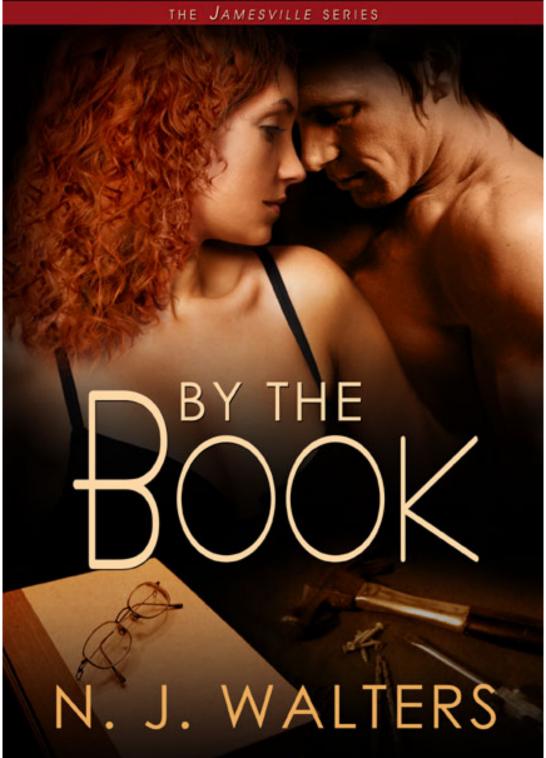
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# By the Book

N.J. Walters

#### Dedication

Thank you to all the readers who have loved visiting Jamesville as much as I do. I'm not quite done with this town yet!

To Gerard—you are my inspiration and my biggest supporter. There is no way to thank you enough for everything that you do.

As always, thank you to my editor for her keen eye and hard work.

#### Chapter One

Amanda Barrington placed her hand on her stomach and prayed she wouldn't puke. That so wouldn't be good for business.

She still couldn't quite believe she'd packed up her old life in Vermont and moved to Jamesville, Maine. Not only that, but she was now a homeowner as well. The butterflies in her tummy started to dance around once again, so she closed her eyes and took a deep breath to help settle them.

When she opened her eyes, she was still in the front room of her new home, surrounded by boxes waiting to be unpacked. She was also waiting for her first new client. Elizabeth Sutter was dropping by with a dozen boxes of hardcover books she wanted Amanda to have a look at. Recently divorced, Elizabeth was trying to clear out the remnants of her old life so she could start anew.

While Amanda was sorry for Elizabeth's troubles, she was excited to see what books the other woman had. That was the nature of her business. As an antiquarian and rare book dealer, Amanda did some of her best business when heirs were clearing out estates, or when the newly divorced or widowed were looking for a fresh start. While she had empathy for her customers, she couldn't quite quell the excitement that gripped her whenever she opened a box of books. One never quite knew what would be inside.

Of course, she had a steady stream of regular collectors with whom she dealt on a constant basis. She'd learned her profession well, and been mentored by one of the best in the business. Irascible and brusque to most, Seymour Morton had taken Amanda under his wing when she was just a gawky teenager, teaching her the business and sharing his wealth of knowledge and contacts with her. It hurt her that she couldn't pick up the phone and talk to Seymour. She still couldn't quite believe he was gone. He'd been ninety when he'd died in his sleep, but somehow she'd expected him to live forever.

A heavy knock sounded on the front door, shaking Amanda from her reverie. "You can do this," she muttered. She'd dealt with hundreds of clients, but this was the first time she hadn't had Seymour beside her.

Walking to the front door, she pulled it open and came face-to-face with a man who made every single thought vanish from her mind in a heartbeat. His midnight-black hair fell to his shoulders in a waterfall of silk. Her fingers curled into her palms, itching to touch it to see if it was as soft as it looked.

Pale green eyes tipped with thick, dark lashes stared back at her. They reminded her of cat's eyes. They held the same intense, predatory stare of a cat just before it pounces.

Amanda was finding it hard to breathe, impossible to think. Her skin flashed hot and then cold. She'd swear she was having a menopausal hot flash, except for the fact that she was only thirty-one.

His face was all angles and planes, his lips thin. His nose was slightly crooked, but that in no way detracted from his appeal. This was one sexy man, and she hadn't even managed to check out what was below his neckline yet.

Her breasts swelled and a low throb began deep in her belly. What the heck was wrong with her?

"Mind if I come in?"

His voice sent shivers skating down her arms, raising goose bumps in their wake. It was so deep and richly textured. This guy could read the phonebook and make her cream her panties.

He arched an eyebrow at her. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a woman's voice. "Jonah, is anything wrong?"

Like a splash of cold water, reality came crashing back. She was ogling a complete stranger at her front door and he was obviously with a woman. Amanda could feel the heat creeping up her cheeks and the butterflies in her stomach began to flutter again.

"Hi, I'm Elizabeth Sutter." A lovely brunette with creamy white skin and a shy smile juggled a box in her arms and held out her hand.

Amanda shook the proffered hand as her mind began to fire on all cylinders once again. This was her new client. For the first time since opening the door, she took in the entire scene in front of her. It was only then she noticed that the hunk was holding a large box in his arms.

"Come in." She pulled back the door and motioned them into the front room, the home of her new business, By the Book. "Please forgive the mess. The moving truck only left an hour ago and I'm up to my ears in boxes."

Amanda tried not to look at the guy's behind as he bent down and placed the box on the floor. She really did. But she couldn't resist. Tight and firm, his ass filled out his jeans to perfection. And she shouldn't be checking out the guy's butt, not with Elizabeth standing in the same room. What was wrong with her? She wasn't the type to poach on another woman's man. He straightened, turned and stared at her as if he knew exactly what she'd been doing.

Once again, she felt the heat on her cheeks and cursed the fact that she blushed so easily. Combined with her freckles and curly reddish-brown hair, she must look a sight.

"Oh, we could come back another time if it's not convenient."

Amanda's gaze shifted to Elizabeth Sutter, who was nibbling on her lower lip and looking concerned. The box she was carrying was poised in the air, as if she couldn't quite decide if she was going to put it down or make a run for it. Amanda pictured her new client, and all her books, walking out the door.

Back to business. "Not at all." She smiled, genuinely pleased to have her very first local client. "I'm sorry for all the mess, but I'm excited to see your books."

Elizabeth smiled as the man took the box out of her arms and laid it atop the one he'd brought in. "That's wonderful. This is my brother, Jonah Sutter."

Relief, all out of proportion to the situation, flooded through Amanda. She didn't even know Jonah, but finding out he wasn't romantically attached to Elizabeth sent her hormones jumping. Of course, that didn't mean he didn't have a wife or a significant other somewhere out there. And she really had to keep her mind focused on business, not

on her attraction to Jonah. "Pleasure to meet you." Amanda was proud of the way her voice didn't break. She sounded calm and personable. She extended her hand in greeting.

His green-eyed gaze never leaving her face, he closed his fingers over hers. Heat and strength seemed to radiate from the man. He slowly inclined his head. "You're Amanda?"

God, could she be anymore scatterbrained? "Amanda Barrington." She forced herself to pull her hand away even though she would have been quite content to leave it exactly where it was. He had wonderful hands—broad, slightly rough and very strong. A shiver ran down her spine as she imagined those hands running up her arms and down her torso, wrapping around her hips.

"Pleasure." He turned from her and headed back to the front door. "I'll get the rest of the boxes." Amanda noted the way his shoulders filled out his leather jacket and the fact that his boots made no sound on the hardwood floor. He moved silently for such a big man.

"Thank you, Jonah." Elizabeth's voice jerked Amanda's attention back to her client, who waited patiently.

Thankfully, the other woman hadn't seemed to notice anything amiss. Pulling her professional persona around her, Amanda motioned her client to the lone chair in the room. "Please sit down. Can I get you some coffee? Tea?" She thought she knew where to find the kettle, but she wasn't one hundred percent sure.

"No. That's fine. I know you're busy getting settled, but I just wanted to get these boxes out of the house." Elizabeth bit her lower lip again and looked away.

Elizabeth's vulnerability hit Amanda squarely in the chest and her professional demeanor slid away, replaced by genuine concern. "That's okay. I understand how these things are. Divorce is never easy. You're ready to start your new life and this is a part of the past you need to deal with and clear away."

"That's exactly it." Elizabeth motioned to the boxes, a tremulous smile on her lips. "There are several hundred books, but I'm not sure if any of them are valuable. I got half of the library in the settlement. I picked out the books I wanted to keep, but these..." Elizabeth waved her hand toward the boxes, "...these are the ones I really don't want."

Amanda nodded, crouching on the floor. "That's why you have me. Let's see what we have here." Pulling the smaller box down in front of her, she folded back the flap. The familiar excitement coursed through her. The smells of paper and ink rose up to hit her nostrils.

She sensed Jonah just before another box appeared beside her. She didn't look at him when he turned and left, even though she wanted to. That was one good-looking man.

One by one, she pulled the hardback books from the box. Most were of minimal value—first editions of popular fiction authors that would sell from anywhere between five and twenty dollars. But at the very bottom was a gem.

Amanda picked up the book carefully and gently pulled back the cover, examining the endpapers before turning to the copyright page. It was as she suspected. "This is an original copy of *A Clockwork Orange*." The cult classic by Anthony Burgess was worth a pretty penny to collectors.

"Is that good?"

"You betcha. I can easily get you between five and six for this. Maybe even a bit more."

"Five or six hundred dollars?" Jonah laid another box on top of the ones he'd already brought in.

She turned, ignoring the way his long hair framed his remarkable face and the cynical gleam in his eyes. "No, not five or six hundred dollars."

"I didn't think so."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "That would be five or six thousand dollars."

Amanda heard Elizabeth gasp, but she couldn't look away from Jonah.

Even though she was sitting on the floor, the pretty little shopkeeper still managed to look down her nose at him. Damned if she didn't make him want to grin. Jonah's cock

jerked in agreement and he willed it back into submission. This was not the time or the place. He was here to help his sister and to make sure she didn't get swindled.

Not that the curvy redhead looked like a con artist. The smattering of freckles on her face and her open smile made her look—he searched for the right word—innocent. In his experience there was no such thing, and women who looked harmless were usually the most venomous of all, able to sneak past a man's guard with seductive smiles and soft promises.

She was wearing jeans and a green cardigan sweater that hid more of her than it showcased. Not exactly a femme fatale. Yet his body responded anyway. From the moment she'd opened the door, he'd had the urge to push her up against the wall, strip her naked and bury himself in her sweet warmth.

He was so cold and it had been so long.

His blood chilled as he remembered the last time he'd gotten involved with a woman—beautiful, sexy, mysterious Darla. She'd played him like a fish on a line while trying to get him to spill military secrets. And he'd fallen for it, if only for a short time. She'd never discovered anything of importance, but not for lack of trying. The day he'd come home early and caught her in his apartment hacking into his computer had clued him in to the fact that she wasn't what she seemed. The fact that she'd tried to shoot him had also been a dead giveaway. That had been five years ago.

Jonah swore beneath his breath. Amanda Barrington was no enemy spy and Darla was no longer a problem. He had to get his mind out of the past and into the here and now.

A quick, hard fuck against the wall wasn't going to happen with this woman. Amanda had commitment written all over her and that wasn't the kind of woman he needed in his life. He had enough problems without adding a woman to the mix.

"Five or six thousand?"

He winced at the excitement in his sister's voice. Elizabeth was starting over again after a long, failed marriage, and although she'd gotten a decent deal in the divorce settlement, the extra money certainly wouldn't go astray.

Amanda nodded. The motion sent a profusion of cinnamon-colored curls bobbing up and down. Her hair hung halfway down her back and was pulled back in a terrycloth wrap of some sort. What did his sister call it? Oh yeah, a scrunchie. Jonah wanted to strip the holder away and watch her curls bob around her face.

Swearing under his breath, he got a grip on himself. *Concentrate*. "What about the rest of them?"

Her moss-green eyes were cool as she turned back to him. "That remains to be seen. In this box, most of the books are worth five or ten bucks apiece, but this one..." she picked up the book in question, "...this one is a gem."

Amanda pushed to her feet. She was standing so close to him, he could smell her—a combination of lemon cleaner and dust from where she'd been working—but underlying it all was the alluring scent of woman and lavender soap.

The top of her head rose to just past his chin, putting her at about five-foot-six. She reached out and grabbed another box, the movement pulling her sweater tight against her and accentuating her curves. No doubt about it, Amanda had some sweet curves. Her breasts would be a handful, no more, no less, but they appeared to be firm and ripe.

His hands fisted at his sides as he wondered what color her nipples were. Pink or beige? Jonah took one look at her hair and grinned. He'd bet on pink, verging toward red.

"It will take me a few days to go through all the boxes and work up a list for you." Amanda was sitting on a box next to Elizabeth, a receipt book in her hand. "Do you know how many books you have?"

Elizabeth shook her head. "No, I just packed them in the boxes."

"That's okay, we can count them and I'll give you a receipt. In a few days, I'll have a complete list of the books and what price I will be asking for them. As I said on the phone, I take a commission on every book I sell."

"That's fine. Whatever I can get for them." Jonah wanted to shake his sister. She was asking to get taken advantage of.

"We'll look at the list and review your commission before my sister agrees to anything." He had to speak up before Elizabeth just gave Amanda the damn books.

Amanda's back stiffened, but her expression remained friendly, if slightly aloof. "That's fine. I can also provide you with references from past customers if you'd like."

"That would be—"

"Jonah." His sister cut him off abruptly as she jumped to her feet. She turned to Amanda. "I'm terribly sorry about that. Jonah tends to be a bit overprotective. I trust you to be honest with the boxes I've brought. With just the first box you went through, I'll get more than I even imagined I would for the lot of them."

"Don't worry, Elizabeth. I understand completely. You've been through a hard time and he is your brother." Amanda turned away and quickly began opening boxes. In a swift, methodical fashion, she counted books, not seeming to pay any attention to their titles. When she was done, she wrote up the receipt. "You've got two-hundred-and-fifty-seven books." Ripping the paper away from her receipt pad, she handed it to Elizabeth.

Going to one of her own boxes in the corner, Amanda yanked open the flaps and dug inside. She muttered to herself as she rummaged around. He sensed her triumph as she pulled out a small wooden box. Opening it, she took out a business card, flipped it over and wrote on the back. Her movements were stiff as she walked up to him and handed him the card.

The name of her business, By the Book, was embossed in gold on the front of the card. Below it her name and profession was listed, along with her Jamesville address as well as her website and email addresses. Jonah flipped it over. On the back were several names and numbers.

"Those are former clients," she informed him before he could ask. "Feel free to call them."

Turning her back on him, Amanda focused on Elizabeth. Jonah wanted to grab her by the shoulders, turn her around and pull her into his arms. Then he wanted to kiss her until she lost that uptight expression. He wanted to see her smile at him again or look at him with the slightly unfocused and dreamy gaze she'd greeted him with when she'd first opened the door of her home. Anything but the cold shoulder he was currently receiving.

It was definitely past time to go if he was starting to worry about what any woman thought of him, let alone one he'd just met. "Time to go, Elizabeth."

His sister's face paled and her shoulders slumped inward. "I'm sorry. I know this is taking up your time."

Now he felt like a jerk. His sister had been through a rough time with her abusive, jerk of a husband. She needed support and time, not him growling at her. "I don't mind the time." He kept his voice gentle, his tone level. "I just think that Ms. Barrington has a lot of work to do and we're keeping her from it."

"I don't mind at all." Amanda glared at him and he wanted to rub his finger over the frown line that formed between her brows.

"I'll contact you in a few days and maybe you'll come and check out the store when I get it open." The last was addressed to his sister, he noted, not to him.

"You're planning on opening a store? I thought you did all your work online?" He could tell she wanted to ignore him, but good manners forced her to reply. Strangely enough, he was interested in her plans.

"Most of my work will continue to be through my online store, of course. My customer base is varied and spread across the country and around the world. This building is zoned for business as well as residential, so I thought I'd open the front room as a small shop for a few hours a week. Tuesday through Saturday in the afternoons to attract some local and tourist traffic for those books that aren't worth the time or the effort to list on my website." She picked up one of the books she'd unloaded from Elizabeth's boxes. "Like this one. It's worth about ten dollars resale, hardly worth putting online, but it should sell quickly locally."

He found himself admiring her business sense in spite of his resolve to remain skeptical about her. She had a sharp tongue that he found strangely appealing, although he could think of much better uses for it than verbally challenging him. He could easily picture that tongue sliding over his dick just before her mouth opened around the tip and sucked him inside.

His jeans tightened and he shifted his stance. It didn't help. His cock was more than willing to accommodate anything he had in mind for the pretty Ms. Amanda. Every cell in his body was on alert and the skin on the back of his neck tingled.

That was not a good sign. More than once over the years, that small sign had been enough of a warning to save him and his buddies from disaster. It usually occurred just before everything went to hell in a handbasket. All his years in the Special Forces had given him a respect and trust for that little neck tingle. And right now it was telling him that Amanda Barrington was trouble. What kind of trouble remained to be seen.

Whether he wanted to or not, he'd keep an eye on her until her business with Elizabeth was settled. Not that it would be any hardship, but it might get downright uncomfortable. His balls tightened in agreement.

"Are you ready, Elizabeth?" He inclined his head toward Amanda as he pocketed her business card. He'd definitely check into her past and her business.

"I'm ready." Elizabeth turned to Amanda. "Thank you for doing this. I know you're not quite ready for customers yet. But when Alicia mentioned you to me, it was too perfect an opportunity for me to pass up."

He hadn't known that Alicia Flint, Elizabeth's divorce lawyer, had recommended Amanda. He'd have to ask his sister about that. Or maybe he'd talk to Alicia.

"It's really no problem." Amanda's easy smile sent Jonah's blood pressure skyrocketing. Objectively, she was cute, even a little average in looks. But his body didn't seem to care. There was something about Amanda that called to him on the most basic of levels.

They all walked to the door and Amanda said goodbye to them. As Jonah pulled his truck away from the curb, he couldn't resist glancing in his rearview mirror. Amanda was still standing in the doorway watching them leave.

#### Chapter Two

Whoever had said that owning a home was easy had obviously never owned one. Not that she didn't love her new house, because she did. Amanda loved the fact that it had stood for a hundred years. It had history. It was the same thing that she loved about the antiquarian book business—the sense of history, of connection with the past.

She loved the thick moldings in every room and the hand-carved newel post at the bottom of the stairs. She absolutely adored the scuffed hardwood floors and the large slab of oak that acted as a mantelpiece over the tiny stone fireplace in the living room.

Sure, it all needed work and a little tender loving care, but that was fine by her. She wasn't afraid of hard work. Was looking forward to it. She'd even stopped by the hardware store and picked up some paint chips the day before. There were so many colors to choose from.

No, the fact that it needed some work wasn't the problem. She loved her new home. What she didn't like was the finicky electrical system.

Amanda grabbed her flashlight and opened the door to the basement. Holding tight to the railing, she took a deep breath and started down the rickety steps. This was definitely something she'd have to have fixed. Eventually. Right now, she had bigger concerns. Namely that two of the electrical outlets in the front room didn't work.

She was praying it was just a tripped breaker, but she was very much afraid it was something more.

"You checked on the plumbing before you bought the place because you wanted to make sure you had plenty of hot water, but you didn't think to check on the electrical system," she muttered as she shone the flashlight into the gloom.

She hated basements. They were dark and dingy and sometimes damp. They almost always had a musty, closed-up smell about them, and this one was no different.

If she remembered correctly, there was a light switch at the bottom of the stairs. Something else she needed to add to her to-do list. She definitely needed a switch at the top of the stairs.

Flashing the light along the wall near the bottom, she gave a crow of triumph when she found what she was looking for. "Gotcha." She flicked the switch and smiled when the bare bulb came to life. "Damn it," she muttered when it flickered out two seconds later.

She almost retreated up the stairs, but held her ground. "You're a homeowner now," she reminded herself. "You've got to learn how to deal with these things."

Amanda swore she could practically hear Seymour telling her to buck up and get on with it. "Too bad you're not here, you old goat. I'd make you do this."

Tears pricked her eyes and she blinked them back. Seymour wouldn't want her to cry. Even on his deathbed, he hadn't wanted her tears. "I've lived a long and interesting life, girl. I've got no regrets. Now it's time for you to live life to the fullest."

When she'd protested, he'd scowled at her. "Don't think I don't know the only reason you've stuck around here all these years is because of me. You don't need to have some old man taking up all your time. You're young. You need to get out there in the world and live a little."

Amanda rubbed her eyes as the memories threatened to overwhelm her. Seymour had been family. The only one she'd every really had. After shuffling from foster home to foster home for most of her life, Amanda had been emancipated at the age of eighteen. As a birthday gift, she'd been booted out of the home she'd been living in for the last six months, as the state would no longer pay for her upkeep.

Alone and desperate, Amanda had answered an ad in the local paper. It had simply said, "Assistant wanted."

She'd been fascinated by Seymour Morton and his books from the moment she'd stepped into his jam-packed store on Mission Road. Books had always been Amanda's escape from reality. The thought of being able to make a living and support herself while being around books was intriguing and very appealing.

Seymour had taken one look at Amanda and scowled at her. She'd scowled right back at him. Tall and thin to the point of being gaunt, he was an intimidating sight with his wild shock of white hair and his bushy white mustache. But she didn't care. She'd been in the foster care system too long to show fear. To show fear was to give another person power over you, power they usually abused.

The strangest thing had happened then. Rather than be angry with her for scowling at him, he'd smiled, flashing two gold teeth in the front. "You've got spunk. I like that."

From that day forth, she'd worked beside him, soaking up all his knowledge, which he'd shared freely. He'd become her teacher, her friend and the family she'd never had.

Now he was gone and she was alone again.

"Buck up, Amanda." She walked down the final step and moved into the basement, flashing the light along the wall. The electrical box was somewhere on her left. She remembered that much from when she'd toured the house before she bought it. "You're having an adventure."

Although, this was the kind of adventure she could have done without. She shivered as a cold draft skated over her face. No doubt about it, she didn't want to be down here, especially with nothing more than a flashlight.

She quickened her pace. The faster she found out the problem, the faster she could get out of here. The electrical box was right where she remembered it. Holding the light steady, she opened it and peered inside. There didn't seem to be anything amiss.

This was so not good. Why hadn't she checked the electrical system before she bought the house? "Because you were so in love with the house you would have bought it no matter what," she muttered.

Slamming the door to the panel shut, she whirled around and bolted for the stairs. What she needed was an expert. The electrical system was nothing to fool around with. She needed to make certain she wouldn't fry her computer system. That definitely wouldn't be good for business.

The light in the kitchen seemed unusually bright after the pitch darkness of the basement and Amanda blinked several times to accustom her eyes. The mug of coffee

she'd poured before she'd gone downstairs still sat on the kitchen counter. She laid aside the flashlight and picked up her mug, taking a large swallow. She hoped it would chase away the cold shivers.

She'd unpacked the coffee pot, supplies and her large sunflower motif mug first thing this morning. Amanda couldn't imagine starting her day without coffee. After Elizabeth and her sexy brother, Jonah, had left yesterday, Amanda had spent the remainder of the afternoon making notes and running to the local stores. She'd bought cleaning supplies and some basic groceries, most of which were still in bags.

Her plan this morning had been to start cleaning the kitchen before she unpacked enough pots and dishes to get by on. She wanted to paint before she settled in.

Yes, she still had to work, but a couple hours a day on her laptop would take care of everything that needed to be dealt with. She'd worked hard preparing for this move during the past few months since Seymour's death, and she had scheduled several weeks off to allow for painting and minor repairs.

She guessed this qualified as a minor repair. At least she hoped it was minor. She had a sneaking suspicion it would be anything but.

The big question was, who did she call?

She laid down her mug and stared at the boxes and bags piled in the middle of the kitchen. "Where did I put that phone book?" A quick search turned up absolutely nothing. Amanda was slightly disgusted with herself. She was usually much better organized, but she'd been a bit scattered lately.

Picking up her cell phone, she dialed the one number in town she knew by heart. At the last second, she checked her watch and swore under her breath. It was only quarter to eight in the morning.

"Stone Manor, how may I help you?" A deep voice reverberated through the phone line. At least Cyndi's husband, Shamus, was up and around.

Cyndi O'Rourke was the reason that Amanda had moved to Jamesville. She'd met the woman almost a year ago when she'd handled the library of her late father's estate. They'd become immediate friends. Cyndi hadn't been married to Shamus then, but Amanda had known it would happen. A blind man could see how much in love the two of them were.

Amanda smiled. "Morning, Shamus. How are you this morning?"

He laughed. "Morning, Amanda. I'm good. How are you doing? Settling into your new home?"

She wrapped one arm around her waist and looked around, still unable to believe that this was all hers. "I'm a little overwhelmed, but I'm loving it." She paused and added truthfully, "Well, most of it."

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure." She wrinkled her nose when she noticed a smudge of dirt on her hand. Great. She'd probably picked it up from the stair railing or the electrical box itself. That probably meant she had dirt on her face too.

"Two of the outlets in the office don't work. When I went to check out the problem, the bulb at the bottom of the stairs went out. That could just be a bulb, but I'm not counting on that. I need an electrician to come and check everything out. Can you give me the name of someone local to call?" As a contractor, Shamus knew everyone in the construction business. He'd know who was reliable and honest.

"I'm just on my way out the door, why don't I swing by and take a look?"

"I don't want to be a bother."

Shamus snorted. "No bother." He paused and Amanda could hear a female voice in the background. "Oh, and Cyndi says she's expecting you for supper tonight."

A feeling of well-being enveloped her. It didn't matter that Shamus and Cyndi had been her friends for almost a year now, she was still taken aback by their innate kindness. It was something she'd never take for granted. Kindness had been in short supply for most of her life. "I'll be there."

"See you in a few." Shamus hung up and Amanda closed her cell phone, shoving it into the back pocket of her jeans.

She'd had some doubts about this move. About packing up her apartment, the only place she'd lived since she was eighteen, but the time had been right for a move. Besides

which, she hadn't had a choice. Seymour had owned the building and his will had stipulated that all his property be sold. She'd had three months to get her affairs in order and move. Even in death, he was still trying to direct her life.

She could smile about it now, but at the time she'd been devastated. She felt as if she'd been kicked out of the only home she'd ever known, the only place that had truly been hers. Then, a month later, an official letter had arrived in the mail, informing her that Seymour had made her the beneficiary of his entire estate. All the money from the sale of his property, his investments and his life insurance policy were all hers. Even after taxes, she was left with a hefty amount of money.

He'd also left her his entire stock of books.

But it was the letter he'd left her that had meant the most to her. A gruff man, not given to displays of emotion, he'd told her she was like a granddaughter to him. He'd encouraged her to spread her wings and fly. So she had. All the way to Jamesville.

And she didn't regret her decision. She'd been back several times since her original trip here. Once on business and twice for pleasure. It was on her last trip that Cyndi had encouraged her to move here. With Seymour gone, she didn't have any ties to her home in Vermont any more. It had been surprisingly easy to make the decision.

With the stock from Seymour's store, Amanda knew she could make a fresh start and buy a house of her own. If it hadn't been for the financial stake he'd given her, she'd be fretting about the repairs. Not that she could afford to be loose with her money, but she could easily afford to do whatever renovations needed to be done.

A bell chimed, making her jump. She glanced at her watch. She'd been woolgathering for fifteen minutes. That was probably Shamus.

Hurrying out of the kitchen and down the short hallway, she unlocked the door and pulled it open, a smile on her face. But it wasn't Shamus on the other side. Her smile slowly faded. "What are you doing here?"

Jonah couldn't stop staring at Amanda. Her hair was once again caught at her nape in a ponytail. She wasn't wearing any makeup and there was a smudge of dirt on her nose and another on her cheek. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses perched daintily on her nose, giving her a studious appearance. She hadn't been wearing them the first time he'd met her so he assumed she must wear contact lenses at least part of the time. She looked good enough to eat and he hadn't had any breakfast yet. He'd left home the second he'd gotten Shamus's phone call.

"Can I come in?" His voice was rough with arousal, but he was hoping she wouldn't notice. Thankfully, he'd left his shirt untucked and the tails covered most of the front of his jeans, hiding the hard ridge there. His fingers tightened around the handle of his toolbox.

She was wearing a pair of faded jeans that fit her like a glove. The material lovingly caressed her curvy thighs and waist. Her green V-neck T-shirt was modest enough, but it hinted at the firm, rounded breasts beneath it.

Amanda frowned at him and glanced back toward the road. Her eyes widened when she saw the truck he'd driven over here. "Sutter's Electrical?"

"Family business." He stepped forward and she fell back a pace. He kept going until he was firmly inside. "Shamus called me." Jonah used his booted foot to shove the door closed.

"Oh." He could sense she was still suspicious of him. "That was fast."

He barely suppressed a smile. She had no idea just how fast he could be given the right motivation. He estimated it would take him about fifteen seconds, maybe less, to strip her clothing off her and burying his face between her curvy thighs. "I was just on my way out the door when he called."

"Oh."

"You already said that."

She scowled at him and waved her hand toward the kitchen. "The electrical panel is downstairs. I have no idea what the problem is, but two of the outlets in the front room don't work."

When he didn't move, she turned on her heel and headed toward the kitchen. Jonah took the opportunity to admire her firm, tight ass. No doubt about it, he'd love to have her on her hands and knees in front of him as he fucked her from behind.

His cock jerked in agreement. Jonah reached down and adjusted himself, but it didn't help. There was no relief to be found. He'd already done quite a bit of research on Ms. Amanda Barrington and nothing in her past sent up a red flag. She seemed to be exactly what she presented herself as—a dealer of antiquarian and used books who'd moved to Jamesville for a fresh start.

Amanda had one hand on the handle of the basement door. It was more than obvious that she wasn't comfortable with him. That had to change if he ever hoped to get her into bed with him. And he did.

"How about a cup of coffee?" He placed his toolbox on the floor.

She hesitated. "Okay. I guess that would be...okay." She sucked her bottom lip into her mouth and nibbled on it.

Jonah almost groaned. There was a natural sensuality about Amanda that he doubted she was even aware of. He glanced away from her and noted all the boxes. She hadn't even begun to unpack yet.

"I think I can find another mug." She opened a box and peered inside before she began to rummage.

Unable to resist, he moved up closer to her. As if she sensed him behind her, she jerked upright. "What are you doing?"

"This." Reaching out, he stroked his thumb over her cheek, brushing at the dirt there. "You have a smudge right here."

"Oh." A tinge of pink colored her face. He was fascinated by how easily she blushed. Her pupils dilated as he ran his thumb over the bridge of her nose. "I must have gotten that when I was down in the basement earlier."

"No problem." Her skin was so soft beneath his calloused fingers. He wanted to run his hands over her entire body, learning her curves, searching out all her sensitive spots. His gut clenched as he imagined how soft and inviting her pussy would be.

Her breathing was shallow, her chest rising and falling rapidly. She licked her lips and swayed slightly toward him. Her eyelids drifted shut, fanning her thick lashes against her cheekbones. That was all the permission he needed.

Cupping the back of her head with his hand, he held her steady as he lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were as soft as the rest of her. Jonah ran his tongue over her bottom lip before moving on to the top. He caught the faintest taste of cherries and knew it had to be her lip balm.

Her hair was thick and he tangled his fingers in the mass, not wanting her to escape him. Not yet. He loved the color, with its tinges of cinnamon, red and mahogany. It was vital and alive, just like Amanda. He wanted to know if the hair between her thighs was the same color.

He urged her closer and she came. She made a small sound of pleasure as the soft mounds of her breasts pressed against his chest. One of her hands slid up his arm before stopping at his nape. Her touch made his skin tighten and his balls ache.

Deepening the kiss, he pressed his lips more firmly to hers and let his tongue slide over the seam. She parted for him and he slipped inside. Her mouth was warm and wet and oh-so-inviting. She tasted of coffee, of late nights and early mornings. She tasted like home. But he wasn't a forever kind of guy.

Jolted, he pulled back. Yes, he wanted to bed her. And he would have her. But only as a temporary lover.

Her eyelids fluttered open and she stared at him with that innocent, green gaze. No woman could be this open and innocent. He dropped his hand and took a step back just as a knock came on the front door.

Grabbing the flashlight from the counter, he opened the basement door and plunged down into the darkness. He welcomed the chilly air against his skin. His cock throbbed, a potent reminder of just how fast Amanda aroused him. It was shocking really.

For a man who'd spent many years in situations where his life, and the lives of others, depended on discipline and willpower, it was more than a little disconcerting to have his self-control challenged like this.

#### N.J. Walters

"You better answer the door," he called back over his shoulder. "That will be Shamus."

#### Chapter Three

Amanda didn't exactly remember what she said to Shamus when she let him in the house, but whatever it was, it must have made sense because he hadn't seemed to notice anything amiss. She didn't remember much of anything but the mesmerizing kiss that Jonah had given her.

She wrapped her fingers tight around her cheerful sunflower coffee mug and stood at the top of the stairs, listening to the male voices drifting up from below. She could easily distinguish Jonah's voice from Shamus's. They both had deep voices, but Jonah's made her entire body tingle.

Ignoring the way her nipples puckered, she turned away from the open door of the basement and wandered aimlessly around the kitchen. She really should start cleaning the cupboards. If that was done, she could begin to unpack and get organized.

But she couldn't focus on cleaning. Not with Jonah so close. "Stop thinking about him," she muttered as she tipped up her mug and drank the last of her coffee before plunking it down on the counter. "Think about electrical repairs."

She was praying the repair job wouldn't be a big one, but that hope was growing slimmer by the second. When Shamus had arrived, he'd descended into the bowels of the basement to join Jonah in checking out the electrical panel. They'd made their way back upstairs and Jonah had grabbed some tools before they'd gone from room to room checking outlets. Looking grim, they'd headed back down to the basement. They'd been down there at least ten minutes now.

To try and distract herself from thoughts of her electrical problem and the even bigger problem of her attraction to Jonah, she decided to make a fresh pot of coffee. It only took her a minute to scoop fresh grounds into a paper filter and fill the coffeemaker with water. While the coffee was perking, she opened several boxes and found more mugs, which she laid next to the coffee pot. The men would probably want coffee when they were finished working.

Amanda knew she should probably be in the basement with them. After all, it was her house. But until there was more light down there, she'd happily stay up here. Besides which, being down there would put her in very close contact with Jonah, and she wasn't ready for that yet.

She sighed and wrapped her arms around her torso. The coffeemaker sputtered and steamed as she peered out through the window. Jonah. Her thoughts always came back to him. Considering she'd only met the man yesterday, he occupied way too many of her thoughts.

She hadn't been able to look Jonah in the face when he'd been going from room to room, checking out the outlets in each. Not after that mind-blowing kiss. If her hair hadn't already been curly, it certainly would have been after that kiss.

The fact that she couldn't look directly at him certainly hadn't stopped her from following him and Shamus though. She hadn't been able to take her eyes off him while he worked. His shirt stretched wide across his shoulders and when he'd leaned over once, the tails had ridden up in the back, allowing her a brief glimpse of his vastly superior jeans-clad butt.

His eyes had flicked to her bed when he'd moved his inspection into her bedroom, his gaze lingering ever so briefly on the tangled sheets. Amanda wished she'd taken the time to make the bed when she'd rolled out of it this morning, but she'd had so much she'd wanted to accomplish today that she hadn't bothered.

Amanda mentally shook away the image of her mussed bed as she touched her fingers to her lips. She could still taste him there—potent and dark and male. She couldn't quite define his taste. All that she knew was that she like it. A lot.

Her breasts felt swollen and her nipples were still puckered tight. Goose bumps rippled over her skin. She rubbed her hands over her upper arms, grateful that she'd thought to pull on a cardigan while the men had been working upstairs. She didn't want

to advertise her swollen nipples to either man. The sweater wasn't much protection against the potent sexual attraction Jonah exuded, but it was something.

There was nothing she could do about the persistent throb between her legs. She pressed her thighs closer together to try to ease the ache. It only made things worse. Her panties were damp and the material only seemed to aggravate the situation when it brushed against her sex.

The coffeemaker gave a final whoosh and gurgle, announcing it was finished brewing the fresh pot of coffee. And just in time too. Work boots clumped against the stairs. She moved quickly from the window and leaned against the counter, trying to look nonchalant.

They were finished their inspection. Amanda placed her hand on her stomach and took a deep breath. She didn't know what worried her more at this point—having to face Jonah again or finding out exactly what was wrong with the electrical system.

Shamus emerged first and the look on his face wasn't encouraging. He offered her a smile, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Tell me." She didn't see the need to drag out the situation.

"You want the good news or the bad news?" Shamus walked over to the counter and grabbed one of the clean mugs she'd put there and poured himself a cup of coffee.

"Both." No need to put off the inevitable. The quicker she knew what she was dealing with, the better.

"The good news is that someone attempted to upgrade the electrical system in the past ten years."

"That's good, right?" She didn't see anything bad in what Shamus was saying.

"The bad news," Jonah interjected, "is that whoever did it didn't hire an electrician and they didn't know what the hell they were doing."

Her stomach dropped. "What exactly are we talking about?"

"The entire thing needs to be redone and brought up to code. You've got old wiring mixed with new. It's a fire hazard." Jonah strolled over to the counter, picked up the glass

carafe and poured himself a mug of coffee. Amanda tried hard not to look at his large, strong hands. It was all too easy to imagine those hands on her body.

She took a deep breath. "Okay, what am I looking at time-wise?"

"I can start right away." Jonah brought the mug to his lips and took a swallow of coffee. Amanda stared at his moist lips and the way his Adam's apple moved up and down as he swallowed.

She mentally shook herself. She was obviously losing her mind if all she could focus on was how sexy Jonah looked drinking a mug of coffee instead of her huge homeowner's problem. The stress of the past few months was catching up to her.

Pulling her gaze away from Jonah, she focused on Shamus. "Won't that mean cutting out sections of the walls in each room?" The dollar signs in her head got bigger with each passing moment.

"Probably, but it won't be too bad. I can fix your walls for you."

She nodded. "I'll need an estimate from both of you."

Shamus shook his head. "You buy the materials, I'll fix your walls."

"You can't do that." She pushed away from the counter and shoved her gold-rimmed glasses up further on her nose. "This is what you do for a living."

He sighed, crossing his arms over his chest. "No, this is what I do for a friend." When she started to protest again, he held up his hand. "Let me do this for you. You've been such a good friend to Cyndi. Let me return the favor."

Put like that, it would be small of her not to accept. "Thank you."

He flashed her a smile. "No problem." Shamus looked at his watch. "If we're done, I've got to get to work." He glanced over at Jonah, who nodded. Turning back to Amanda, he added, "I'll see you later tonight."

Amanda nodded. "Tell Cyndi I'll be there."

Shamus stopped long enough to give her a peck on the cheek. "Will do."

He was gone before she realized it, leaving her alone with Jonah. There was no hiding any longer. Squaring her shoulders, she faced him. "I'll need an estimate before

you begin to work." She'd never dealt with these sorts of repairs before, but she knew enough to get it in writing.

"I'll be fair."

She raised an eyebrow and stared at him. He had a lot of nerve to assume she'd take his word for anything after the way he questioned her professional reputation. "I'll need references as well."

His eyes widened. Obviously, he wasn't used to having his word questioned. It was childish for sure, but she was glad to be able to give him a taste of his own medicine.

His frown disappeared and a slow smile spread across his face. Oh, no. She locked her knees, ignoring the way that his smile made her stomach, and other parts of her body, flutter wildly.

"I guess I deserve that." He set his mug down on the counter, the sound echoing in the mostly empty room. "The thing is, I've only been back in town a few months so I haven't done that many jobs for private citizens. Most of my work has been as a subcontractor to B & O Construction. Shamus is my best reference and he was the one who called me."

He was right about that. "I still want an estimate." She wouldn't compromise on that.

"Fair enough. I'll have one to you by tomorrow." Jonah walked toward her and she found herself backing away from him. He ignored her and went straight to his toolbox. Pulling a screwdriver and a few other items from his pockets, he crouched down and put them back in the box before closing the lid.

What he'd said was still ringing in her brain. "I thought you grew up here."

"I did." He stood, brushing his hands on the front of his jeans. "But I was gone for more than fifteen years."

"What did you do all those years?" She placed her mug on the counter beside his and folded her arms loosely across her stomach, trying to calm the fluttering feeling in her belly.

"Army."

She smiled then. "Excuse me for saying so, but I'm having a hard time picturing you in the army. You don't seem like the type who would take orders well."

He gave a small chuckle and threaded his fingers through his hair, pushing the dark mass away from his face. "That was a problem at times, but my group had a lot of leeway and we were pretty independent."

"Your group?" She could hear the affection and respect in his voice.

"Special Forces." He turned away and walked toward the window. He stood with his back to her, peering out over the slightly overgrown yard. She knew all the trees needed to be pruned and the grass needed to be cut. When it was done, it would be a beautiful space for her to enjoy.

"Why did you come back?" She knew it was none of her business, but she couldn't seem to stop herself. Everything about Jonah fascinated her. She couldn't claim to know him well, but she could hear the pride he had in his former career.

He turned to face her, hands on his hips. "My father died and my sister needed me." The brusque tone told her that this was a closed subject.

"I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"No, it's not. But you'd hear about it eventually anyway. The one thing that never changes in a small town is the love of gossip." He came toward her and this time she forced herself not to back away from him. It wasn't easy.

He was bigger than her, but not as big as Shamus. She frowned. Shamus might be taller, but Jonah exuded a sense of power, of menace. Maybe it was because she was attracted to Jonah, while Shamus was nothing more than a friend. Whatever the reason, Jonah made her heart pound faster with each step closer he came. He stopped right in front of her.

Reaching out his hand, he touched her hair. She scowled. "I know it's a mess."

"It's beautiful. Like fire." He threaded his fingers through the mass that fell below the ponytail holder. "Much like you. You try and keep all that fire contained, but it's there just below the surface. Waiting for the right man to release it." Having Jonah close to her set her internal furnace rumbling on full. Her earlier chill was gone and Amanda could feel a bead of sweat rolling down the center of her back. She swallowed, trying to think of something witty to say. She came up empty. No man had ever said anything like that to her before.

She was no virgin, but she wasn't exactly overly experienced either. Two serious relationships, both with staid, sensible men, did not make her an expert by any means.

Still, she had to say something. "You think you're the right man?" She couldn't believe she was challenging him. Was she out of her mind? A man like him would respond instantly to a challenge. Was that what she wanted?

Jonah's smile deepened. "Oh yeah, sugar. I'm definitely the man to release all that pent-up fire." He shifted his body so close she could feel the heat rolling off him even though they weren't touching anywhere. Her nipples tightened and her core clenched.

His fingers feathered over her cheek and down the side of her neck. A shiver racked her body, raising goose bumps on her arms, but it certainly wasn't because she was cold. If anything she was hot. Too hot.

He traced her collarbone and even through the layers of her shirt and her sweater, she felt scorched by the heat of his touch.

"Maybe," she countered.

He closed his hand over her breast and squeezed gently. "Definitely." She moaned, unable to stop herself.

He only cupped her breast for a second before sliding his hand over her belly. Amanda felt her arms falling to her sides and her breath caught in her chest as his fingers crept lower. When they were almost to her mound, he stopped. "Thing is, I'm not looking for a relationship. Nothing permanent."

His words dampened her sexual excitement as effectively as a cold shower, but they didn't smother them completely. Arousal still simmered beneath her skin as she forced herself to take a step away from him. "I see."

He sighed and let his hand drop back to his side. "Do you?" Jonah stared at her, his green eyes ablaze with pure sexual heat. "I want you, Amanda. Make no mistake about it. But I'm not the settling down type of guy."

"I see." She wished she could think of something else to say, but those two words seemed to be the extent of her vocabulary at the moment. Knowing she needed to collect herself, she turned away from him and walked over to stand in the empty eating nook. "I'm not the kind of woman who has a one-night stand."

"It wouldn't be one night." The whisper startled her. She hadn't heard him moving to stand right behind her. "I'd need a lot more time than that to sate myself with you. That will take days, maybe weeks. I want to take you fast and hard. Then I want to fuck you slow and easy. I want to pound into your sweet flesh until you scream with pleasure."

Amanda swayed. The pictures he was putting in her brain threatened to overwhelm her totally. "I can't think." This was outside of her realm of experience. Hot guys like Jonah didn't say things like this to a frizzy-headed woman with freckles. Sleek, sophisticated blondes were more likely to be the target of all this potent testosterone. "I don't understand."

"What's to understand?" He pressed closer and she could feel the hard ridge of his erection against her ass. "I want you and you want me. We're both single, healthy adults. What's the harm?"

He stepped back then and went calmly to his toolbox. "I'll have an estimate for you by tomorrow."

She faced him, unable to believe he was just going to drop that bombshell and then leave. "You're going?"

"Unless you want me to stay?"

The way he said it left no doubt in her mind that if he stayed it would be for one reason only. As attracted to him as she was, she'd just met him. She shook her head.

"I didn't think so, but you can't blame a guy for trying." He hefted the heavy red box in his left hand. "I'll keep asking."

His work boots rang against the hardwood floor as he walked calmly down the hallway. Amanda heard the door open and close.

She stood in the center of the kitchen and stared at the plain white walls. "What have I gotten myself into?"

#### Chapter Four

Amanda decided that work was the best way to get her mind off Jonah. Setting up her office chair in what would be her new workspace, she pulled Elizabeth Sutter's boxes of books alongside it. With her laptop perched on a couple of stacked boxes, she started to work.

She muttered to herself as she opened book covers, checked bindings and dust covers, and gauged overall condition before logging the book title, author, year of publication, publisher and any other pertinent information into Elizabeth's file.

Most of the books weren't worth much. She would list them in her online shop, but she'd also put them on display when she opened her little bookshop here in her front room. She tried not to think how long that might be delayed.

There was no point in hurrying to paint until the electrical work was done. Although she was going to take her paint chips when she went over to her friends' house for supper. Both Cyndi and Shamus had a good eye for color and she wanted their opinions. Cyndi had turned her family home into a first-rate B & B that was both classy and homey at the same time. And Shamus worked in the construction industry. He was sure to have ideas about what would work in a home like hers. She wanted to try to keep the colors as authentic to the original age of the house as possible.

Amanda pulled open another box of books and began to sort through them. When she was finished logging the books into her computer, she lightly penciled in a number code just inside the front cover. That was how she kept track of her inventory. Customers had a specific number and each one of their books was logged accordingly. When she finished with each book, it was put in one of two piles—inexpensive hardcover or absolute gem.

She was still excited about the copy of *A Clockwork Orange* and she'd added four more books to that pile. One was a science fiction classic from the seventies, which she knew would sell for a pretty penny. The other three were hard-to-find original hardbacks from popular authors. Not overly priceless, but certainly able to fetch around a hundred dollars each.

Whenever she was uncertain, she made a note to do a check of her online sources and compare prices. Amanda made it a point never to be at the top end of the pricing range unless she had something super rare. It was better to be just below the top price. More chance of selling the book that way.

She was at the final box when she found it. Amanda immediately knew that it wasn't a regular book, but a journal. And it was old. The leather binding and the gold-embossed lettering on the front told her that. Her fingers hovered just above the name. She didn't touch it though, not wanting the oils on her fingers to damage the old lettering.

"Cecilia Sutter." Sitting back in the chair, Amanda carefully opened the cover on the journal. The writing was ornate, yet neat. It harkened back to an age where a person's penmanship mattered.

"Eighteen-Eighty-five." The journal was more than a hundred years old. Amanda's stomach twitched with excitement. She loved old journals. Most of them were filled with the kind of mundane things that people didn't bother with today.

She'd read journals that were filled with weather and crop reports, town news, family triumphs and tragedies. She'd even read journals that were filled with such household tidbits as how to best butcher a hog and preserve every bit of the meat for future use, to how to mix the best wood cleaner. Journals were a treasure trove of information.

Turning the page, she read the first entry. "I got married today. The sun was bright and the roses in Mama's garden were in full bloom. Henry looked so handsome in his new suit it was all I could do to listen to the minister as he performed the ceremony. Henry Sutter is the most handsome man in the world." Amanda lowered the book, commiserating with the long-deceased Cecilia. "If Henry looked anything like Jonah, I understand completely."

She'd definitely have to return this to Elizabeth. It was a family treasure, probably a wedding gift because Cecilia's married name was on the cover. Still, a part of her hoped that Elizabeth wanted to sell this family journal. Amanda would buy it for her private collection.

Journals had been her passion ever since the first day she'd stepped into Seymour's shop. Over the years, she'd collected about three dozen of them, ranging in age from the seventeen hundreds right up until the nineteen-forties.

A psychologist would have a field day with her collection. She had no family ties of her own, no history, so she collected other people's history. That might be the case, but Amanda figured she was protecting the past from being discarded.

She logged the diary into her computer program and made a note to ask Elizabeth about it. She started to place it in the pile with the other collectable books, but stopped. There was no denying that she wanted to read a bit more about Cecilia and her new husband.

What would it hurt?

After all, Elizabeth had put it in the box with the rest of the books. For all Amanda knew, Elizabeth wanted to be rid of it.

Laying the diary aside, she closed out her program and shut down her computer. Standing, she groaned and stretched her arms over her head. She'd obviously been sitting there a while. She tended to lose track of time when she was working.

A quick glance at her watch had her groaning. "Quarter to four." She'd planned to stop by Delicious Delights, the local bakery, and pick up something to take to Cyndi and Shamus's place for dessert.

Grabbing the diary, she left the room in its state of organized chaos and hurried up the stairs. If she was fast, she could grab a shower, change, go to the bakery and still get to her friends' place by four-thirty.

Amanda carefully placed the journal in her bedside table. Ignoring the open suitcases and piles of boxes that mocked her, she headed to the bathroom. At least she'd unpacked the towels.

"That was delicious." Amanda pushed back her plate and gave a deep sigh of pleasure. Seated in the large, warm kitchen with her two friends, Amanda felt a sense of satisfaction. She'd made the right decision about moving to Jamesville. It was good to be close to friends.

The table was situated in a nook area surrounded by glass on three sides, giving a spectacular view of the garden. The late September sun was beginning to fade, but Amanda could see that some of the flowers were still blooming.

Though this was a B & B and there was a huge dining area with a half-dozen tables or so, Amanda preferred the coziness of the kitchen. It made her feel more a friend and less like a guest.

"Thank you." Cyndi rose from the table, her blue eyes twinkling with delight. "You still have room for any of that cheesecake you brought with you?"

Amanda groaned, but nodded. "I think so." She really wanted a piece of that chocolate dessert. "I'm so going to have to go back to Delicious Delights."

Cyndi laughed. "I know what you mean. I love that place, which is why I limit myself to a visit once a week. Their éclairs are to die for."

"Don't tell me that," she groused. "I'll gain ten pounds the first month I'm here if I'm not careful."

Shamus snorted, but wisely said nothing. He pushed back his chair and began to help his wife clear the table.

"Let me help with that." Amanda stood, but Shamus waved her back to her seat.

"You've had enough of a shock today. Relax and enjoy."

"Shamus told me what happened." Cyndi carried the cheesecake over to the table and went back to the counter and grabbed plates and forks.

"It's my own fault. I should have paid more attention, but everything happened so fast. Seymour's death and the fact that he'd authorized his lawyer to sell the building was a blow." Amanda watched as Shamus carried two mugs of coffee to the table and handed her one. "Thanks."

"That had to have been devastating." Cyndi cut a huge hunk of cheesecake, popped it on to a fine china plate and handed it to her.

"It was hard, but it all turned out for the best." Amanda forked up a piece of the cheesecake and took a bite, savoring the rich chocolate flavor. When she put her fork back down on the edge of her plate, she noticed the intricate floral pattern around the edge. "You know, Linda would love this plate."

Linda Fletcher was an antiques dealer and the reason that Amanda had met Cyndi and Shamus. When Cyndi had decided to clear out her family's home, Linda had contacted Seymour and he'd sent Amanda to Jamesville. Cyndi, Linda and she had become good friends.

Cyndi wrinkled her nose and laughed. "Last time she was here, she tried to talk me out of them, but I like them. I think she's slightly appalled that they're my everyday dishes."

"I think she's afraid I'll break them," Shamus added as he carried the final mug over and sat back down. He smiled at his wife as she handed him a thick slice of the dessert.

"No she isn't," Cyndi scolded. "Okay, well maybe." They all laughed and continued to eat. After a minute, Cyndi continued. "Now, back to the house..."

"Umm," Amanda said as she swallowed her last bite of cheesecake. She wished she'd opted for wearing sweatpants instead of jeans. The zipper was about ready to burst and the button was digging into her belly. She was well and truly stuffed. "As I said, the decision to move here happened so fast." She raised her mug and saluted Cyndi. "And thank you so much for the suggestion."

"Hey, I was being selfish. I wanted you closer. A couple trips a year wasn't enough time to spend with you."

Tears pricked Amanda's eyes. The emotion caught her slightly off guard. She was so used to it being just her and Seymour. It was nice to be wanted.

She blinked and changed the subject back to the house. "The minute I saw the house I knew I wanted it. I did check the foundation, the roof and the plumbing, but for some reason I didn't even think about the electrical system." Amanda took a sip of her coffee

before continuing. "Of course, there was an inspection. I had to go back to Vermont, so the realtor handled it and faxed me the report. I went back and checked all the papers I received on the house and there in black and white on the inspector's report is the fact that the electrical system needed upgrading. No one hid anything from me. I just wasn't paying close enough attention."

"The real estate agent should have made certain you understood everything about the house." Shamus pushed his empty plate aside and sat back in his chair. "Who was it?"

"A guy named Jim Brown."

Shamus frowned. "Damn, I should have known. He probably didn't want to lose the sale."

"Something wrong with him? He seemed like a nice enough guy." In his late thirties, Jim Brown had been professional and amiable enough. "He gave me all the papers. It's my fault for not reading them as closely as I should."

"He's Elizabeth Sutter's ex-husband, and Jonah's ex-brother-in-law. It wasn't exactly an amicable divorce." Shamus's expression was grim. "It would be best if those two were never in the same room together."

Amanda shrugged, not quite knowing what else to do. "It's a small town. Not like they can avoid each other." It would be awkward as hell though.

"No, it's impossible to avoid someone forever in a town this size." Cyndi hesitated as if she wanted to say something, but then changed the subject. "You brought paint samples with you?"

"I did." Amanda accepted the change of subject, reached behind and grabbed her bag. Digging into it, she pulled out a handful of paint chips. "I've narrowed it down, but I'd like a second opinion. I also want to know how long you think this project will take?" She directed her question to Shamus.

He tilted his head to one side and thought for a second. "Go ahead and buy your paint. I don't think it will take Jonah long. He does quality work, but he's fast. I can come by in the evenings once he's finished in a room and make any necessary repairs to the drywall. That way you can start priming and painting a room at a time."

"That's a lot of trouble for you." Although, Amanda couldn't deny she was more than ready to get started painting.

"It's no problem." He hesitated. "It might be none of my business and feel free to say so, but are you okay money-wise? I mean you just bought a house, paid for a move and now this. I can talk to Jonah if you need some time to pay him."

The tears were back in her eyes and there was a huge lump in her throat. No one in her life, other than Seymour, had ever shown such care and concern for her.

"And I'll help you paint." Cyndi picked up the paint chips and started to spread them across the table. "Show me what you've picked out."

She cleared her throat. "I'll be fine, but thank you so much for asking, Shamus." A thought occurred to her. "I can pay you too if that's what you were worried about earlier today."

He held up his hand. "That's not open for discussion. Our helping you is our housewarming present to you."

"Thank you." She didn't know what else to say in the face of their generosity, so she picked up a paint chip. "I thought I'd put this cozy forest green in the front room I plan to use for the shop. I think it will contrast well with the bookshelves I'm going to have built."

When she unlocked her front door, Amanda was still feeling warm and fuzzy and stuffed from the wonderful supper that Cyndi had cooked for them. She closed and locked it behind her and just stood there, allowing the peace to surround her.

The house still felt empty, but that would change once the renovations were done and all her furniture was in place. At the moment, the bulk of her belongings were in what was the dining room. Thankfully, the older home had a formal living room as well as a front parlor. That allowed her to turn the parlor into her shop, while letting her keep the living room as a private space. It was confusing right now, but Amanda had it all planned in her mind.

Kicking off her shoes, she padded up the stairs and into her bedroom. She'd left the upstairs hall light on when she'd left, so she could easily find her way up the stairs without having to worry about tripping.

She stifled a yawn as she walked into her bedroom and dumped her large purse by her bed. It had been a long day. She'd managed to get Elizabeth's books catalogued and she'd checked her online store and completed several transactions.

She'd have to go to the post office to mail the books to their new owners. Her life and work didn't stop just because she'd moved. All the boxes for her shop had been carefully marked and coded so she knew exactly what inventory was in each of them. If only she'd done the same thing with the boxes for the rest of the house.

Not that she had a ton of stuff, but she'd collected more than she'd thought over the past few years. At least Seymour had hired a company to deal with his stuff after his death. The man had been ruthlessly organized to the end. She'd been allowed to pick out what she'd wanted before the rest was either sold or donated to charity.

Even with weeding out her belongings before she packed, she had an impressive amount of boxes.

Tomorrow, she promised herself as she pulled off her clothing and tugged an oversized T-shirt over her head. Tomorrow, she'd sit down with Jonah and sketch out a timeline for the project. That would give her an idea of when she could do what. She'd have him do the front room first, if possible. That way she could get the walls painted, the shelves built and her shop up and running. She might be doing okay financially, but it wouldn't pay to be lax with her business. She had customers depending on her.

Amanda removed her glasses and placed them safely on the bedside table. She rubbed the pads of her fingers over her eyes and stifled another yawn. It had been a long, eventful day.

Padding to the bathroom, she brushed her teeth, washed her face and went through her nightly routine. She was proud of the fact that she'd managed not to think about Jonah all evening.

Closing her eyes, she groaned. "He's back."

Glancing at her reflection in the bathroom mirror, she scowled at her slightly blurry reflection. "The man is sexy as all get-out, but he only wants to sleep with you."

What's wrong with that?

Ignoring the little voice in the back of her head, she continued her lecture. "Sure, you'd probably have the best sex of your life, but it wouldn't last."

But you'd have the best sex of your life!

That little voice was beginning to get on her nerves because it was starting to make sense. "Sex with Jonah would be incredible." Her reflection nodded in agreement. She had no idea how she knew that, she just did. The man exuded sex appeal.

"What am I thinking?" She turned away from the mirror, flicked off the light, and headed to bed. "I'm thinking that it might be nice to actually have an orgasm that wasn't self-induced."

Amanda slapped her hand over her mouth even though there was no one there who could hear her. It was enough that she'd heard herself utter the words. Feeling silly, she pulled her hand away.

"Okay, so not every woman has an orgasm during sex," she grumbled to herself. She could feel her cheeks heating as she stumbled to bed and crawled in. Yanking the covers up around her, she settled her head against the pillows.

Her body had not been silent during her conversation with herself. Her skin felt hot, her breasts heavy. Ignoring the pulsing between her thighs, she turned over on her side and reached for the knob on the bedside lamp.

Before she could turn it off, the phone rang.

## Chapter Five

Amanda reached for her glasses and slipped them on. She glanced at the clock radio as she picked up her cordless phone. It was only half-past ten. Not too late. Maybe it was Cyndi, checking to see if she made it home okay. "Hello."

"Hello, sugar." The smooth male voice went through her like a hot knife through butter. Every cell in her body seemed to spark with anticipation.

"Jonah." Her voice shook slightly. It was if her very thoughts had conjured the man from thin air. Her fingers tightened around the phone.

"Did you have a good evening with Shamus and Cyndi?"

She frowned and then remembered he'd been here when Shamus had mentioned it earlier today. "Yes, I did. They're good friends." She could hear the defensiveness in her voice and sighed. Taking a deep breath, she tried to settle her nerves and slow her pounding heart. "I had a wonderful time."

"That's good."

She closed her eyes and absorbed the sound of his voice. Damn, she had it bad. "Jonah, what do you want?" The quicker she found out, the quicker she could get him off the phone. As it was, she suspected it would be quite some time until she relaxed enough to sleep. Her body felt as if she'd been drinking coffee for about six hours straight.

"You."

That one stark word made her heart start pounding again. Amanda opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, trying to distract herself from the growing ache low in her belly. The paint was chipped in several places. It was on her to-do list.

"You still there, sugar?"

She nodded and then sighed, giving up trying to get control of her unruly hormones. "Yes, I'm here." She raked her free hand through her hair, making an even bigger mess of her curls. "But I don't know what to say."

"Say yes." His voice was little more than a sensual murmur. Amanda swallowed hard and tried to ignore the hard points of her nipples pressing against her T-shirt.

"You know I can't," she whispered. But oh how she wanted to say yes.

She definitely wasn't the type of woman to make a rash decision about anything. Slow and methodical was more her speed, but these past months her life had been speeding out of control.

"Sure you can," he coaxed. "We're both adults. We're both free." He paused and she could hear the brush of fabric on fabric as he shifted position. "I could make you feel so good."

"It's not that easy for me." She'd never had sex for the sake of it. She'd always been involved in a relationship with the men she'd slept with.

"It can be." Jonah sighed softly. "Don't over-think it, Amanda. We could even start now if you want."

She leaned back against the headboard and tried to get comfortable. "What do you mean?"

"What are you wearing?"

She glanced down at her slightly ragged T-shirt that she wore as a nightshirt. If he expected her to act as if she was wearing something sexy, he was sadly mistaken. "I'm wearing a white T-shirt that says 'Booksellers Do It By The Book' and a pair of white cotton panties."

Silence. Then a low chuckle filled the line. "I like it. I can picture it on you. I'll bet the shirt doesn't quite cover your ass, does it?"

"No. Almost, but not quite."

"Hmm."

She had no idea what he meant by that, but she wasn't about to ask. It felt strange to talk about her nightclothes to Jonah.

"Your bed is warm and your sheets are rumpled. I wanted to crawl in there today and pull you in with me."

Arousal pulsed low in Amanda's belly. She pressed her legs together to try to ease the growing ache. It didn't help. "I saw you looking at the bed." Was that low and sultry voice hers?

Jonah laughed. "Oh, yeah. I couldn't resist. I couldn't bury my face between your sweet thighs, but I did catch your scent drifting up from your pillow. It was warm and musky, with a hint of lavender."

Her breathing was coming faster now. The things he said. She fanned her face, but it didn't help. Her body felt like a blast furnace on high. Bury his face between her thighs. She'd read about such things, but no man had ever done it for her before.

As if he could read her thoughts, he continued. "I'm going to taste your sweetness some day, Amanda. And soon. I'll bet you'd taste like honey with a touch of spice."

She squirmed and sank lower onto the mattress, kicking the covers off her overheated body.

"I'll bet your pussy is hot and wet for me now. Isn't it, sugar?" His breathing was deep and even. "Put your hands between your legs and check."

"Jonah," she wailed, partly embarrassed, but wholly aroused.

"Do it," he commanded. "You know you want to."

She licked her lips, which suddenly felt parched. Her hand slid down her stomach and dipped between her thighs.

"Are you touching yourself yet? Talk to me, sugar. Tell me everything."

"Yes." Her fingers drifted over her cotton-covered mound and she moaned when they rubbed her clit.

"That's it." His voice was deeper now.

It occurred to her that she didn't know what he was doing. "What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Are you..." she swallowed the lump in her throat and tried again, "...are you hard for me?"

"Oh, yeah. My dick is as hard as a spike."

His words aroused her further and she arched her hips upward, letting her fingers slip beneath the band of her panties. Her sex was hot and wet. "Are you touching yourself?" Her voice was little more than a gasp.

"Yes. I've got my hand wrapped around my shaft, pumping up and down, all the while pretending it's you who is touching me."

"Mmm." She wanted to touch him. Wanted to feel him. "What does it feel like?"

"Hard and hot. If you were here with me, I'd slide into your wet heat and take us both on the ride of our lives."

"Jonah." She whispered his name, needing more from him. She couldn't believe she was actively involved in phone sex with a man she'd just met. But she felt a connection to Jonah. One that was undeniable. "What do you want me to do?"

"Take off your panties, sugar. And your nightshirt. I want you naked."

Putting the phone aside, she sat up and yanked the T-shirt over her head and skimmed her panties down her legs, tossing them aside. Lying back, she tucked the phone next to her ear. She could hear perfectly and keep both hands free. "What now?"

"Touch your breasts. Feel the weight in your palms. Circle your nipples with your thumbs."

She followed his instructions, touching herself. She'd found fulfillment while touching herself before, but it had felt nothing like this. Knowing Jonah was listening and imagining her naked pushed her arousal higher.

"What color are your nipples?"

Amanda licked her dry lips and looked down at herself. It was strange to watch her fingers as they teased the tips of her breasts. "Dark pink."

"Ahh," he sighed. "I thought so. They'd be ripe as a red berry if I had time to suck them."

Her nipples tightened in response. She wanted him to touch her breasts. To rub his fingertips over her nipples before he suckled her with his wet, warm mouth.

His voice was strained, but at least he could still talk. She was having a hard time even breathing.

"Put your feet flat on the bed and spread your legs wide." Jonah waited a second. "Are you open for me?"

Doing as he asked, she pushed her legs as wide as they could go. "Yes."

"Good," he purred. "Some day you'll do that for me in person. I'll look at you first, and enjoy seeing your slick, pink folds. Then I'll crawl between those thighs and eat you until you scream."

"Jonah," she cried. Her inner muscles clenched painfully as her hips arched off the bed. She continued to pluck at her nipples with her fingers. It wasn't enough.

"Touch yourself between your thighs. Put one finger inside yourself as far as it will go."

Panting, she let her hands slip between her legs. "Are you touching yourself?"

"Oh, yeah. My balls are so tight to my body they feel like they might burst."

Satisfaction flowed through her at the thought. She wanted him to come. Wanted to hear him cry out his release. She slipped one finger past the opening of her core. Her vaginal muscles clamped down hard. It wasn't enough, so she added another one.

"Talk to me, sugar. Do you have one finger inside you?"

"Two," she panted.

He groaned. "Make it three and stroke your clit. I can't hold on much longer and I want to hear you scream."

Every nerve ending in her body was alive and screaming for release. Her breasts felt heavy, the nubs puckered tight. She spread the lips of her sex wide, feathering her thumb over her swollen clit as she worked a third finger into her core. Cream slid from her as a light sheen of perspiration covered her skin.

"Harder." She could hear the strain in Jonah's voice. Knew he was close.

She worked her fingers in and out of her body. Through the phone, she could hear his deep breathing, hear him straining toward his own release. Amanda pushed harder, teasing her clit as she pressed her fingers deep. Her back arched. She dug her feet into the mattress and lifted her pelvis off the bed.

Heat slammed into her and she cried out. Her inner muscles convulsed, tightening around her fingers. She cried out again as she dropped back to the bed. Her body shook as the heat spread from her core to her entire body. She heard Jonah's yell. It echoed in her ear and then there was silence.

Amanda wasn't sure how long she lay there with her legs sprawled wide, but she stirred when a cold shiver raced over her. Reaching out, she snagged the covers and pulled them over her. She sighed and snuggled beneath the warmth. It was only then she realized that the phone had slipped lower and that someone was calling her name.

"Yes, I'm still here." How could she have forgotten Jonah?

"How are you feeling?"

How did she feel? Replete, yet somewhat dissatisfied. "I feel good."

"It will feel even better when I'm there with you. When I can run my fingers over every inch of your skin, when I can lick and taste every sweet spot of your body."

Although she'd just had an amazing orgasm, her body stirred to life at his words. Then she stilled. There was no longer any question of if they'd sleep together. The question had become when it would happen. After what they'd just done, she couldn't deny the fact that she wanted him more than any man she'd ever met. Why shouldn't she have an affair with Jonah? As he said, they were both single and healthy. Why not?

Because your heart could get broken.

She ignored the voice of common sense and listened to the one she'd heard earlier. If she wanted an affair, she'd have one. She'd just be careful to keep her heart out of it. This was about sex, nothing more.

A noise drifted up from downstairs. Amanda stilled. Jonah started to say something, but she shushed him.

"What is it?" His voice changed in an instant. Gone was the sated lover and in his place was the hard man she'd first met.

"I think I hear something downstairs. It's probably just the old water pipes or the house settling. I'm going to check."

"Lock yourself in the bathroom and call the cops."

"I will not." She tucked the phone beneath her ear and pushed the covers back. Sitting up, she looked around and found her panties. Grabbing them, she tugged them on. "Wouldn't that look great? Woman alone panics and calls police for nothing. I'm not some helpless female, Jonah. It's nothing."

She picked up her T-shirt and shook it out. "Hang on." Ignoring Jonah's tirade on the other end, she put down the phone and pulled her shirt on. Deciding she needed socks too, she went to the chest of drawers and pulled out a thick pair of athletic socks and pulled them on.

"Do you hear anything else?" he was asking when she finally picked up the phone again.

"No. Like I said, it's probably just the house. It's an old structure and I'm not familiar with all the noises yet."

"I still think you should call the cops."

She heard him rustling around. "What are you doing?"

"If you won't call the cops, I'm coming over to check things out. I'm heading out the front door now."

"That's not really necessary." She walked to the doorway and headed down the hall to the stairs. She wasn't sure she wanted Jonah here, not after what they'd just done. Phone sex was one thing, but she wasn't certain she was ready for the real thing yet.

"Doesn't matter." She could hear more sounds through the phone and knew Jonah was getting dressed.

"Why don't you hang up and I'll see you when you get here?" She had no idea why she was suddenly whispering. The stairs were dark as was the landing below. An icy finger of dread crept up her spine. Great, now she was letting his fears affect her.

"Stay on the line. Don't you dare hang up." The fierceness of his reply startled her. "I'm leaving now." "Okay." In truth, she was glad that he was still on the line. She was starting to get spooked. Taking a deep breath, she reached out and flicked the light switch at the top of the stairs. Nothing. "Damn."

"What?" His voice was sharp.

"The stupid light on the stairs doesn't work." She grabbed the railing and started down. "I'll be glad when you get the wiring of this place fixed and everything working properly."

"First thing tomorrow morning, sugar," he promised.

That was all fine and dandy, but it didn't help her tonight. When she reached the bottom of the steps, she paused and listened. Something in the air felt different. She sniffed and caught the scent of something that didn't belong. Tentatively, she moved forward two steps and then stopped.

Her heart was pounding so loud she could barely hear anything above the noise. She took a deep breath and held it. Her heartbeat slowed enough for her to hear Jonah yelling at her to talk to him.

Instead, she tried to listen to her senses. Her nose picked up the unusual smell again and she paused. It was the smell of perspiration and men's cologne.

Someone was in the house with her.

She slowly began to back away from the opening to the front room. The low sound of a shoe sliding on the flooring told her it was too late for stealth.

Whirling, she leapt toward the stairs. She could lock herself in the bathroom and climb out the window if necessary.

She felt a whoosh in the air behind her. An arm wrapped around her neck, cutting off her air. Panicked, she grabbed the arm, dropping the phone in the process. Her captor swore.

Amanda began to struggle, kicking with her heels. She knew she couldn't do much damage in her stockinged feet, but she tried. Her heels connected with his shins, but that didn't shake him. Her assailant tightened his hold, lifting her off her feet in the process.

Breathing became impossible. The edge of her vision began to turn black. She dug her fingers into his arm, tugging with everything she had in her.

His arm loosened slightly and she sucked in a deep breath as he hissed, "Where is it? Where's the book?"

She had no idea what he was talking about. She shook her head and he tightened his arm again, cutting off her air. She wanted to fight, but found it impossible to lift her limbs. Her vision was dimming. He was strangling her to death. Reaching behind, she tried to jab at his face. Her fingers touched cloth instead of skin.

Sirens sounded in the distance. The man swore again and shook her. "This isn't over." He released her and she fell to the floor, gasping for air. She heard the patter of his footsteps and the crack of the backdoor as it was thrown open. He was gone. Breathing seemed impossible. She clutched her throat.

The sound of a loud banging jolted her. Then Jonah's voice reached her. "Amanda," he yelled. She wanted to answer, but couldn't find the breath to do so.

Rolling on to her hands and knees, she tried to crawl to the front door. She heard the sound of glass smashing, and then Jonah was beside her, a gun held steady in his right hand as he peered down the hallway. "Amanda." She could see the concern in his eyes as he gently eased her back down to the floor. "Relax. Just take it easy. You're fine, you're safe."

The sirens got louder. "Give me a second." He moved away from her and she wanted to scream at him to stay. She must have made some small noise because he responded. "I just need to open the door for the police." She watched as he turned on the porch light, unlocked the door and opened it wide before quickly returning to her side. He kept his weapon out until a car pulled up outside. She could see the lights flashing through the open door. Jonah lowered his weapon, tucking it at the small of his back and pulling his shirt and jacket over it.

The first deputy arrived seconds later, weapon drawn, followed by the sheriff himself. "What's going on?"

Jonah glanced at Sheriff Patrick O'Rourke. He was Shamus's older brother and, from all accounts, a good lawman. "Intruder. Probably went out the back door."

Patrick sent two of his men that way and leaned over Amanda. "Ambulance is on the way. How is she?"

Amanda was suddenly very conscious about her state of undress. Her legs were bare. She tugged at her T-shirt and shivered. Jonah swore and yanked off his jacket, spreading it over her legs. "Better?"

She nodded and tried to speak. Nothing came out but a raw croak.

"No, don't try and talk." Jonah tilted her head back slightly and stared at her neck. "He tried to strangle you, didn't he?"

She nodded and shivered again. She felt cold to her very soul. It was just beginning to dawn on her that someone had tried to kill her.

## Chapter Six

Jonah was vibrating with anger, but he allowed none of it outwardly show. On the outside, he was calm and controlled. Violence was something he was used to. In his years in the Special Forces, he'd been in some of the world's most dangerous locations. He wasn't one of those guys who enjoyed violence, but he didn't shy away from doing what needed to be done.

But this was different.

Someone had tried to kill Amanda. Sweet, innocent Amanda, with her fiery red hair and her sexy curves. The more cynical part of his brain wasted no time in pointing out the fact that maybe she wasn't as innocent as she seemed. This didn't seem to be a random burglary that had gone bad. Usually, burglars avoided homeowners, running rather than confronting them. Breaking and entering was a lot less serious charge than attempted murder.

This felt personal. And as soon as Amanda was up to talking, he was going to get some answers. It didn't matter that they'd just met. He felt an attachment to her on some deep level that he couldn't deny. Not that he'd let himself get too involved with Amanda or her life, but he couldn't turn his back on a woman in danger either.

She couldn't talk, but kept her eyes on him as the sheriff's deputies went over the downstairs, room by room. One of them called out to the Sheriff. Patrick glanced at Jonah and then down at Amanda. "The ambulance will be here any second. I'll be right back."

Amanda reached out, her hand groping for Jonah's. He took her much smaller hand in his and held on tight. "You're safe. Everything is going to be just fine."

"Sorry," she croaked. She coughed and clutched at her throat.

He frowned. "Don't try and talk until the doctor's looked at you. And you have nothing to be sorry for."

"My problem. Not yours." Her face was stark white, making her freckles even more prominent.

Jonah eased her into a seated position, drawing her into his arms. Her entire body trembled as he pulled her closer. He could feel the soft mound of her breast press against his chest, could smell the scent of her floral soap. His cock twitched, but he ignored it. He was so glad she was alive. He wouldn't even contemplate what could have happened to her if he hadn't arrived in time.

Patrick strode down the hall toward them just as the emergency medical technicians came through the front door. Reluctantly, Jonah released Amanda into their care. One of the emergency technicians covered her with a blanket while the other began checking her throat and vitals.

Jonah pulled his jacket back on, never taking his eyes off Amanda as they asked her questions and checked her from head to toe. She balked when one of them pulled the stretcher alongside her.

"No stretcher," she croaked and started to push herself to her feet. "I'm okay." The fine quivering in her body contradicted her assertion.

The EMT checking her over put out his hand and stopped her. "You've been through a trauma. It's a precautionary measure. Let us load you on the stretcher and take you to the hospital so the doc can check you out. Okay?"

"I'll be right behind you," Jonah promised her.

After a long moment, she nodded and closed her eyes. Jonah kept an eye on things as they carefully lifted her onto the stretcher, strapped her on and carried her out to the waiting ambulance. He watched the stretcher until it disappeared from sight. Then he turned to Patrick. "What did you find?"

Patrick's eyes widened at the demand, but he didn't hold back. "The back door was unlocked. Amanda must have forgotten to lock it. The guy had a free pass into the place." He waved over to the front room. "He ransacked a few of her boxes. I have no idea if anything was taken. I'll know more once I talk to Amanda and she has a chance to go through everything."

Jonah nodded and turned away. He'd find out more later. Now he had to get to the hospital.

"Jonah?"

He stopped and faced Patrick, who stood with his legs braced apart and his hands on his hips. "Yeah?"

"What were you doing here?"

"I was on the phone with Amanda when she heard something downstairs. She wouldn't let me phone the police, so I decided to come over and check things out for myself. On the way over, her line went dead so I called it in. I figured I'd rather be safe than sorry."

Patrick nodded. "I wasn't aware you knew Amanda. She just moved here a few days ago." The sheriff's expression was unreadable, but Jonah could sense that the lawman wasn't quite satisfied with his explanation.

"I met her when I brought a load of books over. She's selling them for Elizabeth. I'm also doing some work on the wiring for this place. Shamus called me this morning when he found out that Amanda is having some electrical problems." Normally the most patient of men, Jonah found that impatience was eating at him. "If you have any more questions, I'll be with Amanda."

Not waiting to see if Patrick had anything left to ask, Jonah strode to his truck and headed to the hospital.

Amanda lost track of how long she'd been waiting in the emergency room, but she knew she'd been here a while. She'd been whisked inside upon arrival and had since been poked and prodded from head to toe. A cold pack had been used on her neck to keep the swelling down. In spite of the trauma, she'd dozed once or twice, always waking with a jolt of fear as the memory of her attack drifted through her subconscious.

Her head was pounding and her throat throbbed. She swallowed and moaned. The doctor, whose nametag proclaimed him to be Doctor David Ames, gave her a sympathetic look as he probed lightly at her neck.

"The good news is there isn't any permanent damage." He straightened and offered her a slight smile. "The bad news is that you're going to have a bruised neck and a sore throat for a few days."

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She was fine. Yes, she'd been scared out of her wits, but she was okay. A sore throat and bruised neck was a small price to pay for being alive. "Thanks," she whispered.

The doctor nodded. "You take it easy and talk only when absolutely necessary. I'm going to give you something to help ease the pain. Other than that, warm tea with honey will help. That and time is about all anyone can do."

A knock sounded and the sheriff poked his head in through the door. "Can I see the patient?"

Doctor Ames nodded. "Don't let her strain her voice." He turned back to her. "There's no need to keep you tonight as long as you have someone to stay with you."

"I'll stay." The deep male voice washed over her like a warm blanket, leaving her feeling safe and warm. Jonah had come just like he'd said he would.

Sheriff O'Rourke frowned at Jonah. "You need to wait outside."

Amanda made a small sound of distress and Jonah's head swiveled around, his gaze caught hers. "I'm staying."

He pushed past Patrick and came over to the side of the bed she was sitting on. "You doing okay?"

She nodded and pulled the blanket more tightly around her. She couldn't seem to get warm. Amanda knew it was a result of the shock and trauma, but knowing didn't make the cold any easier to bear.

Patrick O'Rourke walked over beside her and smiled. She'd met him several times when she'd come to visit Cyndi and Shamus.

"I've got questions for you. You up to answering?"

She nodded and looked around for something to write on. Seeing nothing, she made a motion with her hand, pantomiming the act of writing. Patrick reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and pulled out a small pad of paper and a pen. Amanda smiled at him as she took them and tried not to notice that her hand was trembling.

"What do you remember?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip, trying to think back. "Noise," she croaked and then coughed.

Jonah swore. Grabbing a cup of water from the bedside table, he held the straw to her lips. "Sip."

Gratefully, she sucked back a small amount of the tepid water. It felt good against the swollen tissues of her throat. She mouthed the words "thank you" and straightened her shoulders. The quicker this was done, the better.

"So you heard a noise and went downstairs to investigate?" She nodded and the sheriff continued his questioning. "Then what?"

Jonah picked up the story. "I was on the phone with her at the time. She started down the stairs, but told me the light at the bottom didn't work."

"Deliberate?" Patrick asked.

Jonah shrugged. "I'll check on that. The house is having all sorts of electrical issues, which is why I'd planned to start working on it tomorrow. That's what Amanda and I were discussing on the phone when all this started."

Amanda felt her cheeks heating and bowed her head. Staring at her lap, she tried not to think about what they'd been doing when all this happened. She appreciated Jonah protecting her reputation. Clutching the blanket tighter around her, she glanced up at the men. Thankfully, they were ignoring her for the moment.

She knew she had to get a grip on herself, but it was hard. Someone had tried to strangle her tonight. Before that, she'd had phone sex. The entire night was surreal, like an erotic dream that morphed into a horror novel.

"Amanda?" She jerked at the sound of her name. Patrick was waiting, a look of pity on his face.

She straightened her shoulders. She'd seen that look her entire childhood from well-meaning social workers and do-gooders. Amanda hated it. She didn't need anyone's pity. She'd built a good life and was a strong, independent woman, not a child.

Gripping the pen tight in her fingers, she jotted down a note and showed Patrick.

"You smelled him?"

She nodded. Closing her eyes, she tried to remember the smell. Fear and cologne. That's what the smell was. She wrote that down and showed the sheriff.

"Definitely a man?"

Amanda nodded. No doubt in her mind. Something else popped into her head and she wrote it down, underlining it.

Patrick's eyes narrowed. "He was wearing a mask?"

Again, she nodded. All this bobbing of her head wasn't helping her headache. "I felt it when I tried to hit him. I heard his voice too." She spoke before she thought. The pain was still there, but at least this time she hadn't started coughing.

"He spoke to you?" Jonah stood beside her, strong and solid. She wanted to lean on him, rest against him for a moment. Instead, she straightened her spine. He was just passing through her life. The only person she could depend on was herself.

She nodded and tried to recall exactly what her attacker had said. Clutching the pen tight, she scribbled on the pad. When she was done, she turned it so both men could read it.

Where is it? Where's the book?

"That's what he said?" Amanda shivered and nodded as Patrick repeated the words.

Reality came crashing back down on top of her. Books. Her books. "Books," she whispered, too anxious to bother with writing. Grabbing Jonah's hand, she squeezed tight.

Patrick shook his head. "Whoever hurt you dumped a few of your boxes onto the floor."

Amanda moaned. Her books were her life, her livelihood.

"When you're feeling up to it, you'll have to inventory everything and see if anything is missing." Patrick shook his head. "You need to remember to start locking all your doors at night, especially the back one. It's not visible from the road so it's a more likely target for a thief. This is a small town, but we still have our share of crime."

Amanda shook her head. She'd locked her door. Hadn't she? Closing her eyes, she thought and thought. She'd taken her coffee out onto the back patio yesterday afternoon. Had she locked the door behind her? She was positive she had, but maybe she hadn't. Obviously, she hadn't or the attacker wouldn't have been able to just walk in. The lock was old and a bit tricky. It must not have latched tight. Something else for her to-do list, but this item went straight to the top.

Jonah's hand tightened around hers as if he knew exactly what she was thinking. "It's not your fault. This guy obviously wanted something specific and a lock wouldn't have stopped him. You have some really valuable books, don't you?"

Amanda nodded, not even wanting to contemplate the damage that might have been done to some of them. Yes, she had insurance, but that would never replace a book that had been destroyed.

Patrick reached out and took the pen and notebook from her. "That's it for tonight. I'll be in touch tomorrow. My men should be finished processing the crime scene by the time you get home. In the meantime, I'll leave a deputy in a car in front of your house."

"Thank you," she whispered.

Patrick glanced over at Jonah. "You taking her home?"

"Yes." There was no room for doubt in Jonah's reply.

Amanda wanted to protest that she could get herself home just fine, but she didn't. Truthfully, she could use some help right now. She felt battered and bruised and more frightened than she'd care to admit. She had no idea who would do this or what they wanted.

"I'll see you tomorrow. If you need anything just call." Patrick nodded at her and then left the room. She and Jonah were alone.

"Come on, sugar."

She started to slide off the bed, but he stopped her, scooping her into his arms, blanket and all.

"Walk," she protested, even as she leaned her head against his shoulder.

"You don't have any pants on and no one else needs to get an eyeful of your long, sexy legs, but me."

He thinks my legs are sexy. Amanda couldn't help but smile in spite of the situation. No man had ever given her such a lovely compliment before.

"Besides," he continued. "You're only wearing socks on your feet."

Jonah pushed his way through the swinging door and stopped long enough to handle the necessary paperwork and for Doctor Ames to hand her a prescription. He carried her through the parking lot to his truck. The drive home was done in silence.

As promised, a lone police car sat out in front of her home. The deputy got out when Jonah pulled into her driveway. "The front door is unlocked, but the rest of the house is secured. We finished with the crime scene a few minutes ago."

"Thanks." Jonah came around the truck and lifted her out. He took her up the walkway and into the house, stopping only long enough to secure the front door.

Her arms tightened around him as they passed the spot where her attacker had assaulted her. "Don't think about it. Not tonight." He started up the stairs, carrying her as if she weighed nothing. He wasn't even breathing hard and she wasn't exactly skinny. The man was all muscle.

The bedside light was still on in her room and he carried her straight to the bed. "Do you need to go to the bathroom?"

She nodded and he released her legs slowly, holding her steady until she had her balance.

"Do you need help?"

She snorted. As if she'd let him help her with that. Ignoring him, she padded to the bathroom. First thing she did was look in the mirror. Dark, mottled bruises circled her neck. Amanda shivered and turned away. It would be even worse in the morning, but as the doctor said, it would eventually heal.

That was all that mattered. That and trying to figure out who would do something like this to her. Was it a stranger? A thief who knew she had rare books? Or was it someone she knew? A past customer who'd followed her to Jamesville?

Finishing in the bathroom, she headed back to her room. Jonah was sitting on the side of the bed waiting patiently for her. He'd taken off his boots and socks and laid them neatly beside her dresser. His leather jacket was hooked over the closet doorknob and his shirt was folded and laid on top of a box. His belt, wallet, cell phone and keys sat beside his shirt. His gun looked out of place resting next to her lamp on the bedside table. Jonah wore only his jeans.

He stood as she made her way to the bed. His jeans rode low on his hips, emphasizing his lean waist and wide chest. The muscles in his arms flexed and rippled as he held up the covers and motioned her into bed. A light dusting of dark chest hair covered his upper torso before arrowing down the center of his belly and disappearing into the waistband of his jeans. He looked as sexy as any pin-up model.

"Get in," he urged.

She wasn't at all sure about this. She knew he'd told the sheriff he'd stay with her, but she hadn't realized that he'd meant it literally.

"We're just going to sleep." The corner of his mouth tilted upward. "As sexy as you are, I'm just plain worn out after all the excitement tonight."

Amanda ducked her head, feeling foolish now. Of course, all they were going to do was sleep. She was too battered and bruised to do anything else. And Jonah had to be exhausted. He'd been out at her house at the crack of dawn this morning and he'd spent half the night at the hospital with her.

She hurried past him and climbed into bed. At the last second, she remembered to remove her glasses and place them on the bedside table. Jonah tugged the covers over her and then lay down on top of them. His actions surprised her. "Cold?" she protested, flipping the top comforter over onto him.

Jonah's smile deepened. "Don't worry about me. I've slept in much worse conditions than this."

Was that supposed to make her feel better? She frowned, but he put his fingers over her lips before she could speak.

"Rest your voice. You'll feel better after a good night's sleep. We'll talk then." He turned off the light and she knew he was done talking for tonight.

She nodded, knowing he was right. Snuggling down, she turned onto her side and sighed. Jonah curled in behind her so that her head was tucked beneath his chin and her bottom was cuddled against his groin. She could feel his arousal through the covers and their clothing.

His arm wrapped around her, his hand resting between her breasts. She felt completely surrounded and protected. She was suddenly struck by what Jonah had done for her. He'd saved her life and was still watching over her. "Thank you," she whispered.

She felt his lips graze the top of her head. "You're welcome. Now sleep."

Amanda's last thought was that there was no way she would sleep after the trauma of this evening.

Jonah held Amanda until he was certain she was asleep. Her deep, even breathing soothed the anger churning inside him. Someone had almost killed her tonight. That was unacceptable.

It didn't matter that he'd only met her yesterday. Nor did it matter that he wasn't the kind of man to settle down in a relationship. All he knew for sure was that Amanda was important to him.

When her phone had gone dead while they'd been talking, he'd almost lost it. The sharp talons of fear had gripped him—icy-cold knives tearing at his belly. He'd driven like a madman to get to her, afraid that he'd be too late.

Slipping his arm free, he slid out of bed. Amanda gave a soft snort and moan before settling back to sleep with a sigh. He waited, watching her until he was certain she wasn't going to wake up. Padding silently across the room, he paused long enough to grab his phone before stepping out into the hallway. Using the light from the keypad, he dialed a number from memory.

"What?" the voice on the other end growled.

Jonah grinned. His buddy was a man of few words. "I've got a situation."

"What do you need?" There was no hesitation, no questions, just an offer of help.

"How soon can you get to Jamesville, Maine?"

"I'll be there by tomorrow evening."

The line went dead and Jonah closed his phone. Tucking it into his pocket, he returned to bed, easing Amanda back into his arms.

## Chapter Seven

Feeling warm and cozy, Amanda didn't want to get up just yet. Her bed was particularly comfortable this morning. She snuggled down beneath the blankets and froze when a heavy male arm snaked out and pulled her toward a very large male body.

Jonah.

Memories of the night before came flooding back—the phone sex, the intruder, the desperate fight for her life and Jonah. It always came back to Jonah. He'd saved her life by frightening off her attacker. He'd been with her at the hospital. He'd brought her home and held her throughout the night.

Amanda rolled over onto her side. She blinked to bring him into focus and began to study his features. His straight black hair was brushed away, giving her a good view of his wide forehead and stubborn jaw. His nose was prominent, but it suited him. He looked rugged and tough, even in sleep.

As she thought that, his eyes popped open and she was caught in their green gaze. Her eyes were green too, but hers were a dark, mossy green. Jonah's eyes were lighter, like gemstones, sharp and intense.

"Morning." He leaned down and brushed a kiss on her forehead. His voice was as scratchy as the stubble on his jaw.

She swallowed. It didn't hurt quite as bad as it had last night, so she decided to give talking a try. "Morning." She sounded like a wounded frog, but it was better than nothing.

"How are you feeling?"

It was quite intimate to lie beside a man and talk in the early morning. Both of them not quite awake yet, sleep still weighing heavy. Amanda rested her hand on his chest and felt the steady thump of his heart against her palm. Her fingers curled slightly, tangling in his crisp, dark chest hair.

"Amanda?"

His eyebrows furrowed and she could see the concern in his eyes. What had he asked her? Oh yes, how was she? She took stock of her body and swallowed again. "Good. I feel pretty good." She gave a slight cough. Her throat felt dry.

"Try not to talk too much." He picked up a lock of her hair that was resting on her shoulder and let it slip through his fingers. "You have great hair. I love the deep cinnamon color mixed with the red and the way it curls." He held it up, looking at it in the morning light that streamed through the window.

Amanda could feel her cheeks heating and knew she was blushing. She'd always thought her hair too bright and curly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome." He rolled until she was flat on her back with him looming over her. "Makes a man wonder what it would look like spread across his pillows." Jonah smoothed her hair away from her face. "It's not my pillow, but it still looks sexy as hell."

He touched his mouth to hers, his lips nibbling on her lower one. Amanda's lips parted, but he didn't deepen the kiss, just continued his slow exploration of her mouth. Her toes curled and her skin tingled.

"You have very kissable lips." Jonah kissed the tip of her nose and down the slope to her cheekbone. "Your freckles are like little dots of cinnamon. Tasty."

He proceeded to kiss and lick at every single one of the fifteen freckles on her face. She knew exactly how many she had. They'd been the bane of her existence as a teenager and she'd counted them over and over, using every concoction she could find to get rid of them. Now, she was glad they were there.

Amanda had never felt so beautiful in her entire life. Jonah picked the features that had always bothered her the most—her wild hair and her freckles—and made her look at them in a new way. Yes, she'd come to accept herself as an adult, even gotten to the point where she thought she was pretty in a girl-next-door sort of way. But she'd never quite looked at herself the way Jonah was making her. It was an amazing experience.

Propping himself on one arm, he stared at her neck. His fingers traced the bruises. She knew they'd be even darker and more colorful than they were last night. His eyes narrowed as his fingers slid lower, trailing across her collarbone before coming to a stop at the V-neck of her nightshirt.

Amanda shivered. Goose bumps rose on her arms and legs, and heat suffused her entire body. Having Jonah in bed next to her was better than having a heated blanket. His touch was electrifying.

His hand shifted lower as he pushed the covers aside. She knew her nipples were outlined against the light fabric of the T-shirt. She bit her lip to stifle a moan as he circled one of the tight buds with his thumb. "I know you're not well enough for us to do anything yet, but I want to see you."

Fear and excitement warred within her. Jonah wanted to see her naked. Before she could reply, he stroked his thumb over her nipple, making it tighten even more. Her legs shifted restlessly against the sheets.

"Let me see you, sugar."

She wanted this, wanted to share herself with him. Jonah was special. Deep down inside, she knew she'd never meet another man who would make her feel the way he did. She was thirty-one, old enough to know her own mind. She nodded.

Jonah relaxed and smiled. It was only when he did so that she realized just how tense he'd been. Slowly, he let his hand drift down to the hem of her shirt and slid beneath it. He pushed it up, not stopping until her breasts were fully exposed. They weren't overly large, but they weren't too small either. Average breasts, but well formed.

"Let's get this off you." His voice was gruff, but his hands were gentle as he tugged the shirt over her head and tossed it aside. He stared down at her chest. Her breasts looked fuller to her eyes and they seemed to swell under his hot gaze.

He touched his finger to one nub and she sucked in a breath. Such a simple touch, yet it radiated outward, the sensation running down to her sex and making it pulse.

"Beautiful. Like succulent berries." Leaning down, he covered her nipple with his mouth and sucked.

Amanda moaned as his tongue circled the bud. Her hands fisted in his silky, black hair, pulling him closer. She could feel her panties getting damper with each swipe of his tongue.

He covered her pubic bone with his hand. The heat radiating from his hand made her want to moan with pleasure. She arched upward in a silent demand. His fingers slid beneath the waistband of her panties, sifted through her pubic hair and found her slick folds beyond.

Jonah gave a groan of pure pleasure and sat back, removing his hand. His hair was tousled, his eyes hot. "I've got to see you." Gripping the sides of her panties, he pulled them down slowly, giving her every opportunity to protest.

She lifted her hips and allowed him to skim her underwear over her legs and off. His hand skated up the inside of her thigh. "Open your legs and let me see."

Pulling her left leg toward her, she let her knee fall to the side. She knew he could see her sex, that she was totally exposed to him. Jonah leaned forward and buried his face between her thighs. She felt the rasp of his tongue against her sensitive flesh and cried out. Her throat tightened and she began to cough.

Jonah swore and sat up. "I'm sorry, sugar." He scooted up and wrapped his arm around her shoulders, holding her until the coughing spurt subsided. "You're not well enough for this yet."

As much as she wanted to protest, she knew he was right. Grabbing the sheet, she pulled it to her neck. "Shower."

Jonah rubbed the back of his neck with his hand and nodded. His face was strained, his eyes tired. He looked as bad as she felt. She glanced down at his crotch and saw the hard bulge pressing against the front of his jeans. He caught her looking at him and gave her a wry grin. "I'll survive."

She chuckled, suddenly feeling light-hearted and alive. After almost dying last night, she wanted to celebrate life and everything it had to offer. She realized that was why she'd had no qualms about stripping in front of Jonah this morning.

He wanted her and she wanted him. It was that simple and that complicated.

Life was too short not to take chances. After facing the possibility of her death, she knew she wanted to live more. That included indulging in an affair with Jonah. Who knew where it would end? Probably in heartbreak for her, but she didn't care any longer. Jonah made her feel sexy. She wanted him. And when she was feeling well again, she planned to have him.

Freshly showered and dressed, Amanda was just coming down the stairs when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it," Jonah called from the kitchen. Ignoring him, she went to the door and opened it. Her attacker wasn't exactly going to ring the bell, and besides, when she was putting in her contact lenses, she'd seen the police car still parked out front.

Cyndi and Shamus stood on the front step. Cyndi took one look at her and bit her bottom lip. Tears filled her friend's eyes. "We just found out." Pushing her way inside, she wrapped her arms around Amanda and hugged. "Are you okay?"

Shamus followed his wife inside and pushed the door closed. "Let her breathe, honey." He took his wife by the shoulders and gently pulled her back.

"I'm fine." Her voice was rough, but useable. She heard Jonah swearing under his breath as he came up behind her, but ignored him.

Cyndi gasped, her eyes going to Amanda's throat. "I can't believe something like this could happen in Jamesville. It's such a quiet town."

Amanda almost laughed. Jamesville might be a small town, but it had seen its fair share of trouble in the past few years. Cyndi had been at the center of some of it last year. But unlike Cyndi, Amanda didn't have a past in this town, or any enemies, at least none that she knew of.

"I told you not to open the door." Jonah rested his hands on her shoulders and turned her until she was facing him.

Amanda just patted him on the chest. "I didn't think anyone who wanted to hurt me would ring the bell." Her mouth was dry, her voice hoarse. "Drink first, talk after."

"You shouldn't be talking at all." He motioned to Shamus and Cyndi. "You might as well join us in the kitchen. The coffee is done and I was just getting ready to see what I could find for breakfast."

Shamus removed an insulated bag from his shoulder and held it in front of him. "We didn't know if Amanda had done much shopping yet, so Cyndi packed breakfast. We've got two kinds of muffins, bagels and fresh fruit. She's got several different kinds of herbal teas and some honey. I think she even packed some cereal and milk too."

Amanda smiled. "Thank you." Her friends' thoughtfulness brought tears to her eyes. She brushed the back of her hands over her eyes and turned away. She didn't dare look at anyone until she got herself back under control or she might burst into tears. She was feeling very emotional this morning, her mood going up and down like a yo-yo.

She headed to the kitchen, deliberately not looking at the mess in the front room. She knew she had to deal with it eventually, but not until she'd had a glass of juice and maybe a cup of tea.

Jonah caught up with her and hooked his arm around her waist. Leaning down, he whispered in her ear. "You're going to be emotional for a few days. It's the shock of everything that's happened. Just go with it."

Looking up at him, she realized that he understood what she was feeling. Somehow that made her feel stronger and she managed a smile. Jonah had been busy while she was in the shower. Her antique trestle table was in the center of the eating nook with four chairs around it instead of being buried in the formal dining room with the rest of her furniture. He'd also dug up some plates and found her cutlery.

She really had to get organized. She'd been so intent on working on her office, she'd neglected the rest of the place. That would have to change, but not today. She wanted to wait until the electrical work and the painting was done before she unpacked and set things up. It would be a nuisance to keep living out of boxes, but she could manage it for another week or so.

Shamus deposited the insulated bag on the counter and Cyndi moved in beside him. She opened the bag and began to pull out containers. The last thing she withdrew was a thermos. "I've got orange juice. While we're having some, you can tell us exactly what happened."

Two hours later, Amanda sat in her office chair, her computer propped on her desk. Jonah had decided it would be easier for her to work this way and had pulled both pieces of furniture into the center of the room. They'd have to be moved later when it was time to paint, but right now they were exactly what she needed to help her get organized. She methodically worked her way through the piles of books tossed haphazardly across the floor, trying to determine what, if anything was missing.

Within easy reach was a mug of lemon tea with a large dollop of honey. Cyndi had promised it was just what she needed. Amanda had already had one mug of the stuff and it seemed to be helping her throat.

Cyndi and Shamus had stayed long enough to share a cup of coffee with them while Jonah had filled them in on what had happened. Amanda had been surprised they'd found out about the attack so fast.

Shamus had chuckled. "News travels fast in a small town. Patrick called me first thing this morning. He knew it was only a matter of time before the news was all over town. The hospital staff all knows what happened, as do the sheriff's deputies. That's not even taking into account the folks who monitor the police radios."

Amanda shook her head at the memory and took a sip of her tea, letting the soothing lemon and honey slide down her throat. The small town grapevine was alive and well.

She also knew that Cyndi would be calling later to demand an explanation as to why Jonah had been here when they arrived. Amanda had seen the look of speculation in her friend's eyes, as Cyndi had looked first at Jonah and then back toward her.

"You okay?" She swiveled in her chair to face the doorway. Jonah leaned against the doorframe, his arms folded across his chest.

He'd asked her the same question several times this morning. "I'm fine. Really."

"Good." He watched her as if assessing her physical state for himself. "I replaced the glass in the window that I smashed out last night."

She hadn't even known that he'd broken out a window last night to gain access to the house. There was a vague memory of glass tinkling, but with everything else that had happened, she hadn't made the connection. She had heard him puttering around the house this morning, but it was more background noise than anything. She hadn't thought anything of it. All her focus was on finding out if any of her books were missing. "Thank you." She was thanking him for more than just fixing the window and they both knew it.

"No problem. They delivered the glass and it didn't take long for me to put it in. How about you?" He motioned to the books on the floor.

"There's not as much damage as I thought. I guess I interrupted him before he had much of a chance to go through things."

Jonah's gaze narrowed as his eyes tracked around the room. "You have a lot of valuable books?"

"Some." She pushed out of her chair and went to four large cedar-lined trunks that sat in the corner. Reaching into her pocket, she pulled out a set of keys and proceeded to unlock all four trunks and lift the lids.

Jonah straightened away from the doorframe and strode over to stand beside her. He whistled under his breath. "Some of those look really old."

Amanda reached into a nearby box and plucked out a pair of gloves, slipping them on. "Some of them are." She pulled out a small leather-bound book with gold leafing and embossing. "This is a private doctor's journal from the seventeen hundreds. It's a book on the latest medical techniques. It's part superstition and folk medicine mixed in with the primitive methods they used to treat patients. This author suggests that physicians wash their hands before examining patients. Quite revolutionary for the times."

"People buy this stuff?" Amanda couldn't help but laugh at Jonah's obvious shock. He shook his head. "I mean I know it's historic, but is it valuable?"

"Oh yes." She carefully replaced the small volume. "Doctors and historians alike would be interested in it. Then there are those people who like to collect private journals no matter what they are." That made her remember the small volume upstairs. "Speaking of journals..." she began.

The phone rang, distracting her.

"I'll get it." Jonah strode down the hall to the kitchen.

Amanda hurried after him, making a mental note that she needed to buy a new cordless phone. The one she kept beside her bed had been smashed when she dropped it last night during the attack.

"Hello." Jonah listened for a moment and then turned to her. "I'll check." He pulled the receiver away from his mouth. "It's the sheriff. He wants to know if you've found anything missing yet."

"Not yet, but I'm still going through the books that were dumped on the floor." She swallowed, wishing she hadn't left her tea behind. Talking was getting easier, but it was still a strain.

"She's still checking. Uh-huh." Jonah nodded once. "Okay, we'll see you then. No, I'm not going anywhere." He hung up the phone. "Patrick will be here within the hour."

"That's fine. I should be able to go through most of the books on the floor by then and check them against each box they were in and tell if anything is missing." She tugged at the hem of her sweater. "You don't have to stay, you know. You've been here all night. Don't you want to go home and change or something?"

He came toward her, not stopping until he was right in front of her. She had to tilt her neck back slightly to look at him.

"I'm not leaving you alone."

Amanda sighed. "Jonah, I appreciate you being here, but I'm not your responsibility." His lips tightened and his body tensed. "No," she continued. "I'm not. We've just met, for heaven's sake."

His arm snaked around her back, pulling her snug against him. "There's more between us than that."

She felt the hard bulge in the front of his jeans press against her stomach. "Well, there is the sexual attraction. But you said yourself it was just sex. You're not looking for a relationship or anything serious. Just sex," she repeated.

It was hard to stare him in the face and say those things, but it was the truth. She'd be a fool to make his staying with her last night and this morning into anything more than his innate sense of responsibility and the fact that he wanted her. Not that she thought he was staying solely because he wanted to get her into bed, but that was a part of it.

"You're damn right there's sexual attraction." He ground his hips against her and she had to bite back a moan. The man had turned her life upside down until she didn't know herself any more. She'd never reacted to a man like this in her life. He had only to touch her and she wanted him.

Amanda stared up at him, trying to follow the conversation. It wasn't easy with Jonah looking so sexy and serious at the same time. "I'm not denying it." There really was no point. Her nipples were digging into his chest. The man would have to be blind or stupid not to notice. Jonah was neither.

"But there's more." He brushed a stray curl over her shoulder and his fingers skimmed her neck, sending a shiver down her spine. "Much more."

Amanda leaned back so she could see him better and rested her hands on his chest. "I know you feel a sense of responsibility because you're a decent guy, but it's okay. I know you've got a life of your own that will still be there long after our affair is over."

Jonah stilled, his hands resting lightly on her waist. "That means there will be an affair."

She nodded. She'd come to her decision and wasn't about to back away now. A man like Jonah only came along once in a woman's lifetime—if she was lucky.

"But I don't need a babysitter."

"Damn it, Amanda. Someone tried to kill you last night."

"But it's not night now and there is a deputy parked right out front. I'm safe for the time being. Maybe it was just a random theft. Some guy who figured I'd have some valuable books just lying around."

"You don't believe that." His hands slid up her back to cup her shoulders.

She sighed. "Not really, but it's not your problem, Jonah. It's mine." She glanced at her watch. "I have to get back to work, and you have to get to work. But first you need to go home."

He raked his hand through his hair. "I need to check on Elizabeth and Susie."

"Susie?"

"My niece. She and Elizabeth have moved back into the old family home with me since the divorce."

Amanda hadn't realized he'd taken on the responsibility for his sister and niece, but she wasn't surprised. Jonah was just that kind of man. She didn't want to be one more obligation for him.

"I'll take off when Patrick arrives. I need to run home and pick up my tools so I can start work on your place. I'd planned to begin today anyway, so it's not exactly a change in my schedule."

"You sure you can start work here today? Don't you have any other work lined up?" She wanted the work done, wanted Jonah here with her, but not at the expense of his livelihood.

"I'm sure. I finished up a job two days ago and don't have another one lined up for two weeks. Your lucky break." Leaning down, he rested his forehead against hers. "Listen, sugar. I want you to be careful. I'm going to stop by the hardware store today and pick up some better locks for your front and back doors. I'll install them later."

She wanted to protest his heavy-handedness, but couldn't. She'd planned to do the same thing later when she finished sifting through the mess in the front room. This would save her some time. "That's fine. Just save the bills so I can reimburse you, and add the labor to the bill for the electrical work."

He nodded and released her. She stepped back, already feeling the separation growing between them, and it was more than physical. Jonah's mind was already elsewhere.

"I'll be in my office if you need me. You don't need to wait until Patrick arrives. The doors are all locked, the deputy is outside and I have my cell phone with me. I'll be fine."

Not waiting for a reply, she turned on her heel and strode back to her office.

It was time to finish with this mess. Then she planned to take some measurements. Shamus had promised to drop by later this afternoon to look at her plans for this room. He'd seemed confident that it wouldn't be a problem for him to build the shelves and cabinets she wanted for her new shop.

Jonah's talk about locks reminded her that she needed to look at the overall security of the house. Not only did she want better locks, but possibly shutters for the windows in the front room, plus a lock for the inside door. It would be her office, her store and her livelihood. She didn't want to take any chances with it, especially after last night.

## Chapter Eight

The sheriff had come and gone and the boxes in her office had been repacked and piled in the center of the room. Nothing was missing. That was a relief to Amanda. But the police still had no leads on who her attacker might be, which was more than a little worrisome.

Still, she didn't want to dwell on the negative. There were plenty of positive things in her life at the moment. She had a new home and would have By the Book up and running again within two weeks. Besides her online business, which was doing very well, she'd have her small shop open too. She also had several good friends in this town.

Then there was Jonah.

She listened and could hear muted sounds coming from the kitchen. Jonah hadn't left until Patrick arrived and he had returned an hour later. It hadn't escaped her notice that the sheriff had stayed until Jonah returned.

Not that she minded the company. She wasn't stupid and knew she'd be jumpy for a few days. She also wasn't looking forward to tonight. It wouldn't be easy to sleep alone, but she would do it. There wasn't any other choice. Jonah couldn't baby-sit her forever. Besides which, she wasn't about to let some stranger frighten her or chase her away from her new home.

A knock came on the front door. Amanda wiped her hands on the back of her jeans, and left her office, taking care to close the door behind her. She opened the door and stared at the stranger standing in front of her. He was a tall man, thin, with brown hair that was starting to turn gray at the temples.

A quick glance at the curb assured her that a deputy was still stationed there. The sheriff had told her he'd leave a man there until tomorrow morning, but then he'd have to pull him. A small town didn't have the resources for more. Amanda suspected he'd already gone well beyond what any normal police force could or would do.

The man waiting on her doorstep didn't look happy.

"Can I help you?" She kept the door partially closed, ready to slam it if necessary.

"You the woman opening up the bookstore?"

Sensing a potential customer, she put on her best professional demeanor. "Yes, I am." She offered her hand. "Amanda Barrington."

He looked it, but didn't take it. She reluctantly lowered it back to her side, her nerves returning.

"I'm Hector Baker. I own a shop on the far end of Main Street. It's called the Buy and Sell. You might have heard of it."

Bewildered, she shook her head. "No, I'm sorry I haven't. I've just moved and haven't settled in yet. I'll be sure and stop by." She was still no closer to knowing what he wanted from her. Was this just a social visit from another local business owner? She didn't think so. Mr. Baker didn't seem to be in a particularly social mood.

"I sell a lot of books." He pulled back his shoulders and frowned at her. "A place this small doesn't need another bookstore. You might want to rethink opening a shop here." Hector frowned at her. "Heard you had some trouble here last night."

Amanda heard the underlying threat in his words. After last night, her nerves were on edge, but she stood her ground. Jonah was in the house. If she yelled, he'd come running.

There was no sound, no footsteps, but suddenly she felt Jonah behind her. He tugged the door wider so that Hector got a good view of him standing behind her. "You know anything about that, Hector?" Jonah's voice was low, his tone mild, but it sent shivers down Amanda's spine.

Hector took a step back. "No. No, I don't know anything about it. Just what I heard down at the diner. Everyone is talking about it." He squinted at her. "Someone tried to choke her. That's what they're saying. And she don't sound so good."

"Mr. Baker." She waited until she had his attention, eager to nip this problem in the bud. "I don't think my business will interfere with yours at all. Do you sell mostly popular novels and paperbacks?"

He nodded. "I do real well with them too. I trade with some folks and sell with others."

"I deal primarily in collectables, not in paperback fiction. In fact, I'll have to stop by your shop and pick up some reading material for myself."

Hector stared at her hard, as if trying to assess if she was telling the truth. "You do that. In the meantime, I'll be keeping an eye on you."

"That a threat, Hector?" Jonah tried to ease her to one side, but she held her ground. This was her problem and she had to deal with it.

"No threat. Just a fact." Turning, he ambled down the walkway and made his way to a dusty brown truck that was parked at the curb.

"Well, that was my first welcome from the local business community." She frowned. "If you don't count Cyndi, which I don't because she's my friend."

Knowing she was rambling, she shut the door. Jonah stood waiting patiently beside her. She really should lecture him about butting into her business. Instead, she went up on her toes and planted a kiss on his chin. "Thank you."

Jonah looked slightly bemused as if she'd surprised him with her action. He'd obviously expected her to tell him off for butting in. She'd had her say to Mr. Hector Baker, but she suspected it wasn't the last she'd hear of him. Amanda was smart enough to pick her battles and this one wasn't worth squabbling over with Jonah.

"I'm going upstairs to straighten up a bit. If you need me for anything just give me a shout." She could feel his eyes on her as she walked up the stairs. It wasn't her fault that there was an extra bit of swing in her hips as she did so. No, it was his fault for making her feel so sexy.

She worked upstairs for an hour, unpacking her suitcases and putting away her belongings. She'd have to move the things in her closet to paint it later, but she needed to be able to find her clothes.

She also unpacked a box that contained several books she was reading. She stacked them on the shelf in the nightstand, promising herself she'd get back to them soon. It was then she remembered Cecilia Sutter's journal. She'd meant to tell Jonah about it before they'd gotten distracted by the sheriff's phone call.

Pulling open the drawer, she drew out the small volume. She debated and decided she could take a few minutes to read some more of it. What would it hurt? Scooting up on the bed, she leaned against the headboard and opened the book. Flipping past the first page, she began to read.

The wedding supper was fresh lamb that Henry's father slaughtered just for the occasion. His mother baked a cake and just about everyone in the town showed up, everyone that is except Edwin Brown. He wanted me to marry him, but the only man for me is Henry Sutter. He was Henry's best friend until we announced our engagement. Then he just turned his back on us. I feel bad for Henry, but there is nothing we can do about it. Hopefully, Edwin will come around once he finds a wife of his own.

We received the most wonderful presents: a pie plate, a fancy serving dish, linens, a quilt and so much more. Henry and I danced the evening away. It was the best day of my life. My parents were so happy, but none was as happy as I.

When we left the reception, Henry carried me back to our new home. Mama had come to my room the night before and told me what to expect on my wedding night. She lied. It was so much more than she'd said. I blush even to think about the things that Henry did to me, and I to him. I love him more now than I did when I married him.

"I hear you," Amanda mumbled as she turned the page. "These Sutter men can be lethal to a woman's heart." Sighing, she flipped through a few more pages. There was a

recipe for biscuits along with a new remedy Cecilia had tried for removing stains from linens. But underlying all of the entries was her love for her husband.

She made a mental note to mention the journal to Jonah. If Elizabeth didn't want it, maybe he did. In the meantime, she decided to leave it up here in her bedroom. If it got lost amongst the many books downstairs, she might forget to mention it to Jonah until she'd had a chance to organize the rest of the shop. Plus, she freely admitted that she wanted to read a bit more. The journal was a fascinating insight into Cecilia Sutter's life. She felt that she and the other woman had something in common—their fascination with a Sutter man.

Closing the journal, she tucked it safely away into the drawer of the bedside table. She'd been here longer than she'd anticipated. Her stomach growled and she glanced at the clock radio. It was almost time to think about supper. She'd eaten one of Cyndi's muffins and a banana for lunch, but she'd need something more substantial for supper.

After a full day and half a dozen cups of lemon and honey tea, her throat was feeling much better. Maybe she'd open a can of soup and make some biscuits for supper. She thought she had all the necessary ingredients to make them. If she didn't, she had a can of ready-made ones in the refrigerator. Reading the recipe in the journal had given her a craving for them.

She'd just reached the bottom of the landing when a knock came on the front door. This was certainly a busy place today. She opened the door and smiled. It was Jim Brown, the realtor who'd sold her the house. Dressed impeccably in a gray suit with a pale blue shirt and a slender silk tie, he looked every inch the successful businessman. She wondered if he was related to the Edwin Brown that Cecilia talked about in the journal.

"Hi, Jim."

"Amanda." He smiled and took a step forward. It was either let him run into her or take a step back and let him in. She let him in. He was a good-looking man if you went for the classic blond with an athletic build. But he was a little too pushy for Amanda's

taste. The trait was probably good in his business, but it would be hard to take on a regular basis.

"To what do I owe this visit?" Jonah was still here somewhere and this man was his ex-brother-in-law. Amanda hoped to avoid an awkward meeting between the two.

"I heard you had some trouble."

"The police are looking into it." She had no intention of going into the particulars with him.

"The police are looking into your electrical problems?" He frowned. "I don't understand. And do you have a cold? You're very hoarse."

Amanda laughed at herself. Seems not everyone in Jamesville was aware of her business. "I'm sorry. I thought you were referring to the break-in last night."

"Break-in? Are you okay?" His frown deepened. "Do the police have any leads?"

"I'm fine, and no, they don't have any leads. I'm sure it was a random thing." She didn't think that for a second, but really didn't want to go into it with him.

Jim nodded and pushed his sleeve back, glancing at the expensive timepiece strapped to his wrist. "I heard you had some problems with the electrical system. It was all outlined in the papers I gave you."

So that's why he was here. He wasn't concerned about her, but about her causing problems for him. "I know. I rechecked the inspector's report. It was my fault for not reading it more closely."

Jim nodded, a lock of his blond hair falling rakishly against his forehead. "I'm sorry for your trouble. Let me make it up to you." He smiled and leaned closer. "Let me take you to dinner. There's a nice Italian restaurant in town, or a steak house if that's more your style."

Amanda was taken aback by the offer. She stared at Jim, noting how the corners of his blue eyes crinkled when he smiled. There was no disputing that he was a handsome man, but she just wasn't attracted. Any man, no matter how good looking, would pale beside Jonah. "Thank you for the invitation." She summoned up her best professional

smile. "But I have to decline. With everything that's happened, I just don't have the time right now."

He inclined his head. "I'll ask again when you've had time to settle in." Before she knew exactly what to say to that, he added, "At least let me help you sort out the problem with the electrical system. It's the least I can do."

She was grateful that she didn't have to fib about this. She was no good at lying and didn't want to give him false hope for a future date. "I'm having it taken care of."

"By whom? I can recommend an electrician if you'd like."

"She doesn't need your recommendation, Brown. I'm doing the work."

Amanda felt the change in the very air around her. It thickened, making it hard to breathe. Jonah sauntered up to stand beside her. The two men were a study of opposites. Jim, with his blond hair and suave suit, was the epitome of the sophisticated businessman. Then there was Jonah. With his dark hair and rugged face, Jonah appeared stronger, more dangerous. It had nothing to do with the faded jeans and work boots he wore, but had more to do with the man he was.

This could get ugly. Amanda stepped into the breach. "Jim just stopped by because he'd heard I had a slight problem with the house. I assured him I didn't hold him or his office responsible." Turning back to Jim, she offered him a professional smile. "If that's everything, it's been a long day."

He took the hint. "I'll be going then. If there's anything you need or if you change your mind about wanting my help, just call my office. They always know where to find me."

"Thank you."

He inclined his head to Jonah. "Sutter."

Jonah just glared at him as Amanda ushered him out of the house and shut the door behind him. "Well, that was fun."

"Stay away from him." Jonah's tone was harsh. He prowled toward her. She took a step away, but he kept coming. Amanda felt the door hit her back. There was nowhere for her to go. Not that she was afraid of Jonah, but she wasn't quite sure what to make of his mood.

"You can't tell me who I can see or who I can't. But I have no reason to contact Jim Brown for anything. I already have a house. Remember?" He ignored her obvious sarcasm and cupped her face with his hands. They were calloused and hard, yet warm and gentle.

"That man is not to be trusted." A muscle ticked just under Jonah's right eye. "Stay away from him."

Totally exasperated, she reached up and pulled him closer. "I repeat. I have no reason to contact Jim Brown for anything else. He was my realtor. Nothing more. If I want a recommendation for any work around this place, electrical or otherwise, I'll ask Shamus."

Jonah let out a sigh that ruffled her hair. She'd tied her hair back earlier today, but tendrils had escaped from the holder and were now curling wildly around her face.

"Shamus, huh?" His fingers slowly caressed her face as they slid down to her neck. He was very careful not to let them touch her bruises.

"Yup. He's my best friend's husband, plus it's his business to know who to recommend. The man is a contractor after all." She let her fingers slip through his hair. "And he did recommend you."

A slow smile crossed Jonah's face. "He did, didn't he?" Leaning down, Jonah brushed his lips over hers. He didn't stop there, but kissed her cheeks, her nose, her forehead and chin. "How are you feeling?"

He'd asked her this question at various times today, but this time she had a feeling he was asking for a very different reason. For a man she hadn't known long, she was quickly becoming attuned to his moods. She knew he disliked his ex-brother-in-law, but that was to be expected. What she hadn't expected was the edge of something darker and deeper. There was more to his dislike than just a simple divorce, but now wasn't the time to ask.

With Jim gone, Amanda sensed the change in Jonah—mentally and physically. She felt the hardness of his erection as he crowded closer to her, felt his growing need for her.

She knew it was because he wanted her, but it was partly a guy thing too. His need to establish his connection to her. It was primitive and raw, and damn if it didn't turn her on.

Her hands fell to his shoulders and her fingers curled into the material of his shirt. She could feel the thick muscles bunching beneath her palms. He was so strong and so warm. "I was just about to make supper." Her voice had an almost breathless quality about it.

"Supper can wait." He kissed the side of her neck, nibbled at the lobe of her ear. "I'm hungry for you." He let his hand roam down her body, following the curve of her waist and hip. Curling his hand behind her right thigh, he pulled it up around his waist.

The action brought her mound into direct contact with his erection. She moaned, unable to help herself. "Supper can wait," she agreed. Supper could definitely wait, but she couldn't. She wanted Jonah. No, she needed him. Needed him to fill the empty space inside her, to warm her from the inside out, to make her feel safe and wanted and sexy.

Jonah traced his tongue over the whorl of her ear before taking the lobe between his teeth and gently tugging. Her pulse quickened and her breathing got shallower. "Jonah," she gasped and pulled him closer.

He buried his face in the curve of her shoulder and took a deep breath. It made her feel better to know that he was as affected as she was by the sexual heat between them. He raised his head. "Are you *sure*? I don't want to hurt you, Amanda. But be sure. If I start, I'm not certain I can stop."

She swallowed hard. Her throat was still tender, but other than that she felt perfectly fine. Better than fine. She was on fire for Jonah and only he could give her what she needed.

"I'm sure."

## **Chapter Nine**

Jonah took a deep breath to try to slow the pounding of his heart. He had to get control of himself. The last thing he wanted to do was to hurt Amanda.

His blood had gone cold when he'd heard her talking to Jim. His sister's ex was a bastard through and through. The type of guy with a public persona of being Mr. Nice, but in private was anything but. His sister would bear the mental, if not the physical, scars of her marriage forever, and he didn't want Jim anywhere near his sister or his woman.

*His woman*? Where the hell had that come from? He gave himself a mental shake. Amanda and he were having an affair. Nothing more. It was only common decency that made him warn her about getting chummy with Jim.

That didn't explain the unreasonable anger and possessiveness that had filled him when he'd heard the two of them talking. He'd planned to wait a day or two until Amanda was totally over the trauma of her attack before he pushed the physical side of their relationship, but Jim's unexpected visit had changed everything. Jonah felt the need to claim Amanda, mark her as his, so she and everyone around them knew that she belonged to him.

It was primitive, but he didn't care. He was well aware of how thin the veneer of civilization actually was. He'd seen it stripped away from men and women around the world, until all that remained was the human animal with basic needs. And right now, he needed Amanda.

She was staring up at him, her green eyes becoming deep pools of need. Yeah, she wanted him all right. He could feel the heat from her mound through all the layers of clothing they both wore. "I'll be gentle." He needed her to know that he would never hurt her, that she could trust him. That was important to him.

"I know." Her smile was filled with such trust that it made his chest hurt.

He pushed away from her and nodded. There was no going back. For either of them. Sliding one arm around her shoulders and another around her thighs, he lifted her. He liked the weight of her in his arms, the feel of her pressed against his body. She slid her arms around his neck, holding tight as he climbed the stairs to her bedroom. Her head rested on his shoulder and her breath tickled his neck.

Jonah stopped by the side of the bed and looked around the room. "You were busy." The boxes and suitcases were gone, and a rug had been placed by the side of the bed. Several pictures were propped against the wall, waiting to be hung, but the room looked more like a bedroom now instead of a haphazard pile of boxes and bags.

"It's not anywhere near finished. I still have lots to do." Her fingers played with the ends of his hair, teasing the back of his neck.

He released the arm holding her thighs and let her legs drop until she was standing by the bed. The evening light was muted, but it was more than enough for him to see her without turning on the lights. He didn't want to do anything that might jolt her out of her present mood.

Stepping back, he reached for her top, bunching the fabric in his hands. He slowly skimmed it upward, giving her time to object. She raised her hands over her head as he pulled the garment up and off. He made a low sound in the back of his throat.

The bra she was wearing was a simple off-white with a touch of lace. The cups molded to her breasts, pushing them slightly upward. He traced his finger over the edge of one cup and paused in the center before sloping up the other side. Her skin was softer than the satiny bra, more delicate.

He felt her shiver beneath his touch.

Cupping her breasts in his hands, he leaned down, seized one of her swollen nipples through the satin and suckled. She gasped, her hands captured his head and pulled him closer. Her fingers tugged on his hair and her nails dug into his scalp, telling him just how much his actions were affecting her, arousing her.

He pulled back and admired his handwork. The cup of her bra was damp and showcased her taut nipple to perfection. He bent down and did the same thing on the other side.

Amanda's fingers curled around his shoulders and she tugged on his shirt, a stark reminder that they were both still wearing way too much clothing. He pulled away and stared down at her. Her eyes were closed, her head tilted back as she panted.

Jonah reached for the button on her jeans. When it was undone, he tugged the zipper down. A pair of panties came into view. They matched her bra right down to the touch of lace. Sliding his hands inside her jeans, he shoved downward until the fabric bunched around her knees. "Sit on the side of the bed."

When she was seated, he knelt in front of her and tugged off her sneakers and socks. Her jeans followed. When she was wearing nothing but her underwear, he sat back and looked at her. "Take down your hair." He wanted to see her wild curls tumbling around her shoulders.

She cocked an eyebrow at him and gave him a sassy grin. "I will if you'll take off some of that clothing you're wearing."

His shirt was off before she'd barely finished speaking. She laughed as he began to unlace his work boots. By the time he had his boots and socks off, she'd removed the tie from her hair. She shook her head and her red curls flew in all directions. She looked like some kind of woodland sprite straight out of a fairy tale.

Unable to help himself, he fisted his hands in the springy stuff, leaned down and kissed her. This time, he didn't hold back. He plunged his tongue inside, tasting her sweetness and warmth. He also tasted lemon and honey and almost smiled. It was a combination of flavors he would forever associate with Amanda.

Her tongue tangled with his, her hand coming up to cup the back of his neck. He didn't want to stop kissing her, but the angle was awkward. Breaking away, he lifted her and lightly tossed her into the center of the mattress, coming down beside her.

She gave a squeak of surprise, which quickly turned to a moan when he kissed her again. Her arms went around him, her hands clutching at the hard muscles that ran up and down his back.

Tongues dueled and breath mingled as he slanted his mouth over hers again and again. God, he loved the taste of her. Her flesh would be just as sweet.

He left a trail of wet, openmouthed kisses on her cheek and down her neck, careful not to press hard on her bruises. The closure for the bra was in the front and he flicked it open with one hand, giving a deep hum of pleasure when the fabric pulled back to reveal the soft mounds of her breasts. She'd described herself to him when they'd had phone sex, but that was nothing compared to the reality of seeing her in the flesh.

Her breasts were firm and filled his palms perfectly. Her nipples were puckered into tight nubs that were dark pink, almost red. Like ripe berries, they tempted him to taste. So he did.

He laved his tongue across one nipple and then did the same with the other. "Perfect," he whispered, then blew on the damp bud.

Amanda cried out, her hips arching upward. He threw his thigh over hers, trapping them, holding her still while he sucked and lapped at her breasts.

He stroked his hand over her stomach, feeling the muscles contract beneath his palm. Her hands weren't still either. They touched his shoulders, his chest, his head—wherever she could reach him. His cock ached, throbbing harder with each passing second. His jeans were too confining for him to stand it any longer.

Rolling off her, he stood. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the two condoms he'd stashed there when he went home to change this morning. He hadn't planned on making love to her so quickly, but he'd figured it was better to be safe than sorry. And man, was he glad he'd listened to his instincts. Once again, they hadn't led him astray.

Aware of her watching his every move, Jonah shucked his jeans, taking his underwear with them. Naked, he stood and let her look her fill. She swallowed hard and her eyes widened as they traced a path from his head to his thighs and back again. She bit

her bottom lip as her eyes strayed to his groin again. His erection grew even bigger under her perusal.

She was everything he'd imagined and more. Her curly hair flowed over the pillow and spilled down her shoulders. One curl rested just above her breast, the tip teasing her swollen nipple. Her skin was creamy and soft to the touch. Her breasts were full and her waist curved inward before flowing outward again to her ample hips. He loved her shape. She was all woman.

Her panties still covered her mound, but he could see the dark reddish thatch of hair beneath. Planting one knee on the bed, he hooked his fingers beneath the waistband. Never taking his gaze from her, he pulled the silky garment off her one slow inch at a time.

Amanda could barely catch her breath as Jonah eased her panties from her. He sucked in a breath as her pubic hair came into view and then gave a low growl of pleasure as the rest of her was exposed.

"Damn, you're beautiful." He tugged her panties over her feet and tossed them aside. He stroked his fingers over the inside of her legs from her knees all the way to her upper thighs. "Open for me."

His voice was so deep, so beguiling, she didn't even think of denying him. She parted her legs, feeling vulnerable, yet aroused and sensual.

"Oh yeah," he breathed. He hovered over her, his wide shoulders blocking out everything else in the room. She stared up at him, enthralled by the look of hunger in his eyes.

He was the beautiful one, not her. She'd never seen a man who looked as elemental, or who seemed to be as comfortable with his body and sexuality as Jonah. Muscles rippled as he propped himself up on his arms and gazed down at her. His chest was wide, his waist narrow. There didn't seem to be one spare ounce of flesh on the man. He was sculpted muscle from head to toe.

Then there was his obvious erection. His shaft was long and thick and hard. The bulbous head was darker than the rest of him, the crown damp with fluid. As she watched, a pearly bead of liquid seeped from the tip. The lightly furred sac between his legs hung low and heavy.

Cream seeped from her core and trickled down her leg. "I want to taste you. Touch you." She reached out her hand, but he grabbed it in his.

"Not this time, sugar." Bringing her hand to his lips, he kissed it before releasing it.
"Your throat is still sore and I'm on a hair-trigger here."

"Next time." She could let it go for now, knowing she'd get her turn another time.

"Absolutely." Jonah settled between her legs, his shoulders pushing her thighs even wider. "I knew your hair down here would be red."

Amanda felt her cheeks getting warm with embarrassment as he spread her wide with his thumbs and studied her. No man had ever taken the time to look at her like this. Yes, she'd had sex before, but in the dark with the covers pulled up. And she'd never had oral sex before. Not that she hadn't wanted to, but neither of the men she'd had sexual relationships with had been interested. Jonah, on the other hand, was a sensualist. It seemed as though he wanted to see and touch and taste every inch of her.

Heat rushed through her veins, and this time it wasn't due to embarrassment. No, Jonah brought out another side of her, a side she hadn't thought existed. He made her feel sexual and sensual and she wanted to revel in it, not miss a single moment of the entire experience.

"So soft." He stroked his fingers over her slick folds, up one side and down the other. "So wet." The pad of his thumb brushed her clit and she almost came off the bed. Sweet sensations rocked through her, making her moan.

Jonah peered up at her and smiled. "So damn responsive."

Amanda didn't know what to say. She'd never responded so quickly and easily before. This man certainly knew how to flip her switch. Her entire body was humming with desire. She arched her hips upward, wanting him to touch her again.

Jonah didn't disappoint. Burying his face between her thighs, he tasted her most sensitive flesh. He licked and suckled and teased. His tongue flicked her clit and then circled it, a sensual torture of sorts, which he always stopped just before she found fulfillment.

She hooked her legs over his shoulders and squeezed him tight. She wanted to scream at him, to tell him she needed more, but when she opened her mouth all that came out was a low cry of pleasure.

He pushed one finger deep into her core. Her inner muscles clenched and relaxed rhythmically as he inserted a second finger, stretching her wide.

"You're tight." She could see the beads of sweat on his forehead and knew he was close to the breaking point. He pulled his fingers almost all the way out and thrust them back in again.

"It's been a while," she managed to gasp out.

This time when he pulled his fingers toward her entrance, he widened them, stretching her even more. "I can't wait, sugar. Not this time."

Wait? She didn't want him to wait. "Now!" She undulated her hips, and groaned. His fingers twisted inside her as he slowly removed them. Sitting back on his heels, he grabbed one of the condoms from the bedside table, ripped the packet open and rolled the latex barrier over his thick length.

Supporting his weight on his arms, he levered himself over her. He lifted her hips and positioned the head of his cock at her slit. He pushed and slid just inside her opening. Amanda gasped at the invasion. Her inner muscles stretched and pulsed, finally relaxing around the crown of his shaft.

Jonah leaned down until their lips were almost touching. His hair fluttered down around his face and brushed her cheeks. "Hold on."

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as he gave one quick thrust, burying himself to the hilt. She cried out as he stretched her to the limits. But beyond the overwhelming shock of being filled so completely by him was pleasure. Hot molten

pleasure. Her core pulsed hard around his shaft. He was part of her now. So deep inside her she didn't know where she ended and he began.

Amanda closed her eyes, allowing herself just to feel the sensations buffeting her. Jonah held himself still as her body adjusted to the overwhelming physical and emotional overload. She could feel his cock pulsing inside her, and the steady beat pushed her closer to the edge. His breathing was getting faster and shallower, just as hers was. Both of their bodies were slick with perspiration and need.

She opened her eyes and was once again staggered by the intensity of his gaze. Sliding his hands beneath her hips, he began to rock against her. His erection slipped in and out of her body, stretching her anew each time he plunged deep inside.

Planting her feet on the mattress, she captured the rhythm, meeting him thrust for thrust. Her fingers slid on his slick shoulders, but she held on, digging her fingernails into his skin.

Jonah's hips pistoned faster and faster. Amanda could feel every cell in her body tighten and knew she was close. "Harder!" she cried. She wanted to come, but she never wanted this to end.

Shoving his arms beneath her, he sat back and pulled her up so that she was sitting on his lap. The motion drove him deeper. Her inner muscles began to spasm around him.

"Jonah!" She cried his name as he leaned down and sucked a turgid nipple into his mouth. She cried out again as she came in a rush of liquid heat.

His arms banded around her and he thrust twice more before tipping back his head and letting out a yell of release. She felt his shaft pulsing within her, felt his heat and knew he was coming. The rippling of his shaft triggered another round of spasms deep within her core and she lost herself in the heat and the pleasure.

Every bone in her body had turned to mush. Her head was resting on Jonah's shoulder. She had no memory of even putting it there. Both of them were breathing heavily, their arms wrapped around each other.

Jonah was the first to move. He lowered her back down to the bed and carefully withdrew. She gasped as her inner muscles spasmed around him, trying to keep him

inside her. Jonah groaned and pulled away. "I'll be right back." He kissed the tip of her nose before he rolled off the bed and padded to the bathroom.

She knew she should pull the sheet over herself, and she would, just as soon as she found the energy. She heard the sound of water running in the distance and then Jonah returned with a damp cloth in hand.

Sitting beside her, he ran the cloth over her face and down her neck, being careful of her injuries. From there, he let the cloth caress her torso as he worked his way down to between her legs. She should be embarrassed, but that seemed silly after what they'd just done. The cool cloth felt good against her swollen flesh.

When he was satisfied, he tossed the cloth on the bedside table and crawled back into bed with her. He tugged the covers over them and pulled her into his arms.

"What about supper?" She was hungry, but exhausted.

"In a bit." He tucked the sheet over her shoulders. "Rest for a while. We'll eat later."

## Chapter Ten

Amanda sat at her desk and stared out the window. Her life had changed so much in the past week. For a woman who'd grown up with nothing, she'd come a long way. Her childhood was filled with memories of upheaval and moves. Every time she'd start to settle, something would happen and she'd be relocated to a new home, a new family. She'd hated the constant lack of security.

Even Seymour had taken her home away from her by selling the building she'd lived in. She didn't blame him for that. After all, her inheritance from him was responsible for this new start in her life. Jamesville was beginning to feel more like home with each passing day and she was starting to make a place for herself in the community.

Because she was constantly buying supplies for the renovations, people were beginning to recognize and greet her wherever she went. She gave a rueful laugh. "I sure am good for the local economy."

She'd spent the best part of one morning with Cyndi at the hardware store, the two of them picking out the paint for all the walls in the house. They'd capped off their morning with lunch at Jessie's, the local diner. Cyndi had probed carefully about Amanda's relationship with Jonah, but hadn't pressed. She had, however, warned Amanda to be careful with her heart.

Amanda wasn't quite certain about the state of her heart. She tried not to think too hard about what was happening with her and Jonah, but just to enjoy it. It was difficult though. She didn't make attachments easily, but Jonah had slipped past her guard and into her life. It was amazing how fast she'd gotten into the habit of wondering what Jonah would think about this or that, or wanting to share some small tidbit of her day with him. To a woman used to being on her own, it was somewhat unnerving.

Thankfully, the rest of her life was falling into place. The repairs to the house were on schedule. The electrical work was all but completed and drywall had been either repaired or replaced altogether. As promised, both Cyndi and Shamus had come over to help. Walls had been primed and painted and shelves built.

Leaning back in her chair, she watched a robin land on the porch railing just beyond the window. It perched for a moment before flying off again. The bird reminded her of Jonah's sister—full of life, but unable to settle. She'd run into Elizabeth while out grocery shopping and had stopped to chat. The other woman was a little shy, a bit nervous, but very friendly. Amanda liked her.

That thought brought her back to the open file on her computer. The list for Elizabeth's books had been finalized and prices agreed upon. With the go-ahead from her client, Amanda had listed the books on her website. She'd already had a nibble or two on several of the more collectable books in the grouping and hoped to soon have some good news for her very first local client.

Closing out the file, Amanda pushed her chair back from the desk and stared at her shop. Standing, she made a slow circle around the new home of By the Book, a sense of satisfaction filling her.

She'd painted the room a deep forest green, which contrasted nicely with the pale hardwood floors and the pine shelves Shamus had built for her. Three walls were covered from ceiling to floor with empty shelves just waiting to be filled. The fourth wall held several wood and glass cabinets that had belonged to Seymour. They had sturdy locks and she would use them to house some of her more collectable books. The more valuable books were kept locked in the safe.

Even the structure of the house had changed. It had been Jonah's suggestion to take out one of the windows in the new shop and add a door. That way, By the Book had an entrance separate from the rest of the house. Amanda had painted the door red and planned to have a sign made to place just above it.

Running her finger over her desk, Amanda tried not to think about Jonah. It would be easier to make herself stop breathing than it would be for her to stop thinking about him.

After the first time they'd made love, she'd expected him to have supper and then leave. But he'd stayed that night and every night since. They'd fallen into a routine of sorts as the days progressed, both of them working around the house. Sometime during the day, Jonah went to his place for a couple of hours to pick up clothes and to see his sister and niece. But other than that, they'd spent every waking hour together. At night, after they made love, she'd fall asleep with his arm curled around her.

That surprised her. She hadn't expected him to spend all his nights with her. After all, they were just having an affair. It wasn't as if they were in love or anything. She ignored the way that thought made her stomach clench and her heart pound.

Turning away from the desk, she walked to the new door and peered out. Situated on the far end of the house, it opened out onto the front veranda. She stared out and watched a car drive down the street. Her life was moving on exactly as she wanted, except for one small detail.

She'd allowed herself to fall in love with Jonah.

It had happened so quickly she hadn't had time to erect any barriers around her heart. Jonah had settled there and there was no getting him out. For better or worse, she was in love with the man. And she would never tell him.

He had made it more than clear from the beginning he wasn't in this for the long haul. He hadn't misled her. She'd misled herself by thinking she'd be able to keep her emotions out of their relationship.

Sighing, she turned away from the door.

"That's a heavy sigh." Jonah stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb.

She shrugged and wandered over to the four boxes she'd lugged in from the other room. It was time to get the shelves loaded and her business open.

Jonah pushed away from the doorway and sauntered across the room. "I just finished the last of the work and everything is operational and up to code. The panel box for the electrical system is now in the utility closet in the kitchen. It's more convenient there." Leaning down, he brushed a kiss across her cheek. "I even added a light switch at the top of the basement stairs in case you have to go down there for any reason."

She'd told him how much she hated going down into the basement and he'd moved the panel box and added the light switch without her even having to ask. He did things like that without thinking about it. It was no wonder she'd fallen in love with him. She reminded herself for the hundredth time that he wasn't staying. "That's great. Just leave me the bill and I'll be sure you get paid immediately. I really appreciate you doing this so quickly."

Jonah frowned, his brows drawing together. "You don't think I'm going to charge you for this, do you? Not now."

It was her turn to frown. "What do you mean? Of course I'm going to pay you. That was our deal." Jonah had done so much more this past week than just the electrical work. He'd helped Shamus repair the drywall, and had helped install the new door to her store. Besides that, he'd painted and generally helped out, doing anything that needed doing.

"That deal was made before I was sharing your bed." He stood with his hands on his hips, a small smile playing at the corners of his mouth.

His glib answer made her see red and she took a deep breath to calm her temper before she replied. "One has nothing to do with the other. I don't trade sex for work. I contracted you to do a job and I'll pay the bill." She might feel differently if they were an actual couple, but they were having an affair, not building a lasting relationship. Jonah had made it more than clear from the beginning that this was just about sex. Not to pay him for the work would cheapen their lovemaking and turn it into something else entirely.

"Damn it, Amanda. I didn't say anything about trading sex for work." He raked his hand through his hair. She tried not to notice how rugged and handsome he looked wearing work boots, jeans and a long-sleeved cotton T-shirt in a rich green that matched his eye color to perfection.

She crossed her arms over her chest to keep from reaching out to touch him. "Then there is no reason for you not to take the money, is there?" She had to remember that their relationship was purely a physical one and not a deep emotional connection. If she didn't she was going to be hurt when it came to an end. She swallowed hard. Who was

she kidding? It was going to break her heart when he finally left. All her life, she'd been the one to leave first. Since she already knew she wanted to be with him for as long as possible, she knew he'd be the one to call an end to this affair. This time, she would be the one left behind. Although she supposed it didn't matter. The results were the same—she'd be alone once again.

"You are one stubborn woman, you know that?" He put his hands on his hips and glared at her, his frustration palpable.

"Yeah, I know." She tightened her arms around herself. Is this where he called it quits and decided he'd had enough of her? She wouldn't beg him to stay. She had too much pride for that. But, oh, how she wanted their relationship to continue, even if it was just for a while longer.

And how sad was that? She straightened her spine. She was an independent woman and didn't need a man to be happy. She didn't need anyone. She had her business and a few good friends. Her life was full, with or without Jonah in it.

Huffing out a breath, he reached out and clamped his hands over her shoulders, pulling her close to him. "Come here." His voice was gruff, but his touch was gentle as he pressed her head against his chest. "I'll send you the damn bill."

"Promise?"

"Yeah." He pressed his lips against the top of her head and Amanda let out a sigh. "Listen, I've got to go. I got a call about another job." He pulled away and glanced down at his watch. "I should be back in time for supper."

"You're coming back?" He'd stayed with her all week, but there had been no new threats and the job here was done. She'd expected him to pack up the few belongings he had here and leave. Had been preparing herself for it.

His lips formed a thin line. "Of course I'm coming back." He dropped his arms back by his sides and took a step away. "Unless you don't want me to."

Frustration filled her. She was no good at relationships. She couldn't tell what Jonah wanted. Was he glad she was giving him an out or did he want to stay? Part of her wanted to push him away before she fell even more deeply in love with him than she already

was. Another part of her wanted to hold on tight and hope he'd eventually come to love her back. Confusion filled her and she couldn't think straight, so she threw his own words back at him. "You said this was just an affair. I thought you'd want to get back to your own life."

"Yeah. Sure." He turned and walked away. "I'll be out of your way in a few minutes."

Her chest ached and her stomach lurched. Had she hurt his feelings? Did he want to stay? Hope rose from a deep dark place inside her as she hurried after him. "You're not in the way, Jonah. If anything, I've disrupted your life totally. You have a family. Friends. Yet you spend all your time with me."

He stopped and turned so abruptly, she plowed right into him. He caught her before she fell onto her butt. "You haven't disrupted anything. I want to be here with you."

Amanda didn't even stop to question why her heart leapt with joy at his words. This relationship could only end in heartbreak, but she didn't care. She wanted to be with Jonah for as long as it lasted. "I'm glad you've been here. And not just because of the break-in." She stared at his chest until he caught her chin in his hand and raised it until she was looking at him.

"Supper?"

She knew that if he came back for supper, he'd stay the night. Maybe it was weak of her, but she wanted him. She loved spending time with him, making love with him and having his big body curl around hers late at night. The more she got to know Jonah, the more she found to love about him. "Somewhere between six and six-thirty. Just let me know if you're going to be late."

He leaned down and kissed her. There was an almost desperate edge to the kiss. She couldn't tell if it was coming from her, from him, or from both of them.

He broke away and went back to the basement and gathered his tools. Amanda was still waiting in the hallway when he returned.

"I'll see you in a few hours. Be sure and keep the doors locked and your cell phone with you at all times."

"I'll be fine, Jonah. It's daytime and nothing else has happened since the first breakin. It was an isolated incident. Bad luck and nothing more."

"Promise me." He looked so fierce and protective she found herself nodding. He pressed a quick, hard kiss on her lips and headed for the front door. "I'll see you at supper."

Amanda stood in the hallway and listened as his truck pulled away. She touched her fingers to her lips and sighed. Giving herself a shake, she headed to the kitchen. She'd make herself a cup of tea and then she'd start to unpack boxes.

Two hours later, she stood back and admired the progress she'd made. One entire wall was filled with books and seven more boxes were waiting to be unpacked and displayed. She was pleased with her progress.

Her cell phone rang and she retrieved it from her back pocket. She glanced at the caller ID, but it came up as caller unknown. "Hello."

There was dead silence on the other end, even though she could tell the line was open.

Cold chills raced down Amanda's spine. "Who is this?"

"He won't stay forever. I know you're alone."

The loud click in her ear made her flinch. What did the caller mean? Was it just a wrong number or was it her assailant? Amanda nervously glanced out the window. "Get a grip. It's just a phone call. He can't hurt you through the phone." He might not be able to hurt her physically, but he could certainly disrupt her mental state.

She started to close her phone, but changed her mind. She dialed the sheriff's office instead.

A well-modulated female voice answered her call. "Jamesville Sheriff's Department, how may I help you?"

"May I please speak with Sheriff O'Rourke?"

"May I ask who's calling?"

"Amanda Barrington."

"One moment, Ms. Barrington. I'll check and see if he's available."

She tapped her foot against the oak flooring and stared out the window. The room, which had seemed so cozy just moments before, now felt cold.

"Hey there, Amanda, what can I do for you?" Patrick's deep voice came across the line and she breathed a sigh of relief. Actually, now that she had the sheriff on the line it seemed kind of foolish to even bother him with this.

"I'm not sure." She gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. "I had a phone call and it spooked me."

"What happened?" His voice was all business now.

She strolled away from the window and double-checked the lock on the door. "I was just working when my phone rang. It was a male voice, sort of muffled."

"What did he say?" She heard a distinct rattling sound on the other end of the line. It sounded like he was shifting through papers on his desk. "Was the voice familiar at all? Why would the caller muffle their voice unless they were afraid you might recognize them?"

Amanda left her shop and went to the front door to check the lock there as well. "I didn't recognize it, but as I said, it was muffled. He said that he knew I was alone and that he wouldn't stay forever."

Patrick paused. "He wouldn't stay forever?"

Amanda leaned against the front door and sighed. "Jonah's been staying with me since the night of the attack."

"I see." Nothing in his tone gave away what Patrick thought of that arrangement. "What about your caller ID?"

She shook her head. "Nothing."

"It could be just a crank call, but I don't believe in coincidences. Did the caller say anything about a book?"

"No. That was the only thing he said. Then he hung up."

"Okay. I'm going to send out a deputy to take a look around. In the meantime, we can contact your provider and look into your cell phone records and see if we can't find

out where the call came from." She heard him call out to someone in the office and then he was back on the line with her.

Amanda breathed a sigh of relief. She felt like such a coward, but for the first time in her life, she was nervous about being alone. "That would be great."

"You hang tight. I've got a man on the way out there."

"Thanks, Patrick."

"We'll find out who it is."

"I hope so," she muttered under her breath.

"What was that?"

She saw the familiar vehicle pulling up in front of her house. "The deputy is here."

"Good."

She sensed his hesitation. "Is there anything else?"

"Are you going to be alone tonight?"

Amanda felt like sinking into the floor. She was a grown woman, but she'd never openly had an affair with a man before. She and Jonah were practically living together. "No." She cleared her throat and continued. "Jonah will be back around supper time. He went out on a job."

"That's fine. My deputy can stay until then."

"Thanks, but there's no need. I have my phone and all the doors are locked."

"He'll wait outside until Jonah shows up." She sensed the finality in Patrick's words and couldn't deny the relief she felt.

"Okay." A single loud knock came on the door. "I've got to go and let the deputy in. I'll talk to you later." She ended the call and opened the door to the uniformed man. "Please come in."

Work had always been a balm for Amanda during the bad times and now was no different. The shelves of her shop were filled and the boxes had been broken down. She planned to store them down in the basement for now.

The cedar trunks were now empty and the books had been stored in either the safe or the glass cases behind her desk. The ones in the cases belonged to the store and were not on consignment for clients. They were books she'd personally picked up at yard sales and estate sales. They were listed with her online store, but she didn't mind displaying them in her shop. The idea was to sell them, and Jamesville did a brisk tourist trade in the summer and well into the fall when they held their apple harvest festival.

The trunks themselves had been placed strategically in front of the shelves to be used as seats. All she had to do was buy some cushions to go on top of them.

Her store was ready for business even if she wasn't. Her nerves were still on edge, waiting for the phone to ring again.

The deputy had taken her statement earlier and returned to his car out front. She thought another car had arrived a few hours ago and replaced the original one, but she wasn't one hundred percent certain. She felt sorry for them. It couldn't have been very exciting for them to have to sit and watch her house all day.

She glanced at her watch. It was just past six. "Damn." She'd forgotten all about supper and had no idea what was in her refrigerator that she could cook for her and Jonah to eat.

She was just about to head to the kitchen to rummage through the cupboards when she heard a vehicle pulling up outside. Walking to the window, she looked out. Her heart gave a little jump. Jonah was home.

He climbed out of his truck and went straight to the deputy's car. He leaned down and talked with him for several minutes before straightening. The deputy started his vehicle and pulled away, giving a little wave as he went.

Jonah turned away and stalked up the walkway. He was angry. She could see it in the set of his shoulders, the scowl on his face and the way he loped up the path, like some predator on the path of his latest prey.

She swallowed hard and headed to the front door. She had it unlocked and opened before he could knock. He stepped inside and shut the door tight behind him. "You want to tell me what the hell is going on?"

The massive stranger crouched in the woods just behind the house and watched the deputy throughout the long afternoon. It was no hardship. He was more at home here in the woods than he would be in the house. Besides, this certainly wasn't the first time he'd pulled sentry duty.

He remained, unmoving, as a black truck pulled up in front of the house and a familiar man got out. He relaxed slightly, but continued to watch and wait until Jonah talked with the deputy and then strode up the walkway and into the house.

All was safe. He could leave now that Jonah was back.

Listening carefully to his surroundings, he didn't move until he was certain he was still alone. He slipped out of his hiding spot and headed to his own vehicle, which he'd left in the parking lot of a grocery store several streets over.

He was done for now, but he'd be back. He pulled out his cell phone and checked for messages. There were none, but he knew that there would be one when he was needed again. It was time for him to get some sleep.

## Chapter Eleven

Jonah's patience was nearing the breaking point. He'd hated being away from Amanda this afternoon, but he'd a job to do. Mrs. Haskins had been a friend of his mother's and there had been no way he could turn her down when she'd called.

Returning to Amanda's place and finding a sheriff's deputy parked out front hadn't improved his mood. She'd had a threatening phone call and hadn't bothered to contact him.

He tried not to be hurt by that fact. But coming so hard on the heels of their disagreement this morning, it was hard not to take it personally. She'd balked when he'd told her he wasn't going to charge her for the work he'd done. He still had no intentions of doing so. All the supplies he'd needed for the job had been charged to her account at the hardware store. That was bad enough as far as he was concerned. There was no way he was going to charge her for labor as well.

He'd promised to send her a bill. He just hadn't told her when. She'd be waiting a long time for that bill to come.

He supposed he should be happy about the fact that she wasn't clinging to him, wasn't asking for more than sex. That's what he'd wanted when this whole thing started. An affair, he'd told her. A no-strings affair was all he could offer.

He was an ass.

Somehow, this redheaded spitfire had accomplished something no other woman had been able to. She'd gotten under his skin. And she'd done it without even trying. All Amanda had done was be herself.

Unlike most women he'd known, she didn't spend hours primping in the mirror. She had a natural beauty that shone from her no matter what hour of the day or night it was. He'd wake up some nights and just lie next to her, watching her sleep.

Awake, she fascinated him. She was smart, courageous, had a keen sense of humor and a boundless amount of energy. They talked about everything and anything. No subject was off limits. She was passionate about what she did for a living and her enthusiasm for books made him smile.

Folks around town were starting to recognize her and they all smiled when they saw her coming. Well, everyone except Hector. He was still suspicious of Amanda and her business. Word around the coffee shop was that Hector was grumbling daily about Amanda and her new shop even though it wasn't even open yet.

Some people were a bit too friendly. Jonah had noticed several of the single men in town, including his ex-brother-in-law, eyeing Amanda when they'd gone shopping on Main Street. He'd barely refrained from putting his arm around her and tucking her under his shoulder to keep her close. As it was, he'd had to settle for glaring at several of them. Jim had just smirked at him and said hello to Amanda before sauntering down the street.

There was something about Amanda that reached out and twisted his guts into a knot. She belonged to him. Now, he had to figure out a way to make her see just how much she needed him.

"Amanda?" She was staring at him, her head tilted slightly upward and her stubborn jaw jutting out.

"I had a phone call. It was nothing."

"Nothing." Needing to do something with his hands so he didn't wrap them around her shoulders and shake her, he stripped off his coat and hung it over one of the hooks by the front door. "So nothing had a deputy parked outside your door all afternoon?"

She shrugged, her shoulders hunching slightly inward. "There wasn't anything anyone could do. I had a nasty call and I contacted the sheriff. That's it."

Unable to stand not touching her any longer, Jonah reached out and pulled her close. He sighed in relief when her arms went around his waist, hugging him tight. "You should have called me, sugar."

She leaned back, a bewildered look on her face. "But why? There wasn't anything you could have done."

He stomped down his rising irritation. "I could have come home."

She shook her head. "I was perfectly safe. All the doors were locked. They were only words."

He was grateful she hadn't noticed that he'd slipped up and called her place home. But that's what it was starting to feel like. He'd moved back into the family home when he'd come back to Jamesville. Technically it was his home since he'd inherited it, but it had never been more than a place for him to eat and sleep. Later it became a haven for his sister and niece. But being with Amanda was as close to feeling at home as he had felt in his entire life.

"What did the caller say?"

Amanda ducked her head. "I don't want to talk about it."

He cupped her chin in his palm and lifted it. He didn't want her holding back from him. "Tell me."

She sighed and rocked back on her heels. He dropped his hand to his side, hating the separation he felt between them.

"He said that he knew you wouldn't stay forever and he knew that I was alone."

"Son of a bitch," Jonah whispered. "He's been watching the place."

Amanda rubbed her hands up and down her arms as if she were cold. "That thought did occur to me."

"Come here." He eased her closer, running his palms over her shoulders and down her back. "Everything will be fine."

She shrugged. "It's not up to you, Jonah. All I can do is be cautious and hope the police catch him." She sighed, her breath warm against his neck. "And besides, the caller was right. You can't stay here forever."

Jonah jerked back. "You asking me to leave, sugar?" He thought they'd settled this earlier today.

"No." A fine blush settled on her cheeks, but she met his gaze straight on. "But our relationship is strange. We're only supposed to be having an affair, but we're practically living together."

"Does it bother you that people might find out I'm staying with you?" It had occurred to him that a woman like Amanda might be upset by the situation. She wasn't the type of woman to blithely have an affair. He was actually counting on that fact.

She'd been pulling away from him the past few days. Not in bed. No, there she was as passionate and giving as ever. But she was putting an emotional distance between them. Her not contacting him when this crank call occurred was just another example of her pulling away from him and he didn't like it. Not one bit. Now that he'd decided he wanted more than an affair, he was afraid that she no longer did. At least not with him. He might have done too good a job convincing her that a permanent relationship was something he would never want.

Still, she had allowed him to stay with her every night. That had to count for something. He shoved all those negative thoughts to the back of his mind. There would be plenty of time to straighten out the status of their relationship once the danger to her was over. His only priority right now was keeping her safe.

She shrugged and turned, heading to the kitchen. "I forgot all about supper. I was working until I heard your truck pull up out front."

"Amanda?" She obviously wanted to change the subject, but he wasn't about to let her. He followed her into the kitchen, waiting for her to answer his question.

She opened the refrigerator door and peeked inside. "Not too much here. I've got to make a grocery run again. I'm not used to buying for two."

"If that's a problem, I can chip in for food." He hadn't thought about her financial situation before. She'd just moved here, bought a house and had some major work done on the place. Her bank account had to be feeling the squeeze.

She whirled around, slamming the refrigerator door shut. "I don't need your money." Jonah held up his hands in mock surrender. "Fine."

Amanda gave a huff and rubbed her hands over her face. "I'm sorry. It's just been a strange day."

"Your life hasn't been very normal since you moved here."

She gave a small chuckle. "It hasn't been normal in months."

Reaching out his hand, he tucked a stray curl behind her ear. Her hair was always escaping from her ponytail. She'd told him about her childhood and how she'd met and worked with Seymour Morton. Jonah knew the death of the older man had been a blow to Amanda. But he was glad she'd decided to move here for a fresh start, although it was proving to be anything but easy. She'd had one problem after another since she'd landed in Jamesville, including having him practically move in with her. He knew Amanda was fiercely independent and used to living alone. He had no idea how she really felt about him being here. Sure, she let him stay because she needed protection. But what would happen when the threat was no longer there?

Jonah's gut clenched at the thought of never spending another night with Amanda. He didn't particularly like how quickly she'd changed his life. She made him want things he'd never wanted before—a home of his own and a wife. Just the thought of it made him break out in a cold sweat.

"How do you feel about me staying here?"

She patted his chest with her hand. That small touch had his blood pumping swiftly through his veins. He tried to ignore his growing erection.

"Honestly, I don't think too many people have noticed."

Jonah noticed that she'd avoided answering his question, not giving him any indication of how she really felt about him or the situation. He ignored the shaft of pain that speared his heart. He had time and he was good at planning. Once the threat to her was past, he'd have plenty of time to lay siege to her heart.

He shook his head at her naiveté. "I wouldn't count on that, sugar." Obviously, she was used to living in a larger center. Jonah could guarantee that all her neighbors had noted that his truck was parked out front all night long.

"It doesn't matter." She pushed out of his arms and went to the cupboard, opened the door and looked inside.

"Of course it matters."

Closing the door, she leaned against the cupboard. "What do you want me to say, Jonah? Do I like people knowing my business? No, I don't. Do I like the fact that I'll be

talked about when our affair is over and we've both moved on? No, I don't. But there's nothing I can do about it. People are going to talk no matter what."

"I can pretend to leave, take my truck somewhere else and walk back." He didn't know why he hadn't thought of that before. He paused in mid-thought. He knew better, so why hadn't he done it? The answer was simple. Instinct. In the beginning, he'd wanted people to know that she wasn't alone at night, wanted her attacker to know she was no longer as vulnerable. Plus, the more primitive part of himself liked the idea of people knowing that Amanda belonged to him. He'd done it instinctually and without thought to her reputation.

"It's too late for that now." Leaning against the counter, she crossed her arms defensively over her chest. She tilted her chin up and got that stubborn look on her face he was beginning to recognize. "Folks will talk no matter what."

"What about your store?" This was a small town after all and he didn't want their relationship to affect her livelihood.

"What about it?" She lowered her arms and pushed away from the counter. "Most of my work is done through my online store and, truthfully, I expect most of my sales to come from tourists. I wasn't lying to Hector when I told him that I wouldn't cut into his business. Sure, some of the locals will shop my store, but they're more likely to stop into the Buy and Sell if they want used books. Anyone who wants the latest best sellers is going to buy them new or check them out of the library."

"You're sure?" He walked over to stand in front of her. "I don't want my being here to hurt you."

She smiled at him then. It was a small, sad smile that made his heart ache. "You won't hurt me by being here."

Did that mean she would be hurt if he left? He knew she felt something for him, but he wasn't certain how deep it went. He wasn't about to push things either. He planned to spend all his time trying to insinuate his way deeper into her life and her heart so that when the problem with her unknown stalker was over, she wouldn't want him to leave.

"Come here." He needed to be closer to her, to reestablish the connection between them. And the quickest way to do that was with sex.

She came into his arms easily and once again, he marveled at how good she felt there and how well she fit. Her body molded against his, her breasts pillowed against his chest and her pelvis aligned with his. There is no way she could mistake his obvious erection.

"Amanda." He cupped her behind in his hands and pulled her up tight against him.

"Yes?" Her eyes were glazing over with passion and her breath was coming faster. She was always aroused so quickly by his touch. It was one hell of a turn-on.

"Promise me that if you get another phone call like that, or if you feel threatened at all, you'll call me."

"But there was nothing you could have done."

Jonah realized that she honestly believed that and, furthermore, she was genuinely perplexed by his request. Had no one ever cared enough about her to look out for her? He knew her past had been barren of family. Sure, she'd had Seymour, but no close friends until she'd moved to Jamesville. But she had him now and it was time she came to understand that he wasn't going anywhere. "I could have talked to you." He ground his pelvis against hers and was rewarded when she gave a small moan of pleasure. "I could have come home." He lowered his head to her neck and nipped her sensitive skin. She gasped and snuggled closer. "Promise me." He couldn't go on until he had her promise.

"Okay," she half groaned.

He laved his tongue over the skin he'd just nipped and then raised his head. Her face was flushed, her green eyes dark with pleasure.

"Okay what?"

She smiled then, a real smile that brightened her entire face. "I promise I'll call you if anything happens." Grabbing the sides of his head, she tugged him closer. "Now can we get on with this?"

He felt his lips tilting upward. "Yes, ma'am."

Lifting her off her feet, he turned and started to walk out of the kitchen. She curled her legs around him, locking her ankles together at the small of his back. Using her grip on his hair, she pulled him toward her and melded her mouth against his.

Jonah stopped in the hallway and pushed her back against the wall. Deepening the kiss, he tasted her wild heat, felt her fingernails digging into his scalp and heard her whimpers as she tilted her lower body toward him, trying to get closer.

He had to have her. Now.

Amanda was going to explode and she wanted Jonah inside her when it happened. She was surprised at how angry Jonah had been about her not calling him. Truthfully, it hadn't even occurred to her. She wasn't used to leaning on anyone.

Seymour had been like family to her, but he'd always encouraged her to stand on her own two feet. He hadn't done it because he hadn't cared. Quite the opposite in fact. Seymour was old when he met her and was constantly reminding her that he wouldn't live for too many more years. By making her even more independent, he was trying to protect her, to strengthen her for when she would be alone again.

It was a strange feeling to have someone care about her personal safety and her well-being. But she kind of liked it. Not that she would allow herself to get too used to it. After all, Jonah would probably go back to living in his own home once the threat to her was over. Who knew how long after that before they'd drift apart and their affair would be over.

Amanda pushed that thought aside. He was with her now and she was determined to enjoy every single second of it. He obviously cared for her. He certainly didn't hide the fact that he wanted her. For now, that was enough.

She'd been scared today. She wouldn't admit it out loud, but she couldn't hide it from herself. Even with the deputy out front, she'd felt nervous, waiting for the phone to ring again, wondering if each little sound the house made indicated an intruder. The second Jonah had stepped through the front door she'd felt safe.

Maybe that's why she'd tried to push him away, at least emotionally. She knew he'd protect her physically, but she couldn't depend on him to always be here. That wasn't his responsibility. No one could put that kind of pressure on someone else.

But Jonah was here with her now and that was all that mattered. Everything else would work itself out one way or the other. Eventually her attacker would strike again. It seemed inevitable. A shiver went down her spine at the thought of how it could end up, but she pushed those negative thoughts aside and focused on how good it felt to be kissing Jonah.

The wall was hard against her back and Jonah was hard against her front. There was no give in the man. He was all solid muscle and bone. He held her easily as he devoured her mouth, his tongue thrusting against hers, building the heat that always seemed to be hovering just below the surface whenever they were together.

They were both gasping for breath when he pulled away. "I can't wait." Peppering hot kisses along her cheek and down her neck, he reached for the hem of her shirt and lifted it.

She helped him pull it off. By the time she had her shirt gone, he had her bra clasp unhooked and had pushed the cups aside. He started to lean down, but she grabbed the front of his T-shirt and pulled. "I want this off." She wanted to touch him, to run her fingers over the hard planes of his chest and his thick shoulders.

Jonah used his lower body to keep her pinned against the wall as the two of them dragged his T-shirt over his head. It disappeared to the floor below. Amanda pressed her palms against his skin, feeling the heat enveloping her palms. He was always so hot.

"I love touching you," she whispered as she allowed her fingers to tease his flat nipples.

He groaned. "I love it when you touch me." Putting his hands under her butt, he lifted her until her breasts were almost level with his mouth. His breath was warm on her skin, making her nipples tighten.

"So sweet." He captured one rosy nipple and suckled.

Even after a week of making love to the man, she couldn't believe how quickly her body responded to Jonah. It was as if she'd been fashioned especially for him, and he for her. There had been none of the awkward moments that new lovers usually face. They came together like they'd been lovers forever.

She tilted her hips, rubbing her throbbing core against him. An ache was growing inside her and she knew the only way to sate it was to have Jonah's hard length thrusting deep within her. "Jonah," she gasped.

She didn't have to say anything more. He pulled his mouth from her breast and pushed her legs down his hips. Her feet hit the floor with a thud.

His every move was swift as he undid her jeans and yanked them down her legs. He took her panties with them, leaving her bare from her ankles up. She thought he'd help her take off her shoes so she could remove her clothing completely. Instead, he stood, turning her to face the wall.

"Put your hands against the wall and lean forward."

She did as he asked, feeling very exposed as she flattened her palms against the hard surface. Her breasts began to ache even harder as they hung at a downward angle.

"Spread your legs."

It was difficult with the jeans and panties bunched around her ankles, but she widened her stance as much as she could. Jonah's harsh breath filled the air behind her. The familiar sound of a foil packet being opened reached her ears and she knew he was putting on a condom. Her entire body clenched in anticipation.

The air felt cool against her heated flesh as she waited for Jonah to touch her again. Never in her life had she made herself this vulnerable. But deep in her heart she trusted Jonah. She loved him with all her heart and soul.

The head of his cock nudged at her opening and she tilted her butt slightly to give him a better angle. He pushed just inside and paused, allowing her to adjust to his invasion.

He planted his hands alongside hers on the wall. His hands were so much larger and darker than hers. They were clean, but she could see the several nicks and calluses. She

loved his hands—so hard, yet so gentle when he touched her. His chest covered her back and his lips caressed the nape of her neck.

"Ready, sugar?" She'd barely started to nod before he drove all the way inside her in one swift stroke. Amanda sucked in a breath as his shaft stretched her wide. He was so deep she could feel his pulsing heat in her very center.

She tried to talk, but all that came out of her mouth was a low moan. Jonah flexed his hips, pulling almost all the way out before thrusting forward again. He set a fast, hard rhythm, pushing both of them to their limits.

His sac brushed against her with each inward stroke, bumping against her clit. The brief caress was maddening. She swung her behind, matching him thrust for thrust.

"Jonah," she gasped. Her nails curled, digging into the wall. She needed more.

He dropped one of his hands low on her pelvis, his middle finger finding her swollen clit. His other hand curled over one of her breasts, surrounding it and holding it secure. His thrusts got deeper and harder. He lifted her off her feet with each one.

Amanda could feel her inner muscles pulsing. Her body tensed and coiled. His hips hammered hard as his finger brushed her clit. Tilting back her head, she screamed. "Jonah!"

Every muscle in her body convulsed as damp heat exploded from her core. Jonah yelled and gave one final thrust. His shaft rippled as her vaginal muscles gripped him tight.

Amanda moaned as his finger pressed against her clit, pushing her into another round of spasms. When it was over, she leaned her forehead against the wall. Jonah grunted as he eased out of her body. She tried to straighten up, but it wasn't easy. Her legs felt like jelly.

"Just a second." Jonah tugged her panties and jeans up around her hips and then picked her up. He staggered once and then righted himself.

"What about our clothes?" She looked over his shoulder. Their shirts were still on the floor. Jonah had hitched his jeans around his hips, but she could feel the brush of his semi-erect cock against her side.

## N.J. Walters

"Later," he answered as he carried her up the stairs. From the look in his eyes, Amanda knew it would be much later.

## Chapter Twelve

Amanda was just putting the last dish in the tray to drain when Jonah's phone rang. He tossed aside the dishtowel he'd been using and plucked the phone out of his pocket, glancing at the call display before answering. "Hey."

He walked toward the window in the eating area as he listened to the caller. Amanda pulled the plug on the sink and let the dishwater flow down the drain. After rinsing the sink, she picked up the dishtowel Jonah had been using and began to finish drying the last of their breakfast dishes.

"Elizabeth, honey, slow down. What did Jim say?" Jonah raked his hand through his hair as he turned around and began to pace. "He's not coming over, is he?" He glanced her way and then turned his attention back to his sister. "I'll be there as quickly as I can. No, I'll be there before he gets there. Just don't let him in until I'm there." He listened for another few seconds. "Okay, I'm on my way."

He closed his phone and turned to her. "That was Elizabeth."

"I guessed as much." Hanging up the dishtowel, she went to him. "Problem?" She wasn't certain if she should even ask, Jonah hadn't shared much about his life. She'd told him about her past, giving him plenty of opportunity to talk to her about his. He'd listened attentively to her, asked questions and seemed genuinely interested, but he'd never shared with her. Sure, she knew he used to be in the military and came home when his father died. She knew he ran his own business, was loyal and loved his sister and niece. Other than that, she knew nothing about his past.

If they were engaged in a long-term or permanent relationship, that would have been a problem. But they were having an affair. He didn't owe her any explanations. She ignored the fact that her breakfast suddenly felt like a lead weight in her stomach.

"I've got to leave. Jim told Elizabeth he was coming over this morning. Seems he's decided that she has something that belongs to him."

"I thought their divorce was final."

"It is, but he likes to make trouble."

Amanda wasn't quite certain how to react to that statement. Whatever the relationship between Elizabeth and her ex-husband, it was none of her business. "Of course you have to go if she needs you."

"You keep the doors locked while I'm gone. Or better yet, you can come with me."

She seriously thought about going with him, but really didn't think his sister would appreciate Jonah dragging a virtual stranger into the midst of her problems with her exhusband. "No, you go on. I'll be fine."

Jonah tugged her into his arms. "I wouldn't leave you if it wasn't important."

"I know."

"No, you don't know." He released her and took a deep breath. She could almost see him debating with himself. Finally, he came to a conclusion. "He abused her."

"What?"

"He mentally abused her and it turned physical near the end. Not many people know that. She didn't have any proof that would have stood up in court, but the threat of exposure got her a quick divorce."

Amanda could hardly reconcile the smooth realtor who'd sold her the house with the image of an abusive husband. But then again, she was smart enough to know that abusers came in all forms. "You have to go." She couldn't imagine how frightening it would be for Elizabeth to face her ex alone. No wonder the woman was adamant about getting rid of almost all their books. She didn't need the reminders of him in her new home.

"I'll be as quick as I can, but I have to wait until he's come and gone."

"Of course you do." She gave him a shove toward the door. "Go. Elizabeth is waiting for you."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely." Jonah needed to be with his sister. Amanda didn't want to be in the center of what was bound to be an unpleasant situation. Besides, she had work to take care of and chores to do. She mulled over her to-do list and came to a quick decision.

"Actually, I'm going to leave with you. I need to pick up some things at the grocery store." Jonah paused halfway down the hallway, but she slid around him and kept going. "I'll just run upstairs and get my purse."

"Amanda." She ignored him and ran up the stairs. Grabbing her purse and sweater, she bound down the stairs again. He was waiting, his jacket already on, keys in his hand.

"This isn't a good idea," he protested as she went out the door in front of him.

"It's a perfect idea. By the time I finish running errands and get home, you'll probably already be back." She hurried down the front walkway to her car. "Besides, I can't stop living just because someone is harassing me."

Jonah held her door as she slid into the driver's seat. "It's more than simple harassment." His gaze went to the woods surrounding her home. "Promise me you'll leave the groceries in the car until I get back."

"Sure. I don't mind leaving that chore for you," she teased. "I'll just take the couple bags of perishables in with me and leave the rest for you." When he hesitated, she added, "I have my cell phone and your sister needs you."

He leaned down and planted a hard kiss on her lips. "Be careful." He closed her door with a solid thunk and then strode to his truck. She backed out of the driveway and followed his truck down the road.

An hour later, Amanda let herself into her house. She struggled with the four bags of perishables she had in her arms. She'd bought more than she'd anticipated, but then Jonah had a large appetite. And not just for food. That thought brought a smile to her lips.

Humming, she locked the door and hurried to the kitchen, dropping the grocery sacks on the counter. It didn't take her long to unpack the milk, fruit and meat and store them in the refrigerator. The rest of the groceries would be fine in her trunk until Jonah got back.

Deciding a cup of tea was what she needed, she filled the kettle and plugged it in. She had a supply of herbal teas thanks to Cyndi and was quickly becoming addicted to them. Grabbing her favorite mug and a teabag, she waited patiently for the kettle to boil. While she waited, she made a mental list of everything she had to accomplish today.

It was Saturday, but her business was a seven-day-a-week operation. The nice thing was that she could also take time off whenever she wanted. By the Book provided her with a good living, but more than that, she loved what she did. Yesterday had been a good day for her online store. She'd sold three of her more valuable books to a collector in California. She planned to box up the books and send them out by courier later today.

The kettle began to whistle and Amanda poured hot water over her tea bag. Not bothering to wait until the tea steeped, she picked up her mug and decided to check her email. There had been several inquiries about two of Elizabeth's more collectible books yesterday, plus she'd had an email regarding an estate collection.

Wandering down the hallway, she sighed with satisfaction. The house was beginning to feel like home. By the Book was ready for her to open to the general public any time she wanted. The rest of the downstairs was now a cozy living space, and the last of the empty moving boxes were ready to be carried to the basement. Every room had been painted, paintings and artwork were hung and furniture was arranged. Best of all, her electrical system worked like a charm.

She went into the shop, pausing just inside the doorway to admire how good all the books looked on the shelves. Pleased, she walked to her desk, placing her mug on the corner. She was about to turn on her computer when she thought she heard a noise.

"Jonah?" Amanda went to the window and checked the driveway, but there was no sign of his truck. "This is an old house and it makes odd noises. It's part of its charm," she assured herself. "Nothing to worry about." Her nerves were on edge since the phone call yesterday.

As she turned away from the window, the phone rang. Amanda jumped and gave a nervous laugh as she reached into her pocket and withdrew her cell phone. Her heart was pounding as she answered. "Hello."

"Hey, sugar. You okay? You sound like you're out of breath?" Jonah's voice washed over her, calming her racing heart.

"I'm fine. How is everything with Elizabeth?" She thought it was prudent to change the subject before Jonah pushed it. There was no way she'd admit that she was nervous being alone.

Jonah snorted. "Still no sign of Brown yet. I'm beginning to think he changed his mind. Either that or he's just messing with Elizabeth."

"I'm sure he'll be there soon."

She heard someone calling his name in the background.

"I've got to go, but I'll be home soon. Elizabeth has to take Susie to dance lessons in ten minutes, regardless if Brown makes it here by then or not." He paused and his voice lowered to what Amanda thought of as his bedroom voice. "I just wanted to hear your voice."

Amanda smiled as warmth suffused her. "I'll see you in a bit." She ended the call and shoved her phone back into her pocket. A whisper of a sound caught her ear, but she dismissed it. "Got to be the wind," she muttered, feeling more alone now than she had before Jonah called.

She went back to her desk and started to sit, but changed her mind. There was no way she'd be able to settle down and work until she'd checked the house from top to bottom. Closing her eyes, she listened, but all she heard were the normal creaks and groans of her one-hundred-year-old house. The wind gusted up and the trees outside the house shivered. It was the middle of the day, for heaven's sake. She was completely safe.

Still, she was no fool. Grabbing her cell phone, she opened it and held her finger poised over the buttons. One press would put her through to the sheriff's office. She'd programmed it in right after the attack.

Feeling stupid and paranoid, she crept from the shop and headed toward the living room. There was no one there. She continued on through the other entrance on the far end of the room and checked out the dining room. From there, she went to the kitchen. Steam still wafted from the kettle, but the house was quiet.

Something wasn't right. She knew it, but couldn't exactly put her finger on what it was. "You're losing it, you know that." She took a deep breath to settle her jumpy stomach. Her nerves were jittery and she could feel a bead of sweat on her forehead. "This is ridiculous."

But ridiculous or not, she knew she had to get out of here. Tucking her cell phone into her back pocket, she grabbed her purse and keys from the counter. She'd go to Jessie's and buy herself some lunch. Maybe she'd even call Jonah and see if he could meet her there.

Making herself walk at a sedate pace, she made her way toward the front door. She'd probably end up feeling really foolish later, but that was fine by her. She couldn't stay here a second longer.

Amanda smelled it then, the slightest whiff of cologne. Jonah didn't wear cologne. She knew that scent from somewhere, but where? Her mind jumped back in time to the night of the break-in. Her attacker had been wearing that scent.

Throwing caution aside, she raced for the door, her fingers scrabbling at the lock. Footsteps thudded behind her, but she didn't dare look back. All her focus was on opening the door and getting out. The lock turned. She grabbed the handle.

Her heart pounded, creating a roaring sound in her ears as she yanked the door open. A heavy male body struck hers, knocking the door closed. Amanda's head hit the heavy panel with a hard smack. Her knees buckled, but she remained upright, reaching for the handle. She had to escape.

A hand grabbed her hair, yanking her head back. "This could have been avoided if you'd only left the damn book somewhere I could find it."

The voice was muffled, but it was vaguely familiar. Amanda tried to place it as she struggled with her attacker. A sharp knife flashed in front of her face.

"Don't move or I'll cut you." He said it so matter-of-factly that she had no doubt he'd do it.

He was taller than her and had one hand wrapped around her hair, while the other held the knife. With her back to him, she couldn't even see what he was wearing beyond the black gloves on his hands and the black sleeves of his coat.

She stopped struggling and started to think. Jonah would be home soon. All she had to do was stall him until that happened. Or maybe she could distract her attacker long enough to make a break for it. "What do you want?"

"The book." He said it as if she should know what he was talking about.

She licked her dry lips and tried to focus. "I have a lot of books."

He tightened his grip on her hair and pressed the edge of the blade against her cheek. Amanda felt the sharp bite of the knife as it sank into her flesh. She tried to jerk her head away, but it was impossible. Pain made her cry out. Blood trickled down her cheek.

"Don't make me hurt you." She sensed his growing excitement and knew he was enjoying her fear.

That made her angry. Taking a slow breath, she released it. "You need to tell me what book you want. You can have it. I just want you gone."

He dragged the flat of the blade over her face. "We don't always get what we want, Amanda."

She shivered with revulsion as he said her name and knew he wasn't going to leave here without hurting her. She no longer questioned her instincts. He was going to kill her when he got what he wanted. She had to watch for her chance to escape.

"I want the journal." He dragged her backward toward her shop. She barely kept from tripping. The knife went from her face to her neck. She swallowed hard, but kept moving as he towed her into the shop.

"What journal? I keep all the journals on this shelf." She pointed to one of the shelves just to the side of her desk. He pulled her alongside it.

Keeping the knife pressed to her neck, he released his grip on her hair and began to yank out book after book, tossing it angrily aside. When he got to the last one, he pushed her up against the bookcase. "What game are you playing? It's not here."

How much time had passed since he'd grabbed her? It felt like an eternity, but it was probably less than five minutes. "Those are all the journals I have." Even as she said it, she remembered the book upstairs in her nightstand.

Seizing her by the hair again, he yanked her head back. "Where is the journal Elizabeth Brown gave you?"

Everything clicked into place and she suddenly knew who he was. She had to stay calm and not let on that she knew his identity or he might kill her now and be done with it. "Upstairs. It's upstairs."

"Let's go." He marched her toward the door. "And if you're playing games with me, I'll slit your pretty little throat. Do you understand?"

"Yes." She didn't dare nod with the knife pressed so tightly to her throat.

As they entered the hallway, she felt a stirring in the air. Danger seemed to fill the space around them. Without seeing him, she knew Jonah had arrived.

"Brown!"

Her captor spun both of them around to face the end of the hallway near the kitchen. But it wasn't Jonah who stood there. This man was massive. About six-foot-six, he was as wide as a mountain. Where Jonah was lithe and lean, this man was wide and solid. His hair was black and his eyes were a piercing golden-brown.

Amanda had no idea who he was.

"I'll cut her." As if to prove his point, he pressed the blade against her throat and she felt the warm trickle of her blood yet again as it glided down her neck.

The massive stranger held his hands out at his sides as if to show them he wasn't armed. Amanda almost snorted. The man didn't need to have a weapon to be a threat. Even she could see that. And it wasn't just his size. It was the confident way he held himself. He reminded her of Jonah.

"Now you don't want to hurt the pretty lady." The stranger kept his voice low, his tone conversational.

"I will if I have to." She could feel her captor start to shake. With fear or anger, she wasn't sure, but either way it didn't bode well for her. The blade rested at the edge of her flesh, ready to slice deep at any second.

She tensed her muscles, waiting for an opportunity. If her captor got distracted even for one second, she was going to make a break for it.

The stranger leaned negligently against the wall, as if he didn't have a care in the world. "Now if you do that Jonah's going to have to kill you."

Her captor jerked back at the threat. Amanda felt the blade drop slightly. Striking as fast as she could, she shoved her hands upward with all her might, knocking her captor's arms aside.

The world exploded around her, yet it all seemed to happen in slow motion.

The stranger reached out and grabbed her, pulling her away from her captor. She felt the warmth of his hand around hers as he jerked her to safety. At the same moment, her captor yelled in agony as his hand was ruthlessly yanked away. Amanda heard the sharp snap of a bone breaking.

The world sped up again, returning to normal. Amanda gasped as strong arms wrapped around her. The stranger was talking to her, but she wasn't listening. She couldn't take her eyes off the scene in front of her.

Jonah had appeared from out of nowhere and had her captor facedown on the floor. He must have been waiting in the living room for his chance to pounce, although she hadn't seen or heard him. Jonah fastened some sort of plastic restraints around her attacker's wrists, ignoring the man's scream as he pulled them tight.

It was obvious to her that her attacker's hand was broken. The knife he'd held on her was on the floor a few feet from her. She shivered at the sight of her blood on the weapon. Jonah had his knee in the other man's back and had his head pulled back at an awkward angle. "I should just kill you now and be done with it," he growled. "But that would be too easy." Jonah slammed the man's head down onto the floor and then ripped off the mask he was wearing.

Although she'd guessed who her attacker was, seeing Jim Brown lying on her floor was still somewhat of a shock.

"Jonah." She'd meant to speak louder, but his name barely came out as a whisper.

Jonah's head snapped around and their eyes met. He was beside her before she could blink, pulling her into his arms. "Let me see how badly you're hurt." He tilted her head back and examined the cut on her neck and the one on her cheek. "It might leave a scar, but I don't think either of them will need stitches."

She started to shiver from the shock. Jonah sat down on the stairs and pulled her into his arms. The stranger took off his jacket and laid it over her. "I'm Levi Mann, ma'am. It's a pleasure to meet you." His touch was gentle as he tucked it around her.

"Amanda Barrington." She slipped her hand out from beneath his coat and offered it to him. "Thank you for helping to save me."

He nodded solemnly. "My pleasure, ma'am." He gave her hand a light squeeze before tucking it back beneath the coat.

"I don't understand." Amanda was still confused. "Why are you here?"

A brief grin flashed on his face. "Jonah's had me out in the woods this past week watching your house." Sirens blared in the distance. "Here come the cops."

Jonah tightened his hold on her and she snuggled closer. Once again, Jonah had saved her life. "I've got you," he promised.

She closed her eyes and nodded, wishing he'd never let her go.

## Chapter Thirteen

Amanda sat on the side of her bed and stared at the small journal in her hands. Who knew that such a small thing could cause such huge problems?

The emergency crew that arrived on the scene had dealt with the cuts on her neck and cheek. She'd refused to go to the hospital even though Jonah had wanted her to. If the cuts didn't need stitches, she didn't need the hospital. She wanted to be home, not stuck in the same hospital as Jim Brown. Jonah had broken his hand and they had taken him to get it treated before transferring him to the county lockup.

Her fingers stroked over the leather binding. "You had no idea when you started this journal all those years ago that it would cause such problems, did you, Cecilia?"

She could feel the men staring at her and shrugged. "I kept meaning to tell you about the journal, Jonah, but I kept forgetting. I didn't think there was any harm in reading it. I'm about halfway through and it's mostly just news and recipes. She talks about her daily life."

Patrick held out his hand and she handed the journal over. "You're sure that's what he was looking for?"

"As far as I can tell." She cringed when he casually flipped open the front cover. "Please be careful with it, it's irreplaceable."

The sheriff nodded as he gingerly turned the first page.

Jonah stood off to the side watching her. She couldn't tell what he was thinking. All of them had talked to the sheriff, but still had to give formal statements.

Amanda was still amazed that Jonah had had an ex-military buddy skulking in the woods behind her house for a week. Levi Mann had been watching her house whenever Jonah was away.

It was Levi who'd seen Jim Brown break out a basement window in her house and slip inside. He'd called Jonah, who was already on his way home. The two of them had entered the house the same way as her attacker. Jonah had taken the time to call the cops before he and Levi had moved into position and rescued her.

Patrick flipped through several pages of the journal before placing it carefully into an evidence bag. "We'll be going through this with a fine tooth comb." He handed it off to one of his deputies. "Put this with the rest of the evidence and don't let it out of your sight."

When the deputy was gone, Patrick turned back to her. "You sure you don't want to go to the hospital?"

She tried to smile, but knew it fell flat. "I'm sure." She tugged her sweater tighter around her and tried not to shiver. "I'd rather be home than at the hospital being poked and prodded by a doctor."

Patrick chuckled. "I hear you. We won't be much longer downstairs. I'll let you know when we're leaving." He nodded at Jonah and left.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Jonah's eyes went over her body from top to bottom, his gaze clinical.

She was getting tired of people asking her that question. "I'm fine." And physically she was fine, but she knew it would be a while before she stopped seeing the sharp blade flash in front of her face. Her hand automatically went to her neck, touching the white bandage that covered the cut.

Jonah moved then, coming to crouch down beside her. "Brown used Elizabeth to draw me away from you."

"I guessed as much." She shrugged and picked at the fabric of her jeans, frowning at the bloodstain on the front of her thigh. Her top was probably ruined.

"It was a smart move on his part. If he'd found the journal, he could have shown up to see Elizabeth and had a perfect alibi." Jonah placed his hand over hers, stopping her nervous movements. "I left after I got off the phone with you. I knew something was wrong, could feel it in my gut. I was just turning onto the street when Levi called. There

was no time to wait for the cops." He brought her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. "I'm sorry he hurt you. I'm sorry I let you down."

She frowned. "You didn't let me down. No one could have predicted my attacker would try something this desperate in the middle of the day. Good Lord, the man is a respected businessman."

Jonah jumped to his feet and started pacing. "I should have seen through his ploy. You could have been killed."

"But I wasn't." Rising from the bed, she stepped in front of him. His eyes were hooded as he looked down at her. She could feel the heat emanating from his body, but he didn't touch her. She wanted his arms around her, but he seemed distant from her. Maybe it was time to put all her cards on the table. Facing death for the second time had a way of putting a person's priorities straight.

"Look, I know all you wanted when this started was a simple affair. Instead, you've been drawn into this mess. I'm sorry for that, but I'm glad it's over." She tried to smile, but it quickly slid away. She'd never felt less like smiling in her life. "Thank you is totally inadequate for what you've done for me. You've saved my life twice."

Jonah was as still as a statue. She couldn't tell what he was thinking.

Taking a deep breath, she forged onward. "I understand totally if you want to leave. You didn't bargain for having your life so disrupted when we started this affair."

"You understand." He cocked his head to one side and stared down at her. "I'm glad one of us does."

"We're leaving now!" Patrick yelled up from downstairs. "I expect to see you both first thing tomorrow to give statements."

"We'll be there!" Jonah called back as he left the room and started down the stairs.

Noise drifted upstairs as all the members of the sheriff's office gathered their belongings and left. Would Jonah leave with them? She didn't think so. He was an honorable man, and she knew that in his mind, she was still his responsibility. She hated that thought. She didn't want to be anyone's responsibility. She wanted him to stay

because he wanted to, because he loved her, not because his sense of honor dictated that he should.

Amanda scrubbed her hands over her face, wincing when she accidentally struck the bandage on her face. Shivering, she kicked off her shoes and crawled under the comforter, pulling it around her for warmth.

The house was quiet now and a sense of calm settled over her. No matter what happened, she couldn't regret the time she'd spent with Jonah. She loved him more than she'd thought it possible to love someone. She wanted to be with him but she didn't want to be just another one of his responsibilities. It was time he knew that.

Amanda didn't know what she'd do if all he still wanted was an affair. The sensible part of her warned she'd have to end things with him before her heart was irreparably broken. The woman in love urged her to take a chance that he might eventually come to love her.

She didn't hear his boots on the stairs, but she knew the second he entered the room. Lowering the covering from around her face, she watched as he walked straight to the bed and sat down beside her.

Her fingers tightened around the comforter and she picked up the conversation where she'd left off. "I don't want you to feel responsible for me, Jonah. You're an honorable man and I thank you for everything you've done. But you don't owe me anything." She gave a rueful smile. "If anything, I owe you."

He planted his hands on the mattress and leaned toward her. "You don't owe me anything."

"Fine. Then we're even." This entire conversation was getting ridiculous. "So where does that leave us?"

"Where do you want it to leave us?"

Amanda was realistic. They couldn't go on living together now that the threat to her life was gone. If they continued their affair, they'd probably continue to see one another several nights a week. That would be enough for now, but eventually she would resent the fact that Jonah didn't love her. Either she would end it or he would. Their affair was

temporary, doomed to end from the moment it started. Tears pricked her eyes, but she blinked them back. No one ever promised her happily ever after.

"I guess we could keep on seeing one another." She glanced at him, trying to get a sense of how he felt about the situation before she laid her heart bare. She was immediately captured by the haunted look in his eyes. "Jonah?"

"I've never been the kind of man to settle down." He leaned back but stayed seated on the bed beside her. "My career in the military took me to some of the worst places on the face of the planet. I've seen things that I wouldn't wish on my worst enemy." He paused and looked away. "Been betrayed by someone I trusted. Done things I'm not especially proud of, but they were things that had to be done. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

She knew that he was telling her that he'd killed people during his time in the army. That was the nature of war and conflict. She sensed that the betrayal by someone he'd trusted had hurt him in an even deeper way.

Her heart ached for what Jonah had been through, but his experiences had made him the man he was today. He was self-sufficient, brave, honorable and the finest man Amanda had ever known. "I understand."

He nodded, but didn't look at her. "I have nightmares sometimes." He glanced back at her before turning away again. "Not often, maybe every few months or so."

"That's understandable." She wanted to reach out and touch him, but was afraid he'd stop talking if she did. He was opening up to her and she didn't want to do anything to disrupt him. Hope blossomed deep within her. Maybe a relationship between them was possible.

"Maybe." He propped his elbows on his knees and clasped his hands between his legs, staring at the wall in front of him. "I banked and invested most of my money." He gave a small chuckle. "Well, Levi invested it. That man has a talent for making money on the stock market and he's doubled my money more times than I can remember. I'm financially sound even if I never work again."

"That's good." She propped herself against the headboard so she could see him better. Jonah wasn't a man who shared himself easily. The fact that he was doing so now, making himself vulnerable to her, made her heart skip a beat. He was offering up a part of himself to her, a painful part, and he would only do that because he trusted her completely. It also meant he had feelings for her. For a man like Jonah, this was a big step. His face was set like stone as he continued.

"I inherited the house and the family business. I'm an electrician by trade, compliments of the military. I'm also an expert in weapons, explosives and hand-to-hand combat."

"All handy skills."

He gave a short bark of laughter and turned to her. "What I'm saying is that I'm no prize." He rubbed his hand across the back of his neck, the motion stretching his T-shirt over his chest. Amanda ignored the distraction and concentrated on his face, trying to understand exactly what he meant. "I'm rough around the edges and that will never change."

She nodded, not quite sure what he wanted her to say. To her he was simply Jonah, the man she'd come to love.

"It never mattered to me before." He swiveled around to face her again. "I knew I'd never settle down, never marry."

Amanda tried to ignore the pain in her heart. It hurt worse than either of the knife wounds she'd received. The cuts on her neck and cheek would heal. She was afraid the one on her heart never would. She understood what he was trying to tell her now.

He might care for her, might even love her, but he didn't want anything permanent. Maybe it was because of his military past, or the betrayal he mentioned. Whatever the reason, she had to accept it. This obviously wasn't any easier for him than it was for her. She could tell each word he spoke was painful for him.

"It's okay." Reaching out, she took one of his hands in hers. "I knew you weren't looking to settle down when this started. You were perfectly honest with me."

A low rumble rose from deep in his chest. "Amanda."

"No." She had to get through this quickly or she'd break down and cry. "I understand and I have no regrets. You don't have to worry about letting me down easy or anything. If you want to go, just go." She bit the inside of her mouth to keep from crying. All she had to do was hold it together until Jonah left. Then she could bawl her eyes out.

"What if I want to stay?" His words were so low she almost didn't hear him.

"What did you say?" Amanda wasn't certain she'd heard him correctly. Was afraid to believe he meant anything beyond staying for the moment.

He shifted closer to her and cupped her cheek with his palm. "I don't want to leave." He leaned forward and brushed his lips against hers. "Not now." He dragged his tongue over her bottom lip. "Not ever."

"Jonah?" Her heart rate had doubled in speed in the past ten seconds. She couldn't manage to catch her breath. "What are you saying?"

The corners of his mouth tilted upward. "I know I shouldn't ask you this now. You've been through a trauma and you're emotional. But damned if I'm not bastard enough to take advantage of that fact."

"Ask me what?" If he didn't get to the point soon, she was going to explode. She couldn't take the suspense. Hope hovered just above the despair that had threatened to overwhelm her only moments before.

"I want to be with you now and forever. I'm no prize, but I'll always be faithful to you, take care of you." He brushed his thumb over her cheeks and down her nose. "No one will ever love you as much as I do."

Her heart skipped a beat. She knew her mouth was hanging open, but she couldn't manage to speak. Jonah loved her. It was hard for her to wrap her head around what she was hearing.

"You don't have to give me your decision right now. Just think about it." He dropped his hand from her face and stood.

"Jonah." Her fingers released the death grip on her comforter and it slid to her waist. She lunged at him, wrapping her arms around his waist. "Oh, Jonah." She wanted to say so much more, but her tongue wouldn't work. Tears trickled out of the corners of her eyes and she sniffed.

"Are you crying?" He tilted her face up and swiped at her tears with the pads of his thumbs. "I'm sorry, sugar. I didn't mean to make you cry. I'm a bastard. I told you I was rough around the edges."

Her tears flowed faster. "I love you." His hands froze on her face and she nodded. "I love you so much."

"You've been under a lot of stress lately."

She shook her head and laughed. "I've been under stress, but I'm not stupid, Jonah. I know my own mind. You're strong, intelligent, honorable, stubborn, a little overbearing at times, and you make every cell in my body tingle."

A slow smile crossed his face and he laughed. "All that. Overbearing, huh? I can see you're under no illusions about me."

She laughed. "I know that we'll have our disagreements and that life won't always run smoothly, but as long as we face our problems together, we'll be okay."

"Amanda." He eased them both back down onto the bed and pulled her into his arms. "How did I get so lucky?"

She snuggled closer to his chest. "I was smart enough to buy a house that had electrical problems."

Jonah laughed and swooped down to capture her lips in a searing kiss.

For the first time in his life, Jonah felt a sense of total peace descend upon him. Amanda's lips parted, inviting him into her warmth. He didn't hesitate, surging forward, he let his tongue tangle with hers. She tasted so fine, like an aged whiskey. He savored her unique flavor, rolling his tongue over every inch of the warm cavern of her mouth.

His arms tightened around her. He'd almost lost her tonight. That bastard Brown had almost killed her. He'd known the truth before, but he hadn't truly understood the depths of his love for Amanda until the moment he'd seen the knife at her neck. She was his world. He'd have killed Brown in a heartbeat if he'd really hurt Amanda.

He'd known then that he had to tell her how he felt. It hadn't been easy. He wasn't the kind of man to go around spouting his feelings, but Amanda was different. It was easier to talk to her, to tell her things he wouldn't tell anyone else.

Easing back, he gasped for breath as he absorbed every inch of her precious face. He loved everything about her, from her cinnamon-colored hair and freckles to her curvy shape. He loved the way she read the paper from back to front and always did the crossword puzzle. He loved the way she nibbled on her bottom lip when she was thinking about something. Heck, he even loved her stubborn streak and the way her chin jutted out when she was about to give him hell about something.

Her fingers feathered over his face and he closed his eyes, absorbing the tender care in her touch. Amanda was the most open and honest woman he'd ever met in his life. He knew deep down in his gut that she'd never betray him, never hurt him. She'd also make his life richer and a heck of a lot more interesting. Amanda was a challenge and she was the woman he'd been waiting for his entire life.

The past was over and behind him. Amanda was his future.

Need surged through him. He fought with the urge to strip her and make love to her. She'd been hurt and needed tender loving care, not him jumping her.

"Jonah." Her fingers were making circles on his chest and that light touch was driving him crazy. His cock was pressing hard against the zipper of his jeans and his balls were drawn up tight against his body. Still, he didn't care how much discomfort he was in. Amanda was here in his arms. Nothing else mattered.

"Yeah, sugar." He shifted to try to get a bit more comfortable. It didn't work.

One of her hands slid lower, skimming over his stomach and landing just above the waistband of his jeans. He sucked in a breath. She peeked up at him through her thick lashes. The corners of her mouth turned up in a mischievous grin as she allowed her hand to drift lower.

"Amanda," he groaned. "You've been through a trauma. You need to rest."

She squeezed his cock through his jeans. He tightened his hands around her shoulders, but he couldn't bring himself to push her away. His hips thrust toward her touch.

"What I need," she countered, "is for you to touch me." She slid her hand up and down the hard ridge of his erection. "For you to make love to me."

"I don't want to hurt you," he gritted out as she fingered his balls through his jeans.

"You won't." Sitting up in bed, she started to pull her top over her head.

"Let me." He scooted up beside her and carefully lifted the material so it didn't hit her neck or her cheek. "You should be in a hot bath. Your neck and shoulders will probably be stiff tomorrow."

"Later." Reaching for the front closure of her bra, she unhooked it. The cups fell away and she shrugged her shoulders, letting the straps fall down her arms.

Jonah leaned forward and captured a turgid nipple with his lips and sucked it into his mouth. Amanda made a small sound of pleasure, her fingers tangling in his hair to hold him close.

His clothing felt way too restrictive. Giving her nipple one final tug with his lips, he rolled off the bed. He was naked in less than ten seconds. Amanda watched him, her eyes wide and dreamy. She glanced at his erection and licked her lips. A bead of liquid seeped from the tip.

She came up on her knees and reached for him, wrapping her hand around his shaft. Jonah closed his eyes and gritted his teeth to keep from coming as her soft, warm fingers encircled him. She pumped her fist up and down, stroking him from root to tip.

His eyes popped open when he felt her moist breath on his cock a second before her lips closed over him. He groaned as she traced her tongue around the sensitive ridge at the base of the head. She wrapped her hands around the base and squeezed him tight as her mouth glided up and down his shaft.

He tangled his hands in her hair, loosening it from the clip that held it at her nape. Using his hold on her, he silently encouraged her to move her mouth faster. "Suck harder."

Her cheeks hollowed as she followed his instructions. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen in his life. Her cheeks were flushed, and her lips were a moist pink. Her green eyes glowed as she took his length into her mouth. It was better than anything he'd ever imagined. And that was saying a lot because he'd been imagining this moment from the instant he'd met her.

She dragged her tongue along his shaft, encircling the head with her tongue before taking him deep once again. Jonah moaned, his balls drawing up tight. He had to stop or he'd come here and now, and he wanted to be inside Amanda when that happened.

He pulled her away from him. There was a small pop when she released him. She smiled up at him and licked her lips.

Opening the drawer in the bedside table, he grabbed a condom, opened it and smoothed it on. He couldn't wait any longer.

Reminding himself to be gentle, he reached for the button on her jeans.

Amanda found it hard to breathe as she lay back on the bed and watched Jonah roll the condom over his erection. Fully dressed, he was a sight to behold. Naked, he almost made her heart stop. He was all corded muscles, thick bones and sinew. His shoulders were wide, his waist lean.

And his erection made her mouth water. Like the rest of him, it was hard and thick. She loved the taste of him—salty and spicy. She'd never given oral sex before, but she decided that she liked it. A lot. His deep moans of pleasure, the sensual tug of his fingers in her hair and his tangy flavor had all combined to heighten her arousal.

He looked at her then and heat suffused her entire body. Her panties were damp and her nipples puckered even tighter under his gaze. His green eyes were darker than usual, his lips moist from where he'd sucked on her nipples. Her core throbbed in anticipation.

They'd made love many times since he'd moved in with her. It had been passionate, intense, fun and playful. But this felt different. Now there was a commitment between them that hadn't been there before.

Jonah reached for her jeans and undid the button and pulled down the zipper. "Lift." His voice was deeper than usual and thick with emotion. She lifted her butt off the bed and he pulled her jeans and panties over her hips and down her legs, not stopping until they were off. He tugged off her socks, leaving her as naked as he was.

He stretched out on the bed beside her. Propping himself up on his arm, he leaned down and kissed her. The kiss started out gentle, but didn't stay that way for long.

His shaft pressed against her hip, hard and insistent. The folds of her sex thickened, getting wetter with each passing second. Her breasts ached, so she rolled onto her side and pressed them against his chest.

Jonah groaned and peppered her face with quick, hot kisses before working his way back to her breasts. "Such sweet breasts," he murmured as he lapped at a distended nipple. She sifted her fingers through his hair, needing more than that light, teasing touch.

He stroked his hand over her belly and cupped her mound. His fingers traced the slick folds of her sex before dipping inside her slit to test her readiness. "You're always so wet for me." She could hear the pleasure in his voice.

"Always." Grabbing his shoulders, she tried to pull him on top of her, needing to feel his hard length inside her, but he resisted.

"I don't want to hurt you, sugar." He rolled onto his back and lifted her on top of him. "Ride me. Take as much or as little as you need."

Amanda slid her mound over his cock, pressing her folds against his hard shaft. She gasped when it caressed her clit. It felt so good she did it again.

Jonah groaned. His eyes were open, but his head was tilted back, the tendons in his neck corded as he struggled for control. His hands were fisted in the covers, biceps straining as he sucked in a breath.

His obvious arousal pushed hers up a notch. Unable to wait any longer, she wrapped her hand around the base of his cock and guided him to her opening. Both of them moaned as she sank down, not stopping until every inch of him was inside her. She watched, spellbound, as his shaft entered her. It was incredibly erotic to see him

disappearing into her tight sheath and to feel him stretching her. Her inner muscles tightened and relaxed, squeezing him, accepting him.

It didn't seem to matter how many times they made love, she was always astounded by how deeply he filled her. It almost bordered on pain, but always stopped just short. Each time he thrust inside her, she wanted to wrap her legs around him and keep him there forever.

"You feel so damn good." Releasing his grip on the comforter, he reached out and palmed her breasts.

Placing her hands on his chest for support, she began to lift herself up, letting his shaft slip out of her. When only the tip remained inside, she paused before dropping back down. Her channel rippled as it expanded, welcoming him once again.

Her breasts swayed as she continued her rhythm. Jonah plucked at her nipples, teasing them with his fingers. They were intimately joined, but she wanted to be closer to him.

Lowering herself, she sighed as her stomach touched his and her breasts pillowed against his chest. "I need to feel your skin against mine."

He banded his arms around her and rolled them so they were both on their sides, facing one another. Lifting her leg, he pulled it over his thigh and began to rock his hips against her. Amanda began to undulate her hips, matching his stroke.

He caressed her shoulders before settling his hands on her ass. She pushed his hair away from his face, loving the feel of the heavy black silk as it slid through her fingers. Letting her hands fall to his shoulders, she savored the warmth of his skin and the strength that rippled beneath it.

She gasped when Jonah slipped one of his hands lower, letting his thumb brush the puckered entrance of her behind before moving on to touch her slick folds.

All sense of urgency was gone, yet every muscle in her body tightened in anticipation. Her toes curled and her scalp tingled. She felt every hard slide of his body as his cock slipped in and out. Their bodies were slick with perspiration. Both of them were breathing hard, their chests rising and falling rapidly.

Jonah murmured her name and she heard the longing in his voice. She leaned up and kissed him, sliding her tongue into his mouth. He tightened his hold on her and began to thrust harder—short, shallow thrusts that made her moan.

He angled her hips and his pelvic bone brushed her clit with each stroke. She buried her face in his neck, crying out his name.

Her entire body shook and shuddered. She felt the hard pulse of his cock deep inside her, but still he continued to thrust. The orgasm rolled over her in long, slow waves. Closing her eyes, she clung to him and savored each sweet sensation.

When she finally roused herself a while later, she had no idea how much time had passed. She moaned when Jonah lowered her leg and gently slid his semi-erect cock from her. The sensitive muscles protested and contracted, trying to keep him inside.

"I'll be back." Jonah rolled from the bed. She heard his footsteps as he padded to the bathroom. She must have dozed, because it seemed as though he'd just left when he was crawling back in bed beside her.

She snuggled her head against his chest and sighed with satisfaction when he pulled her thigh over his. The steady beat of his heart lulled her. Smiling, she laid her hand over his chest and fell asleep.

## Chapter Fourteen

Amanda rolled over in bed and frowned when she discovered nothing but cool sheets. Forcing her eyes open, she blinked. Sunshine filled the room, illuminating what she'd already suspected. Jonah was gone.

She glanced at the clock radio and gasped when she saw the time. It was just after ten. She never slept this late. Levering herself into a seated position, she groaned when her stiff muscles complained. No doubt about it, she was certainly feeling the effects of yesterday's attack.

Where was Jonah?

She wasn't too concerned. Wherever he was, he'd come back to her. Of that she had no doubt. Warmth spread from her heart, radiating throughout her entire body. She still couldn't believe what had happened, how much her life had changed. Amanda had never believed in happily ever after. Her life hadn't had much love in it. But that had all changed. Now she not only had wonderful friends and a new home, but she had someone special in her life.

Pushing her hair out of her face, she padded to the bathroom. One look in the mirror had her groaning. Her face was pale and her hair was sticking out at all angles. Her cheek and neck were slightly bruised around the white bandages that covered the shallow knife wounds. She also felt sweaty and slightly sticky from last night's passionate lovemaking. Not exactly an inspiring sight.

She headed straight for the shower. Turning the water on, she stepped beneath the spray and sighed. The heat from the water and a quick lather from head to toe made her feel much better. She didn't linger, but rinsed and twisted off the taps before stepping out onto the bathmat.

Drying off, she wrapped the towel around her. She decided it was too much trouble to blow-dry her hair. Instead, she combed it and pulled it back with a scrunchie. The bandage had fallen off her cheek and the one on her neck was almost off. She finished the job, peeling it off and dropping it into the garbage can. Both cuts looked good, but she didn't want to take any chances. Opening the medicine cabinet, she pulled out a tube of antibacterial cream and slathered some of it over each cut.

Satisfied, she went back to her bedroom. It didn't take her long to pull on clean underwear and socks. Opting for comfort, as she almost always did, she dressed in jeans and a soft lavender sweater. She didn't bother with shoes or slippers, but padded down the hall in her stockinged feet.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she never did have any supper last night. She hadn't eaten anything since yesterday lunchtime. The smell of coffee hit her nostrils when she reached the bottom of the stairs and she almost moaned with pleasure. She desperately needed a cup of coffee. In spite of the shower, she still felt like she was in a bit of a fog.

She paused just outside the kitchen door and watched Jonah as he puttered around her kitchen. The coffee pot was indeed full of freshly brewed coffee. Something smelled wonderful. Bacon for sure, and maybe eggs.

Jonah stood at the counter, pouring two glasses of orange juice. He was wearing jeans, but nothing else. Amanda sighed and watched his back muscles ripple as he set the jug on the counter and picked up one of the glasses. Turning, he smiled at her. "Hey, sleepyhead."

She smiled and went to him. "You knew I was there all along?"

He handed her the glass of juice. "I heard you coming and I could smell your soap."

"I guess I can forget trying to sneak up on you." Lifting the glass to her lips, she savored the cool sweet juice as it flowed down her throat. "That tastes great."

"I've got bacon and eggs in the oven." He reached out and pushed down the lever on the toaster. "I heard the shower go on and knew you wouldn't be long." He took the glass from her hand and set it down on the counter. Pulling her into his arms, he leaned down and kissed her.

Her arms crept up around his shoulders, as she tasted the rich flavor of coffee on his lips. "Umm...coffee."

Jonah grinned and herded her toward the table. "Sit. I'll get breakfast."

"I could get used to this," she remarked as she pulled her chair closer to the table.

"That's the plan." Jonah placed her juice glass and a mug of coffee in front of her. The toast popped and he quickly buttered it. A minute later, they were both seated at the table with a plate filled with bacon, eggs and toast.

"Thank you." She was touched. No one had made breakfast for her since she was a kid.

He reached out and took her hand in his. Raising it to his lips, he kissed each knuckle before lowering it back to the table. "My pleasure. Now eat, you have to be hungry."

"Starving." She forked up some of the eggs and chewed. They were perfect, light and fluffy. The bacon was crisp and the toast was lightly buttered just the way she liked it. "This is good."

"How are you feeling this morning?" Jonah picked up his mug and took a sip of coffee.

"A little stiff, but other than that, I feel perfectly normal."

Jonah nodded and they both continued eating, neither of them talking. But it was a comfortable silence and Amanda felt herself relaxing and just enjoying being with Jonah.

They were just finishing up their breakfast when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it." Jonah pushed back his chair and headed for the front door. Amanda cleared their plates from the table, piling them into the sink.

Male voices drifted down the hallway. Heavy footsteps followed. Patrick stepped into the kitchen followed by Jonah. "Morning, Amanda." Patrick inclined his head. "We found out why Brown was so intent on finding that journal and I figured you'd want to know."

"Absolutely." She waved him toward the table. "Can I get you some coffee?"

"That would be great."

Before she could pour, Jonah was beside her. "I'll do that. You take it easy."

"It's only coffee." She kept her voice low. "I'm fine, Jonah."

Sighing, he relented and joined Patrick at the table. She filled a clean mug with coffee and carried it to the table. Sitting down, she turned her attention to the sheriff. "What do you know?"

"We found something interesting in the back half of the journal." Patrick took a sip of coffee before continuing. "Numbers to Brown's offshore bank accounts."

Amanda sat forward in her chair. "Bank accounts?"

Patrick nodded. "Seems Brown was helping himself to the occasional item from his clients' homes. Nothing they'd miss right away. Heck, a lot of them thought the items were lost in the move and filed a claim against the moving company. We're still trying to sort it all out."

"He was stealing from his clients?" Amanda could hardly believe it.

"Yup." Patrick sat back in his chair and tapped his fingers against the side of his mug. "And that's not all. He was also blackmailing a few folks. As a realtor, he had access to some folk's houses when they weren't home. He'd take a look around and if he discovered anything he thought they might want to keep secret, he blackmailed them. Not great amounts, but enough. Between the two scams he had a few hundred thousand dollars tucked away in an offshore bank account."

"That's incredible." If she'd made the time to finish reading the journal, she'd have come across the numbers. Not that she'd have known what they were for or who'd written them there.

"Blackmail is more common than you'd think," Patrick added. "Anyway, after his attack on you failed, he started talking, complaining really about how unfair it all was. How Elizabeth, Jonah and now you had spoiled all his plans."

Jonah snorted. "That doesn't surprise me. Brown is the type to blame other people when things go wrong."

"He started screaming for a lawyer after a while, but we'd already read him his rights and have witnesses, so everything he said will be admissible in court. Even if it wasn't, we've got the journal and Amanda's testimony. Plus, we've already been through his house and seized his personal papers. I imagine we'll find more evidence as we sift through them."

"But why did he wait so long to get the journal? I mean, he and Elizabeth have been divorced for a while now." That part didn't make sense to her.

"I asked him the same thing." Patrick shrugged. "Seems he thought the journal was in the boxes of books he got in the settlement. The house he and Elizabeth owned was sold as part of the divorce settlement. Brown was living in an apartment for a few months and kept almost everything in storage until he moved into the new house he just bought. He didn't need to access the accounts until a couple of weeks ago. He went looking for it one night, but couldn't find it. After going through every box, he realized Elizabeth must have it."

"That must have been quite the shock." Jonah rose and walked to the counter. Returning with the coffeepot, he refilled their cups before resuming his seat.

"Why did he write it in Cecilia Sutter's journal to begin with?" Amanda could think of safer places.

"He figured it was a book that Elizabeth would never part with because it was a family heirloom. Plus, she'd never expressed any interest in reading it. It was the perfect place as far as Brown was concerned."

"Why didn't he check with Elizabeth first or at least search the house?" Jonah asked.

"He was afraid to ask, afraid that she'd discover the secret hidden there. But he did check your house," Patrick countered.

"He broke into my home?" Jonah's voice was flat, but Amanda could hear the underlying anger and shivered. Jim Brown should be glad he was in custody. He was safer in prison than he would be on the outside right now.

"Yup." Patrick took another sip of coffee. "Seems he had a key to the backdoor from when your dad was still alive. You didn't bother to change the locks when you moved back home."

"Son of a bitch," Jonah swore under his breath.

"He waited until everyone was gone and let himself in. He went through all the books in your house and quickly realized that the journal wasn't there. Brown was furious when he learned Elizabeth was getting rid of most of the books she'd received in the divorce settlement and that she'd already brought them all to Amanda to sell. Since he'd already been through the books at your place and through Elizabeth's things, the only place left to search for the book was here."

"Wow." Amanda didn't quite know what else to say. "That's like something out of a mystery novel."

"Brown also used a spare key he'd gotten made to let himself in through Amanda's back door the first night he broke in." Patrick rubbed his thumb over the edge of the mug. "You didn't leave the door open as we suspected. He just let himself in."

"I knew I locked that door," she muttered. It had been bothering her since that night. As a woman who lived alone, she was always careful to lock her doors and check her windows.

"When we searched his home, we found keys for quite a few of the homes he's sold," Patrick continued. "This is a small town and folks are trusting, especially when it's someone they've known their entire lives. Not everyone thinks to change the locks when they buy a new home. He probably planned to let himself in here at some point and steal a book or two, but then he discovered the journal was missing."

"I still can't believe he told you all this." Amanda could hear the skepticism in Jonah's voice. "Why? Out of the goodness of his heart? Or is he trying to cut a deal?"

Patrick chuckled. "The man doesn't handle failure well. His anger got the best of him. The shot they gave him at the hospital made him even chattier. He wasn't pleased that you'd changed the locks here. Made it more difficult for him. Brown didn't like the

fact that he'd had to break out the basement window and climb in like a common criminal."

"Will it hold up in court?" Jonah asked.

"Proper procedure was followed in questioning the suspect. Brown confessed to almost all of it before the doctor gave him any medication and he started yelling for a lawyer. It's all on tape." Patrick smiled. "You gotta love technology."

"Good." Jonah leaned back in his chair and raised his mug to Patrick.

"What will happen now?" Amanda wrapped both hands around her mug, feeling the heat seep into her.

Patrick took another mouthful of coffee and swallowed. "There will be charges laid for both assaults against you, the break-ins, theft and blackmail. Jim Brown is looking at being in jail for quite some time."

A flare of satisfaction went through her. The man deserved to pay for what he'd done to her and to the people who'd trusted him.

Pushing back his chair, Patrick stood. "I'll need you both to come down to the station later today and give your statements. With them, the confession and all the evidence, we've got more than enough to convict the bastard."

"Thank you for taking the time to drop by and let us know what was going on." She felt better knowing that Jim Brown was going to pay for his crimes.

Patrick nodded to her. "My pleasure. I'll see you both later."

Jonah walked him out and returned a minute later. Amanda was still sitting in her chair, staring out the window. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." She reached out and took his hand, twining her fingers with his. "I know this kind of thing happens everyday, but it's hard to imagine someone ready to kill me because I happened to have a book that contained his bank account numbers."

"Try not to think about it." Jonah crouched down beside her and stroked the curve of her cheek. "It's over and we don't have to worry about him any longer."

"No, we don't." She took a deep breath. Last night he'd said he loved her and wanted to be with her. It was time to find out what he really meant by that. "So where do we go from here?"

He cocked his head to one side and frowned. "I thought we straightened this out last night."

She shrugged. "I know that I love you and you love me, but what does that mean? Are we dating? Living together? Where exactly do you see this going?"

Jonah shook his head. "I told you I was rough around the edges, sugar. Obviously I didn't make myself clear last night." He took both her hands in one of his and brought them to his lips. His mouth was warm as he kissed the top of each hand. "I've never told a woman I loved her before. This is it for me."

Her heart swelled with love. "This is it for me too."

The corners of his lips turned upward and he gave her a smile that made her heart speed up. "I kinda figured that."

She nodded, willing him to continue.

He cleared his throat. "I want to be with you always. I want to live with you, argue with you and love you until we're both old and gray. Will you marry me?"

Tears welled in her eyes, but she blinked them back. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

It wasn't the two words, but the way he said them. Jonah was a man of honor and principle. If he made a commitment, he'd keep it. Her heart seemed to expand in her chest, making her entire body tingle. "Then yes, I'll marry you."

He came to his feet and plucked her out of her chair. Wrapping his arms around her, he spun her around and around until she was dizzy and laughing.

"Stop! Stop, Jonah, or I'll be sick."

He halted in his tracks and lowered her until her feet were touching the floor. "I'm sorry, sugar. I forgot all about your injuries. I didn't hurt you, did I?"

She smiled and cupped his face in her hands. She could happily spend the next fifty years looking at his face. "No, but the bacon and eggs are sloshing around in my stomach."

He chuckled. "Can't have that."

"Where are we going to live?" She hadn't meant to blurt that question out, but it was something they had to discuss. "You have a house and a business and I have a house and a business."

A lock of her hair had come loose from her scrunchie while he'd been spinning her around. He hooked it behind her ear and gently caressed the curve of her ear and her neck. "I thought that Elizabeth and Susie could have the family house and we could live here. I can still run my business out of the garage at my old place. Elizabeth won't mind."

"That wouldn't be a problem for you?" She was touched by how easily he would rearrange his entire life for her.

He leaned down and kissed the tip of her nose. "I don't care where I live as long as I'm with you. Besides, I'm partial to this house. With all the work I've done on it, it feels like home."

He kissed her again. Softly brushing his mouth over hers. Amanda slid her hands over his chest, loving the feel of his heart beating steadily beneath her palm. "I love you, Jonah." She'd never said those words to anyone but Jonah. With him, there was no hesitation, no fear. Loving Jonah was right no matter what happened in the future. Amanda was no longer afraid to love.

Jonah scooped her into his arms and headed for the stairs. Sliding her arms around his neck, Amanda rested her head against his shoulder. He carried her into the bedroom and laid her down on the bed. "I love you too, Amanda." Coming down beside her, he drew her into his arms.

The phone rang, but they both ignored it. "Later," he told her. "We'll find out who it is later."

Then his lips met hers and she forgot about everything except the man holding her in his arms.

#### About the Author

To learn more about N.J. Walters, please visit <a href="www.njwalters.com">www.njwalters.com</a>. Send an email to N.J. Walters at <a href="njwalters22@yahoo.ca">njwalters22@yahoo.ca</a> or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as N.J. <a href="http://groups.yahoo.com/group/awakeningdesires">http://groups.yahoo.com/group/awakeningdesires</a>

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A night of secret passion could immerse this lawyer in red-hot gossip.

## A Legal Affair © 2008 N.J. Walters

Book 5 of the Jamesville series.

Alicia Flint enjoys her community, her home, and her career as a lawyer. But since her livelihood depends on her spotless reputation, it's not easy to even date in this small town, much less take a lover.

Then a chance encounter with a stranger at a friend's wedding tempts her to do something she's never done before—have a red-hot, one-night stand. The guy will be gone tomorrow; no one need ever know her delicious little secret.

Gill Baron has come to Jamesville to visit friends and figure out what he wants to do with the rest of his life. As a newly retired, burnt-out cop, he's not looking for love, but he won't say not to a night of no-strings sex with the seductive brunette. A night that leaves him wanting more.

When she meets the investigator on her latest case, Alicia is shocked to come face-to-face with Mr. One-Night-Stand. Jamesville doesn't need another lawyer-related scandal to gossip about, but the truth is, she needs Gill's top-notch investigative skills.

Their attraction is too deep to keep the town clueless of their affair forever. When Jamesville finds out, Alicia wonders if her reputation—and her relationship with Gill—will weather the storm.

Enjoy the following excerpt for: A Legal Affair

A shiver went down her spine and the hair on the back of her neck rose. Alicia glanced around the room, feeling someone watching her. It was him. She had no idea who he was, only that he'd arrived with Patrick and Shannon. He had to be some friend of the O'Rourke family, but she'd never laid eyes on him before.

He wasn't the type of man a woman would forget.

Rugged was the first word that sprang to mind. There was a coiled strength, a restless energy about the man that drew her attention immediately.

His blond hair was short in the back, longer on top. It swept away from his face, revealing a crooked nose, full lips, a high forehead and intense eyes. She'd seen him standing next to Patrick earlier and guessed that he was around six feet tall, maybe a bit less, but he was strong. Wide shoulders and a broad chest, tapered down into a trim waist. He was wearing a deep blue shirt and gray sports coat that fit him to perfection.

Unlike the other men in the room, he was wearing jeans instead of dress pants. They clung to his butt and muscular thighs like a second skin. She'd noticed both when she was waiting in line at the buffet table earlier.

Not wanting to appear too interested, she arched her brow in silent question. He didn't smile, but she caught the flair of interest in his eyes and the slightest curve of his lips.

Oh, he was a handsome devil. It would be easy to fall under his sensual spell. And that wouldn't do. *Why not?* a voice in her head demanded. She hadn't been looking for a one-night stand, but the perfect opportunity for one was being laid in front of her. She hadn't noticed a ring earlier, so he wasn't married. Or likely wasn't. She'd check that for certain before she did anything.

She stilled her thoughts. Ohmigod. She was contemplating a one-night stand with a complete stranger. Was she out of her mind?

*No*, the voice of reason in her head stated. Obviously, he was a friend of Patrick and Shannon's. And as Patrick was the sheriff of Jamesville, it stood to reason that this man wasn't a criminal. If he was here for the wedding, he'd probably leave tomorrow or the next day. There was no doubt that she was physically attracted to him, if the throbbing ache between her thighs was any indication.

In short, he was perfect.

He glanced at his watch and she knew he was thinking about leaving. He seemed on edge and had pushed his beer away from him. This was her one and only chance. She could let it slip away or she could grab it.

Alicia was on her feet before she even made the decision. Her mind might be questioning her actions, but her body knew what it wanted.

He straightened in his seat and then stood as she approached. His lips curved up in a sexy smile that made goose bumps break out on her skin. It was a smile of promise, of anticipation.

"Are you married?" She couldn't believe she was asking that of a perfect stranger.

"No. You?" His deep voice skated over the nerve-endings in her body, making her tingle.

She shook her head and the heat level in his eyes kicked up another notch. Much more and she wouldn't need to wear her coat home even though it was the first of March and there was snow on the ground.

She reached out her hand and he took it, his larger, stronger one closing over hers briefly before releasing it. "Come with me." Her voice was thick with invitation. There was no doubting what she was asking.

Without question, he followed her from the room, his hand heavy and warm at the small of her back.

# Satin Lies © 2008 Tricia Jones

Eight years ago, Faye Benedict discovered she was pregnant with Enrico Lavini's baby. Knowing Enrico didn't love her, she turned to his brother for a marriage of convenience. Now an accident has taken her husband and stolen her memory. Slowly, as her memory returns, she is forced to confront the past and the deception that helped tear a family apart.

As head of an Italian banking dynasty, Enrico considers it his duty and responsibility to protect his estranged brother's widow and child. The feelings he once had for Faye are safely buried beneath the weight of the past. But as long-hidden secrets are exposed, his role as protector transmutes into that of avenger, and Faye is forced to suffer the consequences as he exacts his own particular brand of revenge—marriage.

Yet underneath the hurt lies a soul-deep love that will not be denied. Love that only the truth can heal.

Enjoy the following excerpt for: Satin Lies

"I heard you have kept yourself busy rearranging the library. I only hope you have not taxed yourself unnecessarily."

"I haven't, and it was in need of some restructuring." Talk, she thought. It was easier when she talked. Then she didn't have to focus on the way her heart thumped. "Do you know you have first editions going to rack and ruin, not to mention collections that need only one or two books to complete them. Acquire the missing books and the value of the whole collection could most likely double in price, triple even."

Enrico listened with an indulgent glint in his eye. "Interesting." He pursed his lips. "But make sure you get enough rest."

Talking wasn't doing much good, Faye realized, as sensations sizzled through her. She gripped the ledger until her fingers hurt. "I'm bored silly just sitting around here all day. Everyone watches me like a hawk, at your instruction no doubt. Besides, by doing this I feel I can pay you back in some way."

His brow creased. "Pay me back?"

"For your kindness in allowing us to stay here."

He threw his jacket over a nearby chair. "Please do not insult me, cara."

Before she registered his intention, he'd snatched the ledger from her arms, his gaze falling to her breasts. "If I required payment from you I would demand it by more interesting means."

He dropped the ledger onto a side table where it fell with a resounding thud. Then, quick as a beat, he had her breath jerking from her lungs as he grabbed her arms and pulled her against him.

"And would you make such payment, Faye?" He caught her chin when she tried to turn away. "I wonder what price would my *kindness* be worth to you? Exactly how high a price would you be willing to pay?"

Hot blood raced through her, burning her veins. She looked at his throat, that thick tanned column that made her mouth water. He jerked her chin giving her no option but to look in his eyes.

"Stop it." She damned herself for the weakness in her voice. "I only meant—"

He gave her chin another jerk until their mouths were a breath away. "What exactly did you mean, Faye? Did you think that by insulting me, by offering me payment for your board and lodgings, I would keep my distance?"

His breath feathered over her lips, sending waves of awareness down her spine. "No, of course not."

Suddenly his arms were around her and she was pressed against him. The hard, muscled strength of him seeping through her until her frenzied brain demanded he finish what he undoubtedly intended to start.

Kiss me, she willed him. Oh, God, just kiss me.

"Perhaps I have kept my distance for too long," he ground out. "I should have dealt with this years ago, made things right."

A mad joy hovered at the edges of her heart. "What are you saying?"

His eyes bored into hers, his voice deep and rough. "We made love," he said as if it was something that might have slipped her mind. "Here in this room. Then you went to London, married my brother, and I never had the chance to make things right."

The self-reproach in his tone poured icy water on her hopes. "What do you mean?" she asked her voice flat. "How did you expect to make things right?"

"I should have formally apologized to you for what happened, made sure you knew it was not your fault. That I—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" Faye shook herself out of his arms, not even trying to cloak her anger. "You apologized all right. In fact, that's all you did do, over and over. Told me how *sorry* you were."

"You belonged to my brother. I had no right to take from you what was rightfully his." He shook his head. "I had no right."

She poked a finger into his granite chest. "Get this, Enrico. I don't belong to anyone. And what I do—did—with my body is my business. It's *my* right to decide who gets what."

She stopped, dragging in much needed oxygen while she fought against the urge to tell him that if anyone had a right he did. He had every right. He was the father of her child. The only man she had ever loved. The man she loved still and always would.

"You are angry. You do not know what you are saying."

"I'm angry all right. Do you know why? Do you?" She poked him in the chest again. "Because I'm sick and tired of you insinuating I don't know who I am or what I want. I'm bloody fed up with you always telling me how I feel, what's good for me." She dragged in more air, her chest rising and falling with the effort. "I've had enough of this, Enrico. I've so had enough of this."

His expression darkened. Nostrils flaring, chest heaving. He glared at her as if she were the devil incarnate.

Then he swore...and his mouth came down on hers.

No tenderness. No tentative play of lips. Just possession. Fierce and brutal.

And she was more than a match for it. Her fingers spiked into his hair, pulling his head down to take more. She wanted more...more... She wanted to pour into their kiss every long, lonely, aching moment of those eight years without him.

Harsh breathing filled the air, punctured only by fractured mutterings of pleasure—of encouragement. Not that Enrico needed any. His body pressed against hers, the hard, muscled strength of his arms keeping her close, allowing her little space to move.

Possessive hands slid down her back, molding her curves. Those long fingers dug in, squeezing and lifting until her pelvis was cradled tight to his. She tried to shimmy, but he held her too firmly.

The heat was so intense she marveled that she didn't simply combust on the spot.

Without knowing why, she pulled back.

She gasped for air and watched him do the same. It was fear that had made her stop. She was scared. Though not of him. Never of him. It was the situation. The consequences.

She was scared of her lies, her treachery. What had they done? She and Teo. What had they stolen from Enrico? If they made love now she would have to tell him. She wouldn't be able to stop herself telling him. And once he knew the truth he might never forgive her.

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