, luscious thrusts brought him to the heart of her, each movement slow and steady, his cock stroking her length again and again. No matter what she did, she couldn’t seem to get close enough to him.

Mick released her from the kiss as his mouth traveled down her throat, a brazen invader that sent fresh quivers of excitement dancing over her flesh. He latched on to one nipple, tongue stroking and smoothing before sucking strongly. Acutely sensitive, her nipples felt so tight, so hard she couldn’t stand the sensation as he switched from one nipple to the next. Intolerable pleasure escalated, threatening to drive her mad. Only a few sweet strokes and her body trembled, reached, spilled over the edge like a crashing waterfall. She cried out, his mouth taking her sound and muffling it in her throat.

He broke their kiss as his breathing increased, and she opened her eyes to witness Mick’s strain for the last remnants of his control.

They’d waited too long for this and it showed in their increasingly frantic movements. His breath rasped in his throat as his head went back, eyes closed tight, lips parted as he strained. Mick braced on his palms, his powerful thighs generating the motion, the speed as his hips pistoned. He paused long enough to slip his hands under her hips, his fingers clamping tight on her ass as he tilted her into his increasingly powerful thrusts. He plunged faster and faster, his breath now harsh as moans left his throat. Gasping, he stiffened and groaned as he growled out his pleasure, the sound primitive and filled with raw male pleasure.

* * * *

“I’ve got to go home,” Celeste said, but Mick didn’t want her to leave his embrace.

Spooned with his front to her back, Mick gloried in the last three hours and what they meant. His head spun with the implications, with the mind-blowing experience they’d shared. After sex he usually fell asleep, but for some reason his mind wouldn’t let him. Not when his cock wanted more of the hot, sweet channel between her legs. His hands coasted over Celeste in an unremitting search for satiation that wouldn’t come.

“Don’t go.” He pressed his groining arousal between the crease of her buttocks. He nuzzled her ear, breathing in her unique aroma that he knew was imprinted on his mind forever, mingled with the musky, primal scent of sex. “Stay the night. Besides, you’re exhausted.” He grinned and spread his fingers and palm over her belly to tuck her closer to his groin. “Or if you’re not, you will be soon.”

She laughed softly. “You’ve got a deal.”

Chapter Twenty

“Sir, can I see your driver’s license and insurance?” The deputy said to Darrell.

Darrell considered drastic action for all of two seconds. He nixed the idea. While he could match the cop for strength—he was bigger than the other man—he didn’t think a fight would help his cause. A scene flashed through Darrell’s head. He imagined trying to take the smaller man and almost snorted as he recognized how ridiculous and unproductive it would prove. Only an imbecile, a desperate one, would attempt such a ridiculous action. Unlike the criminals he’d studied and treated, he would not do anything so stupid. He remained cool, surprised by his own composure under this challenge. He told many of his patients to face what they feared the most. While he didn’t fear capture by the police, he did abhor delay.

He glanced at the deputy sheriff’s nametag before he reached above the sunshade to locate the registration and rental papers. He also handed over his driver’s license.

MacGilvary.

The blond-headed, bully looking cop was related to Mick MacGilvary. *Interesting.* He hadn’t asked around or researched his rival for Celeste’s affections so he hadn’t known until now the bastard had a cop for a relative. Too much nosiness could result in the police learning more than he wanted them to know.

He handed the requested information to the poker-faced cop. Down in Darrell’s gut the indignation rose, the desire to seek escape heightened. The cop walked back to his car with Darrell’s information. He imagined appearing on a reality television show where cops chased hapless, foolish criminals who somehow had the arrogance to think they could escape.

When the cruiser had rolled up behind him, surprise had punched his emotions, but not much else. Other than Celeste’s lover Mick MacGilvary, Darrell had never experienced a policeman’s scrutiny before, or a cop’s brand of anger. Yet he felt up to the challenge, assured that his intellectual superiority would best the deputy.

When he’d called Celeste at the bridal shop, he hadn’t expected MacGilvary’s wrath to blast him over the phone. But then distance separated him from the cop’s retribution. His brother...well, that created a twisting in Darrell’s gut. An apprehension he didn’t want to analyze. The danger of the situation didn’t feel as delicious or daring as watching Celeste perform her day-to-day life. No, not at all. Waiting for this new pest, this new MacGilvary to give him a ticket, sent rolling tides of impatience through Darrell.

How would he play this? He stared at the hood of his car, aware of his surroundings with startling clarity. The wind ruffled through tree branches, a constant swirl of sound and motion. A hot, annoying wind. Not unlike the Santa Ana winds he’d experienced while growing up in California. He immediately blocked the thought of California from his head. Thinking about childhood fueled his outrage—he would embrace it later in the hotel room. The new hotel room where he’d moved last night. Staying in one space too long made him conspicuous and easy to ponder. People could ponder all they liked after he accomplished his main goal of tormenting Celeste and showing her that she belonged with him.

“Sir?”

Darrell jumped, surprised the deputy had arrived at his window like a ghost. A wisp of sound. A damned nuisance.

The officer stared down at him with a superior air. Darrell saw mistrust written over the man's face. As a psychologist Darrell also read a veiled desire in the cop's eyes. The cop wanted to do him bodily harm. To punch his lights out perhaps. MacGilvary handed Darrell's documents back to him.

"May I ask what the problem is, officer?" Darrell asked, willing to play dumbass for the sake of show.

MacGilvary's hands rested on his belt, a sign of command and authority. "We both know what's wrong, Huntley. Maybe you thought a dye job would assure that no one knew who you are, but I'm afraid it doesn't work on the sheriff's department. You're stalking a friend of mine. You're sitting less than a half block from Celeste Rice's house with no reason to be here."

Darrell did what the cop wouldn't expect. "Am I being charged with a crime?"

"Not yet."

"Then I fail to see the problem. I assure you that I'm no harm at all to Miss Rice. I don't think I can say the same about her, considering she's a highly unstable individual with a persecution complex. I'm afraid she's suckered you and your brothers. It's something she does very well."

Utter contempt flickered through MacGilvary's eyes. This man thought he had the upper hand. Darrell quickly assessed the officer. Not likely that he could make him react rashly with a few words.

"May I go, deputy?"

"Not only can you go, I don't want to see you here ever again."

Darrell nodded, and smiled into the cop's eyes to make his amusement clear. As MacGilvary returned to his car, Darrell started his vehicle. Within moments he pulled onto the tree-lined street.

True to form, he saw the cruiser follow way back, as if he thought Darrell would never see the black-and-white.

Fat chance, cop.

Darrell smiled. Those words sounded exactly like the dumbass criminal in a television program would say. Darrell would never voice such a thing in front of law enforcement, but he could delight in saying it in his mind.

As he drove, Darrell imagined the things he could have said to the cop. Ideas amused him as he smiled and headed down the main street toward his hotel.

"Deputy Sheriff, have you considered that you might have picked this job out of a sense of sexual inadequacy?"

"Your ego is showing, officer."

"Your background suggests you are using this job as a power trip, MacGilvary."

"So did the death of your friend Celeste and your brother Mick create any lasting conflict inside you?"

Darrell visualized the cop's reaction to this last question. How agonizing would that feel for this other MacGilvary? How much would he suffer? Darrell savored the thought as the obsession ran through his head, repeating like a bad flick in a theater that has nothing better to run. His mind raced with possibilities, with evil doings he could apply to this moment and what he'd like to say and do to MacGilvary and his family.

Darrell wanted madness and wanted it fast. He wished he believed in conjuring incantations to suck the devil in, drawing evil to himself with undeniable certainty. He didn't. Evil, as far as he believed, was locked somewhere in DNA. Someday scientists would remove the capacity for evil and then the real chaos would start. Ah, yes. When people could no longer be bad, when they had no concept of evil but only good, evil would get a real foothold on minds.

Ah, but there is no madness in a sociopath. You know that.

Only sure and certain absence of conscience.

He knew it and wished he didn't.

The madness he longed for could never be his.

As he pulled into the hotel parking lot, he wished moving from hotel to hotel didn't serve only as a way to avoid suspicion of others, but to deepen his dark experience. The darkness he courted required room to grow. It required feeding and care to enlarge. Perhaps he'd discovered laziness within himself. He smiled. Well, that could serve his gloomy desires as well.

When he reached the bizarrely named Sunny Lake Hotel, he parked a few places away from his room...room thirteen to be precise. He entered his room and made certain to lock and chain it. Never could be too careful. The door hung crooked on the hinges and as a result it took an act of Congress to lock it. He lifted up on the door so it sat correctly and would lock.

He turned to survey this day-old acquisition. The hotel room had to be forty years old if it was a day. Minimal improvements over the years had been performed in a haphazard fashion. Cracked linoleum in the sterile bathroom and contractor's poor-quality fixtures. At least the linens and towels appeared scrupulously clean. The king-size bed sagged in the middle, the bedspread a baby-puke yellow. Oddly enough, all the disgusting features in the room looked new. He wondered if the owners bought the world's ugliest décor with the idea of purposely disgusting their clientele. He could think of no other psychology for it. Which in itself was damned disappointing. Didn't matter. He wasn't in Gold Rush to analyze hotel owners or managers, but one vulnerable woman. She would be his piece de resistance. His art form.

Someone knocked on the door, and Darrell's heart thumped with a start. He drew a deep breath. He'd left his weapon in the glove compartment. Not a good idea perhaps. He unlocked the door but left the chain on.

* * * *

Mick kept his hand on the service revolver in his holster, ready for anything as the door opened. A security chain kept the door from swinging wide.

A man's face appeared in the opening; one Mick knew well. Dressed in a t-shirt and jeans, Darrell looked every inch the casual man. The clean, unwrinkled white t-shirt and new jeans didn't fit the downtrodden exterior of the hotel. This man could afford better—why the hell would he stay at a dump like this? Anonymity? Probably. Too bad. The jig was up.

"Darrell Huntley, it's Mick MacGilvary of El Torro Sheriff's Department. Open up."

Huntley hesitated, and Mick's self-preservation kicked into gear. He could have brought Craig with him for back up, but he didn't want to drag his brother into this if things turned bad. Anger pulsed below the surface, threatening to unravel Mick in a way

he hadn't felt since the night he dragged that asshole off Celeste when she was a teen. He needed to keep a lid on his emotions.

Huntley undid the chain and opened the door. "What do you want?"

Huntley looked bigger than the last time he'd seen him, if that was possible.

"My brother told me you were loitering on my street. On Celeste's street."

"There's no law against parking on a street and enjoying a few moments relaxation."

Huntley's voice sounded rusty from lack of use, as if he'd been let out of a cage only recently.

"Listen here, you stupid fucker, I can guarantee if you get near Celeste, if you dare touch her, I *will* kill you."

One tawny eyebrow lifted in mocking disdain. "Really? If I said I was concerned I'd be lying. Celeste doesn't have to worry about me. I think it's you she should worry about. After all, you're of a violent bent, aren't you? A well-documented study showed peace officers are on the same psychological plane with criminals. The only thing that makes you different from a gangster is the restraint of law. If you weren't afraid of it, you'd use it to your advantage." Huntley's eyes, as cool as chips of ice, glowed with excitement for the subject. "Police officers are aggressive people. That's something sweet Celeste won't deal with easily. After all, her life was ruined by violence, wasn't it?"

"Save the psychobabble, Huntley. Stay away from her."

Mick expected to see disdain, anger, or amusement in Darrell's eyes, but he didn't.

And that worried Mick most of all. Darrell's gaze held nothing.

Absolutely nothing but an enormous, yawning darkness.

Mick's hand itched for his weapon, for an opportunity to bring down the bastard with one quick shot until he couldn't hurt Celeste or any other woman. Mick's fingers tightened on his weapon as he dared Huntley to try a move.

Make a move, you bastard, and it might be the last thing you ever do.

Huntley grinned, his pale skin stretching across his face like tight papier-mâché. "I know more about Celeste's weaknesses and foibles than you'll ever understand. All her damaged thoughts and idiosyncrasies. There are so many aspects of her you can't relate to like I can."

Mick wanted to shout at the man. *You sick bastard. You sick, sick fuck.*

"Now, if you'll excuse me, deputy, I think this is police harassment. If you aren't going to charge me with anything, get out of my doorway."

"I'm not kidding, Huntley. Come near her or call her again, and the entire El Torro SWAT team will tear you to pieces, but not before I've had a chance to knock your balls into your throat."

Mick backed away but kept his gaze on the man. He didn't trust the bastard. For all he knew, the asswipe had a weapon stashed somewhere.

Without another word, Huntley shut the door. Mick heard the chain latch.

* * * *

"I hope you have a good explanation for what you did earlier today." Captain Ginipri gestured toward the chair at the front of his desk.

Mick sat down in the hospital green chair facing his supervisor's desk.

"What would that be, sir?"

Ginipri grunted and scratched his bald head. His mustache and square face made him

look like a brutal version of Mr. Clean. “You know what I’m talking about, MacGilvary.”

Mick’s nose twitched. Today the office smelled like a pine cleaner, a little too astringent and pungent for Mick’s nose. Mick sneezed once. Twice. Three times.

“Shit, MacGilvary. You okay?”

“I’m good, sir. Best I’ve been in a long time.”

“The promotion feels that good?”

“Feels damn right wonderful. I’m celebrating tonight.”

“Good.” Ginipri put his hands behind his head, his body sinking down a bit in a relaxed way few supervisors dared to show the way this man did.

Unlike a stereotypical supervisor’s sterile environment, Captain Thomas Ginipri had an immaculate but not stuffy office. He’d decorated the walls with pictures of hunting trips where he’d used his compound bow. His desk sported a photograph of him with his wife, teenaged daughter and son.

As he often did, the captain waited to speak again. This quiet method of intimidation worked on some officers, but it didn’t on Mick. Ginipri knew this but it didn’t keep him from trying to use it.

Mick decided to cut to the chase, pretty certain he knew what the captain was talking about. “Did the bastard complain?”

“What do you think?” Ginipri’s voice held sarcasm. A good cop and a good man, Ginipri told the truth as he saw it, but never claimed it was the *only* truth. That’s one thing Mick had to admire in this black-and-white world.

“He called this afternoon, saying he was a victim of police harassment. First Craig, then you. Tell me what happened.”

Mick quickly explained the city’s denial of Celeste’s restraining order, and how Craig had patrolled down their street as a precaution and saw the dark-haired man sitting in a rental vehicle. After identifying the perp as Huntley, he’d called Mick and said he’d follow the man to his destination.

“Your idea was to find out where he’s staying,” Ginipri said.

“Yep.”

“So you took it upon yourself to talk some sense into Huntley after your brother told you where to find him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ginipri leaned back in his utilitarian desk chair. His full lips thinned with disapproval, but Mick saw amusement in his eyes, too. “And you thought telling him to piss off will keep your girlfriend safe?”

“If it puts fear in the man, yes.”

Ginipri shook his head. “I don’t think this guy is standard-issue nuts.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s a psychologist. He’s not some downtrodden, pathetic man without a job who blames somebody else for all his woes and sees your girlfriend as a convenient woman to stalk. He’s planned this with precision. He’s not going anywhere because you went macho on him and warned him away from your woman.”

Mick flinched internally. “I did, didn’t I?”

To Mick’s surprise, Ginipri laughed. “Like a man beast.”

“I wasn’t thinking, sir.”

“No, you weren’t. You know that many stalkers escalate after they’ve been taunted.

That's why you advised her to screen all calls and hang up if he calls and she answers, right?"

Mick swallowed hard. "Right. Look, I was pissed because this jerk-off has cost her two jobs already."

Ginipri frowned and sat up straight, casualness disappearing as his green eyes went sharp. "No kidding?"

Mick explained the situation at the school and the job at the bridal shop. "He's enjoying the fact she can't keep a job because people are afraid of him and what he might do."

"Have her try the restraining order again. I can place a call if need be. At this point it can't hurt anything." Ginipri stood slowly. "Well, that's all. Get out of here, MacGilvary, and if I hear you're harassing that asswipe again it'll be your butt in a sling."

Mick's supervisor's words sounded tough, but the emphasis behind them remained mild. Mick stood as well, knowing that he'd stretched Ginipri's patience but not broken it.

As Mick started to open the door, Ginipri stopped him with, "MacGilvary."

"Yes sir?"

"If it had been my wife that jerk was stalking, I would have done the same thing." Ginipri smiled and dismissed him with a sweep of his hand. "Now get out of here."

Chapter Twenty-One

Celeste's stomach did a flip-flop as she opened the front door to Mick. She was nervous, damn it. Nervous that she'd overdressed. She'd chosen ultra-fancy attire because even in casual Gold Rush, the Steak Emporium had an unwritten dress code of elegance. At the same time, she felt nervous because their one night of staggering, mind-melding sex seemed to be the only thing she could remember. She thought about it over and over; it was an obsession in her blood.

As Mick entered, and as she closed the door behind him, his gaze swallowed her whole with undeniable appreciation. His eyes burned as they cruised from head to toe with caressing attention.

"Whoa." He clenched his heart. "You are heart attack material, honey."

Honey.

Said in his husky, liquid velvet voice, that one word became so much more than casual, so laced with affection and sensual promise. She shivered at the sweet pleasure.

"Thank you."

His attention slid from her hair, which she'd piled on top of her head, down the full sleek length of fire-engine-red dress. Made of a stretchy, clinging fabric, the sleeveless, spaghetti-strap dress cupped her breasts, nipped in along her ribs, clung to her waist and hips, and caressed her butt with intimate attention. Top off the prize with garnet earrings, necklace, and ring, plus strappy sandals, and she was ready.

"God, you're..." His breath caught as his gaze warmed into flames of undeniable appreciation. Mick cupped her face and moved in. His lips touched her forehead and then her nose. "Beautiful. You're so pretty."

"Thank you." A bit breathless, she murmured, "You're not so bad yourself."

He wore a dark grey suit that fit him as if tailored, a red tie, and a crisp white oxford shirt.

He pressed a warm, delicious kiss to her lips. She thought he meant to keep it soft and quick, but when her hands clung to his waist, he deepened the embrace. His arms anchored her around the waist, his grip possessive and yet gentle. His mouth twisted over hers, sipping and tasting until her lips parted in languid warmth. His tongue plunged, stroked into her mouth with a rhythm that sent sweet tingles across her nipples and into her belly. She fell into the kiss without restraint as his hand came up to caress her throat, to slide over the v-neck with a gentleness that sent raw excitement dancing along her body in pinwheels of pleasure.

His hips nudged hers, his hard cock brushing intimately. She arched into his hold, her hands searching his chest, delighting in the carved muscle flexing under her touch, compelled by sheer arousal to get closer. His touch skimmed over her ribs, down to her hips and coasted over her butt to cup and squeeze. Mick released her lips to tease her ear. His tongue flicked her earlobe, his mouth traveling to brush over her neck. She quivered under his relentless attention, a melting sensation turning her entire body into one languorous mass.

Mick nibbled her neck, his breath coming faster, chest rising and falling. He cupped her right breast lightly, and she gasped. He tested the rigid nipple under his thumb,

circling and brushing until her entire body felt like it might catch fire.

“Mick. Oh, God.”

Moist heat gathered between her legs. She ached high inside with a fierce desire to find relief. As his thumb moved and then moved again, she bowed into his touch. He groaned softly as she gasped. Celeste cherished his response, never wanting this floating, ecstatic feeling to diminish.

“Celeste.” Mick’s voice turned thick with desire. “I want you so much.”

Her throat ached. “I want you, too.”

Eyes blazing with passion, he rasped, “I don’t have a condom with me.”

“I bought some. They’re in my bedroom.”

He grinned—a wide, sparkling smile that spelled twenty times relief. “Thank God.”

She laughed as he took her hand and headed upstairs to her bedroom.

“We’ll be late for dinner,” he said.

“It’s your dinner, you can be late. Besides, we can make it a quickie.”

A rough groan left his throat—one that said he appreciated the idea with great relish. When they reached the dim interior of her bedroom, he gathered her into his arms. Swept up in the exotic feelings sweeping through her, Celeste let her inhibitions disappear. A quickie. *My first. Oh, wow.* It sounded good. Incredibly good. She ached, wanting him with a lust that burned her from the inside out. As his mouth took hers, every stroke of his tongue over hers rocked her with sensual fire.

She took control, wrestling with his trousers until the button and zipper came open. As she toed off her sandals, she backed away from him long enough to slip her bikini panties down her legs and step out of them. He freed his cock.

“Stockings,” she said as he drew her back into his arms. “Quick access.”

“Mmmm, good,” was his husky agreement. “Condom?”

She fumbled in the bedside drawer and within seconds he sheathed his cock.

His palms worked under her dress, easing the garment upward until he clasped her naked ass. He lifted Celeste and her legs went around his waist. He carried her until they bumped against a wall. Mick’s hard length probed, found the silky wetness between her legs. He teased her for all of a few seconds before thrusting.

Oh. My. God.

Thick and long, his cock spread her wide and deep until he touched her womb. It was good. It was beyond good. Immediately he pumped, his hips surging against hers with thrust after long thrust. Like a wild animal, he possessed his mate, put his stamp on her the way no other man could. She twisted against him in an insanity she’d never experienced before, eager to stamp her ownership on him and make him hers forever. Writhing in his arms, she tried to impale herself more deeply on his length.

“Yes. Yes,” she managed to gasp.

Her heartbeat quickened into the stratosphere, her pulse ticking in a frantic race to the finish.

Mick paused only long enough to stir the base of his cock against her and stroke with gentle movements inside her. She whimpered in rising passion, her head falling back as he touched a secret place within, stroking and plunging until the fire erupted into a conflagration. She squirmed as the pleasure tormented her to within an inch of screaming and begging. His sensual assault took her to a place so pleasure-filled, she panted for breath.

“Please, Mick. Please.”

“What do you want?” Husky and demanding, his question asked for her honesty.

“Faster.”

He complied as the animal mating detonated. He hurled her toward the culmination with no mercy. As his hips pounded, Celeste heard her own gasps of delight, and the groans deep in his throat as passion spiraled to the top. Sinking into a whirling storm, she tightened her grip around his neck. He buried his face in the crook of her neck as his hips picked up speed, attacking her slick depths until all she felt was her body opening wider, farther, pulling him within until she thought he went to the very heart of her, deeper than she could have imagined.

Fire surged upward, and she writhed violently. A fierce, flooding storm overtook every fiber in her body and she screamed in melting orgasm. She didn’t try to restrain her cries as the climax seemed to last forever, and his cock continued to hammer. She clutched at his head, holding him tight as the ecstasy rolled like thunder.

With one last ramming thrust, his entire body shuddered and harsh growls issued from his throat. They panted, relaxing moment by moment, until he eased out of her, and she stood on her own.

Mick cupped her face and kissed her tenderly. “Damn, honey. That was...” He shook his head and smiled as his chest rose and fell quickly. He glanced at his watch. “Yeah, we’re still going to be late.”

She grinned as she searched for her panties and headed for the bathroom.

“Complaining?”

“Hell no.”

After they cleaned up, Celeste wanted to tease Mick, make him uncomfortable so that later, when she went wild for him, he would lose that control one thread at a time. Boldly she leaned into him so his arms went around her. She took over the kiss, thrusting her tongue into his mouth. He groaned and clutched her to him.

He broke away, breath once more coming faster.

She stroked the tie. “Mmmn. Red for passion.”

“And we didn’t even plan the matching colors. Come on. Let’s get to dinner. I’m starving.”

They reached the ubiquitous exterior of the Steak Emporium. It wasn’t impressive from the outside, but when they stepped inside the elegant Victorian lines of the restaurant came out to embrace them. Mick’s mother and brothers stood in the waiting area, chatting away with animation.

The brother’s indulged in some masculine back slapping to congratulate Mick on his promotion. Craig and Trey both looked disgustingly attractive, Craig’s suit conservative colors, Trey a tad more flamboyant in a yellow shirt and tie that expressed his more adventurous side. Dinner proceeded with delicious food and fun conversation. Celeste and Mick kept the conversation away from work and Darrell, and that suited her fine. The whole experience gave Celeste a strong feeling of belonging to this family, and the way Mick’s mother and siblings embraced her in the fold made her long for more of the same. She presented Mick with a funny, joking card that didn’t imply anything too intimate.

Later that evening, when they returned to her home, she invited Mick inside.

After they locked up the house, he sagged onto the couch. “I had a great time. Thanks for helping me celebrate. And thanks for the card. It was funny.”

“You’re very welcome.”

Tired of high heels, she kicked off her sandals and nudged them under the coffee table. She wriggled her toes on the cold hardwood floor.

“What’s that smile about?” he asked.

She sighed. “It’s amazing, actually. I’m feeling really grounded. Happy even though I don’t have a job, and there’s a jealous ex trying to play head games with me.”

“You’re a resilient woman.”

Feeling bolder by the minute, she sauntered toward him with the slinkiest, most sensuous walk she could manage. Mick’s grin widened, his eyes reflecting heated appreciation as his gaze danced over her. She settled on the couch beside him and his arm went around her shoulders. She turned just enough she could look into his eyes.

“What do you believe about us?” Mick’s eyes pleaded with her. “Is there anything still holding you back?”

How could she ignore his request and hope to enjoy closeness with him? Closeness? When had her desire to be with him had anything to do with desire to connect on a deeper level? When had the pure sexual energy between them turned to more?

Knowing she wanted a closer tie to him staggered her, stilled her thoughts like a blow. It took a few seconds to gather her thoughts into coherency. “Before we made love the first time, I thought that if I gave in to what I felt, to the attraction we have, I would lose control.”

“Lose control of what?”

How did she explain? No words seemed adequate. “To the one thing I have. Myself.”

“Your mother and father failed you, your aunt failed you by keeping you and I apart. The scum who tried to rape you added to your feeling inadequate.” He tucked her hair behind her ear. “There’s a part of you that thinks I’ll abuse you emotionally. It’s that lack of trust that’s kept us from connecting all the way.”

His words made her realize Mick understood far more than she’d imagined. “Maybe. Since Mom and Dad were self-absorbed, I was always trying to get their attention. Nothing really worked. I don’t think they realized how much it hurt. They were just thoughtless.”

He didn’t speak for a short time and watched her with those concerned, admiring eyes. When he did speak, his tone held compassion. “It hurts a little that you’d believe I’d do anything to deliberately hurt you.”

She touched his hand and pressed. “No. Never deliberately. I know that much. You know that old saying that’s so damned clichéd on the dating scene? ‘It’s just me?’”

He smiled crookedly. “Yeah.”

“Well, it *is* just me. I’m learning, though. I’m learning.”

Mick turned his hand over to clasp hers. “I’m learning stuff about myself, too. I can’t control everything and everyone. I can’t always make things better even when I want to. I can’t save or protect everyone who needs it.”

She frowned. “You honestly believed that?”

He tapped his forehead. “Part of me did on some level.” Lifting her hand, he brushed his lips over her fingers. “Stupid of me.”

“You’re telling me you’re a reformed control freak?”

“Yeah. There ought to be a group for it. Control Freaks Anonymous.”

She laughed, happy they’d discussed their perspectives more in depth. “Forgive me

for not believing in you?”

“Only if you forgive me for pushing you hard.”

“Deal. Should we shake on it?”

He leaned toward her. “I think a kiss is a better idea.”

*

One hot kiss turned into another and yet another until Mick found himself on his back on the couch, Celeste lying on top of him. God, she felt good. Right. He cupped her ass, squeezing the giving, round flesh. Her butt fit just right in his hands, and he loved the possessive, hungry stirring in his groin. He’d never experienced this raw an emotion, this certainty that no other woman would do for him now or in the future. During dinner this evening he’d recognized that his life before Celeste seemed less full...less certain. Less meaningful. Yep, no other woman would do.

Only Celeste.

Celeste. Oh, God. God. I love her.

The frenzy inside urged him to move faster, quicker. He devoured her mouth with kiss after kiss, and she plunged into the abyss with him. For the first time in his life he recognized a true lack of control. The first night they’d made love he’d poured his love into her without knowing what it was, caught up in a sexual rush to completion. Tonight his feelings felt sure. Deliberate.

Unchained.

She eased away from him. “I want this wild.”

*

All night Celeste had watched him and wanted him, much the way she’d wanted him after the martial arts competition. His legs sprawled out, and despite his formal attire, he looked like a big, healthy panther awaiting a meal. She took a chance.

She eased the bottom of the dress upward over her hips and stepped toward him. His eyes widened and fixated on that point where her dress barely covered her matching red panties. She’d worn thigh highs and a garter belt.

He licked his lips. “Wow.”

She smiled, gratified with his reaction. Without more hesitation, she straddled his hips. His hands came to her hips as she pressed downward and found his erection. As her panties touched that long length of masculinity, she inhaled sharply. *Oh, yes.*

Mick cupped the back of her neck, his eyes on fire, and drew her mouth down to his. Hot and firm, his lips started a relentless kiss, a stamp of pure ownership that stirred her blood. She squirmed a bit on that tantalizing erection, and he groaned against her mouth. His tongue slipped inside, the steady thrust and retreat setting her blood alight.

Celeste pulled back enough to lift the dress over her head. She tossed it lightly onto the leather chair. Watching Mick’s reaction, though, was the kicker. He looked amazed and transfixed. A man startled and pleased all in one swoop.

He snapped open the front clasp on her bra, and cupped her breasts. Her rosy nipples went hard. She moaned and closed her eyes as he caught her nipples and rolled them, tugged them between his fingers. Mick groaned as he teased her nipples, leaning forward to brush his tongue over one sensitive nub and suck it into his mouth.

*

“Shit.” His hips surged upward, grinding his cock into her pussy. “God, you taste good.”

With only her stockings, panties and garter belt Celeste looked like a goddess. A creature of light and love he was damned lucky to know. He opened his pants, freed his aching cock.

"Let's move this to the bedroom," she said.

"Good idea."

Once they entered the bedroom, she switched on the bedside lamp and said, "Don't go away."

"Not a chance."

While she went into the bathroom, he made quick work of his clothes, struggling to get out of his garments in record time. Soon his clothes were scattered on the floor. He lay back on the bed, anticipation hardening him to a spike.

He clasped his cock and stroked, pumping his fist over the hard flesh with one movement. Two. He gritted his teeth and let go. He couldn't do any more or he'd spew right here. Lose that precious control. He wanted to lose control inside her.

In record time she returned with the condom and a bottle of what looked like lube. By now she was completely naked.

Oh, yeah.

"What have you got there?" he asked.

"Party favors."

"Good. I think it's time we tried something you'd like."

Her eyes widened. "Oh?"

"Give me the lube, honey."

He saw the curiosity in her eyes and wanted to tease her with the possibilities. Whatever happened next she'd love, and he'd make sure of it.

He rolled on the condom, lubed the fingers of his right hand, then lay back on the bed again. "Sit on me."

She smiled, eyes filled with anticipation. She eased over him, straddled his cock, and settled down onto his erection with a slow plunge. His breath hissed out. She groaned, eyelids fluttering shut as her lips parted.

"Don't move yet." He sat up. As she gasped, he felt like his cock surged an inch into her hot, wet channel. She felt so good. She pushed down, sinking yet another increment onto his flesh.

He teased the crease of her buttocks, and her eyes opened wide. He locked eyes with her as he smoothed the lube over her rosette.

"Feel good?" he asked.

Her silky flesh tightened over his cock, and he sucked in a harsh breath. With one push he sank his middle finger into her tight entrance. This touch felt more intimate than anything they'd done so far. Perhaps because they'd revealed more to each other. More than he ever thought they would.

"Oh, God, Mick."

"Squeeze me."

She did.

He didn't move, allowing her body to milk him with tight contractions. He moved his finger, fucking her with slow pumps, feeling the delicious pulls over her flesh around him. The rhythm of her contractions increased, her breathy sighs and moans signaling that she'd soon climax.

While he'd thought she'd lost control before, the way her body accepted him, opened wide for every deep thrust told him she wanted him with a hunger far surpassing anything before.

With a gasp she climaxed, and the sensation of her silky flesh pulsing around him sent Mick over the edge. A shout left his throat as he shuddered and quaked with delicious pleasure. He clutched her to him, his heartbeat pounding like a marathon runner's, his joy in being with her running head to head with physical satiation. She clutched him close, her face buried in his neck, her body still hot and trembling, breath still coming hard.

When he caught his breath, he said, "Move in with me."

She pulled back enough to give him a confused face. "What?"

"Live with me."

Her mouth popped open, and for a few seconds he imagined he saw joy flood her eyes. "I know you want me to stay here so that you can protect me, but—"

"Yes. Yes, I do."

She searched his eyes, but he didn't know for what. With a smooth movement, she slid off him and headed toward the bathroom. "Be right back."

She returned a few moments later, and he took his turn, more than happy to give her time to think. *Maybe you shouldn't give her time to think. Like a salesman who revels in a sale that pins a person into buying something they don't really want. Maybe she won't want you if she thinks too much about it.*

When he returned she lay on the bed naked, and to his mind, stunningly beautiful. He ached with desire again, wanting to brand his passion on her with another bout of lovemaking.

Instead he lay down and hovered over her, caging her in with his left arm and propping up on his elbow. "What are you thinking?"

Doubt glimmered from her eyes, a surefire sign his plea hadn't hit the mark. When she spoke her voice held regret. "I can't stay with you, Mick."

Disappointment filled his center and twisted into a ball in his throat. He forced words past the obstruction. "Why not?"

"I need to find my way through this danger, Mick. If I rely on you to keep me safe, how will I ever rely on myself again?"

"It's not like that. Think of it as a professional job if you want. I'm the cop, you're the civilian in need of protection. You're my...friend...in need of protection."

Right away Mick knew the words were inadequate, that he hadn't said what *she* wanted to hear, and *he* hadn't said what he wanted to say.

"I've got a security system, and I'm being careful. In the end that's all I can do. So the answer is no, I won't move in with you."

She stood and went for her closet. She extracted a soft looking red robe and belted it securely around her. Silence surrounded them until it stretched so long he couldn't think of a damned thing to say.

When she turned to him, her smile held sadness and happiness all mixed into one glorious expression that stirred needs and desires inside him. "The dinner tonight was wonderful, Mick. I'm so glad I could share it with you."

He rose and started to dress. "I'm glad you were there, too. I wish I could stay, but we have a special warrant we've got to serve at six in the morning, so I have to be up

around three.”

After he’d dressed and she followed him to the door, Mick wished he could stay all night and make love to her a half dozen times. At least then he could hope his scent, the feel of him would stay branded on her forever. Possessiveness roared up and threatened to explode in some ridiculous primitive statement he knew he’d regret a hundred times over if he expressed it.

You fucked this up, MacGilvary. He knew he had, and he struggled with the right words and couldn’t think of a damn way to restructure what he’d already expressed.

He cupped her face and claimed her lips with a lingering caress. “Lock up tight behind me, okay?”

“Always.”

They hugged, and as they stood there for what seemed an age, he soaked in the warmth, the delicate and womanly scent of her hair until he had to let her go or be lost forever.

Too late MacGilvary. Too late. You’re already lost forever.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Celeste worked on her resume Monday morning, sitting in the dark paneled office on the first floor of her home. Surrounded by hundreds of books her aunt had collected over many years, Celeste wanted to read. In fact, the dreary, unusually cool rainy weather urged her to read more than tweak her resume.

Right. Get off the stick and finish the resume.

Determination and renewed confidence made her work harder to finish. She'd spent the morning working on the document and perusing online job listings. Staring at the computer, she tweaked the document to show her considerable administrative assistant and accounting experience. She'd spend eight hours a day hunting until she found something. A city this small boasted fewer opportunities than where she'd lived in Vermont. Still, she needed the job. She closed her eyes to rest and smiled. Last night's dinner and time spent with Mick had sent her on an emotional roller coaster. She could no longer pretend she wasn't in a serious relationship with Mick. The time she'd spent with him lately, and the power of their lovemaking confirmed that they'd connected on more than a physical level. She was blown away by her feelings, and her eyes filled with tears at their power.

Tossed in a storm of happiness and anticipation, she'd decided that Mick's career as a SWAT officer could be tolerated. She didn't fear him in any way. On the contrary, she knew he'd do anything to keep her safe.

Move in with me.

Mick's request had taken her completely off guard. Though she'd controlled the roller coaster of conflicting emotions his request generated, she'd wanted to throw herself against him and scream yes...yes, she would move in with him. But she wouldn't. Moving in with a guy would be a big step for her—she didn't look at it as a convenience based on the need for sex. She wanted her relationship with Mick to be based on more than that.

Yet his words, his request hadn't sounded like a man wanting a woman for companionship or love. It had sounded like he offered protection. As nice and noble as that was...no...she couldn't do it because he felt obligated as a police officer and friend to offer security. Moving in with a man would only come if she loved him and he loved her.

Before she could ponder further, the phone rang. She walked into the living room to hear the answering machine pick up on the second ring.

"Hey, Celeste? Are you there? It's Leigh." Leigh's voice had an urgent tone.

Celeste rushed to the phone. "Hi, I'm here."

"Thank goodness. I don't want to alarm you but I think you'd better turn on the TV. Channel four."

Celeste reached for the remote and sat on the couch. What she saw on the channel sent a nasty shock through her. "Oh, no."

Celeste stared at the screen. A reporter talked in the background while camera angles showed sheriff's deputies in SWAT gear swarming a wooded area and shack-like house. An ambulance pulled away from the scene.

A female reporter said, “The El Torro Sheriff’s Department SWAT team was called out on a narcotics warrant at about eight o’clock this morning. They suspected fifty-five year old Barry Scanlon, a known felon with neo-Nazi ties, could be trouble. When SWAT entered the premises, they were met with automatic weapons fire.”

“Oh, God.” Celeste’s chest tightened, her heart pounding as the report continued.

“Two officers were hit, and their conditions are unknown at this time,” the reporter said.

“No.” Celeste didn’t want to hear this, but she didn’t shut off the television.

“I’m sure Mick is all right,” Leigh said. “But I had to let you know what’s going on.”

Grim realization tortured Celeste. “Thanks for calling. But this is just the thing I feared. This is just the reason...”

Silence on both ends of the phone punctuated Celeste’s feelings.

“Like I said, I’m sure Mick’s okay,” Leigh said.

Celeste’s fingers clenched the phone, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. “How can you be sure?”

“I can’t but—”

“I have to find out who was hurt and how badly.”

“Who can you call?”

“I’ll ring Mick’s cell phone.”

“Okay, well, let me know what’s happening as soon as you can.”

“I will.” Celeste hung up and stared at the rug for a few seconds.

Digesting what may have happened, that Mick could be seriously injured, caused new tears to surge to her eyes. *Damn it.* She couldn’t do this roller coaster. No matter how much she cared for him, the pain would—

She punched in the numbers to Mick’s cell, having memorized it some time ago. When she got his voicemail, her heart sank.

“Mick, it’s Celeste. I heard about the SWAT call-out. A report on the television said two officers were hurt but they didn’t know how badly. Please call me as soon as you can.”

When she hung up, she stayed on the edge of the couch, tension vibrating through her like an adrenaline rush, as if she’d run away from a predator. As if she already knew Mick had met with injury.

Her heart thumped unevenly in her chest. Or at least it felt like it did while her thoughts took a terrifying twist. What if Mick’s life hung in the balance right now? What if he—?

“No!” The denial came out loud, the only sound in the almost eerie quiet.

She glanced out the window as clouds moved in on Gold Rush and threatened more summer rain. Gloom covered what had been a bright day. God, she couldn’t think like this. She couldn’t take this. She hurried to the kitchen and reached into the pantry for a bottle of water. After unscrewing the cap and taking several sips, she returned to the living room and sank back onto the couch.

Everything she thought she’d known this morning about her relationship with Mick had blown up in her face like a bomb. As she gazed around the room, not really seeing anything, she knew what she had to do. She couldn’t live with this fear every day. Tears rushed to her eyes.

Tears continued to pour down her face as she watched the television and hoped for a

new report. For fifteen minutes she watched a repeat of a reality television show from two years ago and hated it.

"Come on, Mick. Please call."

Five minutes later the phone rang, and she grabbed it. "Hello?"

"You've been avoiding me, Celeste."

Darrell.

Anger swamped her, and she clicked off the phone. *Damn him. Damn Darrell to the seven levels of hell.*

The phone rang again, and this time she let the machine get it.

"Celeste, it's Mick. You there?"

"Thank God." She grabbed the phone. "Mick."

"Hey, I just got your message. Sorry it took so long to call back. I've been at the hospital."

"Are you okay?" Words sprang out of her like missiles in a slingshot. "I saw the report and they said two deputies were hurt."

"I'm fine." His voice sounded weary. "It wasn't that bad. When we went into the house the guy started shooting. I jumped out of the way but some flying glass cut my arm and Kelso was grazed across the upper arm by a bullet. We took the guy down. The asshole will never sell narcotics or say Heil Hitler again."

She released a breath, her relief so profound she felt weak. "Kelso is okay?"

"Yeah, it's more of a scratch than anything. My cut needed a couple of stitches. Other than that we're fine."

She couldn't speak.

"Hey, you okay? You sounded really frantic on the message," Mick said.

"That would be an understatement. I'm not okay with any of this."

"I'm sorry if it worried you."

"Top that off with Darrell calling, and this is not a good morning." She heard herself carping and didn't like the sound of it, but it came out anyway. "I don't know if I can do this, Mick."

"What?" Genuine confusion colored his voice.

"This. Our relationship. Do you know what it felt like when I heard there were two deputies with possibly serious injuries, and I had no idea who it was? If it had been any one of your team, your brothers...but especially you..."

Mick's voice hardened. "I know, but it's all over now and no one was seriously hurt except for the felon. Everything is good."

"It's not, Mick. Look, I have to work on my resume. I'll talk to you later."

"Wait a minute. This isn't that simple. What are you saying you can't do?"

She sighed. "I don't know. I guess I was a fool for thinking I could be like so many other women who worry about boyfriends and husbands in law enforcement. It's just not...I just can't. I don't know if I even want to live in Colorado anymore. If I was here I would still worry about you."

He made a sound of derision. "We talked about this before, Celeste. Being with me includes accepting my job." His voice turned deep and gravelly, a whispering tone that said he tried to keep his voice down. "I understand how childhood trauma effects adulthood, but it won't stop me from living. I can't control how you feel about my job, Celeste. You have to make a decision on whether you can accept what I do. Being a

member of SWAT is a huge part of who I am. That's *not* going to change."

The firm, no-nonsense tone in his voice confirmed his feelings in no uncertain terms. It solidified her stupidity for becoming involved with him.

"I guess that's it, then. Goodbye, Mick."

She ended the call and placed the phone on the couch beside her. Stunned down to the core, she sat on the couch and tears came. She laid on the couch, burrowing her face into a decorative pillow, sobs wracking her, torturing her until she drew into a fetal position. Finally, she went to the powder room and gazed into the mirror. Sure enough. Bloodshot eyes, red nose, and a blotchy face greeted her.

Tormented by emotions too numerous to sort, she glared into the mirror as if seeing a stranger. In those seconds she didn't feel she understood herself. She thought she'd come to terms with Mick's career. She gripped the side of the white pedestal sink, looking into her eyes for answers. She felt small and weak. Confused. Mick's definitive statement on his career hadn't altered, but the coldness in his voice sounded nothing like the sensual, deep voice he used most of the time.

Her fierce, protective SWAT man hadn't altered. Only she had.

He'd *never* said he'd give up his career for her. Heady hormones released by powerful sexual attraction made her think the barriers between them had fallen away.

A headache and tension in the muscles between her shoulder blades sent her for the aspirin bottle. She opened the medicine cabinet and after retrieving the bottle headed back to the kitchen.

Her stomach growled and reminded her she'd planned a trip to the grocery store today. Regardless of her chaotic emotions, she still needed to eat.

Leigh. Leigh needed to know what happened—at least the part concerning Mick's welfare. She used her bedroom phone and lay down on the bed to call Leigh's cell.

"Hey, sweetie," Leigh said. "Have you heard from Mick?"

"He's all right. He called me. He cut his arm, and another one of the team members has a flesh wound."

"Thank goodness it wasn't more serious. What about you?" Leigh's voice softened to concern. "Are you okay? Your voice sounds funny."

"No, I'm...Mick and I..."

"Mick and you?"

"Long story."

"Oh, I see. You don't want to talk about it."

Celeste felt bone tired, and the concept of doing anything, going anywhere was too hard. But she'd do it because she wouldn't allow herself to fall into a ridiculous funk. She wouldn't allow herself to become like her father and wallow in depression and misery.

"Not now." Celeste twisted one finger in a lock of her hair. "I don't want to talk now."

"I understand. Well, call me if you want to talk."

"Wait...um...do you have any plans tonight?"

"Other than doing yoga and eating dinner all by my lonesome? Nope."

"Want some company?"

"Sounds fantastic. You want to come by around six-thirty? I'll make some of my famous spaghetti, and we can christen a bottle of Chianti. You better bring your jammies 'cause I have a feeling we might have a sleep over."

Already Celeste's mood lifted, but she'd bet an entire vineyard of Chianti wouldn't drown her heartbreak.

* * * *

Cool weather moved into Gold Rush as dark clouds lowered over the mountains surrounding the town and sprinkles hit the windshield of Celeste's car.

Grocery shopping hadn't improved her mood—she'd allowed people's idiosyncrasies to bother her. The slow old lady in front of her who took an extra long time to figure out how to use her debit card. The woman behind her in line who had two fussy toddlers. She knew better than to be impatient, but damn it, her frustration level overwhelmed her. Especially since it would probably make her late for dinner at Leigh's. It was already six fifteen, and she'd never get the groceries unloaded and be on time.

Her nerves felt as prickly as a cactus, yet her body heavy with a bone-deep tiredness that had nothing to do with physical exhaustion and everything to do with her state of mind.

As she drove down her street, she passed Mick's house.

Good thing you didn't move in with him like he suggested. If she had, moving out would have torn her up.

Any more than you are now?

"Shut up," she said out loud. "Just shut up."

Like hell.

She turned into her driveway and down the side road to the back parking area. As her stomach growled she decided maybe a piece of fruit would solve her hunger pangs until she indulged in Leigh's spaghetti. She wanted to leave room for that. It sounded good. Much better than the frozen dinners she'd stocked up on. The thought of a lonely dinner, of never eating with Mick again, made her stomach flip flop and ache. Maybe the piece of fruit would wait. With any luck her dinner with Leigh would take her mind off Mick.

Ahem. As if anything could do that short of a nuclear bomb exploding in my back yard.

She slung her purse over her shoulder and climbed out of the car. Time to haul the groceries into the house. She unlocked the house and threw her purse on the kitchen counter, then brought in two paper bags of groceries at a time. She'd gotten low on supplies, so she'd bought a lot. Two more bags left. She returned to the car and grabbed the last bag and slammed down the hatchback. She entered the kitchen, and the screen door slammed behind her. She turned—

"Hello, Celeste."

She gasped and put her hand to her mouth as she stepped back and bumped into the kitchen island. The corner stabbed into her back, but she barely felt the pain.

One word escaped her mouth. "Darrell."

Dressed in a red polo shirt, jeans, and athletic shoes, Darrell looked damp but every bit the normal man. He smiled like he hadn't seen her in a decade, like a man who'd found a long lost love. Only the gun in his hand gave any indication he didn't intend to pay a nice social call.

* * * *

Mick stared at the open freezer door and glared at the assortment of frozen dinners. Florentine chicken. BBQ chicken. Meatballs and spaghetti. He pulled out the spaghetti and inspected the sumptuous photo on the front.

“Man-sized meal.” He grunted. The small box disproved the wording on the box. “Right.”

He tossed the meal back in the freezer and shut the door with a thud.

Standing in the middle of the kitchen for a full five minutes, he contemplated what to eat and what to do with the rest of his evening. He hadn’t planned on getting home so early, but Captain Ginipri ordered him and Kelso to take off the rest of the shift. Mick looked at his bandage. The SWAT team medic had ordered him to head to the doctor right after the warrant today and he’d traveled in the ambulance with Kelso. Stitches and a bandage took care of what ailed Mick, while Kelso got off without stitches but a bandage as large as Mick’s. Mick had hoped for a sympathy kiss from Celeste, but that wouldn’t happen now. Maybe never.

Never, you jackass.

Not if he let her have her way.

Which he would, damn it. He sure as hell wouldn’t let his feelings for her turn him into an asshole stalker like Darrell. *Shit, shit, shit.* He didn’t like the idea of abandoning Celeste. After all, Darrell was out there, and he wasn’t going to stop. If he was a true sociopath, or even honestly insane, Celeste could still be in danger.

He’d come down on her harshly, but at the same time, if she felt she couldn’t be with him because of his job, so be it. A cold, hard knot of discontent took up all the room in his stomach. He wasn’t hungry. Still, he didn’t leave the kitchen, contemplating what his next move with Celeste should be. Regardless of the sharp pain churning inside him, he owed her the oath of his profession. To serve and protect. He’d call and reassure her she had his professional protection regardless of their personal relationship dissolving.

He clenched his fists at his side. He’d do this, even if it ate a hole clean through him.

Mick started toward the kitchen phone when it rang. He picked up, half hoping to find Celeste on the other end. The voice was female all right, but not the one he wanted to talk with the most.

“Mick, this is Leigh Strong.” Her voice sounded whispery and out of breath. “I—I—you have to come right away. I went up to Celeste’s house and, oh God—Darrell Huntley is in there with her and he has a gun on her.”

Mick’s heart turned into a block of ice. “What?”

“She was supposed to meet me tonight for dinner but when she didn’t show up and she didn’t answer her cell phone or home phone, I knew something was wrong. I drove by and when I came up to the front of the house, that’s when I saw Celeste through the living room window with Darrell pointing a gun at her.” Leigh’s voice rambled quickly, out of breath.

“Son-of-a-bitch! Fuck!” Mick moved, running to his bedroom for his shoes and his weapon. “Did you call 911?”

“Yes. Oh, God, Mick—” She sounded tearful.

“Get away from the area.”

“But—”

“Now!”

“Okay.”

“I’m on my way.”

Mick tossed the phone on his bed. He jammed his feet into his athletic shoes and grabbed his weapon. Within seconds he ran for the door, Glock steady in his hand. He’d call his brothers on the way.

An almost paralyzing fear threatened to eviscerate Mick, to destroy the cop within and make him only one thing.

A man terrified for the woman he loved.

* * * *

“Have a seat.” Darrell’s voice held the warmth of a caring man inviting his sweetheart to make herself at home.

Celeste couldn’t stop staring at the gun in his hand. One day at the firing range didn’t qualify her to know what type of pistol he brandished.

Darrell waved the gun, gesturing. “Better yet, let’s sit in the living room.”

As he urged her to walk in front of him, panic threatened to rise. She wanted to scream, to run, to escape. Fight or flight. None of that would happen soon, she knew. Underestimating this man’s smarts would get her killed. Darrell held dark depths she hadn’t experienced, and that frightened her more than anything.

Darrell lowered his weapon, which surprised Celeste. Relief made her so weak she sank down onto the couch. Once her mind resolved the shock, the way he’d taken her off guard, shame blindsided her. She should have paid more attention to her surroundings. She should have done something. No, with that gun leveled at her, she didn’t have a choice. She didn’t possess the right self-defense moves, what little she’d learned, to disable a man armed with such a weapon. Any move now would prove foolish, if not fatal. She didn’t have a good read on his mental state, and his actions and mood told her any action without a reasonable assessment would do more harm than good.

If Darrell’s assertion he was a sociopath was correct, well, her situation was even more precarious. He would have no compunction, no remorse, no concern past his own needs. If Darrell had been insane, she could more easily deal with him. At least then he’d have emotions and feel deeply.

As Darrell stared at her, never looking away, Celeste understood she dealt with the worst opponent she could face. On the other hand, dating him for a month had given her insight another woman wouldn’t have. She could use his predictability to her advantage. He might be a doctorate-holding psychologist, but she wasn’t at a complete disadvantage.

Darrell’s crooked smile, the one he always bestowed on her, held no reassurance. Though she held sway over showing fear, that same dread ate a hole in her control and threatened to shred it. She struggled to keep the tremble from her voice, the shaking from her hands.

I’ll survive this. I will.

His intense stare impaled her to the spot, two cold orbs void of human compassion. “You didn’t expect this, did you?”

Her mouth went dry, her heart revving. “No.”

The smile didn’t retreat, and the gun swung level with her head. She held her breath, stark terror finding a grip, then receding. If she had to die, so be it.

But oh, how she wanted to see Mick again.

God, Mick. I love you.

Knowledge sideswiped her, but it gave her strength. She would live to see Mick and tell him the one thing he couldn't know.

I love you, Mick. I love you.

Darrell's grin grew wider, and only his unflinching stare said he knew the effect on her and didn't give a damn. "You think we're getting out of this alive, Celeste?"

"Yes." She had to believe it. Nothing else would maintain her sanity.

"Come on now. Things will be damned dull if you don't say more." He spoke slowly and sure, his voice modulated by unwavering self-confidence and a heart as unaffected by sentiment as any human being could feel. "Remember those conversations we had on our first two dates? We went to The Peacock?"

"I remember."

His eyes reflected no affection for the memory or the place. "Not a bad imitation of an English pub." He smirked. "Remember Cynthia in my office? My bumbling Executive Assistant?"

"Yes."

"I fired her right before I came here. Closed down my whole practice. Once she made the mistake many American's make out of pure ignorance. She said, 'well, you know...the British with their quaint accent. And then there's the Scottish.'"

She nodded and sat back to give her tense muscles a break. "Scots are British and so are Welsh. She was thinking the English are the only Brits."

Darrell cocked his head to the left, his gun arm never relaxing, holding that menacing metal in the same position. "Very good, Celeste. You're ten times more intelligent than that bitch ever was."

What could she say to that? Thank you?

Her skin crawled as he sat too close to her right side, his gaze trained on her face without altering. Anyone who witnessed his words and deeds would think him crazy, but he wasn't. She dared to meet his eyes and looked into the heart of darkness. "What do you want, Darrell? Why are we doing this?"

He shifted, the gun now dangling between his legs with a carelessness that should have astonished her but didn't. "I told you. I want you with me."

"Why?"

"Because you're beautiful, smart, and I'm tired of dealing with women who want something from me. You understand my thoughts. You want absolutely nothing from me. That makes you a pure subject."

"A pure subject for what?"

"I can teach you to follow my dark side and delve into your own. Come with me and learn how to unleash the hate inside you."

It would mean humanizing him, but she turned her body until she faced him. This also gave her a chance to shift back a foot and gain the comfort of distance. "You only care about what you want, Darrell. Why do you want me to unleash my dark side?"

"Because I know you have it in you. I know that everyone has it in them to do both good and evil."

She shook her head, not understanding his logic. "Are you capable of good?"

He chuckled, but the sound held no real amusement. Every emotion, every smile he'd bestowed was a facsimile of the real thing. He'd become an expert long ago at showing emotions he never felt.

"I'm capable of doing just what I want. That's what I want for you, Celeste. To learn to do just what you want, when you want. To take when you want to take. To gratify all your impulses, regardless of the consequences."

"Even if they break the law and hurt someone else?"

"Absolutely."

"Have you always been this way, Darrell? Since you were a child?"

"Like what?"

She took a chance. A big chance. "Emotionless. Invested with dark thoughts from somewhere in hell."

He chuckled and threw back his head. "Hell is where you're at right now, darlin'. The only heaven is when you embrace your true self."

"And I'm not my true self right now?"

"That's correct."

"So all I would need to do is go with you right now?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Back to Vermont."

By now he held the weapon loosely. It dangled between his knees. For a second she imagined grabbing it and training on him. *No*. Right now, it seemed futile.

When she didn't respond, he said, "If you go with me and embrace your darkness, you'll prove to the world and to me that my work wasn't in vain."

"Your psychology work?"

"My work to turn the sane into the insane."

"Is that what you think you are? Insane?"

Silence held sway for a few more moments. "I thought perhaps I was a while back. Then I realized just because I saw a delusion, because I imagined that a hole intended to swallow me doesn't mean it's true."

"Then you don't believe you're insane?"

He laughed. "Why don't you tell me? You know my theories. I've told you exactly what I am."

She did, but preferred not to voice them. She hesitated.

He sat up straighter and turned his gun toward her once more, resting his wrist on his forearm. "Go on. Tell me."

"You believe that all mankind is born evil, but not because of original sin or any religious reason. Because we are animals. Because we come from the dirt, and we return to the dirt."

He laughed, tilting his head back. "Good. You remember what I said on our third date."

Sarcasm slipped from her. "Amazing, isn't it? What now? Why are we doing this, Darrell?"

"Because I'm never letting you go."

"You could have any woman you want. Why me?"

"No, I couldn't have any woman I want. I'm not interested in married women, or teenage girls or anything perverted. My relationship with a woman must be pure. Of course, there's the problem of MacGilvary. I know when he learns you're in here with me, he'll try to kill me. I can't have that. If he tries, I'll use you as a shield. As much as I

want you with me,” he shrugged, “if I can’t get away, you’ll just have to be collateral damage.”

“You want me with you, but you don’t care about me.”

Those cold eyes never left her. “That’s exactly it.”

Words flowed in anger before she considered consequences. “You really are a conscienceless ass, aren’t you?”

He stood, eyes as impassive as always, as merciless as the eroding grind of an ice flow.

She didn’t get a chance to duck.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mick knew if he burst in on the scene without backup, he didn't have a prayer in hell of helping Celeste.

He ran the short distance to her house, barking orders into the phone as he relayed messages to dispatch and his brothers. He arrived quickly at the side of her house, weapon drawn. He moved with cautious steps, mind and body alert.

He would save Celeste or die trying. Nothing mattered more than freeing her from that asshole's grip.

If he moved in before the rest of the SWAT team arrived he could put Celeste's life in jeopardy. On the other hand, if he didn't—the same result could occur. Fear ran in cold and hot rivulets through his bloodstream. His commander would have his head on a platter if he moved in without orders. Unless he could do something immediately to protect Celeste.

Right, you ass. You did a damn good job of protecting her. She wouldn't be in harm's way if you had. You should have insisted that she live with you, even if she didn't want anything more to do with you physically or emotionally.

As if he would have forced her, required her to do anything against her will.

Fear and guilt twisted inside until he felt gut punched. Mick managed one deep breath, then another as professionalism reminded him what to do—what he *must* do.

He wanted to rush in and save her.

He wanted to kill the son-of-a-bitch who dared take her hostage.

Doing either or both right now would destroy everything he'd worked for and more than that, put the woman he loved in harm's way.

He shook with the agony of hesitation. Of not making a decision that could mean her death.

He crept to the front window, kneeling so Huntley wouldn't have a view of his stealthy approach. Mick crouched by the window, well aware that Huntley could already be tipped off. If he'd seen Leigh looking in the window, he would have to know she'd call for help.

Huntley stood over Celeste, weapon pointed right at her. Mick saw stark, undeniable fear in Celeste's eyes. But around that fear he saw strength and determination.

And blood on her temple.

Jesus.

All of Mick's muscles tensed. *That fucker. That piece of filth, scumbag, peckerwood.*

Huntley would know she feared him, and that gave the man an advantage. Anger sent energy spiking up Mick's spine as he assessed the situation. Mick's heart flooded with love for Celeste. Now he understood when Dace had described his desperation for Mary when she'd been taken hostage. He also understood with stark clarity how Celeste might have felt when she thought he might be hurt today on the SWAT operation.

Of course she'd been frantic about him.

Maybe, just maybe, could she feel one inkling of love for him?

The thought twisted in his gut.

A man wild with fear for the woman he loved could make serious mistakes. With a

sense of dread, Mick moved away from the window.

That asswipe had done something to her—hurt her. Huntley *would* live to regret it.

Mick reached for his phone again and dialed Dispatch to relay intelligence to Captain Jefferson Harris, Commander of the SWAT unit.

Dispatch immediately linked him. “ETA is six minutes. Don’t make one damned move until we get there, understood?” Captain Harris said, the expectation Mick would follow his orders clear and harsh in his voice.

“Understood. If there was any way I could sneak in behind him—”

“Don’t even consider it.”

“Yes sir.”

Two Sheriff’s Department cruisers rolled toward Mick about a half block away. He ran toward them and within seconds recognized his brothers. As they quickly left their cars, they hurried to open their trunks and grab everything they’d need.

“Hey bro,” Trey said, eyes troubled as Mick ran up to them. “The van is on its way.”

Craig clapped his hand on Mick’s shoulder, his eyes warm with understanding. “You okay?”

Mick shook his head. “No, but I will be as soon as I break that son of a bitch’s neck.”

“You aren’t touching him.” Craig squeezed his shoulder. “Harris won’t let you anywhere near this one.”

Trey slipped his vest over his head. “Besides, you didn’t bring a cruiser home with you and all your gear is in it. We’ll take care of her, Mick. We won’t let anything happen to her.”

Mick growled his response. “You’re damned right you won’t. There’s blood on her face. The fucker has already hurt her.”

Kelso rolled up in his unit and so did Dace. City officers arrived on scene to erect barriers and keep the public out of the area. People in houses nearby would be directed to keep out.

The SWAT van appeared and even at a half block away, the black rolling command post looked imposing and ready to take on any situation. At this point they wouldn’t need the armored personal carrier, but it was possible they might later on if the situation continued for long. Unaccustomed doubt raged through Mick, and he tasted the awful flavor it left in his mouth. Recognizing the symptoms of his own fallibility and fear, he resolved to maintain control of his emotions.

Captain Harris alighted from the vehicle as did the negotiator, Bill Renfore. Mick immediately informed Renfore that Huntley was a sociopath.

“That’s going to make things more difficult,” Renfore said as he took note of the information.

Harris’s grim expression erased his normally jolly attitude. Bald-headed, around fifty, and sharp as a razor, the Captain ran the SWAT team with a firm but fair hand. As the other men suited up and prepared to rumble, Mick itched to do the same.

Harris’s green eyes flashed as he headed toward Mick. “Don’t even think about it.”

Mick bristled. “About what?”

“Going in there with us if we have to make an assault on the house. First, you’re off duty.”

Mick swallowed hard, and stuffed his Glock in the back waistband of his jeans.

“We’re on twenty-four, seven.”

Harris put his hands on his hips. "Doesn't matter. You know the rules. You aren't participating if you're personally involved with the hostage. Are you?"

"You know I am."

"Then why have you got your piece?"

"When Leigh Strong called me, I acted on instinct and ran to check out the situation. I wasn't going near the house without my weapon."

Harris's stern face relaxed, then he headed for the back of the van. "Got it. Stay back while we plan this operation."

"Wait, Captain." Mick grabbed his shoulder for a second and the other man turned around. "I know I can't participate, but at least let me hear what's going on. Celeste is—" His throat tightened. "I don't want anything to happen to her."

Harris's eyes softened with understanding. "I understand. You can listen in."

It wasn't much relief to Mick, but it was all he had.

* * * *

Celeste swayed as dizziness threatened to fell her like a tree. Her head ached, but she considered herself fortunate Darrell hadn't hit her hard enough to kill. She dug her fingers into the couch cushion, while she reached with her other hand to touch her cheek. Her fingers came away bloodstained.

If Celeste wondered before if he'd hurt her, she had proof now that violence resided within Darrell. For a second the throbbing in her cheekbone and the stunning turn of events shifted her confidence. She'd believed if she talked to him, she might make a difference in his actions. She doubted it now.

Silent, she waited for Darrell's next move.

The phone rang, and she jumped.

Darrell laughed, still standing over her, gun in his hand by his side.

He walked to the table between the couch and chair and grabbed the receiver.

"Yeah? Yeah, this is Dr. Darrell Huntley."

Celeste noticed he emphasized the doctor, as if the title still garnered respect at this stage in the game. Darrell listened for a long time, answering with a few uh-huh's and a yes or two.

"What's at stake here is my life, and Celeste's. If she wants to live, she'll do what I want and there's no negotiating that." Darrell's voice stayed low, modulated and emotionless. "She and I will go down together one way or the other. Either she agrees right now to go with me, to make a life with me in Vermont, or she's dead. It's simple. It's what I want. I always get what I want."

He hung up.

"That was a negotiator," he said as he sat back on the couch. "He said we could work this out, but you know we can't, right?"

By the firmness in his tone, and what she knew of him, her instincts answered for her. "Then there's only one alternative. I'll go with you."

Maybe he didn't expect her to acquiesce. Darrell's eyes widened, and his smile showed amusement. "Good."

"I have one condition."

"There are no conditions."

"Let me call Mick. At least let me show him I'm all right. Give me that much. I

know he's worried."

Once more the weapon dangled from his hand and between his legs. "You want to alleviate his concern?"

"Please."

He shook his head and made a tscking sound. "You should know pleading never works with me, Celeste. There's my way or there is death."

"If you want to live, you'll have to let me go at some point. The SWAT team will never let you escape here."

"They will to keep you alive."

"Let me call Mick."

Desperation threatened to derail calm. She had to talk to Mick. If she didn't make it out of this situation, she burned to speak with him once more.

To tell Mick she loved him.

The clock on the mantle ticked like a metronome in the sudden silence. Outside the wind picked up speed and battered the house with heavy gusts.

"All right, you can say farewell to your lover. You won't ever see him again, so I guess it doesn't matter."

"Then I need my purse. I don't have his cell phone memorized and the number is stored in my cell phone."

"Very well." He tilted his head to the side. "This should be entertaining." When she stared at him, he continued with, "You don't think I'll let you hide in another room and have a private conversation, do you? Get your purse and come back in here. Quickly." He gestured with the gun.

She hurried to the kitchen, still within his line of sight, and grabbed her purse from the countertop. Inside she had the twenty-two caliber she could use if the time proved right. Problem was, she had to be careful. If he suspected anything...

"Hurry up!" Darrell's voice came from the living room.

She rushed back, the purse slung over her shoulder and the cell phone in her right hand. She returned to the couch and used the contacts part of her cell phone to look up Mick's number.

"You can be very stupid, Celeste." He waved his gun in another sign of dismissal. "How is anyone supposed to call you on it if you leave it where you can't hear it?"

She couldn't keep the sarcasm from her reply. "I guess I'm just too stupid to remember, Darrell."

Ignoring his laugh, she located Mick's name and hit the button to dial the stored number. Her breath hitched in her throat, anticipation, fear, and a pounding heart strangling her.

Mick's voice came on after one ring, deep and frantic. "Celeste?" He'd know from his caller ID who was on the line. "Are you all right?"

"I'm all right. Mick, I have to do what he says. You have to let him do what he wants. I have no doubt he'll kill me."

She could hear him take a deep, almost shuddering breath. "Listen, honey, we won't allow anything to happen to you. Stay calm. Why is he letting you call?"

"Because I asked."

"Celeste, we're getting you out of this. I love you—"

Before she could respond, Darrell seized the phone from her hand. "Hello, Mick."

Celeste could hear Mick's curt, hard-edged response, even though her ear wasn't at the receiver. "I swear, if you hurt her—"

"It's like this, MacGilvary, I have all the cards. I call the shots. You've just run out of options, and she's run out of time."

"Wait. Look, we can work this out—"

"Yeah, I'll work it out all right." Darrell lifted his weapon toward her and pulled the trigger.

The blast sounded so loud that Celeste expected searing pain.

Just as swiftly, she grasped that Darrell had fired to the right and straight into the couch back. Shock stunned her, sharp as a knife to the gut. Had he missed her intentionally?

Darrell dropped the phone on the floor and stomped it with one crushing blow, then another, until the little flip phone cracked and the flip portion lay crooked. She winced at the violence.

His face held mocking superiority. "Do you know how interesting your face is when you think you've just been killed, but you haven't? The strangest thing I've ever seen. Maybe I should do it again."

She swallowed hard, trying to gather enough spit to speak. Her insides trembled like gelatin. "If they think you've shot me, they'll barge in here sooner rather than later."

He shrugged. "Your boy is in love with you, isn't he? The frantic tone in his voice was illuminating." A strange expression passed over his face, one of curiosity. Then it disappeared. "I wonder what it would feel like to understand that emotion. Tell me, what is it like to feel fear and despair?"

"Horrible."

He nodded. "That's what I thought. Still...I'm not sure I'd like to be bothered with those emotions. I mean, your boyfriend sounded as if someone had just shot his puppy."

Mick had said he loved her, and her heart plummeted. *Oh, God*. If Mick truly loved her...she hadn't given him a chance. She'd been such a fool. Such a damned fool rejecting him. Sorrow threatened, but a new surge of emotion far stronger forced its way to the forefront. She should have said that she loved him right away when she had him on the phone.

If Mick loved her, she had a hell of a lot to live for. Determination rose, digging in and holding on. She would survive this somehow. Some way.

The phone on the table rang again.

"Don't touch it," Darrell said. "We're done listening to them."

She held her hands up in a plea and frustration. "I've already told them I'll go away with you. Let's just leave."

A half smile on his mouth didn't reach the blank, hard stare he pinned on her. "No. I think I have a better game to play."

* * * *

Mick's knees gave out. He sat on the bumper of Trey's cruiser as he gripped the cell phone and stared at it in anguished disbelief.

"The fucker shot her." Mick's voice croaked, a raspy sound. "He shot her."

"Oh, shit," Craig said.

"Fuck," came Harris's more virulent curse.

Inside the command center van the negotiator echoed their sentiments with equal ferocity.

Mick covered his eyes with his hand as a deep shudder worked through his body. "She called me for help. I let her down."

"Bullshit." Craig's strong admonishment broke through Mick's guilt. "Don't start that. The blame is entirely on him."

Mick couldn't speak, his body filled with shock, too staggered to do more than fill his mind with a horrific imagining of Celeste bloody and lifeless. He barely registered Harris snapping orders to the team and relaying a command to Trey at his sniper position. A command to shoot to kill if the opportunity presented itself.

"Mount up!" Harris's authoritative voice punched out expectations to the team. "Negotiations are over. If he's hurt or killed the hostage, we need to move in."

Mick closed his eyes as fury shredded the misery threatening to rip him in two. "I'll kill him myself." He stood and glared at the commander. Mick felt the rage turning to a heartless thirst for revenge. "I'll kill him."

Harris's eyes reflected sympathy even as he told his men what to do next. "No. You won't. Payson!" He gestured at a street cop nearby with a jerk of his hand. "Get Mick out of here before he goes postal on me."

Resentment lashed at Mick as Payson made a move in his direction. Mick shoved his cell phone into his belt holster and put one hand out like a barricade. "Don't fuckin' touch me. I'm not leaving here until I know..." Moisture stung his eyes. "...until I know if she's..." He swallowed hard. "I'll stay right here. I won't interfere."

Harris's concerned but no-nonsense gaze didn't waver. "I don't want you anywhere near this when we go in. Understand me, MacGilvary?"

As difficult as it was to force words past his lips, Mick managed. "Yes, sir."

Ready to move in full SWAT gear, including helmet, vest, and locked-and-loaded MP5, Craig walked up to his brother. He squeezed Mick's left shoulder, his eyes filled with an equal anger and cold determination Mick knew must be reflected in his own gaze.

"She's all right, Mick. I promised that Trey and I won't let anything happen to her, and I meant it."

At his brother's reassurances, a glimmer of hope blossomed in Mick's chest. "I'll hold you to that."

* * * *

"What's the plan?" Celeste asked Darrell as she stood slowly.

Her legs felt rubbery, and her mind raced for answers. With her limited knowledge of what SWAT teams did in this situation, she didn't know whether they'd assault the house if they thought he'd killed her. It seemed logical, though.

Darrell grinned, and his eyes held a glimmer of self-gratification, his narcissistic personality in full force. He shoved one hand through his hair. His somewhat angelic expression, wiped clean of misdoing, made him almost appear innocent.

Darrell held the butt end of his weapon out to her. "Take it."

She stared at the gun. "What?"

"You're smart, Celeste, but you have no guts. You don't have the will to kill me. Take the gun and shoot."

With a surreal sense of unreality, she reached for the weapon, her hand shaking. She

couldn't speak, couldn't believe what he'd just said to her.

"Take it," he said again.

She grabbed the butt end and stepped back, her legs bumping into the couch.

He stepped back and held his hands up. He smirked. "I'm your prisoner. I dare you, Celeste. Show some fortitude. Some bravery. Shoot me."

She brought the gun up, holding it with both hands and leveled it straight at his chest. "No."

"You've got the gun. Use. It." He bit out the words one by one.

Rising fear and furious anger nipped at her heels like rapid dogs. She wanted to kill him. Wanted to put him out of her misery after everything he'd put her through.

"You aren't brave enough, Celeste. You can't do it." His taunt grated against her ears. "That's why you'll never be adequate on your own. You need my help, Celeste. You always will."

Darrell lunged for her.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Celeste heard the bang, the slight kick of the gun as she pulled the trigger without a thought.

Stunned that she'd actually shot Darrell, she stood there with her finger on the trigger, ready to pull again.

And again.

Darrell's lips parted as red stained his left shoulder, and he dropped like a stone. Her world turned white as a flash erupted in her vision, glass crashed. Shouts assaulted her ears as the front door broke open and men poured into the room.

At the shouts, she dropped the gun and held her hands up. Her mind felt scrambled and rocked by confusion. SWAT officers burst through the smoke and stood over Darrell, their assault rifles trained on him as he writhed in pain, groaning loudly. Another officer secured the weapon she'd dropped. More SWAT officers came through the kitchen and poured into the living room, shouts ringing in her ears.

She thought she recognized one officer by his eyes, but couldn't say for certain. Decked out in black SWAT gear, they all looked the same.

One man yanked down the Baklava that covered the lower half of his face and reveled it was Craig. Coughing wracked her as smoke from the flash bang they'd thrown through the front window irritated her lungs.

Craig lowered his weapon and pressed her shoulder, concern etched in his features. "Are you injured?"

"No."

"Let's get you out of here. Mick's going out of his mind with worry, and we need an EMT to check you out."

As Craig ushered her outside, another officer reported into his radio that the hostage was secured and alive but medical assistance was required for the hostage taker.

I'm alive. I'm alive.

Her mind almost failed to wrap around the concept. Under Craig's guiding hand, she stepped around broken glass from her front window and exited the house through the bashed-in door.

She heard someone call her name, and when she looked up, Mick strode across the lawn toward her. A smile broke over his face, and a sob parted Celeste's lips as joy swirled inside her with tremendous force.

All she managed was a soft whisper. "Mick."

She trotted toward him.

As he caught her, she threw her arms around his neck and held on as if she might be torn from his embrace at any time.

He buried his face in her hair. "Thank God." Desperate, hoarse relief in his voice. "Thank God."

"I didn't think I'd see you again." She shuddered, her voice breaking as a sob escaped. "He shot at me."

"I know, honey. I heard it." He pulled back long enough to stare into her eyes, to show the sheer relief mixed with remnants of distress. "I thought he'd...ah Jesus,

sweetheart, I thought he'd—Are you hurt?"

"No."

He tilted her face to look at her cheek and fire built in his eyes. "He hit you."

"Yes, but I'm all right."

He peppered her forehead and cheeks with kisses, then cupped her face in his big palms. "I love you."

Joy eradicated fear and doubt like a storm scouring the earth clean. "I love you, too."
And his mouth met hers.

* * * *

"Come on." Mick's soft tone broke Celeste from the numbness that seemed to have taken up residence in her mind and body. "Into the shower. You'll feel better."

She followed him into his large master bath, noticing only that the muted colors and calm décor brought welcome solace to her overloaded nerves.

Hours had passed since she'd shot Darrell. After an EMT had declared her fit except for the bruise blossoming on her cheek, an officer had taken her statement. The entire time the officer took the report, Mick sat next to her, his arm around her shoulders and a fiercely protective look on his face. She'd felt sluggish and so tired, and couldn't wait to close her eyes, sleep, and forget everything in a cloak of healing sleep. Leigh had come running up once they let her through the barricade, and her hug had reassured Celeste everything she experienced was not a cruel dream.

Secured in Mick's house, she battled with opposing emotions.

Mick stared at her, his concern evident. He brushed a strand of tangled hair away from her face and kissed her forehead. Weariness drew lines next to his mouth and a haggard expression in his eyes. "Do you want privacy?"

"No. Please stay."

"Bath or a shower?"

She closed her eyes and allowed her mind to absorb what her body truly felt. Sore. Her eyes opened. "A bath."

While she peeled her clothes off item by item and allowed them to fall to the floor, he started the bath water and tossed a gentle grin over his shoulder. "Sorry I don't have any of those froo-froo bath salts."

"I don't use them."

As the tub filled with steamy water, he turned to Celeste. Within his eyes she saw regrets, lingering anger, but more than anything she saw the love she hungered for. She walked toward him, leaned into his strong chest. His t-shirt clad muscles supported her, the glorious breadth and width of his strength a balm to her battered psyche. Mick's arms circled her nakedness with tender regard, as if he feared she'd break if he held her too tight. His gentleness soothed more than he could know.

Her hands spread across his broad shoulders. "Thank you."

With a mere brush of his lips across her forehead, he conveyed sweet affection. "For what?"

"For being here. For taking such good care of me. I really can do for myself..."

Gathering her closer, he pressed her head to his shoulder. "Shhh. I love you. Of course I'd do anything for you. Anything at all."

Silenced by his declaration, she cherished the way his hands caressed her back. She

tucked her face into his shoulder and stayed inert, allowing his care to flow through her like a calm, winding mountain stream. Cool. Soothing. Bringing peace to her soul. Though he stood completely dressed and her naked, he'd bared his heart to her in so many ways in the last hour.

He pulled back and brushed her hair away from her cheeks, cupping her face. "Tub's full. Climb in."

"Come in with me. Please."

His brow creased, and for a moment she thought he might refuse. Instead, he smiled and drew his t-shirt over his head. Despite her battle-weary body and mind, she couldn't deny the sight of his stalwart chest sent a raw, almost primitive need straight to her core.

Turning away from the sight of all that male flesh, she dipped a toe into the water and found it just right. She turned off the faucet and climbed in. As she sank into the healing water, she sighed with relief.

Mick stripped away his shoes, jeans, and briefs. As he stepped into the tub behind her, she made room for him. Without a word he gathered her back against his chest. Her body pressed to his, surrounded by strength and heat.

With slow strokes he rubbed her shoulders. "Relax, honey. You're safe."

"I know." The rhythm of his hands kneading away tension lulled her into a sweet languor. "Mick?"

"Mmm?"

"This is just beginning, isn't it?"

His hands stilled on her shoulders. "What's just beginning?"

"My ordeal." Darrell had survived the gunshot and the thought he could come after her again made her entire body shiver.

Mick's hands rubbed up and down her arms, then he circled her waist. "Don't think about that right now. Just relax." He kissed the side of her neck. "I'm proud of you, you know."

"For what?"

"The way you handled yourself today. You didn't panic, you did everything you needed to stay alive. You saved yourself."

She snorted softly as tears filled her eyes. "No, I didn't. I survived. The SWAT team saved me in the end."

"You came back to me. That's all I care about. When Leigh told me Huntley had you at gunpoint, I wanted to kill him with my bare hands. I was..." He trailed off, and as his arms tightened convulsively around her, she experienced his unspoken fear.

"Afraid?" she whispered the question.

"More afraid than I've ever been in my life. I've stared down the barrels of guns, I've been shot at, I've been in high-speed chases, but none of it scared me more than knowing that bastard had you. When I thought he'd shot you and maybe murdered you, I thought I would die. I wanted to be with the team when they went in there. I wanted—"

She squeezed his forearms. "It's all right. We're here now. We have each other."

He pressed a kiss to her ear, his mouth wandering over the lobe, teasing with sensual promise. "I'd give it all up for you. If you want me to leave SWAT, I will."

Her fingers contracted on his forearms again. "No. I learned something important today. I won't allow you to sacrifice your profession. I want you just as you are, happy and fulfilled in your career." She leaned her head back against his shoulder as his hands

wandered down to her thighs and brushed with light touches. She shivered under the sweet, sensual sensation as it darted into her belly. “I faced my worst fears and survived them. I made it out alive. That’s the one thing he didn’t count on when he handed me the gun. That I’d become a different woman. He thought I’d buckle and that would be the end of my resistance. But I didn’t. Because of you.” She turned toward him, coming up on her knees and balancing her hands on his shoulders. She looked down at him, a plea in her voice. “Forgive me for not believing in you.”

“There’s nothing to forgive.” He sighed. “It’s all over. Let’s enjoy the here and now.”

She kissed him, and as their tongues caressed, a fire blossomed at her core.

Mick hadn’t expected this. Confessions, perhaps, professions of love, most definitely. But lovemaking...he hadn’t expected she’d want it. Yet the way her hands moved over him, with searching desperation, told another tale. Her mouth clung to his like a soft, sweet fire, incinerating him from the inside out. His cock surged into readiness, begging for the tight, wet clasp of her body. God, he wanted her.

Mick drew back from her kiss. “Honey, if you’re tired and need sleep, I’ll understand.”

“No.” She smoothed kisses over his forehead, over his nose, and pressed a torrid, earthquake of a kiss to his lips. “Make love to me.”

“God, I love you.” His throat felt raw with emotion. “I love you so damned much.”

“Oh,” her soft voice whispered over his senses, “I love you, Mick. More than I could have imagined.”

His hands clamped on her waist and held her secure as his gaze caressed her round, pretty breasts. When he licked one nipple, she gasped and held his head to her. “Yes, Mick. More.”

Pleased to oblige, he stroked her tight nipples, feathering them with long strokes and deep pulls of his mouth. She squirmed in his hold, and hot liquid flesh and subtle arousal spilled over him. He lifted his hips and nestled his erection between her pussy lips. Her hand found him already erect, but she stroked his eager flesh at the same time she kissed him. His body shivered under her persuasion, eager to learn her secrets once more and drink in her cries as she accepted the hot fire that grew between them and would burst into an electrical storm.

He knew she needed to forget, to satisfy a hunger he, too, felt. Mick gave her everything, sweeping this tongue over one nipple, then the other until she cried out.

When he urged her to face away from him, Mick craved one thing. “Turn around baby, and ease down on my cock.”

She sat slowly, and as her silken interior opened for him, he breathed in deeply, gritting his teeth as exquisite pleasure twisted inside him. The hot, wet, gloving tested his patience—he wanted to fuck her hard, to brand Celeste with his possession in the most primitive male way he could. Yet he knew she wanted and needed tenderness.

“That’s good, honey. Let’s just sit here and enjoy,” he said.

As her body encased around his cock, she started to squeeze. Clasp. Release. Clasp. Release. He groaned, feral with lust. He encircled his breasts in his palms, gently strumming her nipples.

“You feel so good inside me.” Her voice sounded breathy, aroused, lush with longing. “So hard.”

“Mmm. If you keep doing that, I’m going to come.”

She leaned her head alongside his, reaching around to clasp the back of his neck.
“Please.”

Then he remembered. *Come.*

“Damn, honey, I’m not wearing a condom—”

And in that second her breath caught, and she uttered a soft, quavering moan. Her body trembled around his, squeezing and releasing in pulsing rhythm. “God, Mick. Oh, God!”

His hips moved as he arched, absorbing each contraction of her orgasm as he drowned in the knowledge that she responded so heatedly to his presence. He gritted his teeth, panting as her quick reaction fired his own.

“Come inside me,” she said breathlessly. “Come inside me.”

And in that moment he wanted to brand her with his body, to leave a part of himself within her. She was his and he was hers, and nothing that came next would ever change that.

It was right. So right.

His hips surged and arms tightened around her waist. He growled deep in his throat as hot climax spread like wildfire over his body, and his cock jerked in her tight grip as his seed poured into her depths.

“Marry me,” he whispered between one panting breath and another. “Marry me.”

Without hesitation her reply came, and it made him the happiest man on earth. “Yes. I will. I will.”

A different ecstasy rocketed through him, one he held close to his soul and planned never to forget.

As they cooled in the afterglow, Mick realized he’d never felt this euphoric in his entire life. “My family will want an engagement party so they can wish us well. Or a big dinner somewhere.”

Celeste sighed. “Sounds lovely. Mick?”

“Mmm?”

“I never thought I could be this happy.”

He kissed the side of her neck. “It feels like my life is just beginning.”

*

Celeste squeezed him again and heard his gasp. She laughed and did it again. Deep inside his cock hardened immediately, and the arousal within her surged to a blissful height, tingling and centering until she knew it wouldn’t take much to bring her to climax once more.

But more than that, her heart was blessed. For however long eternity reigned, she would be in this man’s heart and he in hers. “Make love to me again.”

He moaned softly. “Forever.”

The End

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