



Healing Touch

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

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Chapter One

Sarah Bancroft sipped the sparkling wine and gazed around the decorated ballroom of the Sheraton Hotel. Red, white, and blue was the theme every year at the Blue Collar New Year's Eve Ball. All proceeds from the fifty-dollar-a-head dinner went to the Cooper Valley Police and Fire Department charity funds—even though the ball wasn't held in Cooper Valley.

No, Cooper Valley was too small to host the fundraiser. Hell, they didn't even have a hotel there, unless the SleepyTime Motel could be considered worthy. So, here she was, one year older and...

She glanced at her best friend, Celeste, who sat next to her. Celeste looked ravishing in a midnight blue dress that hugged all her soft curves. But it wasn't the dress that made the woman, it was the glitter of happiness in her baby blue eyes, and the wide grin that seemed permanently glued to her face. She'd finally found the love of her life. Detective Paul Jensen sat on the other side of Celeste, their fingers interlaced on top of the linen-covered table, their heads close together as they whispered God-only-knows-what to each other.

Though Sarah might envy the love her friend had found, she was also so happy for her friend she could burst. If anyone deserved happiness, it was Celeste.

Practically every policeman and firefighter from Cooper Valley attended the ball every year. Sarah and Celeste had attended every year, also, but usually together, going stag. They'd always sat together, drunk

too much champagne, and pretty much acted like schoolgirls giggling over the handsome men in uniform.

This year, Celeste only had eyes for her lover—her new husband—and Sarah had a hard time finding anything to giggle about, or even smile about. She'd done what she and Celeste had done the past six years, ever since the death of Sarah's husband. She thought it would still be fun to rent the luxury suite right here in the hotel to spend the night, but now she questioned herself...her sanity. What she wanted was to be home, in her bed, maybe with a good book and a hot toddy.

Letting her gaze move around the room once more, she picked out most of Cooper Valley's heroes: the sheriff, his deputies, and Paul's partner, Liam Taggart. Then there was the much larger group of firefighters. Some of them were on call, so they weren't drinking. Others looked a little toasted—all devastatingly handsome in their blue uniforms. There were wives and girlfriends, too, decked out in sparkling, shimmering dresses. Then there was the rest of Cooper Valley who attended. Mostly members of the Better Business Bureau like herself. And there were quite a few nurses and doctors from the Cooper Valley Hospital. Celeste had been an ER nurse there for what seemed like forever.

Sarah's attention snagged on a man in uniform she'd never seen before. He was tall and lean with wide shoulders and skin the color of espresso. Dark and rich. He wasn't as young as most of the uniformed men in the room—she'd actually place him around her age of forty-seven. He stood at the bar by himself—well, not by himself, but he wasn't talking to anyone around him. He sipped a cocktail and kept his focus on his glass. His uniform said he was a firefighter, but she was sure she'd met most of them. It was a small town after all, and having a best friend who worked in the ER, she'd been introduced at one time or another to just about everyone.

She leaned over slightly and nudged Celeste in the side with her elbow.

Celeste turned to her. "What?" Her eyes were glassy and her smile a little goofy from too much champagne.

Sarah couldn't help but chuckle. "The black guy at the bar. Who is he?"

Celeste blinked a couple of times then grinned. "That's Richard Davis."

Paul leaned around Celeste and said, "He's an ex-cop from L.A. Retired after twenty years, and now he's a paramedic."

"First full-fledged paramedic Cooper Valley FD has ever had on staff," Celeste added. "Of course, the hospital ambulance service has paramedics, but now the fire department won't have to wait around for them if medication is needed. Their first responders are great, but having him on staff will really help."

Hmm. Police *and* paramedic. Couldn't get more hero than that, now could he? She turned to ask Celeste another question about the handsome stranger, but she and Paul were in a tongue-dueling lip lock.

"Get a room," she muttered, knowing full well the two of them already had a room. Just down the hall from hers, in fact.

There was one way to find out more about the guy. She stood up, picked her purse up from where it hung over the back of her chair, and headed across the room to the bar.

"Hi," she said to Richard as she stopped next to him and motioned the bartender for a glass of champagne, which flowed free and freely all night.

Richard glanced up from his drink, gave a quick nod. "Hello."

"Name's Sarah Bancroft." She held out her hand. "I don't think we've been introduced."

He stared at her hand for a moment, then grasped it in a firm but gentle shake. "Nice to meet you. Excuse me." And then he was gone. Headed across the room and away from her.

Well, shit. Shit, shit, shit.

She sat down on the bar stool next to her and lifted her freshly filled glass. The man was simply rude. She deserved a little more consideration than that. It wasn't as if he was in a hurry to meet someone. He'd been standing at the bar by himself for a full ten minutes before she came over. The least he could have done was a little small talk, even if he

wasn't the slightest bit interested.

She gave a soft groan and wanted to bury her face in her hands. She was getting old. Turning on the stool, she made a point of looking at the women in the room. Hell, even some of the old guys had wives nearly half her age.

She shook her head. Women her age didn't inspire great lust in men. She should know that by now.

Well, that wasn't even true, and that was the worst part. Her best friend in the world, same age as she was, had not only found great lust, but great love. And the guy was ten years their junior. She stared daggers at Celeste's back for a couple of seconds, but then chided herself. She loved Celeste like a sister.

"Hey."

Sarah turned her head toward the man who'd slid onto the barstool next to her. He was handsome in a beach bum surfer dude kind of way. Looked a little out of place in this crowd, though he was dressed nice. "Hi."

"You're lookin' a little lonely," he said, then picked up the glass of bourbon the bartender had just poured for him.

She gave a little shrug. "Maybe a little." Maybe she wouldn't have to spend the night alone after all? He seemed interested, and he was in what she guessed was his late thirties, so it could be kind of fun.

He slugged back the alcohol and turned more fully toward her. "What say we blow this joint?"

Sarah raised an eyebrow and set her half-empty glass on the bar. "Yeah? What did you have in mind?"

He leaned closer to her and whispered. "Something to take away the loneliness, maybe?" He smelled of cologne that was just a little too sweet, but his words weren't slurred, and his eyes were clear. He wasn't drunk.

A slow smile curved her lips. He'd made his meaning clear. If she couldn't find the love of her life, at least she wouldn't ring in the New Year alone. "I have a room upstairs...if you're interested."

"Oh, I'm interested all right." His voice was little more than a

growl in her ear, and a shiver of excitement went down her spine.

“Come on, then,” she said and slid off the barstool.

He followed her through the maze of revelers into the lobby and to the elevator.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Bill.”

Okay, first names only. That was fine. “I’m Sarah.” She pressed the call button.

They stood on opposite sides of the elevator as they rode it up to the tenth floor. No words were said as they walked down the wide hallway to her room. She inserted the key card and held the door open for him.

He stepped inside and glanced around the room, but as soon as the door clicked shut behind her, he was on her. His mouth on the side of her neck, his hands on her breasts, kneading them through her silk gown.

She dropped her purse and gripped his shoulders as a low moan escaped. Yes, this was exactly what she needed to forget her troubles for the night.

He pressed her into the hard wood of the door with his big body, and she shoved his navy suit jacket off his shoulders. He wasn’t as hard as she’d originally thought—not so much the surfer dude she’d imagined. Probably a desk jockey. He was kind of soft around the middle, she found, as she let her hands travel down his sides to his waistband.

She undid his belt, button, and zipper, and his pants fell to his ankles. He was hard and probed her belly with his erection. She heard seams rip as he shoved her dress off her shoulders, and she cringed. Damn, this dress cost a small fortune. She gave his shoulders a little shove, and got his mouth disconnected from her neck. What was that about? Vampire fantasies?

“Hold on a second,” she said softly as she reached behind her and unzipped the dress to try to stave off any more damage to the thin material.

His breathing was heavy, and his face was flushed. He pressed both palms to the door on either side of her head and stared down at her

breasts. As soon as the dress dropped away, he was back at them with his hands.

She didn't wear a bra—no need to being as small as she was—and that seemed to please him. He cupped her right breast and leaned down to suck the puckered nipple. She bit back a curse when he got a little too enthusiastic about it.

This guy obviously wasn't schooled in the art of seduction.

She reached into his light blue boxers and wound her fingers around his cock. He wasn't very long, but he was thick. He groaned against her chest and grabbed her ass in both hands. Since she wore three-inch stilettos and was as tall as he was, when he tried to lift her, it became even more awkward. She released his dick and grabbed his shoulders to keep from falling. For more balance, she wound her legs around his waist.

He turned them, his mouth never leaving her breast, and shuffled to the bed with his pants still around his ankles. Then he came down over her so hard the breath whooshed from her lungs.

"Ow, hey, careful," she said when she could breathe.

"Sorry," he muttered as he moved over to the other breast and sucked it into his mouth.

His cock probed her apex with hard, uncontrolled movements, and she gave up hope of getting off tonight. He was obviously too horny to worry about *her* needs.

Shit. One fuckup after another. Might as well get it over with. Maybe there was hope of getting out of this... "Do you have a condom?"

"Uh huh."

He moved off of her then, and she had an instant to imagine actual escape, but then he was back, rolling a rubber over his cock after shoving his boxers down to his ankles along with his slacks.

Maybe this whole younger man thing was not for her!

He jerked her panties down her legs, and it felt as though he took some skin with them, because he sure as hell wasn't careful about it. Then he was on her again, squishing the breath from her lungs.

She threw her arms out to her sides as they lay sideways on the

bed, spread her legs, and prayed she was wet enough from the little tiny bit of excitement she'd felt at first. It wasn't his fault she wasn't into it. He sure was.

One, two, three, four missed attempts until he found the right spot and surged into her.

Oh! That felt good. Maybe this *was* what she needed. It had been a really long time since a man had filled her up. But then he went and ruined it by grabbing her breasts and squeezing.

"Hey! Not so rough."

He buried his face against her neck, his breath hot and moist, his hands clasped over her breasts, his forearms digging into her ribs, and rode her as if she were a damned... Well, she wouldn't go there.

She lifted her legs, tried to get him to at least hit the right spot so she had some hope of coming, but he was too big, too heavy, and she could barely move. She gave up and wrapped her legs around his lower back, and waited.

He came with a low groan and quit moving. He couldn't seem to catch his breath, and she wondered if this overweight thirty-something would have a damned heart attack in her bed, on top of her. Well, at least there was one paramedic and a dozen EMT's in the building tonight. She dropped her legs from around him, and waited some more.

Finally, he lifted his head, then pushed up and off of her. He tugged off the condom, dropped it in the wastebasket next to the bed, and pulled up his pants.

He was leaving. She glanced at the clock on the nightstand. It was only eleven-thirty. Half an hour before the New Year. And she would still spend it alone.

A bigger fool was never made.

She lay there and watched him straighten his shirt, tuck it in, and do up his belt. Then he reached into his back pocket and withdrew his wallet. She frowned as he opened it and drew out a few bills.

"Two hundred cover it? I mean, you still have time to head back down and get another john before midnight."

Her mouth dropped open as he set the four fifty-dollar bills on the

nightstand.

"You should warn your johns that you're a lot older than you look." His gaze raked over her, and she fought to keep from covering herself. "At least you're not that saggy and wrinkled."

She opened her mouth to tell him to get the hell out and take his money with him, but no words came from her tight throat. None were needed, anyway, because he was out the door in seconds.

Sarah lay on that bed for long, long minutes, staring up at the textured ceiling, trying to figure out how the hell that could have happened. How could *anyone* think she was a call girl? A hooker? A *whore*? She owned *the* premier real estate business in Cooper Valley. She drove a Cadillac. She was a grandmother!

She sat up and stared at her reflection in the mirror on the dresser across the room. She wasn't saggy. She barely had any wrinkles. Maybe her boobs weren't as high as they'd been twenty years ago, but they still had shape. She worked out, ate well, had an active lifestyle.

"Well, fuck it." She reached for the phone and dialed room service. She ordered two slices of chocolate cake and two glasses of milk. After she hung up, she got in the shower to wash away the stench of that asshole's cologne, and when room service arrived just a few minutes before midnight, she gave him the two hundred bucks the jerk had left for her services.

She mixed two little bottles of Kahlua from the mini bar into her milk and took the tray to the bed. Fuck them all. Fuck men. She stuffed a big bite of cake into her mouth and washed it down with her spiked milk. She didn't need a man. She was a professional woman with a wonderful son and daughter-in-law, and a grandson who was coming up on a year old. A man was not something she needed in her life.

She downed the milk, but three bites of the cake were all she could handle. She never ate cake. Grabbing the remote control off the nightstand, she turned on the television to see she'd just missed the big ball drop in Times Square.

Happy Fucking New Year.

That was when the tears hit. When the emptiness consumed her.

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She rolled to her side, gathered up a pillow to her chest, and sobbed. It had been a long time since she let the pain take over. Now was as good as any to let herself feel it, experience it.

She should have spent the evening with her son and daughter-in-law. At least then she wouldn't have been alone.

Chapter Two

Sarah paced across the plush beige rug in the rustic log home she was supposed to show, and cursed under her breath. The Mallorys were scheduled to have been there almost two hours ago, and she worried over the snow falling outside. Already her Cadillac in the driveway had several inches of the white stuff covering it, and it was beginning to get dark.

She should have heeded the warning of the weatherman on the news that morning, but he'd predicted snow for the past two weeks and there had been none, so she'd ignored him. It was twenty miles back to town, and it looked as though the blizzard he'd been warning about finally hit.

She stalked to the breakfast bar separating the kitchen from living room and pulled her cell phone from her purse. If she couldn't reach them, she had to leave. As it was, her Caddy ran like a sled over wet snow rather than a high performance car.

"Shit," she muttered when she flipped open her cell to find it dead. She dug back into her purse, found her charger, and walked into the kitchen to plug it in by the stove. As she inserted the prongs, the lights went out.

"Damn it!" Darkness dropped heavy over the house, the gray dusk outside doing little to light the space through the wall of windows in the living room. She dug back into her purse for her key ring, turned on the tiny flashlight, and made her way to the attached garage and the electrical breaker box there.

Her heart sank. None of the breakers had popped. The power had gone out. No phone, a blizzard blowing outside, and in a couple of hours this cozy little house would be as cold as tomb. Even the gas fireplace was electrically ignited, so there was no heat. She had no choice but to head out to the car and pray she made it home before too much more snow fell. For an educated woman, sometimes she could be pretty damn stupid.

It took only moments to gather her purse, papers, slip on her wool coat, and open the front door. Stinging pellets of crystallized snow stung her cheeks as she put the key back into the lockbox on the side of the house. Within moments, her toes went numb inside her pumps, and when she tried to open her car door, she had to tug extra hard, almost landing on her butt when the thin layer of ice gluing it shut gave way.

Muttering about the stupidity of living in the Midwest, she started the car and turned the heat to full blast, hoping to thaw the ice on the windows so she didn't have to scrape. She reached into the back seat for the snowbrush, then put on her thin leather driving gloves before getting out to try to clear off the car.

By the time she was done, her legs up to her knees stung from the cold. She called herself a hundred names because she didn't have boots, didn't have pants, wore a skirt in a blizzard, and now that it was full dark, she had to try to drive home in this crap.

The windows were clear though, so that was a plus, and the car was almost too warm. She took off her gloves because her hands would be colder inside of them than out at this point, and carefully executed a three-point turn in the driveway. Her heart sank as she stared through the blowing snow at the half-mile long driveway in front of her. She could barely make out the edges of the gravel drive. Thank God, the snow from an earlier storm had been plowed into mounds on the sides, or there'd be no telling where the road ended and the lawn began. She only had about a hundred yards until the trees began, and then it was much easier to stay between them. Finally, after what seemed forever, she reached the highway. Not that it looked like a highway. It was as white as everything else, and the wind was even harder here away from the trees, making drifts against the leeward side of the preexisting snow piles. She knew

across the highway was a field, but she could barely see to the end of her headlights.

She turned left onto the highway, slowly, carefully, her tires spinning on the ice beneath the crispy layer of fluff, and bit her lip. The temperature had dropped horribly in the last few hours since she'd driven out there. It looked as if no one had driven this way since the snow began. It was several inches deep, no other tracks on the road, and she stayed to the middle, unsure of where the edge might be. Twenty miles, usually driven in less than a half hour, would take her forever. She kept her speed under twenty, her foot light on the gas pedal.

A gust of wind hit the side of the car, and she yelped as it pushed her to the right, toward the snow bank. She slammed on the brakes in panic, and the car spun. And spun. She closed her eyes and braced for impact. When it came, it was almost soft, more of a puff than a crash. But when she looked out her side window, she wanted to cry. She'd landed in a pile of snow, and it came up to her window. The boat of a car couldn't drive out of it.

She tried, though, pressing on the gas just a bit. Her tires spun, and the car didn't so much as budge.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she held in the scream of frustration and anger. *So fucking stupid!* Not the car, not even the snow, but the fact that ever since her son gave her the new Blackberry cell phone for Christmas, she'd put off purchasing a car charger for it. Well, at least she had heat.

Just as the thought formulated, the car sputtered and died.

* * * * *

Rick Davis grinned—an honest to God grin—as he followed the crew back into the fire hall at the end of his first full shift as Cooper Valley's newest firefighter/paramedic. It had been a good day. A damn good day.

Well, relatively speaking.

He stripped out of his turnouts along with the six other firefighters, and placed them in his spot along the wall of the fire engine bay.

"Good job out there, boys," the chief said as he ambled through the doorway from the lounge area. "Real good job."

A chorus of, "Thanks, chief," echoed through the empty bay.

"You were awesome out there," Lieutenant Steve Sheldon, one of the senior firefighters, said as he clapped Rick on the shoulder.

"Thanks." He grinned some more. Finally, he had a place where he made a difference. He'd saved a little girl's life today after the car she'd been riding in slid into a power pole. He felt so damn good he was near to bursting.

"You wanna come over and have dinner with me and Gracie?" Steve offered.

What surprised him was that he was tempted, but the snow was coming down damn hard, and he had a long drive to his cabin. He hadn't considered blizzards when he chose to buy a little place out on the lake, nearly twenty-five miles from town. "Thanks, man," he said as they headed inside where it was warmer, "but I better head out or I might not make it home if we get as much snow as the weather guy predicts."

Steve nodded. "Another time then. We normally head over to Darby's after shift, but I think everyone's looking forward to warmth and safety tonight. Take it easy. See you in a few days."

"Great job," Toby, a young firefighter, the only other black guy in the department, said. "Watching you almost makes me want to go back to school to get my paramedic's license."

Rick chuckled. "It's worth it." He headed up the stairs to the lockers to change clothes for the drive home.

Wow. He hadn't felt this good in...forever. His smile eased, and as he pulled open his locker, he stared at his reflection in the little mirror hung on the door. "Fuck," he whispered.

Spending the day putting out fires, rescuing a damn cat from a rooftop, and then as first responders on that car crash with guys half his age, he'd forgotten. For just a few hours, he forgot how old he was and why he was here. What had sent him running halfway across the continent to this Godforsaken frozen wasteland?

He changed into his jeans, sweatshirt, and insulated hiking boots

from his CVFD uniform, and grabbed his down jacket before he headed back downstairs.

"Davis," the chief called.

Rick turned on his heel mid stride and walked into the chief's office as he slipped on his coat and drew his gloves and stocking cap from the pockets. "Sir?"

"Heard some damn good things about you today."

"Thank you, sir."

The chief, who was bulky around the middle and mostly bald, was still younger than Rick. "Welcome to the team, son."

Rick held in a smirk. "Thank you, sir." Maybe being that all the other guys who worked under him were so young, the chief assumed they all were.

"Get some rest. It's been a busy couple of days for you guys. And if this weather stays, it won't be any better when you come back on shift."

"Yes, sir," Rick said, giving a polite nod then pulling on his black knit cap. "See you in a few days, Chief." He turned and headed for the door, ready to make his escape. He hadn't done anything extraordinary today, just his job. It had felt damn good to be part of a team again. It felt even better to be saving lives rather than throwing junkies and thugs in jail—not that Cooper Valley even had any junkies or thugs. Well, they probably did, but...

He pushed open the glass door, and the breath whooshed out of him in a white plume when the cold air hit his face. Damn! He didn't think he'd ever get used to this. He zipped his down jacket up all the way and ducked his lower face into the collar. This was fucking cold! No sand and surf and sunshine here. No walking on the beach barefoot in January here. Not that he ever had time for that back in L.A., but still, it had been an option.

At least he'd had the foresight to buy an old 4x4 SUV instead of keeping his car. If he hadn't, he didn't think he'd make it to his house in this crappy weather. He hopped into his Bronco and turned it on, then got back out with the long-handled snowbrush to clear the windows while the heater did its job.

He stopped off at the grocery store deli counter and bought enough rotisserie chicken and barbeque ribs with all the trimmings to hold him through his four days off, picked up a twelve-pack of Budweiser, a gallon of milk, and a box of Cheerios. He had enough bread and mayo to make it through the next few days, and he already laid in a supply of bottled water—just in case. Having lived in Southern California with the earthquakes, he still lived by the rule of *always be prepared*. Bottled water to last a week, battery-powered radio, extra batteries, flashlight, emergency food of granola bars, and some military MRE's.

He needed to start eating better, but he wasn't about to waste time on a night like this to browse the shelves to stock his cupboards. It was already black out, and it was only six-thirty. He figured it'd take him at least an hour to make it home in the blowing, blinding snow.

The heat blasting as hot and high as he could get it, the radio tuned to a country station—seemed the only stations that came in clearly in the area—he drove slowly and squinted through the blowing snow, barely able to see where the road ended and the farmland began. A swirling world of white and darkness surrounded him, and if his ass hadn't been in the seat, he wasn't sure he'd even be able to tell which side was up.

As he came around a gentle curve, only able to tell where the road was by the previously plowed snow banks, he slammed on his brakes, sending the big-tired Bronco into a slide down the middle of the snowy track, stopping just inches from the front of a car sticking out of the snow. On his side of the road. The headlights were dim, as if the battery was dying, but thankfully they'd been on or he probably would have rammed right into it. Other than that, he couldn't tell anything about it because he couldn't see through the blowing snow.

Carefully, he backed up the Bronco and turned it so that his headlights shone right on the car, then turned on his four-way hazards and got out to see if there was anyone in the car, surprised no one had gotten out when he stopped. Unless whoever was in there was hurt.

He approached the car on the passenger side, because the car was half buried on the driver's side. He figured the only reason the car wasn't covered in snow was because the wind kept it off. When he peered

through the frosty, ice crusted window, he saw what he thought was a woman, huddled in the passenger seat in a long coat, her face buried in her collar. All he could see was long, dark hair.

He rapped on the window with his gloved knuckles. No response. He knocked harder.

The woman's head came up, but she stared straight ahead into his headlights.

He slammed the side of his fist against the window a few times, and slowly, her head swiveled, and she started at him through the foggy glass, but she made no move to open the door.

"You okay?" he called, pitching his voice as loud as he could to ride over the wind and the closed window.

She turned her head forward once again, then ducked back down into her coat.

He reached for the door handle but found it locked. He tried the back door. Locked, too. Only one reason someone would react that way, and it was hypothermia. All she wanted to do was sleep. How long had she been sitting here? He stalked to the back of the car and looked for tracks, but couldn't see any. No telling how long she'd been there. Hours? He had to get her out of there and into his warm truck, or she'd die.

He went back to her window and thudded against it with his fist a few more times, but this time she didn't even raise her head. As he trudged to his truck to find something to break a window, he wondered what kind of moron went out in a car like that in weather like this. All he had was his tire iron, his first aid kit, and his emergency kit. He grabbed the heavy metal tire iron and slammed the door shut, then went back to the car. He tried knocking yet again, but still she didn't respond, so he moved to the back door and swung the iron at it.

It bounced off, and the vibration damn near made his hand go numb. He aimed better for the center of the window and swung again. This time the safety glass cracked, but didn't break out. One thing he could say for these cars was that they were well made. He took a few more swings at the window, and finally the glass fell into the back seat in a crumbling sheet. He shoved the shards out of his way so they didn't rip

his jacket, and reached through to unlock the passenger door. Then he pulled the door open.

"Hey." He hunkered down next to the woman and touched her cheek with his gloved hand, then ripped off his glove and checked the pulse in her neck. "Fuck. Hey! Wake up." Her pulse was slow, she wasn't even shivering, her head lolled to the side when he touched her. Her skin hadn't turned blue yet, so no cyanosis, but that wouldn't be far behind.

"Wake up, woman. Come on."

Her eyes fluttered open, and she stared straight ahead. He was most concerned about the fact she wasn't shivering. She'd crossed over that line, and her life was in danger. He dropped his tire iron on the floorboard near her feet and scooped her into his arms. She weighed practically nothing, seemed to be all skin and bones. No wonder she got cold so fast; no padding. He took her to his truck, juggled her against his chest so he could open the passenger door, and then set her on the seat, shoving his bags of food onto the floor as he did so. With the dome light of the truck, he could see that she wore a skirt, nylons, and high-heeled shoes.

"Idiot woman," he muttered as he shut her into the warm cab and jogged back to her car. He grabbed his tire iron and her purse off the floor next to it, turned off the headlights, and dropped the keys into her purse. Then he was back in his own truck, his face stinging in the heat after being so cold.

He put the truck in gear and headed down the road. He couldn't be sure how far he had to go to his place, being he was so new to the area and couldn't see shit, but he didn't think it was far.

"You awake?" he called as he used his right hand to direct the dashboard vents at her while keeping an eye on the road. "You gotta stay awake. I'll get you warmed up in no time." He just hoped it wasn't too late.

He almost missed the turnoff to his house, and skidded a bit when he hit the brakes too hard, but the four-wheel drive took his snow-covered gravel drive like a champ. Then his heart fell a bit when he stopped in front of his cabin and realized the power must have gone out. He always

left the light on over the kitchen stove, and the house was pitch-black.

Leaving the truck running, he grabbed his flashlight from his emergency kit in the back seat, got out, jogged up the slippery steps to his door, and rushed right in, straight to the fireplace. He'd laid the wood this morning, so after ripping off his gloves, it took only a few minutes to get the flames going. It would take a bit of time to warm the whole room, but he didn't have the time to wait. The woman didn't have the time.

He grabbed the spare blankets from the closet next to the bathroom and spread them on the bed, pulling back one corner so he could slip her under all of them and the sheet. A bit of heat filtered from the airtight fireplace, so he dropped the flashlight on the bed to light the room and went back out to the truck, turned it off, and lifted the woman into his arms. She mumbled something unintelligible but didn't put up any resistance to being carried.

After laying her on the bed, he pulled her hands away from her chest where they'd been crossed the entire time. Her muscles were still limber, not rigid, which was a good sign. He unbuttoned her wool coat and pulled it off of her.

"Hey..." she said, but her teeth chattered. In fact, her whole body quaked with shivers. Her eyelids finally opened, and he grabbed the flashlight to check her pupil response. She flinched at the bright light, but her pupils contracted as they should. Another good sign. Very good. Her irises were the color of winter pine needles.

After dropping the light to the mattress again, he stripped off her silky blouse, leaving her chest bare because she wore no bra. Then he pulled off her linen skirt, stupid ass woman shoes, and her nylons, or rather, her stockings. Wow, he didn't know women really wore these things. Thigh highs with little lace trim at the top. Once she was down to her underwear, he didn't hesitate to strip out of his own clothes and climb onto the mattress next to her. He shut off the flashlight so he didn't waste the batteries, pulled her against him chest-to-chest, and threw the covers up and over both of them, even covering their heads.

It wasn't ideal, and definitely would have been better to have heated blankets and hospital staff, but he remembered his cold-weather

training and did what he could. Body heat was the only way to get her warm because that was all he had.

Her flesh was cold, her teeth chattered, her body shook, and soft little whimpers came out of her. His heart went out to her, not because he knew from experience what she was going through, but he'd read enough, studied enough during paramedic training. He held her tight against him, threw one leg over hers, and scrubbed his warm hands up and down her back, her arms, trying to warm her blood.

On the other hand, he couldn't believe how very stupid she was. Who in their right mind goes out in those clothes in a blizzard? And even if they did, wouldn't they be smart enough to carry cold-weather gear with them? This was Wisconsin, after all. Not the Bahamas.

The whimpers turned to sobs. Not loud, but she cried.

"It's okay," he whispered as he laid his cheek against hers. "I've got you. You're going to be okay."

"I'm...such...a..." She stopped when racked by a tremendous tremor that shook her entire body and rattled her teeth. "...moron."

Rick tried not to chuckle, he really did, but nothing could have been truer. He figured she'd be all right if he could just get her body temp back to normal.

Chapter Three

Toasty warm, sheltered in the heavy embrace of a man's arms. Sarah drew in a deep breath and smelled musky male skin, the sweet aroma of fabric softener, and the earthy scent of burning wood.

A leg anchored her to the bed, an arm held her snug around the middle, and her back aligned with a solid, heated chest. And against her butt was the long, thick, unmistakable sensation of fully aroused male flesh.

Her breath caught for an instant, and her pussy clenched as her own excitement sprang to life full force. Oh, this was so not right. But it felt right. It felt good. This man had saved her life last night, used his own body to warm her, then made her drink sugar-sweetened warm water to heat her insides and eat granola bars to bring up her blood sugar. He'd been sweet, caring, gentle. And when she'd awakened in the night, cold once again, he'd stoked up the fireplace and climbed back into bed with her to keep her warm with his own big, furnace-like body.

Moving slowly as not to wake him, she lowered her hand from near her cheek and laid it over his just below her breasts—breasts that ached for him to touch her there.

His hips thrust forward, grinding his erection against her butt, and his arm around her tightened, yet his breathing was still heavy. He still slept.

Good God. She pressed back against him, arching her back slightly and rubbing her bottom against his cock. He was huge and so hard. Only

separated by her satin panties and his boxers, it wouldn't take much to just let him slide right in. As wonderful as he'd been last night, she just knew he'd be perfect. He'd see to her physical needs to climax as much as he had seen to her much more urgent need for warmth last night.

He grunted, and he slid his leg between hers. When she lifted her thigh, his own raised up and pressed against her pussy. A soft whisper of a whimper came out of her, and she dragged his hand from her ribs to her breast. He cupped her flesh, stroked her nipple with his thumb. It went hard with just one swipe of his finger, and a jolt of heat flared through her the second time he touched the hardened, sensitive peak.

"Yes," she whispered. "Touch me."

His warm breath heated the back of her neck, sending goose bumps down her arms. She pressed back against him again, and again, rubbing her ass against his cock in a slow, sensual glide, mimicking sex.

"Ahh," he sighed, his voice low, husky, rough almost. Sleepy.

A slow smile curved her lips. She hadn't had lazy morning sex in forever. His hand massaged her breast. He plucked gently at her nipple, making her jerk and moan. Heat pooled in her pussy, and she was wet. Slick. She ran her hand down her side, loving the feel of her own touch on her now heated skin. She shoved her panties down over her hip, and on her next motion against him, rose up just a bit and pulled them down to her thighs.

His mouth opened on her shoulder, soft, damp, with the slight rasp of morning whiskers that sent a thrill through her, tightening her untouched nipple. She sighed and reached behind her, between them, and slid her fingers into the front flap of his boxers to wrap around his hot, hard cock.

He jerked away from her so hard and fast he tumbled off the side of the bed and thumped on the floor. "Fuck," he said in that low voice, then groaned.

Sarah laughed and rolled over to look at him as he lay on the rug next to the bed. "Uh, sorry."

Her laughter died when she saw the pained expression on his face, his eyes squeezed tight.

"Hey, you okay?" Had he hurt himself when he fell?

He opened his eyes and glared at her. Those gorgeous, dark chocolate eyes held anger, which made her suck in her breath. Fury was more like it. His nostrils flared, and his jaw clenched tight, the muscles in his cheeks ticking. His hands were fisted at his sides, and his cock was still long and hard, tenting his boxers.

"Richard?" she said softly. "I'm really—"

He was on his feet in an instant and pulling clothes from the dresser next to the bed. They'd barely spoken last night, but she knew who he was; that gorgeous paramedic from the New Years Eve party who'd blown her off as if she didn't exist.

And now he was doing it again. She frowned at his back, even as she couldn't help but admire his high, round butt, long muscled legs, lean waist. The way his flesh slid over his muscled shoulders as he moved in short, angry motions.

He turned, holding a wad of clothing in front of his crotch, and tossed some other clothes on the bed. "Put those on." And then he stalked out of the room, down a short hallway she knew led to the bathroom. The door shut with a resounding click.

Sarah sat in the silence, staring at the navy blue sweatpants and matching shirt he'd dumped on the bed. And big, thick, white socks. What the hell...?

The next sound from the bathroom had her holding her breath and listening. It was unmistakable. Sexy. Made her tingle all over with renewed arousal. The soft, low groan of a man reaching climax.

Then it hit her. Hard. Right between the eyes. He'd rather jack off in the bathroom than sate his lust in her.

She pulled on the sweatshirt then threw back the covers to pull on the bulky socks and the pants. They were thick and warm, and she huddled against the pillows, feeling cold again, but not from the air temperature, which really was toasty warm. No, the cold came from her empty heart. He'd touched her and held her and got hard because he'd been asleep and she was there. That was the only reason. Once he realized who he was about to fuck, he'd freaked.

Pulling the blankets back up, she stared out the bay window across the room, watched the snow blow almost horizontal, making it impossible to see the lake she knew was just beyond. Fat, massive flakes. She had no idea how much it had snowed overnight, but it showed no sign of stopping anytime soon. She was stuck here with this man, with no electricity, no phone, until it stopped. Until the highway was plowed. With a man who couldn't stand the thought of touching her.

Was she that undesirable?

What had happened to her in the last year or so? She'd had a few affairs since Joe died. They'd been nice, if not completely fulfilling, but the men had made her feel good, wanted. Since her daughter-in-law had her baby last year, things had changed. She was a grandmother now. Was she projecting some kind of attitude that was so different than before? Was she just too old to find love again?

Celeste had done it. Her best friend had found an amazing man, the love of her life. So why—?

She stopped her line of thought and sucked in a deep breath. Less than a week ago, she decided she was done with men. Period. She didn't need them. She sure as hell didn't need this kind of emotional turmoil. She had her son, daughter-in-law, and grandbaby. She had the warmth of family. Maybe she didn't have a man to hold her in the dark loneliness of the night, but for everything else they could supply, she could take care of herself. Hell, in the last two years she'd gathered up a nice supply of sex toys and could get herself off in numerous ways any time, anywhere she wanted. She so did *not* need a man!

* * * * *

Rick stood in the cold bathroom, staring at his reflection in the mirror over the sink, disgusted with himself. He was too fucking old to act the way he had, to wake up with a boner just because he had warm, silky woman flesh in his arms.

"God," he whispered. He'd almost had sex with her. He ran his hand over his stubbled chin. He couldn't even shave because there was no

hot water. He wondered how long it would take the pipes to freeze. The water pump ran on electricity, so did the water heater. He'd have to take all the food out of the fridge and put it out on the porch to make sure it didn't go bad. At least they'd have water with all the fresh snow. He'd just have to bring it in pots and put it on the fireplace. He was glad his cabin had the freestanding, airtight fireplace with a ceramic top so he could melt water and warm food.

The rest of the cabin was warm, but the bathroom was cold. He'd donned his jeans, thick socks, and a sweatshirt, but still the cold pressed in. What he needed was a cold shower. Maybe he should go roll in the snow or something. Even though he'd taken care of his problem, he still experienced the effects of having touched a woman, warm and willing, for the first time in—

Don't go there, Davis. Can't go there. Not now.

Fuck, he wished there was some way to get her the hell out of his house, but he couldn't come up with an idea. The blizzard was still at full blast, as attested by the icy snow battering the small bathroom window. He hadn't bothered looking out to see how buried his truck was, but he'd bet a good foot had fallen overnight. He was trapped in this tiny cabin with that woman for God only knew how long.

And what did he want to do? Go back out there, crawl into bed with her, and fuck her brains out.

He closed his eyes, dropped his head forward, and leaned against the vanity. Sex had been the very last thing on his mind for the past three years. Not that the opportunity hadn't presented itself a couple of times, especially during his schooling, but shit! Saying no hadn't been difficult. They'd all been way too young for him; most of them in their twenties.

But Sarah... A mature, beautiful business owner. He knew this because he'd gone through her purse, looking for a cell phone, last night after she fell asleep. He'd found one, though it was dead. Even found the charger for it in there, not that it did him any good since he had no electricity. And all he had was his beeper for work and a landline phone. He'd planned on getting a cell phone on his days off, today in fact, but he wasn't about to hazard the roads again until the snow stopped.

Sarah owned a real estate business. Of course, he still couldn't figure how someone who was obviously intelligent could get caught in a snow bank in sub-zero temperatures wearing stupid women clothing, but that was beside the point.

She was his age. Not some kid who thought bagging a retired cop would be a nice notch on her bedpost, something to brag about to her friends. And shit, she was beautiful. All long limbs, tiny waist, an ass that was soft and just right for cushioning—

"Fuck." He shook his head and let out a growl. His dick was getting hard again just remembering what she'd felt like rubbing against him like a cat in heat. Mewling like a kitten licking cream.

"Stop it," he whispered as shame rushed through him. He didn't treat women that way. Fisting his hands against the countertop, he dug his knuckles into the hard Formica. Now was not the time for his libido to make a return. Not now, not fucking ever!

Shoving away from the counter, he took a couple of deep breaths to calm down. He'd get through the next day or so, until he could get her back to town and away from him. He was a mature adult. He could handle it. He *would* handle it. And keep as far away from her as possible.

He opened the bathroom door and stepped into the hallway, where it was much warmer. A couple more deep breaths and he felt confident enough to face the woman. He walked directly to the kitchen and pulled open the fridge, keeping his back to her.

"Cold chicken, cold barbeque ribs, cold cereal. It's about all I have."

"Umm." He heard the bedding rustle, and he finally found the balls to look at her. Her pitch-black hair was tousled, falling around her shoulders, and the sweat suit he gave her was about four sizes too big, making her look tiny. Although, he knew for a fact she was nearly as tall as he was.

"Yes?" he asked.

"Is coffee totally out of the question?" Her voice was silky smooth, and he felt like an even bigger ass for running out of the room the way he had. He supposed he owed her some kind of explanation about his reaction...or maybe not. He didn't know this woman. He'd only saved her

damn life, wasn't that enough?

He shut the fridge and shuffled through his pots and pans in a lower cabinet. "As long as you don't mind instant, and it'll take a while to heat up the water."

"I'm not picky," she stated.

He got his two biggest cooking pots and went to the door, stepped into his boots. "Be right back."

He stepped out on the porch, went to the end where the snow had drifted, and scooped up enough of the white shit to fill the pots. By the time he walked back in the door, his fingers and nose were numb from the frigid wind. He stepped out of his boots then went across the room and set the heavy stainless steel pots on top of the stove.

Now what? He stared at the pots, the snow beading into water around the rims. This was going to take forever.

Sarah cleared her throat, and the box spring squeaked a bit as she moved on the bed.

Finally, with the intention of apologizing, he turned, but she was out of the bed, standing in front of the bay window, arms crossed over her chest. The ribbed ankles of the sweatpants were much too short for her long legs, and she'd pulled the sweat socks up high so no skin showed. It was...cute.

He rolled his eyes. "Look—"

"I'm really sorry about this," she said, cutting him off. "I know I'm a burden you probably didn't need right now, and I thank you for bringing me to your home and taking care of me last night." She tipped her head to the side, as if stretching her neck. Her muscles were probably sore today, after the way she'd shivered so hard last night. She'd probably tensed muscles unused to working.

All he could come up with was a grunt of agreement.

She turned then to face him, and the smile on her face was a little tragic. Her hair stuck up on the right side a bit, but even that didn't detract from its shine. Her eye makeup was smeared, giving her a raccoon look, but still, she was so beautiful. Gorgeous, in fact. He'd thought so last week at the New Year's Eve ball when she'd introduced herself. He

wondered if she even remembered that.

"Could we just forget that what happened this morning ever happened?"

He nodded. That would be the best, though he doubted *forgetting* was possible. But he could ignore it. Pretend it never occurred.

"Thanks." She let out a small sigh. "So, I guess the real estate agent you used didn't warn you about having a generator on hand for days like this, hmm?"

"No. She didn't." He went back to the kitchen and pulled out the makings for chicken sandwiches. She might not need to eat, but he was starving.

"You used Tammy Sinclair, didn't you?"

He nodded as he unscrewed the lid to the mayonnaise.

Sarah made a tisking sound with her tongue. "Bet you paid full asking price, too, didn't you?"

He glanced over his shoulder at her, one eyebrow raised. She'd moved closer to him, to the other end of the counter.

"Tammy doesn't try to get her clients the best price; she's only in it for the money. And she doesn't tell the whole story, like needing a generator in case the power goes out way out here in the middle of nowhere, because that might scare some people off of a sale."

He sliced chicken breast off the bird he'd pulled from the foil bag. "I wouldn't have minded information about a generator, though I suppose I should have thought of that on my own. But I didn't haggle the price; it was within my range."

"Hmm." She reached past him and picked up a slice of meat he'd just carved.

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her movements, so smooth and confident. Her teeth were perfectly straight and white as she bit into the meat.

He swallowed hard and turned so his back was to her.

"I like what you've done with it," she said as she leaned her lower back against the counter, standing way too close for comfort. "You used the space well. What's up in the loft? I figured whoever bought the place

would use it as the bedroom.”

“And kill myself trying to get to the bathroom in the dark at night? No thanks. I’m too old for that. It’ll eventually be my office, which is still in boxes in the garage.” A garage he wished he’d cleared out so his poor old Bronco wasn’t sitting out in the snow right now.

She sighed. “I thought about buying this place myself last summer when the previous owners put it on the market. Would have made a great little vacation rental out here on the lake.”

“So why didn’t you?” he asked, just to keep the conversation going. It was better than uncomfortable silence.

“I don’t know. With the economy the way it is, less people are vacationing. I probably would have been stuck with it for too long before it would even pay its own mortgage.”

He finished building one sandwich, reached up in the cabinet and pulled down a plate, then handed it to her.

“Thanks. I guess I am kind of hungry.”

He grunted in response. After last night, he wouldn’t doubt it. She’d used up every reserve her body had, then some. “There’s some ibuprofen in the bathroom cabinet if you’re feeling achy,” he offered as he started building his own sandwich.

“Thanks. I’ll take a couple after I eat.”

He heard a chair scrape and knew she sat down at the tiny table in the tiny eating area right behind him. He wished she’d taken the food into the living room and got away from him. Her smell of spring flowers, her voice, everything about her called to him on the most primitive level, and he couldn’t handle it. He wanted to get out and away from her.

He stood at the counter and ate his sandwich, his back to the woman invading his space, his peace of mind.

When he finished, he gathered up all the meat-type food, put it into plastic grocery bags then into a cardboard box he retrieved from the garage, and set it on the porch just outside the door. Then he took the other perishables, things that shouldn’t be frozen but needed to be kept cold, and put them in the garage on a low shelf where a cold draft came in from the bad seal on the garage door. The task didn’t take nearly long

enough, and every time he walked through the house, she was there, watching him.

He put on his boots, coat, hat, and gloves. "I'm going to get wood." Then nearly groaned at the statement as he stomped out into the cold. He already had wood. Lots of it. In his pants.

"Sonofabitch," he muttered as he stepped off the porch and into the driving snow, heading for the lean-to across the yard under which he had a cord of wood stacked. Even the frigid wind didn't take away his arousal. A guy his age shouldn't have an eternal hard-on because of some woman who happened to be in his same vicinity.

Screw that. She was in *his* house. His *private* domain. There was a reason he bought this place out here in the middle of the woods! He liked being *alone*.

Chapter Four

And so the time passed with Rick avoiding Sarah in every way imaginable. By the following afternoon, a pile of neatly stacked logs filled one corner of the living room near the fireplace. He'd gone out to start his truck once every few hours and sweep it off. He brought pan after pan of snow inside to melt on the fire for drinking water, coffee, and to keep the toilet tank filled so they could flush. After listening to the weather on his emergency radio, finding out the storm system had settled over the area and wouldn't move out until late the next day, he disappeared into the garage where he'd been for the last two hours.

And still Sarah stared out the window at the falling, swirling, driving snow.

There were no books in the house, not even an old newspaper to read. The novel she'd been reading was in the back seat of her car. Damn. She thought of her laptop in the trunk, probably frozen solid. Rick told her he'd had to smash the back window in order to get her out because she wouldn't unlock the door, but that was the least of her concerns. She wondered exactly how much damage was done to her pretty silver Caddy because of her landing in the snow bank. And she just knew the huge snowplows would shove it farther off the road, probably taking out the whole side as they did so.

She crossed her sock covered ankles on the coffee table and folded her arms over her chest. She wasn't used to being so sedentary. At home, she had a treadmill, piles of books she wanted to read, paperwork to file

and complete. She couldn't remember the last time she spent hours on end staring out a window. She'd paced the living room area so many times she worried about wearing a path in the brand new chocolate colored rug. She wasn't hungry. She wasn't tired.

Crap. She was bored! She couldn't recall the last time she'd had nothing to do, and if she let her mind wander, it came back to two things. Her car in the ditch, and Rick out in the garage. Rick in bed with her yesterday morning. Rick with a raging hard-on he refused to give her.

She let out a growl and covered her face with her hands. Wasn't a woman's libido supposed to die when she hit *the change*? Wasn't she supposed to be a dried up prune by now? Why the hell was she damp and achy and needy and ready to jump his gorgeous bones every time he walked through the room?

"The forbidden fruit," she muttered as she flopped over on her back and stared up at the tongue-and-grove pine ceiling. He didn't want her, so she lusted after him.

Didn't want her? "Ha!" She wasn't blind, nor was she stupid. Just before he disappeared into the garage, there was no mistaking the ridge behind the zipper of his jeans. He was horny as hell. He didn't want her, but he wanted sex. So why the hell had he turned her down yesterday morning? Why had he freaked so badly he fell off the bed? Why had he wasted that glorious erection by jacking off in the bathroom instead of sinking it into her?

She was old, wrinkled, saggy. He was around her age, she'd guess, but he had the body of a guy twenty years younger. He probably had hot young things chasing him everywhere he went. Youthful women with big, bouncy breasts and thighs you could bounce coins off.

"Asshole," she muttered and turned on her side, tucking her knees up to her chest and staring out at the snow. He was just an asshole.

Then again, she wasn't much to look at right now, wearing clothes three sizes too big that hung off of her as if she were a scarecrow. Except for the length of the pants he'd given her, which only reached her calves. All she had for makeup in her purse—which he'd been nice enough to salvage from her car—was a tube of lipstick. Without her war paint, she

looked every bit of her almost fifty years. Lines around her eyes, her mouth...crow's feet and laugh lines they called them.

Okay, this was why she didn't let herself have any thinking time. She had an outstanding ability to feel sorry for herself, to dig herself into a hole of depression.

God, she thought as she sat up and looked around the room. If he even had a crossword puzzle she could work on!

The door to the garage opened, and Rick came back into the house. He glanced her way, then went into the bathroom.

Sarah sighed and got up. With all the food frozen, she might as well start thawing dinner. She slipped on the heavy boots Rick kept by the front door and then opened the door and stepped onto the porch. Wind buffeted her, and she shivered as she opened the cardboard box where he'd stuck the food. She pulled out a foil deli bag that looked as if it might hold ribs. At least it wouldn't be chicken again tonight. They'd had chicken sandwiches for every meal since she woke up yesterday.

She folded the flaps on the box, her hands already going numb in the cold, and rushed back inside, slamming the door behind her. Her teeth chattered, and her cheeks stung from the icy wind.

"You had hypothermia," Rick said, hands planted on hips. "You shouldn't go out in the cold without a coat for a while. Your body needs time to recoup."

She curled her lip in disgust. "Thanks, *Dad*." She dropped the frozen package on the tiny dining table and kicked off his flopping boots while she tucked her hands under her armpits to warm them up. Damn, it was cold out! Maybe it was time to head south, become a snowbird. She had enough money to retire, sell her real estate company, and get a little place on the coast for the winters.

Yeah, then die in a hurricane.

When she looked back at Rick, he still stood in the middle of the kitchen, hands on those lean hips, his eyes narrowed in a glare.

She huffed out a breath. "Look. I know you don't want me here, and believe me, if I could be somewhere else, I would be. Can you just deal with it, please? Stop looking at me like I'm some damned interloper."

His jaw ticked, his lips pressed tight. Those thick, full lips that had felt so good on the back of her neck. A shiver went through her that had nothing to do with the cold. In fact, she felt pretty damn warm all of a sudden.

She cleared her throat and passed by him, heading for the garage and the foodstuff he'd stored there.

"Where are you going?" he asked, grabbing her arm and pulling her to a stop.

She swiveled on one heel, twisted her arm out of his grasp, and shoved against his chest. He barely budged.

"Don't touch me." Her voice came out low and breathless. She hoped he thought she said it because she didn't want him touching her, when in truth, just the feel of his long, warm fingers on her arm, even through the thick layer of the sweatshirt, made her tingle.

His gaze dropped from her face to her chest, which made her realize just how heavy her breaths were. She'd never been so primed, so ready. So sexually needy.

His hands fisted at his sides. That ridge behind his zipper was back, bigger than ever. Long, thick. Sarah swallowed around the lump in her throat. Holy God, he looked as if he were ready to pounce on her. She took a step forward, until she stood chest-to-chest with him, just an inch of space separating their bodies. Tipping her head back just a bit, she looked into his eyes.

"Step off," he said, his voice hard as steel. She could easily imagine him as a cop.

"Or else what?" she taunted.

His eyes were the color of the most expensive dark chocolate, almost black. His nostrils flared slightly. Those gorgeous lips looked soft, moist, and she wanted them on her. His skin was so dark, so different than most black men in the area. His ancestry hadn't been bred into the milk chocolate brown of most black Americans. No, he was as dark as his African ancestors. Gorgeous. She wanted to see her pale skin against his. Wanted to taste that forbidden flesh.

He didn't respond to her question, so she raised her hands to his

chest, curled her fingers so her nails lightly dug into his chambray work shirt.

“Don’t.”

So close, she could smell him. Fresh, clean. Like the wood he’d spent the morning chopping. Like fabric softener and...and an elemental musk that was all him. “Why? You know you want it. Your dick is so hard I’m surprised you can walk straight. It’s been that way since yesterday morning, hasn’t it?”

She ran her hands up to his shoulders, around the back of his neck. Just as she went up on her tiptoes and was about to pull him down for a kiss, the world spun and she found herself facedown, bent over the table. Her right arm was twisted behind her, her hand pinned by his to the middle of her back. Her other hand barely kept her from slamming her face into the hard oak.

“Is this what you want?” he asked in that cold, deadly tone. He kicked her feet apart, as if he were about to search her as though she were a criminal. Instead, his free hand cupped her butt cheek and squeezed.

She moaned and laid the side of her face against the cool wood of the table. “Yess,” she hissed.

“You want me to fuck you?”

“Yes.” She panted as his hand dove into the sweatpants she wore and his flesh met hers. He repeated the hard squeeze to her buttocks. She thrust her ass into his hand. “Yes. Do it.”

Cool air met her skin as he shoved the sweatpants and her panties off her butt. Then she heard his zipper rip open. Heat sizzled inside of her, and her pussy throbbed in need. Just once, and this ache would be gone. She just needed the itch scratched. And God, he was so powerful.

And then he was inside of her in one hard, fast thrust.

She cried out and clawed the tabletop as her hipbones dug into the unforgiving wooden edge. But the incredible sensation of him filling her so full, so fast, was overwhelming, made her dizzy.

He withdrew and thrust again, letting out a low groan as he sank into her, his balls slapping against her labia. She used her free hand to support herself against the table and pushed back into him, hard, grinding

her ass against his pelvis. He felt so good. So perfect.

He released her pinned hand and reached around her, cupping her mound in his big hand as he rotated his hips, pressing so deep inside of her.

She moaned and laid her now freed hand flat against the table and pressed herself up and back. "Yes," she whispered. "Harder."

He slipped a finger through her slick pussy lips and stroked her clit. His other hand gripped her hip, holding her just a bit away from the table's edge, and then he began to really move. His strokes were deep, long, hard, fast.

She grunted with each thrust, pressed against him as best she could with him holding her in place. Skin slapped skin, the sounds adding to her excitement. His breaths were harsh and shallow, but other than that, he was silent control and power.

He pinched her clit between two fingers, and she shouted and jerked in surprise at the shocking jolt that zipped through her. He did it again, and again, until she bucked against him, crying out with each stroke of his thick cock.

"Please," she screamed, and she reached down and put her hand over his on her pussy, pressing him harder against her throbbing clit. "Please."

His hand left her hip, wound around her waist, and then his entire body leaned into her back, pinning her down on the table, his arm protecting hipbones her from the edge of the table. And he fucked her as she hadn't been fucked in ages. Hard. Carnal. His strokes grew short as he pounded into her. He plucked at her clit, and the pressure inside her began to spread. Grow.

Letting go of his hand because he'd found the right rhythm against her clit, she reached between her legs and cupped his balls.

"Fuck!" he shouted, and his testicles hardened in her palm.

"Yes!" she screamed as the orgasm grabbed her hard, tightening her muscles, making her jerk against him.

With a grunt that turned into a low growl, he stopped moving and gripped her tight, around the middle, her mound, and his cock pulsed

inside her as he came.

Sarah collapsed against the table, breathing hard, tingling from head to toe. Finally relaxed, sated. "Wow," she said on a sigh as her heartbeat thudded in her ears. "That was..." She sighed again.

Rick had been leaning over her, most of his weight against her, and she felt him tense. "Oh, God," he whispered in a voice filled with...regret?

Tears rushed to her eyes, and she squeezed them shut tight. *No, please don't...* She couldn't handle any more put-downs. No more making her feel like shit. *This had been so damn good, don't ruin it, please.*

Rick pulled away from her, the cool air rushing over her skin. She wasn't sure what to do. She stood here, splayed over the table, her ass in the air. Just as she started to push herself up, he was there, pulling her underwear up her thighs, then the borrowed sweatpants.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as he smoothed her shirt down her back. "God, I'm sorry." He put his hands on her shoulders and with the utmost gentleness, helped her stand up. Her back twinged a bit. She was a little old to take it from behind over a table that way.

He turned her, his hands on her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She opened her mouth to tell him to shut the hell up, to stop apologizing, but then she looked into his face and the words died on her tongue. Her heart flipped over in her chest. His eyes were filled with sorrow, pain—no, *anguish*. He raised his hand as if to touch her face, but stopped just inches from her cheek, curled his fingers into his palm, and lowered his arm.

"It's okay," she whispered through a throat tight with tears. She knew that look, and it had nothing to do with her.

He slowly shook his head, then let go of her. He turned his back, tucked himself into his pants, and then he slipped on his boots and grabbed his coat from the peg by the door. He was gone again, out into the driving snow.

At least now she thought she understood his resistance to her, his refusal until she'd pushed his buttons to take what she offered.

She laid her hand over her heart as a tear dripped from her eye.

Chapter Five

Rick wasn't sure how long he'd chopped wood. His body was hot under his down jacket, but his legs, hands, and cheeks felt frozen solid. Darkness fell while he tortured his body with the physical labor. The wind had died down a bit, but the air was frigid, his breath coming out in huge white plumes with every exhale. At least the nausea had passed, if not the guilt eating a hole in his gut.

He swung the axe and the wood split with a crack that echoed off the lean-to. He stood up straight and stretched his back, looked up through the snow, then at the house. It said something that he could actually *see* the house now through the snow. Maybe it'd stop before the prediction of tomorrow afternoon.

Sarah had lit a few candles, maybe the hurricane oil lamp he'd dug out of a box in the garage; a soft glow emanated from the living room window. Fuck, he couldn't believe he'd done what he had. Taken her over the table like a horny teenager.

His stomach flipped at the thought of it, and he swallowed back the sickness. He'd violated her, and himself. His vows to his wife. *Sweet Charlene, can you ever forgive me?*

He couldn't stay out here forever. He swung the axe and buried the blade in the stump he used to chop on, then headed across the yard to the house. His new home. The place that was to be his sanctuary from the pain and memories. But it wasn't. It never would be again.

The house was so warm when he walked through the door, his

cheeks stung anew because of the temperature change. He shed his hat and gloves, then tucked them in the pockets of his coat before he took it off and hung it up.

"Hi," Sarah said from near the fireplace. "I heated dinner."

He noticed the cast iron fry pan sitting on the fireplace, and the scent of barbeque sauce made its way to his nose. "Thanks." He wasn't sure how he'd get any food down, though, or keep it down.

He untied his boots and toed them off, then put them on the mud mat beside the door before going to the pot of room temperature wash water sitting on the cold kitchen stove.

"The ribs are hot, the biscuits are warm, and..."

He turned when her words trailed off. Their eyes met across the darkened room and held for a moment before she turned back to the fireplace and lifted a foil package. He saw no censure in her, heard none in her voice. She'd told him it was okay before he'd run out into the cold to get away from her. Of course, it would never be okay, and she had no idea what she was talking about. At least she didn't hold against him what he'd done to her.

In silence, he pulled plates from the cupboard, silverware from the drawer, and set them on the table. Sarah laid out the food, the ribs in the pan, all neatly cut apart. The biscuits she left in the foil, but rolled back one edge so they could take them out as needed. The container of coleslaw and potato salad was there, too.

They sat, served themselves, chewed, and swallowed. He kept his head down, unable to look at her. Unable to face himself in her eyes.

"Mmm," she said. "I know they're from the grocery store, but I swear they're the best ribs in the county."

He glanced up in time to see her slip her index finger into her mouth to suck off barbeque sauce. His groin tightened in response to the innocently sensual action. He shot up off his chair. "Beer?"

"Sure."

He went out to the garage and grabbed two bottles from the twelve-pack he'd purchased the other night. Had it only been two nights ago? It seemed he'd been stuck in this house forever with a woman who

turned him on so hard... She'd been right; walking was difficult around her.

He sat back down across the table from her, twisted off the cap on one bottle, and set it by her plate, then opened his own and downed half of it.

The rest of dinner passed in silence. Sarah didn't eat much. One biscuit, two ribs, and the tiniest bit of salad. She was very thin, and he wondered briefly if she had an eating disorder, but he didn't think so. She was probably one of those health food fools. When she sat back in her chair, lifted her beer bottle to her lips and looked at him, he decided he'd had enough and got up to clear the table.

She didn't move, but her gaze followed him as he rewrapped the food and stored it away. Her gaze burned between his shoulder blades, and as soon as he was done, he gathered up the salads to take back to the garage. He'd just stay out there until she went to bed. He had more sorting to do, anyway.

As soon as he stepped into the garage and the door swung closed behind him, he realized his problem. No fucking light. When he'd been working in there earlier, light came through the windows enough to sort out boxes and restack them in some semblance of order. Now it was as dark as pitch. By feel, he carefully stepped down the two stairs to the concrete floor and made his way across the room, trying to remember where the boxes were and where he could safely step without tripping over something. He bumped into the metal shelving unit and set the food back on the bottom shelf where it was the coldest.

He turned and made his way back to the door to the house just as carefully, but he couldn't bring himself to go inside. So he sat down on the bottom step, reached over to his left where the case of beer sat, and pulled another out of the box.

Halfway through the beer, the door behind him opened. He didn't bother to turn around; it would be obvious he'd just been sitting in the dark. The door closed, blocking out the tiny bit of light from inside the house, but Sarah was still there. He could feel her, smell her slightly perfumed skin. The wooden stair he sat on creaked, and then she was

sitting next to him, one step up, her knee lightly touching his bicep.

"May I have another beer?" she asked, her voice soft as a caress.

He reached over, pulled another from the box, opened it for her, and then touched it to her knee. She took it from him. He heard her swallow a few sips.

Silence stretched for long minutes. Rick had the urge to turn to her, to bury his face against her and wrap his arms around her. He didn't, of course. His weakness would solve nothing. Wouldn't erase what he'd done.

"This was the first time since she died, wasn't it?" Sarah asked in a whisper.

His heart thudded against his ribs, and he nearly dropped his beer.

Her hand settled gently on his shoulder. "I saw it in your eyes."

He fisted his fingers around the neck of the bottle to keep his hand from shaking. He cleared his throat, but he couldn't get a word out. Didn't know how to respond. Couldn't believe she'd seen so much.

"It's okay," she whispered, and her fingers caressed the back of his neck above his collar.

He squeezed his eyes shut and forced himself to bite his tongue. He'd been through therapy, talked until his throat hurt, but nothing—no one—since Charlene had touched him so deeply as Sarah's quiet understanding in the dark.

"Six years ago," she said, keeping her voice quiet, soothing, "my husband came home from work not feeling well. His stomach was bothering him, he said. He couldn't eat dinner, and after lying in bed for an hour tossing and turning, he got up to take some medicine, said he'd watch some TV for a while so he didn't keep me awake." She smoothed her hand over the back of his head, and he couldn't stop himself from leaning into her touch. It felt so good, her small, cool hand against his shaved scalp.

Her breath was a little stilted when she inhaled and then continued. "The next morning when I came downstairs, he was asleep on the sofa. Or at least I thought he was sleeping. I got ready for work, and then went to kiss him goodbye..."

Rick didn't need her to finish. He knew. And he knew she knew some of his pain, but a spouse dying in his sleep was so different than what he'd lived through, what he'd seen happen to his wife, his son. The pain was just as deep, he supposed, if not as life altering.

"A little over a year later, I met an agent from an estate agency in Chicago while I was there for a conference. We had dinner, went dancing, had a few drinks. Wound up in my hotel room." Her fingers stopped moving against his skin. She let out a soft sigh and leaned forward, laid her cheek against his head and wound her arm around his shoulders. "The body's ready, but the mind and heart aren't. There's no shame in that. I understand. I've been there."

A sob, so totally unexpected, tore from his throat. The beer bottle slipped from his fingers and broke against the concrete floor between his feet. Hot tears stung his eyes, and he reached up to push her arm away, but instead gripped her forearm with both hands and clung to her.

Her other hand came around and cupped the other side of his head, holding him against her. "Shh, Rick. Shh. It's okay."

He turned into her, buried his face against her neck, and let the pain roll through him. He'd cried when Charlene and Trevor died, cried at their funeral, but never since. Not in three years.

"Oh, sweetheart," Sarah crooned as she rocked him in her arms. "I know it hurts."

"I can't..." He gasped for breath. "I can't do this."

It hurt so bad to remember, to think about her—them. That night. A month after they died, he moved out of their house because the memories smothered him. A month later, he took early retirement from the LAPD and went back to school to change professions. Now he was here, but no matter where he went, how far he ran, he couldn't rid himself of the memories—the horrors—of that night.

"Let it out, Rick. You have to or you'll never heal. Trust me, I know this." Sarah rubbed his shoulders, his back, held him tight against her.

He wound up with his arms around her, gripping her to him. She was in his lap, and he didn't know how she got there. All he knew was that he needed to hold her. He needed the human contact. It had been so

long since he'd been touched in any intimate way by a feminine hand.

He gasped for air, his cheek against her small breasts, her arms around him. His head throbbed, and his eyes burned. Embarrassment ate at his insides, but he couldn't let her go. Not yet.

"You're okay, Rick," she whispered against his head, her lips warm and moist on his skin. "You're okay. She'd understand. *Your* life has to go on."

He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head in denial. He'd promised her forever. He'd sworn to love her until the end of his days. Because he was a man with a shorter lifespan than women, and because he'd been a decade older than her and he was a cop, he was sure he'd die first. He would have bet everything he had on it, but it hadn't happened that way. By a fluke of chance, a mistake, a fucking stray bullet, she and his baby boy had been ripped from him forever.

Finally, the tears ran out and his breathing returned to a shuddering normal. Still Sarah held him tight against her, and he held her. Her hands never stopped moving over him, soothing, gentling.

"I'm sorry I pushed your buttons this afternoon. I never would have if I'd known."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" he asked, his voice ragged, his throat sore.

"No, Rick." She touched his cheek, smoothed her thumb against his lips. "It's exactly what I wanted. I think I'm having some weird midlife hormonal surges or something. All I could think about was..." She sighed. "Anyway, I'm sorry."

They sat in the dark silence for a long time, arms wrapped around each other, Rick listening to her soft, steady heartbeat. Finally, he got up the courage and asked, "When does the pain go away?"

She took a deep, slow breath. "I'll let you know when it happens."

"That's not real reassuring," he whispered, his heart feeling battered, bruised, all over again.

"I don't think the pain is supposed to go away, though," she said. "I think it's something we're supposed to live with. My husband, your...wife?" He nodded. "They were part of our lives, but they're gone

and we're not. I don't know if it'll ever go away, but it does ease to a dull ache. But you have to get rid of the guilt, let go of it. And there's so much of that, isn't there?"

He nodded again.

"Survivor's guilt, my therapist called it. But it was more than that for me. If I'd paid attention to Joe's not feeling good, insisted he go to the doctor, gone downstairs and sat with him while he watched television. If I'd done something other than going to sleep relieved he wouldn't keep me awake all night with his tossing and turning."

Rick bit his bottom lip to keep it from trembling. If he'd gotten there five minutes sooner. If he hadn't been working late and couldn't get to the store before closed. He'd gone over the *ifs* so many times there were none left.

"How," he choked out.

"Well, my son is very religious. Where he got it, I have no idea, because I never have been. He told me it was God's will that his dad died when he did."

God wouldn't take a baby with a bullet.

"But really, when I think about it with a clear head, I realize that that night was no different than a hundred others we'd had over the course of our marriage. He was always a considerate man, and it wasn't the first night he slept on the sofa in front of the television to make sure he didn't keep me awake. How could I have known his upset stomach was something so much more serious?"

What Sarah said made sense, but it still didn't change the facts. Not in his heart.

"Come on," Sarah whispered. "Let's go inside. It's cold out here."

He was loath to let go of her, but he loosened his arms so she could stand up. His eyes had adjusted enough that he could make out her shape in the dark.

"Could you grab the milk? I... Well..." She touched his cheek again, and he leaned into her smooth palm. "Warm milk with honey, it'll help you relax."

A soft chuckle slipped out of him, along with another tear. That

was what he gave Trevor when his boy couldn't sleep, what Rick's own mother used to make for him. "Yeah, I'll get it." He stood up, too, and Sarah moved around him, up the steps and opened the door, letting in a bit of light from the hurricane lamp she'd left burning on the table.

He crossed the garage, grabbed the milk jug, and gave it a shake. He heard some ice crystals, but it wasn't frozen solid. When he entered the house, she took the jug from him and poured some in a saucepan before putting it on top of the fireplace to warm.

"Why don't you go get changed for bed?" she asked as she handed him the jug to put back in the garage. He raised an eyebrow at her, and she smiled. "Come on. I know you're exhausted after chopping wood all afternoon. You can have the bed tonight."

He opened his mouth to argue, but she shook her head. "Please don't fight with me, Rick." She grinned. "You need the comfort of your own bed tonight, and I fit on the sofa a bit better than you do."

Before he could respond, she turned back to the fireplace to watch over the milk. He wouldn't let her sleep on the couch, but he didn't really want to either. As he returned the milk to the cool garage, he thought that the bed was definitely big enough for two.

Chapter Six

Sarah woke up when Rick pulled away from her and got out of bed. It had been so nice being cuddled up next to him all night. He'd been the one to suggest they share the bed, and she'd been too emotionally exhausted to argue. She'd held it together well while Rick let out his pain and cried, but it hadn't been easy. She'd never been able to handle seeing a man cry, and hearing the anguish behind his tears had ripped her heart to shreds.

She rolled over and watched him return from the bathroom and go into the kitchen. And that was when she realized the light over the stove was on, and the refrigerator motor was running. They had electricity. He picked up the phone, listened for a second, then hung it up.

He wore flannel pajama bottoms, but no top, and she loved the way his muscles rippled as he filled the coffee carafe with water from the sink and set to making a pot of fresh brew.

Ahh, she couldn't wait! She was a latte girl, and having to drink instant the last few days had nearly eaten a hole in her stomach lining. She hadn't even used any of his milk in her coffee because they'd needed to conserve what food they had.

After the coffee was dripping, he went to the end table and picked up her purse. She frowned as she watched him rifle through it, but then smiled when he pulled out her phone and charger and went back to the kitchen with it and plugged it in. The landlines must still be down.

Then, to her utter surprise, he came back to the bed and crawled

under the covers next to her.

"You're awake," he said when he turned on his side to face her, propping his head on the pillow.

"Uh huh. I wondered if you were going to rob me." She grinned.

He smiled, his white teeth flashing against his dark skin.

"Phone still down?"

He nodded. "I'm surprised we have power already. The sun's up, not a cloud in the sky, but I thought it would take longer to get the lines fixed."

She shrugged. "The county is usually pretty good when this happens. They know there's a lot of people who could freeze to death without electricity. Wonder if the roads are plowed yet."

"I think that's what woke me up." He snuggled down deeper in the bed, moved just a bit closer to her. "I think I heard the road grater on the highway."

"I should call my son."

He nodded. "He's probably worried."

That got her moving. She threw back the covers, went to her phone, and punched the speed dial for Joey's house.

"Mom!" he answered on the second ring. "Oh, thank God. Are you okay? I've been trying to get you for days on your cell. The troopers called last night. They found your car with a broken window—Mom?"

She grinned. "I'm okay, hon. I wound up in the ditch, but a Good Samaritan took me home and has kept me warm and fed. My cell was dead, and until this morning there wasn't any power to recharge it."

"Where are you? I'll come get you. Oh, Mom, I was so..." His words died and she could picture her sweet son choked up with emotion.

"I'm fine, hon. I'm sorry you were worried." She peered out the small window by the front door to see Rick's truck buried up to the top of the tires in snow. "I don't think you'll be able to get out here. I'm at 31480 Lakeshore. They might have cleared the highway, but there's a good stretch of driveway that's got about three feet of snow over it. You'll have to call for a plow, and I'm sure they're all busy today."

Truth be known, now that the time was here, she didn't want to

leave Rick, but then she thought... "See if you can get a hold of Bobby Johansen. He owes me a favor. And Rick, the man whose house I'm at, he's a paramedic with the CVFD, and he'll need to get to work soon."

"You said 31480 Lakeshore?" Joey asked.

"That's right. The old Connor cabin I looked at last summer."

"Oh, okay. I love you, Mom. I'll come get you as soon as I get someone with a plow."

"Thanks, hon. Love you, too."

"I'll call you."

She ended the call and laid the phone back on the counter. The coffee maker did its gurgle to say it was done, and she got down two mugs from the cabinet and filled them. The milk was out in the garage, so she forwent it yet again and took the coffee back to the bed.

"Thanks," Rick said as he took one of the mugs from her. Then he scooted over and patted the bed again. "It'll be a while before anyone gets out here, I'm sure."

She nodded and sat, sipped the coffee, then put the mug on the low bookshelf Rick used as a nightstand. "The troopers found my car yesterday and called Joey. He thought the worst."

"Aw, I'm sorry." Rick set his coffee mug on the floor on the other side of the bed and scooted back down under the covers facing her.

He didn't seem to want to leave the bed, and he wanted her there, too, so she did the same, pulling the covers up and turning to face him. He stretched his neck, then settled back against the pillow.

Reaching out, she laid her hand against the corded, taut muscles of his neck. "Sore from all the chopping?"

"Yeah, a bit. I'll survive." He wrapped his fingers around her hand she'd touched him with and tucked it against his chest. The contrast between their skin colors amazed her. Hers winter pale, and his so dark.

As if reading her thoughts, he said, "First generation American. My parents emigrated from Nairobi a couple years before I was born. Pure African blood running through these veins."

"I figured as much. Your skin is so beautiful." She rubbed her forefinger against his naked chest. "I would think you'd have an accent if

your parents were immigrants, though. You sound as American as they get."

He chuckled. "My parents worked very hard, brought me up in a predominantly white, middle-class suburb of L.A. It was bad enough I was this black, I sure as hell couldn't talk like an African if I wanted to survive."

"What did your parents do?"

"My father worked as a janitor sixteen hours a day; two full-time jobs. Hardly ever saw him. Mom was a waitress at a diner. She never said so, but I think she saved every single penny she made in tips in order to send me to college."

She raised her eyebrows, impressed. So different from her lawyer father and stay-at-home mother.

He nodded. "They were good parents, taught me to be a hard worker."

"They must have been proud when you became a police officer."

"Yeah," he said with a gentle look in his eyes and a soft smile to his full lips. "They threw a party for the entire block, invited everyone we knew, and a few people we didn't."

"Are they still...?"

He shook his head. "Father died of cancer about ten years ago. Mom didn't make it through a year without him." He sighed and squeezed her hand. "They had an arranged marriage, but they were together for over forty years."

"Brothers or sisters?"

He shook his head, cleared his throat. "No. Just me. Don't know if it was planned that way or not. I just know they worked their asses off to give me everything I could possibly need."

"They loved you very much."

He nodded. "Father threatened to disown me when I brought home my fiancée the first time though." A soft laugh escaped him, and his eyes sparked with humor as he dropped his voice and took on a strong accent. "No son of mine's going to marry a white woman and dilute our sacred African blood."

Sarah grinned and moved just an inch closer to his body heat. "I guess it all worked out in the end, since you're laughing about it?"

"Yeah, he eventually came around."

"And your mom?"

"Ah, she loved Charlene from day one, even though she thought Char was too young for me."

Sarah raised an eyebrow. "So, I was right. You like younger women."

He shrugged. "Ten years. Not that big of a deal."

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. Cradle robber."

He laughed and reached out with his other hand to touch her cheek. "It wasn't her age that first attracted me, it was her milky white skin. God, she was gorgeous. Short, plump, blue-eyed bleach blonde. She worked at the diner Mom had worked at for twenty years. I'd stop in with my partner for coffee just about every night. Char flirted with all the guys, so I never thought anything of it until one night I was in there alone, and she asked when I was going to get the balls to ask her out." He dropped his hand to Sarah's shoulder and gave it a little squeeze. "The rest is history. We were married six months later." His hand trailed down over her bicep, her forearm, to come up to her hand still against his chest. "What about you? How'd you meet your husband?"

"Not as romantic as your story," she said with a cheeky grin. "But I was *the* Cooper Valley scandal for almost two whole years."

He chuckled. "Do tell."

She curled her fingers around his and laughed at his expression of surprise. "I wasn't always the upstanding BBB business owner I am today." She winked, and he laughed, a sound so at odds with his sorrow of last night it made her heart trip. "Joe was my high school sweetheart, and I got pregnant early in my senior year."

He cringed. "Ouch."

She nodded. "No kidding. In this little town—which was way smaller back then—I became a pariah. My dad was a deacon at our church, Mom was in the choir, the women's league, and secretary of the PTA, so you can imagine. Anyway, even worse was the fact my parents

didn't make me marry him. Even though I'd disgraced them, they didn't believe that two *kids* should get married just because they'd procreated together."

"But you wound up marrying him anyway?"

She nodded, smiled. "Yeah. I finished high school through correspondence and got my diploma the same time Joe did. He went right to work for his father, who owned the only hardware store in town. After Joey was born, we moved in together—another black mark on my already tarnished reputation. About a year later we decided to make it legal and got married at the courthouse."

"And you were together how long?"

"Twenty-two years. He took over the business from his dad about five years after we got married, and I worked with him there, kept the books."

"Now Joey runs the store? I bought some things at Bancroft Hardware last week."

"Nope. Joey had other plans. He's a science teacher at the high school. After Joe died, I sold the store, but the new owners kept the name."

"And that's when you got into real estate?"

With a nod, she said, "Yes. With Joe gone, Joey in college and living in Chicago, and no store, I had nothing to do. I went stir crazy for a few months until I attended a seminar about buying and selling houses." She shrugged. "And the rest is history."

Silence fell between them, and she couldn't take her eyes from his. He had to be the most beautiful man she'd seen in years. She realized he'd never told her how his wife died, but maybe he wasn't ready for that. He might never be. It wasn't as if their relationship would extend past today, past the moment she left this little house. He wasn't ready, obviously, and even if he were, she'd just been a speed bump in his life. Just because she'd been his first since the death of his wife didn't make her anything special. She knew that from experience.

"Thank you for saving my life," she whispered.

He said nothing, just stared into her eyes. For long minutes the

silence stretched, only now it was filled with the sound of the fridge motor and the low buzz of the fluorescent light over the stove. The quiet tick of the coffee maker burner.

"What are you thinking?" she asked when she became frustrated she couldn't read his expression.

His eyelids slowly lowered, and he dipped his head slightly as his hands tightened around hers against his chest.

"What?" she said. "It's okay. You can tell me."

"I have a hard-on." He shook his head. "I'm sorry. Listening to you talk, your voice, looking at you... You're the first woman since Char to have this effect on me." He sucked in a deep breath and met her eyes again. "You must think I'm a total asshole after—"

She pulled her hand from his and touched her fingertips to his lips. "I don't think you're an asshole, Rick." She laid her hand against his cheek, smoothed her thumb against his stubbled chin. "There's no shame in it."

He nodded and frowned. "I feel shame in it. I promised Char forever, yet I want to roll you over on your back and...well, you know."

"You've probably heard this before, but *you're* not the one who died."

He flinched. "My mother died of a broken heart just months after my father. I thought I loved Char that way."

"Oh, sweetheart. No. Don't think like that. You're a strong man. I'm sure you saw death when you were a police officer. You know it happens."

He shook his head. "Those bodies didn't belong to my wife."

She licked her lips and drew in a slow breath. "Do you think less of me because I crave sexual fulfillment, that I didn't crawl into a hole and die when Joe did?"

"No! God, no. But..."

"Do you think it's wrong that I still have dreams of someday finding another man and getting married? Someone to grow old with."

He shook his head.

"Then why would I think less of you? Why do you think less of

yourself? Life goes on, Rick. Your life. My life. They're gone, and we still love them, but there's room inside of us for more. I miss Joe everyday of my life, but I know he'd be really pissed off at me if he thought I was sitting around mourning him and waiting until it was my time to die. What a waste of *my life*."

He opened his mouth, but she cut him off. "It's okay if you're not ready. Everyone moves at their own pace, but don't ever think that Charlene is somewhere looking on you with scorn or disappointment. If she loved you as deeply as you so obviously loved her, let go of the guilt and let yourself get back to life."

He closed his eyes again, and Sarah held her breath, wondering if she'd pushed too hard again. Everything she said were things Celeste had said to her about Joe when she went through a horrible guilt-ridden depression after she'd had that first brief affair. It hurt like hell to hear it, but she knew in her heart it was all true. Joe would have wanted her to find happiness again.

Rick opened his eyes, looked deep into hers, then leaned forward and pressed his lips against hers.

Sarah's breath came out in a rush of surprise. Her nipples tightened, her skin warmed, and her pussy clenched. She refused to move, though, afraid to twitch a muscle for fear she'd scare him away. For all she knew, all he wanted was a kiss.

His breath was warm on her cheek as he lightly sucked her bottom lip, pulling it between his and flicking it with his tongue. He tasted toothpaste minty with a hint of coffee. It took all her will to stifle the whimper building in her throat.

Releasing her lip, he kissed her cheek, her jaw, the side of her neck. "Tell me this is okay," he whispered against her ear. "Please tell me it's okay."

There was desperation in his voice. Even if she'd wanted to—which she didn't—she couldn't deny him anything right now. She wrapped her arm around his shoulders, pressed her front snug against his. "Anything you want, Rick. Anything. It's all okay."

"Touch me," he said on the moan of a dying man, then sucked her

skin in that ultra sensitive area right below her ear.

Reaching between them, she slid her hand under the covers and against his flat, rippled abdomen. His breath sucked in quick, and then whooshed out when she reached inside his pajama bottoms and wrapped her fingers around his thick, hard erection. A low groan came out of him, and he bucked his hips against her hand.

"More," he whispered against her neck as his hand found its way up her shirt to her breast.

"Ahh," she sighed as she gripped his cock hard and slowly pumped him.

His hand was warm, slightly callused as he rubbed her nipple with his palm, then closed his hand over her breast and molded it. *Yes*. It felt so good! *He* felt good, so hard all over. All muscle. He smelled of male musk, slightly sweet. She buried her face against his throat and breathed him in.

He lunged forward and pushed her onto her back. He was over her then, shoving her shirt up around her armpits, and his mouth came down on her right breast. She arched off the bed as he suckled her nipple hard. She gripped his head and held him to her, the whimpers escaping her throat.

"Gorgeous," he murmured as he moved to the other breast. "You're so beautiful."

Sarah wiggled out of her shirt and tossed it off the bed. She ran her hands over his shoulders, down his back, loving the way his muscles bunched and moved under his smooth skin. He was the gorgeous one. He sure as hell didn't look his age, unlike her.

His whiskers abraded her sensitive flesh, and she moaned. Heat flared through her, and she spread her legs, raised her knees to cradle his body against her aching pussy, to rub herself against him like a cat in heat.

As he nipped the side of her breast, he reached down and shoved her sweatpants down. She had to lower her legs, and he rose over her and stripped them off, tossing them onto the floor.

"Oh, God, you're..." He sat on his knees between her thighs, staring down at her. He shook his head, his lips slightly parted, his chest rising and falling in harsh breaths. His pajama bottoms tented over his

erection. His gaze roaming over her was as tactile as a touch, and she shivered. Goose bumps popped out on her arms and thighs.

She wanted Rick like she hadn't wanted anyone since Joe. Not just his body, but his heart. He was a good man, a hurt man, and she wanted to take care of him, heal him. But it wasn't her place. If this would help him start to move on, though, she would give him what he needed. Bringing her right hand to her lips, she licked her middle finger then reached between her thighs and stroked her pussy lips open, revealing herself to him.

"Oh, God, Sarah..."

She spread her legs wider and flicked her moistened finger over her clit. She gasped, shocked at the intense pleasure she derived from doing this while he watched so intently. She raised her knees again, opening herself even wider, and buried two fingers in her pussy. With her other hand, she cupped her breast and flicked her nipple with her forefinger. Heat rushed through her, and her silky juices slickened her slowly pumping fingers inside of her.

Rick lowered his pants over his cock, and she moaned as he stroked himself from tip to base. He was so thick and hard. So dark. Her black knight, she thought with a grin. Only this black knight had a heart of gold.

"Do you want me to come?" she asked as she dragged her damp fingers out of herself and over her clit. "Do you want to see me come like this?"

He nodded. Kept stroking his cock. As much as she wanted—*needed*—him inside of her again, she wouldn't push him. He needed time. And she was pretty damn good at getting herself off. Watching him jack his own cock while she did so would only help speed things along.

She plucked her clit and pinched her nipple. "Ahh." Her back arched off the bed, and she rubbed her clit hard, fast. Her toes started to tingle. She focused on his big hand against his cock. Plunged her fingers deep inside of herself several times as she remembered how he'd stretched her cunt the day before. How hard he was, how hot he was, what it felt like when he pulsed inside of her so long.

"Do it," Rick whispered.

Her stomach tightened as the sensations within her grew. She tortured her pussy with quick, hard pinches, then she slapped her pussy lips a few hard, quick times and cried out. Blood rushed to her cunt with each stinging slap, then she pinched her clit hard between thumb and finger, at the same time tugged her nipple to the point of pain, and she came with a long, rough moan, all the while watching Rick stroke himself, waiting to see his spurt of cum, to feel it fall on her flesh.

Instead, he shoved her hand out of the way and slammed into her before she could even catch her breath. She screamed as her orgasm doubled, tripled, rippling through her, stealing the breath from her lungs.

"Do it again," Rick growled in her ear as he pumped that gorgeous cock into her. "Do it again, please. Let me feel it."

She brought her knees up, locked her ankles around his back, and tilted her hips up at just the right angle. His next thrust stroked the tip of his cock against her G-spot, and she screamed.

"Yeah," he ground out between gritted teeth. "More."

He fucked her without finesse, but it was so good. So perfect. She gripped his ass, dug her nails into that firm round butt, and cried his name as the orgasms raged on within her, one on top of another.

Somewhere in the distance, after she was so far gone in the pleasure and lust, she heard him shout, and his body went still. His cock pulsed. He thrust again...and again...and then he collapsed over her, sweaty and limp. Her pussy clenched and clenched his still hard cock as she fought to regain her breath.

She wished they never, ever had to move.

Her cell phone on the counter didn't let that happen.

Chapter Seven

Sarah stood in the living room and watched Bobby Johansen clear a swath of driveway with his snowplow as she sipped a steaming cup of coffee. The sun glinted off all the fresh-fallen snow, making her eyes hurt. At the end of the driveway she saw Joey's F-150, waiting to take her away from this little bit of heaven and back to the real world.

She figured she had about another five minutes before Bobby made it to the front of the house.

Rick came up behind her but didn't touch her. She heard him sip his own coffee.

She was back in his fuzzy, too big, too short tracksuit and thick socks. He wouldn't let her put on the clothes she'd arrived in. Said she'd break an ankle trying to walk out in the snow.

"Bobby will finish cleaning up your driveway after I go," she said. "No charge. He owes me a few favors."

Rick grunted in response, but didn't say anything else. He was back to being his stoic, silent self, and her heart broke a little bit.

"Well, here comes Joey," she said as the red truck made its way up the driveway to the front of the house.

She turned, and Rick stood there looking at her. She forced a smile and handed him her mug. "Thank you for everything. It...um..." She dipped her head and sighed.

He turned away without comment and set the coffee mugs on the table. She slipped her coat on, and he picked up the grocery bag filled

with her clothes, and then her purse, and handed them to her.

She walked to the door and looked down at her stockinged feet. "Uh, Rick...?"

Without warning, he picked her up in his arms. She gave a yelp and clocked him in the side of the head with her purse when she grabbed for his neck.

He chuckled. "No worries, ma'am. This is how I got you into the house, it's the least I can do to get you back out." His smile faded as she looked into those dark eyes of his, then he kissed her. Soft, gentle, just a bare touch of their lips. "Thank you," he whispered.

She gave a little nod. She wanted another kiss. Deeper. But instead, he opened the door, carried her out to Joey's truck, and set her on the passenger seat after Joey shoved the door open.

"Mom. Are you okay? Did you get hurt? Why's he carrying you?"

She laughed. "I'm fine, honey. I have no shoes—or rather, Rick wouldn't let me wear the ones I had."

Joey hugged her hard and kissed her cheek, then reached past her to shake Rick's hand. "Thanks for taking care of her."

"My pleasure," Rick said with no hint of sarcasm behind his words. When Joey released his hand, Rick touched hers. "Promise me something," he said.

She raised her eyebrows.

"Boots, warm gloves, hat, sweatpants, and a sweater. Put them in your car and leave them there. At least you won't freeze if this happens again."

She smiled, and her cheeks heated in embarrassment. "Okay. I promise."

"Good." He looked past her and smiled at her son. "Take care of her. She's a special woman."

Joey chuckled. "Yes, sir."

"Hey," she said, stopping Rick when he would have backed out of the door and shut it.

"Yeah?"

"You know where to find me if you need to...talk or something."

He held her gaze for a long moment, and she saw his denial there. Maybe a little regret. He wouldn't contact her. But then he nodded and said, "Thanks. See ya 'round." He shut the door and backed up a few steps.

Sarah watched him through the windshield as Joey slowly backed down the drive. She sent him a little wave before they turned, knowing that it would probably be the last time she saw him. Well, it was a small town, but she knew that the intimacy that had existed in that little cabin would never happen again between them, and that broke her heart a little.

"He seems really nice," Joey said as they drove down the freshly plowed highway toward Cooper Valley.

"Mmm hmm. Very nice."

Joey grabbed her hand and squeezed it. "You scared the crap out of us, Mom. Your car being found, the window smashed, your stuff still in it."

"Did my laptop get recovered by any chance?"

Joey shook his head and chuckled. "Yes, Mom. The troopers said it's at the station, and we can pick it up. I called them this morning and told them you weren't a missing person anymore."

"I'm sorry, hon. I didn't mean..." Her throat tightened up as she thought of Rick. If he hadn't come along when he did, she'd be dead. The troopers would have found her frozen solid inside that car. "I'll be more careful from now on."

Joey smiled at her. "Good. Listen to that guy. He knows what he's talking about."

"First then, let's stop and pick up a car charger for the damn cell you got me for Christmas. If I'd had that—" *I wouldn't have met Rick.*

Joey glanced at her as he put his hand back on the wheel. She ignored his look of inquiry. Her son sure as hell didn't need to know anything about her sex life...or the fact she'd fallen in love for the first time since his dad died.

* * * * *

Sarah walked into Darby's Pub two weeks later to meet Celeste for their bi-weekly dinner date. The scent of stale beer and hot French fry oil buffeted her. She breathed deep and headed across the dimly lit room to where Celeste sat at a table in the corner.

"Hey, Celee," she said and brushed a kiss on her best friend's cheek.

"Hey, Sarah," Celeste said with a grin. "Good to see you're none the worse for wear."

"Is it ever going to warm up?" she asked as she peeled off her gloves and coat.

"Weatherman says another week of this before we thaw."

The waitress came over as Sarah sat down. "What can I get for ya tonight?" the busty blonde asked.

"The usual," Celeste said.

"Wait. I don't want the usual. I'll take an Irish coffee and a bacon cheese burger, extra cheese, with fries."

Celeste cast her a wide-eyed glance but said nothing until the waitress walked off. Then she pounced. "Okay, what's that about? You don't eat burgers."

"Yeah, well," she said with a shrug. "Things change."

Celeste frowned. "A near death experience made you a greasy red meat eater?"

Sarah chuckled and shook her head. "I need some comfort food, okay? It's been a bitch of a week."

"What's wrong?" Celeste's tone became serious, and she reached across the table to hold Sarah's hand.

They were best friends, had no secrets. Sarah had spoken with Celeste on the phone several times over the last two weeks, and she'd wanted to tell her about Rick, about all that had happened in that little cabin, but she'd chickened out every time.

"Oh, Celee," she said on a sigh. "I think I'm in love."

Celeste's eyes went wide. "No way. With who? When did this happen?"

"Richard Davis."

"The paramedic who rescued you?"

Sarah nodded. "Yeah, him."

"Oh, wow. Okay. So what's the problem?"

Sarah drew her hand from Celeste's when the waitress returned with their drinks. Her spiked coffee and Celeste's margarita. She thanked the waitress, then turned back to Celeste. "We had sex when I was trapped there with him. Amazing, mind-blowing sex. And we talked. God, I haven't had real conversation with a man since...well, since Joe died. I thought we made a connection. I know we did. But..."

"But...?"

"He lost his wife—and child—a few years ago. I knew about his wife, but when I checked out the newspaper articles online, I found out more than I wanted to know. God, it was tragic. And he's not over it yet. He's not ready to move on."

Celeste nibbled her bottom lip for a moment. "He told you he's not ready?"

Sarah shrugged. "Yeah. Kind of. I mean—" She huffed out a breath. "Remember how I was after I had that thing with Blake Story a year after Joe died?"

Celeste nodded.

"That's where he is. And I was his guilt trigger."

"Oh, hon, that's awful."

Sarah nodded. "I told him he knew where to find me if he wanted to talk, and even though I knew he wouldn't, I stupidly hoped he would, but he hasn't. I even went by the fire hall today, under the guise of returning the clothes he lent me, but he wasn't there. And since I gave his stuff to the chief to give back to him, I have no reason to go back there."

Their food arrived, and Sarah reached for the ketchup bottle. "I don't know what to do about it, Celee. I've tried to just not think about him, but that's not working. I really think I'm in love, and it's scaring the hell out of me because it's all one-sided, and...well...shit," she muttered when the ketchup *blopped* out all over her fries instead of next to them.

"You could call him, you know. Maybe he's too shy or something." Celeste stabbed into her Caesar salad with her fork.

Sara picked up a soaked fry and bit into it. "He's so fragile, though. I just can't push myself on him. I did that once, and, God, Celee, the look in his eyes was so heartbreaking. If he's not ready, he's not ready."

Celeste shrugged, and her lips twisted in sympathy. "I'm sorry. I don't know what to tell you. Maybe wait a while and then try?"

Sara nodded and sliced her burger in half with the table knife. "Yeah. I guess it's all I can do. Hey, you're coming over next Friday for Lance's first birthday, right?"

Celeste grinned. "Wouldn't miss it. Paul's already bought a big ol' noisy gift for him."

Sarah chuckled. "I'm sure Joey and Petra will love that."

"The batteries are removable," Celeste said, laughing. "But he sure likes being an uncle."

Sarah bit into her burger and closed her eyes, enjoying the juicy, calorie-laden meat and cheese. If she couldn't find pleasure with Rick, she'd take it wherever she could.

* * * * *

Rick walked into the Cooper Valley Hospital's emergency room, and went up to the front desk. "I'm checking on a patient who was brought in today," he told the nurse behind the desk.

The fiftyish blonde looked up, and then a big smile spread over her face. "You're Richard Davis, right?"

He nodded.

The woman stood up and extended her hand. "I'm Celeste Jensen. Sarah's told me all about you."

If a black man could go pale, he was pretty sure he did right then. He forced a smile and shook the petite woman's hand. "Nice to meet you."

"Pleasure's mine. So, you were looking for...?"

"A little boy who was brought in today. Zeke Taylor. I just wanted to see how he was doing." The boy had fallen out of his tree house and broke his femur. He'd gone into shock before Rick had arrived on scene

with the fire crew, and he wanted to know if the kid made it.

Celeste tapped some keys on the computer. "He had surgery this afternoon, and is in pediatric ICU, but he's doing well. Just a precaution to keep him under close care for a day or so, then he'll be moved to the pediatric unit until he can go home."

Rick sighed in relief. "Thanks." He turned to leave, happy to know the boy was okay. God, he wondered if he chose the right profession. He had the most difficult time handing off his patients to the hospital paramedics and going back to work as if nothing had happened. Maybe he should try to transfer to the hospital and out of the fire department. Damn it, he liked it there, though, was already bonding with the guys he worked with.

"Hey, Richard?" Celeste called, and he turned back just as he reached the door to leave.

"Yeah?"

"Sarah's throwing a little party Friday night. I'm sure she'd love it if you came."

He hadn't been able to stop thinking about Sarah since he set her in her son's truck and watched them leave. He tried, though, really hard, to put her out of his mind, but he couldn't. Wasn't sure what to do about it, either.

"Around seven," Celeste said. "You know where she lives?"

He nodded. She was in the phone book, and he'd thought about visiting her at least a dozen times, even headed to her house a couple of times, but chickened out.

Celeste grinned. "See you then."

He started to shake his head, to make some excuse, but truth was, he had none. His shift just ended, he was off for the next four days, and damn it, he wanted to see her. All the excuses he'd come up with amounted to nothing but fear.

"Okay. Thanks." He walked out the sliding doors into the damp cool air. The temperature had risen and the snow was melting...for now at least. It was only early February, and who knew how much more snow and cold they'd have before spring.

An invitation to a party. Well, safety in numbers. At least if there were other people around, he wouldn't be able to press her against the wall and have his way with her—the way he'd fantasized. God, maybe it was time to take a chance.

Maybe.

Maybe not. He wasn't sure if he could.

He climbed into his SUV and fired it up. *Not* going would be the safest course of action.

A picture of Charlene floated through his mind. Her wicked smile, her sweet face.

"Is it okay if I need more? If I need Sarah?" he whispered.

Of course, there was no answer. He'd have to decide that on his own.

Chapter Eight

Friday night, Sarah greeted Celeste and Paul with a hug and a grin at the door of her house when they arrived. "Thanks for coming!"

Paul picked her up and squeezed her tight. "Where's the birthday boy?" he asked when he set her down.

She tipped her head toward the living room. "In there, asleep." She laughed. "But dinner's about ready. I'm sure he'll wake up in time to rip open his gifts."

Paul headed into the living room carrying a big wrapped package, and she heard her son greet him.

"So, just the family tonight?" Celeste asked.

Sarah gave her a frown. "Yeah, just us and the kids. Why?"

Celeste shrugged. "Just wondering." But her tone held some secret. She knew Celeste too well to let a fib pass unnoticed.

"Are you expecting someone else?"

With her big, blue eyes wide with faked innocence, she shook her head.

"Celee..."

Celeste grinned and grabbed her arm, dragging her toward the kitchen. "Come on, I'll help you get dinner on the table. What are we having?"

Sarah knew something was up, but she let it slide. "Pot roast with baby red potatoes. Green salad."

"Great. I left the cake in the trunk for now to keep it cold. I made

Joey's favorite chocolate ice cream cake."

Sarah laughed and pulled the big glass bowl filled with leafy green salad out of the fridge and set it on the counter. "It's Joey's *son's* birthday, not his."

Celeste laughed and opened the oven. "Well, yeah, but he's only one. Joey's the one who'll eat most of it. Well, him and Paul." She grabbed the potholders off the hook on the wall next to the stove and reached in for the roast. "Damn, girl, this smells good. Take a cooking lesson lately?"

After Celeste set the roasting pan on the counter, Sarah hip-checked her. "Watch it, or you'll be doing the dishes tonight. Even I can cook a pot roast..." She laughed and lifted the foil to show Celeste the fat roast floating in thick gravy. "...especially when it all comes in a neat package with written directions on how to reheat it."

"Oh, you cheat!" Celeste giggled. "But it's a start."

The doorbell rang.

Sarah glanced at her friend, who acted way too interested in the meat. "Celeste...?"

"Doorbell," she said, again with the fake innocence. "You should probably answer it."

"What did you do?"

The bell rang again.

"Nothing." Celeste turned to the cupboard to bring down the serving plate.

As Sarah headed out of the kitchen, she heard a voice that made her scalp tingle and her feet stop moving.

"Hi. Celeste invited me," Rick said.

She peeked around the corner to see him standing in the foyer, talking to her son. He passed Joey a bottle of wine.

"Come on in," Joey said, slapping him on the shoulder. "Mom said dinner's about ready. Hey, Paul, have you met Richard Davis? And that's my wife, Petra, holding our son, Lance, the birthday boy."

Rick was sucked into conversation with Paul and Joey.

Sarah leaned her shoulder against the wall and tried to catch her breath as she stared at his back where he stood in the living room

doorway, shaking hands with Paul. God, he looked good. He wore khaki slacks that cupped his gorgeous butt, and a black leather jacket, which accentuated his wide shoulders.

"Aren't you going to go greet him?" Celeste whispered from right behind her.

"I hate you," she whispered back.

"I thought you missed him."

"I didn't expect to see him for the first time in the middle of a family get-together."

Whatever was said, Rick chuckled, and the sound made a shiver go down her spine.

"He stopped by the hospital the other night, and I invited him. You're really not mad, are you? I just thought, after what you said last week..."

Sarah shook her head. "I'm not mad. I just don't know what to do." She bit her thumbnail. "God, he's sexy, isn't he?"

"Ohhh, yeah. I'd do him."

Sarah whipped her head around and glared at Celeste.

Her friend laughed and held up her hands in surrender. "Well, if you weren't in love with him, and I didn't have Paul. Calm down. Jeez, you got it bad."

When Sara looked back toward him, he'd turned to take off his jacket, and he saw her. He smiled, slow and sweet, and came toward her.

"Go put the food out," she muttered to Celeste.

"Yes, ma'am," Celeste said around a chuckle and disappeared back into the kitchen.

"Hi," Rick said as he walked up to her.

"Hi."

He lifted his hand and held out a single red rose to her. "Is it okay I'm here?" He looked a little unsure in himself.

She wanted to jump into his arms, kiss him, taste him, feel his hands on her. Taking the rose from him, she brought the big bloom to her nose and inhaled the light scent. "Yes. I'm glad you're here. I've..." *Now or never. Be honest.* "I've missed you. A lot."

He glanced over his shoulder, across the foyer toward the living room, then stepped closer. "I didn't know this was a family thing. Celeste told me it was a party."

She nodded. "It is. My grandson's first birthday."

"You never told me you were a grandma." He stepped a little closer, until she could feel his body heat, smell his citric-scented cologne.

"Does that turn you off? That I'm an old granny?"

The corners of his eyes crinkled as he grinned. "No. Should it?" He seemed, though still a little uptight about being there, a lot more open than she'd seen him. He wasn't trying to shut her out, close himself off from her. Was there possibly some kind of chance here?

"Dinner's ready!" Celeste called from right behind her, which made her jump.

Rick chuckled and touched her arm. "Little uptight?"

She licked her lips, wishing he'd kissed her. She dropped her voice to a whisper as the family came through the foyer, headed for the dining room. "I've never had a man to a family gathering before. It feels..."

He started to pull away. "I can go."

She shook her head and grabbed his hand. "No. It feels right. I've wanted to see you, but I didn't want to push."

"Come on, you two," Joey said as he walked past. "I'm starved, and Rick brought some good vino I can't wait to crack open."

Sarah rolled her eyes. "In a minute, son." She turned back to Rick. "Will you stay until everyone leaves? So we can..." She shrugged. She'd have to leave it up to him what would happen. Maybe he just needed someone to talk to.

He smiled. "Yeah, I'd like that. Come on." He tugged on her hand. "I happen to be starving, too, and that food smells great."

Someone pulled an extra chair up next to hers, where Rick sat. Joey took the head of the table, as he had since his father died, her daughter-in-law at the other end, and her best friends across from her.

Dinner passed with lots of conversation between Rick and Paul as they shared war stories of the mean streets. Paul showed off his bullet wound, and Rick competed with a scar from a knife wound he'd

sustained ten years earlier. Funny, she hadn't noticed the pale scar on his side when she'd seen him naked. Then again, she'd been focused on some other, more important body parts than his side.

Petra was quiet and passed odd looks at Joey throughout dinner. Petra was normally a chatterbox, and Sarah and her daughter-in-law had always been very close. Sarah worried Petra had a problem with Rick. She didn't want anyone to have problems with him. She hoped he'd become a regular at her dinner table and family gatherings.

Celeste just sat across from her and grinned like a loon, which made Sarah roll her eyes more than once. They sipped the wine Rick brought, a very good red that went perfectly with the roast, which didn't turn out too bad, even if it had been pre-packaged. She'd never been a great chef, but she didn't care anymore. Her son ate a lot of frozen dinners and fried chicken growing up, but he seemed to have turned out okay. Now that she lived alone, she mostly ate take-out, though she was a bit more careful about her calorie intake than she'd been twenty years ago. Now it was salads and rotisserie instead of fried.

Petra helped her and Celeste clear the table, telling the men to take it easy. When she got her daughter-in-law into the kitchen, Sarah asked, "Is something wrong?"

Petra shook her head but wouldn't look at her.

"Come on, hon. Talk to me. What's going on? Is it Rick?"

"No! God, no. He seems great."

Petra was the daughter she'd never had, and she loved her to bits. It would have hurt if there'd been a problem there. "So, what is it?"

"Joey didn't want me to tell you yet."

She frowned. "What's wrong? You're not leaving Cooper Valley are you? Please don't tell me you're moving."

Petra laughed and tossed her golden hair over her shoulder. "No, Mom, we're not going anywhere." She licked her lips and leaned closer.

Celeste leaned in, too, to hear whatever Petra was about to say.

Petra grinned, her eyes sparkling. "You're gonna be a grandma again."

A huge grin split Sarah's face, and she let out a squeal as she

grabbed Petra into a hug.

"Shhh!" Petra said, covering Sarah's mouth with her hand. "I wasn't supposed to tell yet."

"Why the hell not?" Celeste demanded.

"Because Joey wanted to tell you himself."

"He'll get over it."

The kitchen door swung open, and the three men stood in the doorway.

"You told her didn't you?" Joey asked with a look of disgust.

Sarah let go of Petra and grabbed her son in a bear hug. "Yes, she did. Congratulations, baby."

Joey hugged her back. "Thanks, Mom. Big mouth," he directed toward his wife.

Sarah slapped his shoulder in play. "Be nice to the girl. She's carrying my grandchild."

Just then, Lance let out a wail from the other room, and everyone laughed.

"I'll get him," Paul said. "He can open my gift first." He sounded as excited as a kid.

The kitchen cleared out, leaving Sarah alone with Rick.

"You're happy, aren't you?" he asked as he helped her load plates into the dishwasher.

She nodded. "Yeah. I love my grandbaby, and I'm thrilled there'll be another one."

Their hands touched as she handed him another plate. A tremor went through her, and she almost dropped it.

Watching her, he set it into the rack then stood up straight. "I can't wait another second," he whispered an instant before he pressed his lips against hers.

She went into his arms with a soft moan. "Thank God," she murmured against his lips.

He dipped his tongue between her teeth and held her tight against him. He tasted so good, felt even better. It seemed like an eternity since he last touched her. And there was no mistaking the almost instant rise of

excitement from his groin, which made her laugh and pull back.

"Sorry," he said a bit sheepishly. "It's just what you do to me."

"My kid's in the other room."

He chuckled and touched his forehead to hers. "I know. I meant to wait until they left, but ever since I saw you standing in the hall... Fuck, babe, you're beautiful. It killed me to sit next to you the last hour and not touch you."

She brought her arms up and propped them on his shoulders. "Same for me." She tickled her fingers over the back of his smooth shaved head. "I wish they'd all go away now, but we have to get through cake, pictures of Lance eating the cake and making a mess, and listening to whatever noisy toy Paul got him."

Rick laughed and hugged her hard, burying his face against her throat. "I'll survive. Really."

She wiggled her pelvis against his, and his cock sprang back to life again.

"Wicked woman," he muttered, then nipped the base of her neck, which made her moan.

"Got the ca—oh!"

Sarah turned her head to see Celeste standing in the doorway holding the triple layer chocolate cake on a platter. "Get used to it. I've been watching you and Paul make out for the last year."

Celeste laughed and set the cake on the counter and grabbed the package of birthday candles from the island.

Rick chuckled against her and slowly released her, though he stepped behind her, probably hiding his crotch until he got it under control. Knowing she still had that effect on him thrilled her to no end. For the first time ever, she really couldn't wait until her family and friends went home.

Chapter Nine

It seemed like an eternity before Sarah's family and friends left. Now, Rick stood in the guest bathroom staring at his reflection in the mirror, somewhat terrified to leave the room and face her alone.

He ran through his head what he wanted to say, what he needed to say. It was time to open up and lay everything out there. Tell her everything. He knew deep down inside himself she'd understand and be supportive, but he hadn't talked about Charlene and Trevor's death in over three years. Not since he stormed out of yet another session with a quack therapist who asked just one time too many, "How does that make you feel?"

"Now or never," he muttered as he pulled open the door and walked out into the hallway.

"There you are," Sarah said as she came from the kitchen. "I thought you ran away."

Her words were given with a smile, and he had to fist his hands at his sides to keep from reaching for her. "No. Just..." He cocked his head toward the bathroom.

She walked right up to him, wrapped her arms around his waist, and laid her head on his shoulder. "Good. We're finally alone."

He groaned and wrapped his arms around her. His body reacted fast and hard. Her lithe body fit perfectly against him, and damned if she didn't look pretty even after wrestling her grandson, who'd practically bathed in chocolate ice cream cake, into the tub. Her clothes were perfect,

she smelled like flowers and spice. He ran his hand over her perfectly straight, silky hair. They were so different. She was high class, lived in this pretty, elegant home. He was just a paramedic ex-cop who until tonight couldn't remember eating with real silverware.

He pulled back. "Come on. I'll help you clean up the kitchen."

She took his hand, smiled a little shyly, and shook her head. "I can deal with the kitchen in the morning." When she lightly tugged him down the hallway, he had no will to fight. There was only one thing down this hall, and he knew it was where they were headed. Her bedroom. Sarah flipped off the hallway light just before she turned into the bedroom and pulled him in behind her, shutting the door after he'd entered.

A soft pink lamp glowed from the nightstand, and the room smelled of flowery women scents, talc, and lotions. He closed his eyes and breathed it in. It had been so long...

Her hands splayed against his chest, and when he opened his eyes, she was there, so close, her body brushing against his. "Am I pushing again?" she asked, her voice soft, her eyes filled with concern.

He shook his head. "No. I want this—you." Stroking his hands up her arms over the silk sleeves of her blouse, he couldn't wait to get to her skin. This time there would be no rushing. They had all night.

With nimble fingers, she unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it out of his slacks. "You want to talk, though, don't you?" she asked, though it almost sounded like a statement.

"Yeah," he said on a sigh as her fingers teased the flesh behind his belt. "But I'm not sure I could concentrate right now."

A wicked little smile tilted her lips. "Oh? I make you lose your concentration?"

"Uh huh." He reached for her blouse buttons. Slipping his fingers beneath the lapels of her shirt, he pushed it back and off her shoulders. She wore a peachy-colored lace bra, a color that matched the blouse. She hadn't been wearing a bra when he found her on the side of the road. With a grin, he ran his hand over her breasts. "This is pretty."

She arched into his touch. "Mmm. Glad you approve."

He stroked his thumbs over her nipples, and they beaded beneath

the silk lace. "Matching underwear?"

She laughed and shoved at his chest. "How old did you say you were?"

"Give me a break," he said around a chuckle as he reached for the button of her slacks. "Last time I saw you, you were a little less put together."

She shook her head and pushed his hands out of the way to undo her pants and push them down. "Yes, matching panties," she said as she stepped out of the slacks and turned around, giving him the perfect view of her butt.

"Nice." He cupped her bottom in his palms. "Very, very nice." His cock throbbed, but he was *not* going to be rushed this time. He stepped up to her back, wrapped his arms around her, and kissed the side of her neck. Her body molded into his in the most perfect fit, her ass aligned with his aching hard-on. Her smooth skin teased his chest, and he rubbed against her like a cat.

"Mmm," she moaned. "You feel good."

"I was thinking the same thing about you." He pushed her hair behind her shoulder and laid a kiss at the base of her neck at her shoulder. "Taste good, too."

She shivered and rubbed her ass against his groin. "I want to taste you," she whispered. Then she turned and fingered his pants button. "Will you let me?"

"Oh, God, Sarah, you're going to kill me, aren't you?"

She grinned. "Only if it's killing you with pleasure." She flipped his button through the hole and slowly unzipped his slacks. "You're so big," she whispered as she shoved his pants and underwear down to his thighs.

"It's a black thing...isn't it?" He laughed at the narrow-eyed glare she sent him, and then she burst out laughing.

"I wouldn't know. You're the first black man I've been with."

"Mmm. A virgin," he teased as he slipped the straps of her bra down her shoulders.

"Yeah, well. Whatever turns your crank, Mr. Davis." She reached behind her and undid her bra, then dropped it on the floor. Her small

breasts, tipped with small rosy nipples, were almost cute. He knew when she lay on her back they practically disappeared, but with her standing here, they turned up at the tips like little candies. He leaned forward and drew one into his mouth.

"You turn my crank, Ms. Bancroft." He sucked the other between his lips and lightly nipped. She drew in her breath and grabbed his head. "Only you."

She lifted his head and attacked his mouth. Sank her tongue between his lips and moaned when he sucked it into his mouth. He pulled her hard against his body, ground his cock against the lacy silk of her panties, and held her tight as he ate at her mouth, sinking his tongue repeatedly into her, tasting her, loving her.

Dear God, he really did love her, didn't he?

He pulled back, breathing hard, and held her face between his hands as he gazed into her beautiful, forest green eyes. He did. He loved her, even though he wasn't sure it was possible. They barely knew each other. Or maybe they knew each other on a deeper level than two practical strangers because of what they'd shared with each other in his cabin.

"Shh," she said softly and touched his lips with her fingers. "We'll talk after..."

He nodded.

She turned him and pushed him back a step. He bumped into the bed, and he sat. With a grin, she went down on her knees and pulled first his shoes and socks off, then his pants. Then she was between his legs, wrapping her fingers around his cock and taking it in her mouth.

"Fuck," he said on a harsh breath. "Oh, God, Sarah...." He dug his fingers into her hair. She sucked him hard and deep, and he was going to come if she didn't stop. Stop. "Stop," he nearly shouted and pulled her away. He panted as she looked up at him from between his legs with a question in her eyes.

A nervous laugh slipped out, and he shook his head as he held her off with his hands on her shoulders. "Baby, I...uh..." He blew out a breath and felt a little lightheaded.

She laughed. "Too much too soon?"

He nodded and pulled her up, over him, as he lay back on the bed. She straddled his waist and leaned down to kiss him. He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight against him, moaned when she ran her nails down his sides, nearly cried out with the lust coursing through him when she ground her lace-covered cunt against his cock.

"I really do turn you on, don't I?" she asked with a sound of wonder in her voice as she wiggled her ass and stroked the damp lace of her panties over his raging erection.

"Uh huh. You really do." He flipped her over so he was over her. "And now I'm going to make you pay for that." He slithered down the bed until his knees hit the floor, and he jerked her panties down to reveal that pretty, pouty pussy. Her pubic hair was jet black against her pale pelvis and rosy colored lips. "Fucking gorgeous," he muttered as he buried his face against her soft mound and breathed in the scent of her arousal.

"Rick," she cried and thrust her pelvis up against him.

He raised her thighs over his shoulders and spread her pussy wide with his thumbs to get a good look. Her slick juices shone in the low lamplight, glistening like honey. Her clit was already swollen, and her muscles twitched as he watched.

"Rick?" He glanced at her face as she leaned up on her elbows and looked at him with a confused frown. "What're you doing?"

"Looking."

She licked her lips. "Uh..."

He grinned and leaned in to take his first taste, stroking his tongue from her weeping cunt up and over her beaded clit.

"Ahrgh!" She flopped back down on the bed and squeezed his neck with her legs.

He chuckled. "No strangling me."

She laughed and loosened her grip. "Sorry."

"Relax, babe." He leaned in again and buried his tongue in her sweet, sweet pussy, lapping up her tangy juices. Damn, it was good. Pointing his tongue, he flicked her clit fast and hard with the tip, and she groaned, moaned, bucked against his face. When he glanced up again, he

saw her tugging on her own nipples with her fingers. His cock surged painfully, and he hoped he wouldn't embarrass himself.

He pulled back just enough so he could lightly tap her pussy lips with his fingertips, the way she'd done when he watched her masturbate.

"Yes!" she shouted as her legs tightened again.

He tapped her again, a few times fast, a little harder.

She growled, a sound primal and raw. "Harder."

So he did, just a little harder, afraid of hurting her.

"Suck me now, please!"

He thrust two fingers into her cunt and sucked her clit hard.

She practically rose off the bed when her body went taught. Her inner muscles pulsed around his fingers, and she sobbed his name as she bucked against his face. He pulled back a bit, to keep from being strangled, but pumped his fingers into her in hard, quick motions that kept her climax going for what seemed like forever.

Finally, she collapsed back on the bed panting hard, and her legs flopped down off his shoulders. "Oh...God..." she said on gasps.

He slowly pulled his fingers from inside of her and gently massaged her clit. Her hips pumped against his hand.

"More?" he asked.

She pushed up with one arm and tugged at his shoulder with the other hand. "Come up here."

He rose up and stretched out over her, maintaining his gentle, circular motion on her clit.

She shoved him over and climbed onto him, and his fingers dislodged from her body. She reached between them, grabbed his cock, and came down over him in one fast, hard thrust that seated him balls deep with in her.

He groaned and thrust up, going even deeper, if that were possible. She was so tight around him, but she didn't give him time to savor because she started moving, bouncing up and down on him, her little breasts jiggling with every motion.

Her hair fell in her face, and she propped her hands against his chest for leverage. He reached up and cupped her breasts, pinched her

nipples between his fingers. She cried out and ground down on him. He tugged her beaded little nipples harder, and she bucked and cried out with every thrust. He pressed up into her, meeting her every movement. His balls tightened, drew up tight.

He reached between them and pinched her clit hard, mimicking the same motion with her nipple.

She arched back and screamed, and her cunt tightened around his cock so hard he went off like a bottle rocket. He shouted her name and gripped her thighs as he thrust into her a couple more times while he pulsed inside of her. Her body sucked him dry. He saw stars.

She collapsed over him, panting, moaning, like a sweaty, sweet, arousal-scented blanket.

He held her tight as their breathing eventually slowed and their thundering heartbeats settled into a more normal rate. She gave a shuddering sigh and curled her arms up next to her body, her face tucked against his neck, her gently pulsing pussy still caressing his slowly softening cock.

"Do you ever like it slow and easy?" he asked as he stroked her back.

She laughed. "Sometimes. But this was good, too."

"Oh, babe, is that an understatement."

Silence descended over them, and he wondered if she'd fallen asleep. Her body was so soft now. He held her, stroked her cooling skin with his fingertips, breathed in her sexy scent.

"Will you stay the night?" she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

"I'd like that."

"Me too."

More silence.

"Do you want to talk?"

He drew in a deep breath. Right now, everything he thought so important just a while earlier didn't seem to matter. He'd meant to tell her all about Charlene, how she'd died in his arms, how Trevor had died in hers just moments before. Did it matter?

What came out of his mouth surprised him. "I'm ready to move

on.”

Sara wiggled a bit, then leaned up, propping her forearms on his chest so she could look him in the eye. “It’s not just your dick talking?”

A smile pulled at his lips. “Ahh, well. I don’t think so. Though, I can’t say it wasn’t partially due to where I put my dick while you were trapped in my cabin, but no.” He sighed. “I spent the last weeks since you were there doing a lot of thinking and soul-searching. You were right. It wasn’t my fault. That night was like a hundred others in our marriage. I was working late so she had to go to the store. She’d done it before, many times.”

Sarah nodded. “I read the newspaper clippings from the *L.A. Times* online. I can only imagine how horrible it must have been.

He swallowed hard. “It was. It still is. I still have nightmares sometimes.”

Her brow wrinkled, and she stroked his cheek with her fingertips. “I’m so sorry.”

“I’d like to give us a chance, if you think that’s what you want.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes, I think. God, Rick. Do you think I wasn’t half in love with you when we made love that second time? You stole my heart when you cried on my shoulder.”

“Aw, babe,” he said and pulled her down and hugged her hard. “I think I was half in love with you then, too, I just couldn’t admit it to myself.”

“And now?” she asked, her face against his neck again.

“And now...I’d say somewhere around ninety-nine percent.”

She laughed and nipped his neck. “Not one hundred?”

He rolled her over and rubbed his half-erect cock against her slick pussy. “Maybe by morning.”

She giggled and wiggled against him. “Yeah, me too.”

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor and, while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar....

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can email her at anna@annaleighkeaton.com or visit her Web site at www.annaleighkeaton.com for all her upcoming and previously published works, and meet her alter ego at www.leannekarella.com.