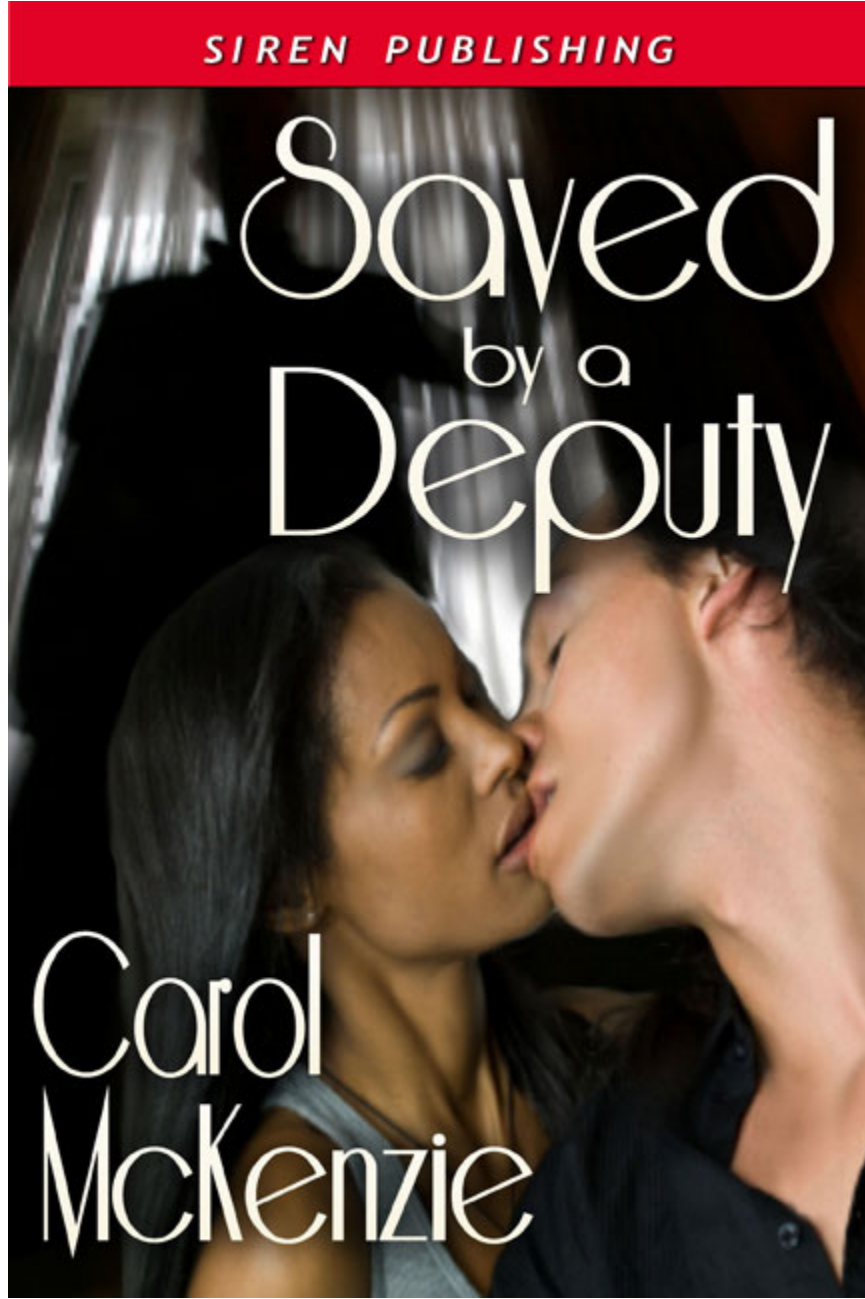


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Save by a Deputy

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SAVED BY A DEPUTY

Carol McKenzie

EROTIC ROMANCE



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A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK

IMPRINT: Erotic Romance

SAVED BY A DEPUTY

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this book to all my author friends at [Writing.com](https://writing.com)

SAVED BY A DEPUTY

CAROL MCKENZIE

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Chapter One

Fronds on the palms wavered like feathers in the breeze outside Liberty's window on Bright Avenue. Tenants' cars lined each side of the shady street.

An average morning—Liberty rendered graphics on her computer and by hand on the desk to her right. She placed an image of a turtle face down on the scanner, turned the machine on and uploaded the picture to her hard drive. While the artwork reproduced, she clicked on a file and studied upcoming job assignments.

Movement out the corner of her eye caught her attention. She turned her head toward a car that passed by on the street. A man jogged by less than thirty feet away.

With the push of a button, the printer copied a second drawing of a critter. Once it finished and the ink had dried, she slid the paper into a nine by twelve envelope and nabbed a marking pen from a cup. Using it, she drew quote marks around the word 'original' and printed out 'L.A. Ad Agency.'

Behind her, a rerun of a game show played; the audience laughed and clapped on cue, but she paid very little attention. Pirate chewed on a squeaking, vinyl fire hydrant toy at her feet. The miniature, silver-colored schnauzer's tail quivered when she closed Windows and picked up the plaything and tossed it into the kitchen. As Pirate ran, his paws moved too quickly for his body. He slid under a chair

and ran headlong into the table legs.

“Be careful.”

The dog didn't heed her warning. He bit the squeaky and brought it back, begging her to throw it again.

A car drove up. The familiar, deep rumbling filled her with dread. She put the toy down and returned to the window and looked out. *Oh crap no. It's him.*

Martin's '98 Mazda Miata had once again run over the bushes and just missed hitting the central air conditioner. By coming to her apartment, he broke the Order of Protection that she had out on him.

She grasped the desk, bracing for his anger. “Oh no!”

The driver's door opened, and he stepped out. Frowning, he tossed his sunglasses onto the seat. As he shut the door, she studied his body language. Her heart thumped in her fear. *What am I going to do if he...?* He stalked up the sidewalk. *He's drunk.*

Her heart pumped even harder. Wishing she had a back door or window to escape from, Liberty held the brass knob and slid the chain across the bar and backed out of the living room of the small apartment.

“Liberty! Open up *now!*” He banged the wood, it sounded like, with his fist. Knick-knacks rattled on the corner shelf.

Short, raspy breaths left her lips as she pulled the sofa in front of the door in a feeble attempt to save herself. “Go away!” she cried out, her voice a high-pitched, excited squeal. “It's over! You're not to come within five hundred feet of me or this apartment!” She visualized his chocolate features and how his rage distorted them. “Where's the phone?” Tears stung her eyes.

“I don't give a damned about your Order of Protection. Open up and get what's coming to you.”

He'll kill me. She considered the possibility of her premature death. Liberty yanked the handset off its base, studied the keys for a moment and punched in 911. “Hurry, please.”

“What's your emergency?” a male dispatcher's voice asked.

She cried out, "Send someone to 4109 Bright Avenue! This guy I've split up with...he's—he's breaking in my door. Martin Miller. He's been in trouble with you before. I—I'm afraid—just hurry!"

"Does he have any weapons?"

"I don't know. He's on the other side of the door, for God sakes!" she screamed. "Maybe, maybe not. Oh dear God, hurry please...ohhhh." She glanced at the alarm clock that sat on an end table. *How long will it take to get here? He's almost inside now.*

"Someone's on the way," the dispatcher said. "Stay on the line. Stay calm."

That's easy for him to say.

The relentless kicking continued. Pirate cowered under the kitchen table and barked.

Liberty dropped the phone and screamed. It seemed like she'd dropped into a scary nightmare, one in which she'd die once inside. *Please hurry.* The lock broke; the wood splintered more with each kick. The door finally burst off its hinges, and Martin barged inside. He shoved the sofa aside as though it possessed the weight of a feather.

"You're not leavin' me." Martin appeared out of his head with anger. "So you got the cops after my ass, eh?"

He cursed, threw a swing at her jaw, but she dodged. His hand fisted in her hair, and he threw her down on the sofa. Her head struck the wood part of the chair's arm. Her luck ran out.

The odor of whiskey stank on his body and breath. He slapped her, jolting her body and senses with sudden, fierce pain. She tasted her own blood and pleaded with him, "Stop it now!"

Liberty floated out of her body. In fact, she watched his arm move and his hand make violent contact with her cheek. *Am I going to die?*

Martin's clutching hands surrounded her throat and took her down on the couch and then to the floor. Once he released her, he grasped her arm, squeezed, and twisted while the other hand grabbed and raised the alarm clock over her head and brought it down hard.

Another sharp pain and pressure followed. Bright stars floated in blackness. Her head felt like it had exploded, and then her world darkened.

* * * *

Wondering how long she'd been unconscious and where she was, Liberty awoke in the hospital thanking God she'd been spared a second time from her evil ex-boyfriend. Her head ached, and her arm was wrapped in stretchy bandages. Her lips were sore, and so was the side of her face. She peered up at her friend and neighbor Carrie Lewis. "The no good bastard did it again, didn't he?" Tears welled and stung.

It felt comforting to see Carrie there, she seemed almost like a sister. An insurance salesperson, she stood five and a half feet tall, Liberty's height, maybe an inch or two taller. Her coloring was similar to Liberty's, a rich, warm mocha. Carrie was a little bit chubbier than Liberty. In her opinion, Carrie was a beautiful woman.

Carrie stopped chewing her gum for a moment and said, "You're in the hospital. He's in jail, hon', but I don't know for how long."

"How long have I been out?"

"A little over a day."

"Am I going to be okay?"

"The doctor said you can go home tomorrow."

She was so aggravated at her own gullibility and vulnerability regarding Martin that her chest ached with bitterness. *Why did I believe him when he said he was sorry and it'd never happen again? Why did I go back for seconds? What's the matter with me?* "I need to get out of this city...away. Far away." *This won't happen a third time.* Liberty shrugged and frowned. "I can't believe this."

"Don't beat up on yourself too hard. He is deceitful."

Liberty recalled his good side. She had helped him pay his car insurance and student loans, even though he refused to work.

Someday, she'd hoped, he'd straighten up and become a good citizen, and a boyfriend she could be proud of. After the first round of physical abuse, he treated her good for a while. His hugs, kisses and sexy side glances had touched her heart. She remembered the cards, presents and roses. Her family loved him when she drove him to her aunt's house for dinner the previous Thanksgiving. Then one day, his mean side had caught her off guard. His "love" evolved to obsession after she asked him to leave.

"Damn it. He nailed me in the eye. It hurts like fire."

"He hit your jaw, too."

A heavy-set nurse with a dark chocolate shade of skin entered the room, smiled and announced, "It's time for a shot, honey. Where do you want it?" She placed a tray with a vial and hypodermic needle on it.

"What's it for?"

"The pain. It may make you sleepy."

"Give it to me in my butt." Liberty moaned, turned toward the window and felt a stick of a needle in her hip. *I'll figure it out tomorrow.* She held her arm out and looked at the bandages. In minutes, the pain med began working, and she dozed. Worrying about Pirate, she asked in a craggy voice, "Where is my precious baby?"

"He's at my place, hon," said Carrie, who moved around the bed to straighten the blanket. "I got his food, leash and him all safe and sound in my apartment."

She gave Carrie a woozy smile. "Thank God. I was afraid Martin had hurt him." *I think he's capable of it.* She reached for Carrie's hand and gave it a squeeze. "I don't know what I'd do without you, Carrie. You're like family."

"Same here." Carrie patted her wrist with her other hand. "I have a plan."

"You do?"

"It'll hide you from that jerk."

"How is that?" *I won't—can't—go live with my sister, Connie.*

Her husband doesn't want anyone living with them. And my parents are dead, so they can't help. My aunt doesn't have much room in her apartment.

"I'll tell you tomorrow about my plan. Right now you're drifting off to dreamland. I've got to go back to work, but I'll come by tomorrow and give you a lift home."

"Okay," Liberty said, her voice weak. Her eyelids felt weighted, her speech slowed. "It's so scary, his obsession for me." Her head sank into the pillow, and she relaxed, nearing the dark fringes of slumber. "At least now he's in jail."

"You can rest knowing you'll be safe."

Chapter Two

The next day, Liberty readied to leave the hospital. Lysol assaulted her sense of smell in the lavatory that connected to her semi-private room. Liberty pulled the hospital gown up over her head and tossed it into a plastic sack that an aide brought. She stepped into the legs of a pair of light green bikini panties and drew them up her legs. Over them she put on a pair of royal blue Bermuda shorts. She stopped and frowned. "Carrie?"

Her best friend stopped reading, put the magazine down and gazed into the bathroom. "Uh huh?"

Liberty located her bra. "I don't remember coming here. You know, I'm lucky it wasn't to a funeral home in a hearse."

Carrie nodded. "That's true." She plucked a copy of *Travel Magazine* from a small pile on the windowsill and leafed through the pages.

Liberty slipped the beige straps of her bra up her arms and reached back and fastened the closure. "How long do you suppose they'll keep him in jail?"

"However long they keep him, it won't be long enough."

"I understand why women stay with his kind." Liberty pulled a white polo shirt on and shook her head of messy hair. "They're tricked, like both of us were. Guys like Martin are snakes."

"Yeah, they spit out this phony sweet talk after they've physically hurt you. The sad thing is that women like us, caring and understanding, believe them," Carrie said.

"They ought to throw away the key on him," said Liberty.

"Thank God not all men do women like that."

Liberty pulled her top down over her midriff. "I hope not."

Carrie crossed the polished floor to the bathroom door and looked inside. Her eyes followed Liberty as she took a seat on the toilet lid, leaned over and slipped her foot in a sandal. She began buckling it.

"Do you know what you're going to do?"

Liberty grimaced. "I don't know."

"I thought about it all night. I'll explain when we get back." Her voice lightened. "I think it'll work. Pirate'll like it."

Liberty raised an eyebrow. "He will?"

"Be strong...and start over."

"I have to, right? Or I'll be dead." She buckled her second shoe and said, "I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You helped me out back in the day. Now I want to help you."

Memories of the day she befriended Carrie rolled through her mind. They met at work in a Whittier department store. They talked and saw eye to eye on many issues. On their days off they visited each other, called each other nightly and began sharing secrets. They became like sisters. At that time, Carrie lived in an abusive relationship with a boyfriend across town from Liberty.

A couple of months after Carrie began living with him, she learned he took illegal drugs. After she gave him an ultimatum, he refused to let her leave. He threatened and scared her. On several occasions, she called 911. Carrie arrived at a low point in her life. She wanted to give up, maybe end it all...with suicide.

Liberty helped her get on her feet. She took her into her apartment and kept her hidden from her ex-boyfriend. Soon Carrie emerged from her depression. Like Liberty, she didn't have family who lived nearby or wanted to take her in their house. Carrie landed a new job, and Liberty drove her where ever she needed to go until she was able to do it on her own.

Teary-eyed, Liberty gazed at her wonderful friend who sat on the windowsill reading a magazine. *I'm so grateful to call her my friend. She wants to repay me by helping me get out of my own dangerous*

situation. What does she have in mind?

* * * *

An hour later, Pirate welcomed her as though she'd been gone six months. He hopped on her lap at the table while Carrie stood at the sink and put tea bags in an iced tea maker.

"Did you miss Mommy?" Liberty asked the wiggling schnauzer. She smooched him on his cool, wet nose.

Carrie peered at them over the rim of her reading glasses and laughed.

"Okay, Carrie, you said you had an escape plan. What is it?"

Carrie looked up from a tea glass that she held in her hand. "Remember I told you several months back that my dad died and left me the farm? Remember me saying I didn't know what to do with it?"

"Yeah." She put Pirate down and watched him make a quick run to the living room to retrieve his toy.

Carrie began filling glasses with ice. "Where's your sweetener?"

"To your left. Second shelf."

"There it is. Okay, so, the farm doesn't have anyone living in it. It's been up for sale for several weeks. It's crazy. Dad, or Sam as some people knew him, had the farm for years. Thinking he wanted to live in an urban area, he sold it. He didn't own it when I needed a place to go to during *my* ordeal. He was like a vagabond." She sniffed and strummed her fingernails on the table top. "Then he missed the farm so much, he bought it back. Daddy passed on, God rest his soul. Now no one has even made an offer.

"Now, if someone—you—could live in it and pay the taxes and maybe a little on the upkeep, maybe I could keep it. At least I wouldn't worry about no one wanting to buy it. It's near woods—three miles out of town. I wish he would've had it when I needed it." Carrie shrugged. "Oh well. It's there for you."

Liberty thought over her idea. Her arched brows drew together,

and she slanted a gaze Carrie's way. *Maybe she has come up with a good idea.* "I'd like to see it."

"Good. I have a picture of it. Hold on." Carrie put the glasses of tea down and sat down, opened her drawstring purse, and brought out an envelope. "Okay, here." She handed the photograph to Liberty. "Right now a deputy sheriff is keeping an eye on it. He lives next door. Metropolis, Illinois."

"Illinois, eh? A deputy lives next door?"

"A real good lookin' one. Strong. Built like a brick wall. In fact, he's an ex-Marine drill sergeant. Oh, I'd say he is thirty-seven or so. His wife was African-American, God rest her soul. A school teacher."

Liberty blinked and experienced sadness for a man she didn't know. "How long ago did she die?"

"Two years ago."

Liberty frowned, feeling sad for him. "That's too bad. What did she die of?"

Carrie scooted her chair close to Liberty. "Breast cancer."

"How old was she?"

"Thirty-five." Carrie shook her head. "Young, huh? Your age, as a matter of fact."

"I guess it happens. Not often, but it does happen."

Liberty gazed at the photo of a large, white house that had tall, green spires and a gabled roof. It had a white wraparound porch. Strong, deciduous trees rose high to each side of the house. "It's so pretty."

"Yeah, it is. I can see why Dad missed it after he sold it, then wanted to go back."

"I can do my graphic design there as good as here, I guess. Send it via e-mail."

"I'll never tell anyone where you went."

"Martin won't rest 'til he finds me." Liberty willed herself to hold her negative emotions back, but the tears kept streaking down her cheeks. Her fear surfaced.

Carrie leaned over and hugged Liberty. "Everything'll be fine."

"What about Pirate?"

"He'll love it. He'll be able to run free."

"Okay. Good deal."

"It's about three miles outside of a small town called Metropolis. It's in Massac County. You'll be safe."

She frowned. "I only have a little over two thousand dollars saved."

"You're lucky. Some women don't have a penny."

Will this plan save me? "Carrie, he's the type to try and find me."

"I know."

"I appreciate your help. I'll pay you back. Promise." She thought about the possibilities. Questions, dark and foreboding, arose. "Furniture. I don't have any."

"The house is loaded with everything you need. Fix it to suit yourself. Put the extra furniture in the barn. Have fun. Paint it. Just get out of L.A. County. He's going to be mad as a nest of hornets when he gets released."

"Why won't law enforcement or the courts help me?"

"They know him." Carrie shrugged. "They know he's a psycho S.O.B. I dunno. It's just that they don't have the manpower to watch over everyone who's threatened. I learned a lot when I worked at the jail. Thank God I'm out of there, but that's a whole different story. But, Liberty, a friend in the department told me he serves his time and is released. A lot of women are in your shoes."

Crossing her arms before her on the table, she gazed at Carrie and shrugged. A wayward smile touched her lips. "I'll do this. I'll start over. I can't believe I gave him my heart at one time."

Carrie scanned her eyes, smiling but a little teary. "We all make mistakes...just not two of them in a row," she said after a long minute.

Liberty agonized inwardly over her uncertain future. *At least I won't be homeless or jobless. And I have a way to make money with my design.* "What do I need to do first?"

"I'll help you. Tell me what you need."

Tears welled and spilled down her cheeks. "Carrie, you're such a great friend."

Chapter Three

Deputy William Banes parked his cruiser, went into the Massac County Sheriff's Department and finished some paperwork, ending his shift. After chatting with his best bud about getting together with a few of the deputies for dinner and a few drinks, chubby-faced Deputy Kevin Redd said, "Bring a date, Will."

He shrugged. "I don't have anyone to bring."

"Come alone, then."

"Nah. I'd feel like a fifth wheel. I'll sit this one out." Will patted his buddy's back and said, "See you later, then."

He left work feeling empty, wishing he had a special someone to accompany him not only to department get-togethers, but also in everyday life. He pressed a key into the lock of his navy blue Chevy truck, climbed in, closed the door and soon drove through Metropolis. It looked like he'd have another round of lonely holidays at the end of the year. He hated lonely holidays.

As he did after every shift, he stopped and bought a few groceries on his way home. Once he'd finished shopping, he put the sacks into the back of his truck and continued the leisurely drive to his farm, three and a half miles out in the country.

The Metropolis High School and a white-steeple Christian church passed by the passenger window and appeared in his mirrors. Girls played softball on a ball field. After he made a right turn down the road that took him home, he passed Sam's farm. No cars sat in the driveway, and nothing looked out of place, as usual. No one had lived in it since Sam died several years back. On his days off, Will had put up new gutters on the eaves, kept the lawn mowed and the weeds cut.

He had painted the outside, put in new windows and light fixtures. In fact, he did many things to upgrade it and was considering buying the place. One day he would call Carrie and talk to her about it.

Along the oiled road between cornfields, boys captured his attention by waving. Two of them displayed toothless smiles as they pushed their bicycles along the shoulder.

He pressed the automatic window button, and the glass went down. "How're you boys today?"

They gazed up at him and smiled. "Hi, Deputy Banes," the auburn-haired boy who stood in the middle said.

People he'd known since childhood waved while standing in their front yard. A bright green tractor plowed a nearby field. *I've lived here all my life, and nothing seems to change.*

Later, after heating a frozen dinner in the microwave, he located a fork and knife, nabbed a cold beer from the refrigerator and carried it to the living room. After putting it on the coffee table, he grasped the remote and turned on CBS. A TV dinner of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and green beans tasted good between sips of beer. Once finished, he took everything back to the kitchen, washed dishes and returned to the living room to finish his beer. Sitting on the beige, overstuffed sofa, he stretched his long, strong legs in front of him and gazed at the big screen television. *This shit is getting old. It's time to get out and find a girlfriend.*

Leaning back in the soft cushions, he watched *Survivor* and turned the boob tube off after it ended. His eyelids felt weighted, he needed to grab some shut-eye.

It had been a usual day. He recalled chasing down and tackling a drug pusher. When the jerk resisted, Will remembered tazing him. At the beginning of his shift, he fought with a man who'd just beat up his wife. *The damned, fuckin' loser. Men who batter women are no good.* Five hours earlier, he had talked a distraught housewife into coming off a high ledge, saving her from jumping off the three-story Baldwin piano store in downtown Metropolis.

The phone rang, drawing him out of his reverie. *Who's calling at bedtime?* He picked up the handset and recognized the woman's voice on the other end of the line and smiled. "Carrie Lewis?"

"Hey, Will, it's me."

"How're you doing?" He noted a touch of sadness in her voice. "How's California?" He drew a pillow behind his head and brought his feet up on the couch and lay back.

"Fine. Well, almost. I've got a slight problem. I don't. My best friend does—Liberty Carmichael."

A short pause followed. He blinked, picturing Carrie's chocolate-colored facial features. She's a good woman. "Why? What happened?"

"Well, I thought I should tell you. My neighbor'll be arriving in Metropolis in a few days."

His brow furrowed, and he stared at a picture of his platoon in the Marine Corps, seeing but not seeing. "Oh yeah?"

"She's moving into Daddy's house, actually. Now she lives next door in my apartment building."

Will pictured his dead buddy Sam Lewis's house. "How can I help?"

Her voice held an edge of frustration. "Will, you've probably seen this in your work."

"I'm afraid I don't under—"

"Liberty's been beaten up physically and mentally."

"What happened?"

"Oh, this stupid ass jerk ex-boyfriend of hers who's now in jail did it. Anyway, Will, I'm going to hide her at Dad's farm. Uh, I know you're busy and—"

Will scrunched his brows in his curiosity. "I'll help." He remembered the time Sam took him in. The slaps, kicks and punches that his dad administered caused him to leave home.

"Thank you."

"I owe you."

"Will. You've been watching out for Daddy's house all these months and—"

"It's not a problem. I didn't do anything, really."

"You did too."

"Your daddy, God rest his soul, was a good man. Maybe he saved my life. Send her here. You can rest assured, I'll watch over her."

"You're wonderful, Will. Her ex would find her in a safe house."

"Tell her if she sees a blue Chevy pick-up or a black police cruiser comin' up her lane, not to freak out. It'll just be me." He got up, went to the kitchen, and headed for the refrigerator.

"Thank God for you."

He pulled the white door open. "What's her name again?" he asked and grabbed a can of beer from lowest shelf.

"Liberty Carmichael. She's a single black woman. She doesn't have kids but has a dog. She'll work for a Los Angeles Ad Agency, online. A nice person. My best friend, in fact."

Considering the woman's dire situation, Will popped the can open with one hand. "Tell her she's doing the right thing by getting away."

"I'm so friggin' relieved that she's doing this, Will. I'll call you again tomorrow."

"All right."

"Does she have family?"

"Not really. Her parents are dead, and her sister Connie's husband doesn't want anyone living with them."

"Okay, I see."

After they said their goodbyes and hung up, he put the phone back on the base and took another sip of beer. Fifteen minutes later, in his stocking feet, he carried his empty can to the kitchen and dropped it in the trash, thinking that he would stop by Sam's place after she arrived. He'd get acquainted and tell her he lived next door if she needed help. He padded to the bedroom and stripped naked and climbed between the cool sheets, vowing to get more information on the man who battered Carrie's friend.

Chapter Four

A week later, after giving away many of her possessions, Liberty packed and fit the suitcases into her trunk. Her computer, printer and scanner fit in the back seat. The idea of leaving a few possessions behind upset her, but it had to be done. She refused to let fear hold her captive. She vowed to put Martin and problems concerning him behind her. *I will move on. My life will change for the better.*

The garage at Bright and Main checked under the hood. She gassed it up and drove from California to Illinois, taking the southern route. She stopped and stayed along U.S. Rt. 66. She stopped at inexpensive inns and diners. In five days, Liberty arrived in Metropolis.

An elderly woman who stood behind the counter of a store-combination-gas station gave her directions, using elaborate hand motions to demonstrate all the turns.

"Thank you," Liberty said and left the store. She climbed back into her car, marveling at the sites. Metropolis thrived on the banks of the Mississippi River. According to a white sign, thirteen hundred residents called it home. The deciduous trees impressed her—maples, oaks and pin oaks. The humidity oppressed her.

It took ten minutes to drive from the Gas Mart to the Lewis' farm. Relieved, she pulled up the lane and parked near the side door. She stepped on the brakes, shifted into park and turned off the ignition. Pirate hopped to the ground and began sniffing around to find a place to pee after she opened the car door.

Seated still, she lowered her sunglasses and peered over the rims at the property from a green tractor to a gray, locked up barn.

"Interesting." She turned her gaze toward the house. It looked just like the photograph Carrie had shown her. A dark woods rose skyward two or three hundred feet away. Cornfields surrounded it on two sides. The scent of wildflowers in the ditches and along the fence tantalized her nostrils.

"Our new home," she told her dog. *What will life bring my way here?* "You'll like farm life, sweetie."

She patted his head, then pulled the keys from the ignition, located the brass key that Carrie had given her, and climbed out into the white gravel. Reaching for the blue sky, she stretched by leaning forward onto her toes. The long drive had worn her out. She told Pirate, "Hopefully, we'll be safe now."

Liberty padded across the cool grass, stepped up and crossed the porch to the side door, the dog following. Though the thought seemed utterly ridiculous, she felt Martin knew what she had done. A shivery, unwanted feeling undulated through her body.

Trees that stood in the dark woods behind the house whooshed and moved like Holy Rollers in church. The creaking swing looked inviting.

Shaking all the negative thoughts, she unlocked the door, shoved it open and stepped inside. The quiet kitchen and living room were clean. Wishing the electricity had already been turned on, she flipped the light switch to the right of the door.

"Come in, Pirate. C'mon boy."

He began sniffing along the floor of the living room and went upstairs. She dropped the keys on the Formica counter next to the door. The house smelled musty, so she opened a few windows and let in the warm, fresh wind that carried the sheers high in the air.

Once she had carried in her bags, the computer, its equipment and her bags of clothing, she turned the faucet on in the kitchen sink and checked to see if she had water. Cold water splashed on her hands.

"Want a drink, honey?"

The dog whined and sat on his back legs.

She took a bowl that she'd found in a cabinet and held it under the nozzle, filling it with water. She carried in a five-pound sack of Purina Chow, filled another bowl and put both bowls down near the back door.

It wasn't a modern home, but it seemed comfortable. The area was much quieter than the urban area that she just left, and she'd like the quietude.

Liberty toured the five-bedroom house and decided to sleep downstairs later that evening on the couch. Blankets and beautifully hand-sewn quilts occupied shelves in closets. The toilets in the two bathrooms flushed, and toilet paper sat in the linen closets. The rooms needed a coat of fresh paint, and the cabinets needed washing inside and out.

"Oh look at these, Pirate," she said of an old knickknack shelf loaded down with salt and pepper shakers.

Later after she'd dressed for bed, wearing a light blue terry robe, fluffy slippers, and matching cotton pajamas, she carried a baseball bat she found out to the front porch and took a seat on the creaky swing while Pirate chased grasshoppers in the yard below. The peaceful drone of the cicadas lulled her into a restful sleepiness.

* * * *

She slept all night. The next morning, she washed using cold water, an old, dried-up bar of Irish Spring soap and a clean washcloth. She gazed into the mirror and drew her raven, below-the-ear length hair onto the top of her head, whirled it into a top knot, and clamped it with a rhinestone comb. She applied deep rose lip color to her pouty lips. She dropped the gold tube into her purse and said, "We have things to do and people to see, Pirate hon'. Getting electricity is first job on the agenda."

Two hours later, she grasped the handles of her beige purse. She wore tan knee pants, sandals and a red polo top. She snapped her

fingers and whistled for her dog. "C'mon. Let's go." From a side pocket of her purse, she brought out a pair of sunglasses and slipped them on. *When will the sheriff's deputy get in touch with me? What's his name? Deputy William Banes? Carrie told me he's safe to be around. He's a good man. He's a nice, white cop who likes black women. Hmmm.*

Liberty rented a box at the post office, bought a postcard and sent it to her sister, explaining her move to Illinois. At a hardware store, she bought a broom, dustpan and a plastic bottle of cleaning liquid.

At the Metropolis City Hall, she had the water put into her name and paid a deposit.

Liberty took off her sunglasses and carried Pirate into the bank, where she put the dog on the floor at her feet. She held onto the leash while opening a checking account. She glanced around the plush lobby and read a sign: Metropolis, The Home of Superman.

Within the hour, she arrived at the power department and paid a deposit to have the electricity turned on. "You're in luck," the auburn-haired woman who sat behind the power office's gray counter said. "We can have it on by later on today."

"That's great." Relieved, she almost shouted with triumph when she left the Ameren C.I.P.S. office and drove back to the farm, stopping only once at a grocery store along the way. With any luck, they would turn the electricity on soon and she could cook supper and do a load of wash. Not once did she worry about Martin showing up to scare, humiliate or hurt her.

Chapter Five

Within forty-eight hours of her arrival, Liberty cleaned the house, beginning with the kitchen. The property had sat vacant for many weeks, and a layer of dust covered the cabinets, shelves and floors. She removed plates, cups and saucers from a cabinet and placed them on the table.

A headache threatened to worsen. Her breasts ached. According to her birth control container, her period was due to start in a week. She remembered a near-empty bottle of Tylenol she kept in the side pocket of her purse. *Maybe if I take two with a glass of water, it will give me relief.* She retrieved it, shook two caplets into her palm and swallowed them down with water.

She wet a rag under the faucet and resumed wiping out the shelves, occasionally peering out the window. Once she had put the dishes back into the cabinet, she brought all the pots from another cabinet and washed them in hot soapy water. The silverware came next, and she placed them on a dishtowel to dry. While she worked, the head and breast pain continued.

"Oh my."

Would it help if I didn't wear a bra? She tried to ignore the minor distraction until it grew relentless. "Maybe so," she mumbled to herself. She stepped into the bathroom, drew her thin top over her head and tossed it into a bag filled with laundry. She reached back and unfastened her bra, freeing her heavy mocha breasts, and pulled the white straps down her arms. Once she put her top back on, she hoped that going without the garment would help.

A car engine rumbled nearby, grabbing her attention. She stopped

wiping the counter and glanced out the kitchen window. To her surprise, a black police car drove slowly up the lane. She put a handful of knives into the drawer, went to the door and peered through the screen.

The car fit Carrie's description, so she relaxed, telling herself that the California Department of Corrections still jailed Martin and the man who visited would help her.

She dried her hands on a dishcloth, pushed the creaky screen door open and stepped outside and stood on the porch. She cupped a hand over her eyes and gazed his way.

The tall man wore a dark duck-billed cap. Tall block letters that read 'Deputy' were displayed on the front of the hat. He wore dark designer sunglasses. He climbed out and took off his sunglasses. *How tall is he? Six feet or so?* He slipped the glasses into his pocket and strode her way.

He said in a deep, velvety tone, "It's good to meet you. I'm your neighbor."

"It's nice to meet you. Carrie told me about you. I appreciate your coming over."

He extended his hand, and when he had hers in his, he gave it a firm squeeze. "Will. Will Banes is the name."

His raven hair had been cut short, military-style, in fact. His shoulders were strong; he stood straight and wore a khaki-colored uniform shirt and a gold shield over his heart.

"Deputy Banes."

"It was all good, I hope."

"I'm sorry?"

"What she said about me..."

"Oh." She nodded and laughed. "Yes, it was."

He smiled. "You must be Liberty."

"Yes, I am."

"If you run into any problems, feel free to call."

His line of vision dropped a couple of inches for a scant second,

making her aware of his interest. She wasn't wearing a bra and thought it was possible he saw her dark nipples through the thin white fabric.

Carrie's description of him entered her mind. *She's right. He is good-looking.*

"I'm doing fine." Her body trembled, and her voice threatened to crack. "He's in jail."

"Carrie told me what happened." He brought a finger to his temple and rubbed it. "Do you have a phone yet?"

"I have one of those pay-by-the-minute phones. I've got five minutes left on it."

"That'll work for tonight. I'll give you my cell number, and I'll take yours. You're getting a phone put in, right?"

"Yes."

"Hold on. Let me get a pen." He trekked back out to the squad car, retrieved a scrap of paper, pen and a business card. He returned and handed her a card. "Here's my numbers." His finger touched the lowest number on the white rectangle. "This one's my cell. I carry it all the time."

The wind carried his masculine, delicious scent to her nostrils.

"What's your number, Liberty?" His hand held the pen, poised to write. Ever so swiftly, she saw his eyes roam down for a fraction of a second, then return to her face.

She refused to let his interest unnerve her. "The number on my temporary phone is 213-555-6142."

"Okay." He folded the paper, brought a wallet from his back pocket and slipped the paper into a hidden section behind some tens. "Don't hesitate to get hold of me."

"I'm sorry for the trouble I'm—" Her heart fluttered. *How embarrassing.*

Will raised a hand. "Not a problem," he said and put her at ease.

He had a way about him that made him seem trustworthy. Carrie was a picky woman when it came to men, so he had to be an

exceptionally straightforward guy. "I don't know you, and you're being so helpful."

"Carrie's dad, who lived right here, Sam Lewis, well, he helped me out when I was a teenager. He took me in because I had an abusive dad. As you know, Sam's gone. I can pay him back by helping Carrie...and you."

"I—thank you. Carrie is a good friend." She crossed her arms over her breasts so he could not see her nipples through her shirt.

"I heard you helped her out not long ago."

"I did. Now I'm worried about Martin getting out. I hope he won't find me."

"When the son of a bitch gets out, me and my friends at the department will be lookin' for him."

His promise reassured her. "I—I appreciate it." Words stuck in her throat, and her voice broke up.

"It's hard, I know. I've seen women take out an Order of Protection in this county. Sometimes it works, and sometimes not. It's just a paper, some of the abusers think."

"It's a scary thing to say, but he'd be that type."

"From what Carrie said, I believe he would be." A short pause followed. He cleared his throat. "So how about a job? Do you need one?"

Thinking it looked strange to keep her arms folded over her chest, she brought her arms down and sank into the seat of the porch swing. "I have a job. I design little critters for an ad agency in Los Angeles and send them off." An elongated, pained sigh left her lips. "I've got to get a computer desk and a drawing board, and then I'll be back in business. I design other things, but right now I'm doing alligators, turtles and worms."

He raised his hat with one hand and ran his other hand over his military haircut. "I'd like to see your work."

"I'll have to show it to you sometime. But cartoon alligators and frogs may not be to your taste."

He chuckled and flashed a brilliant, perfect smile. "I'm sure I would like them, if you drew them."

Smiling, she gazed down, her head spinning from the blatant male attention.

"Well, I'd better go." He grinned and added, "I'll let you get back inside."

"I was just cleaning cabinets and drawers. Tonight I'll do the refrigerator."

"Oh. Fun stuff." He took his gaze off hers and started to walk away. Before he went down the front steps, he raised a finger. "I'm off work tomorrow. If you need help, I'm available. Maybe with the desk and drawing table? I can carry them inside."

His line of vision returned, and she kept a lid on her body language. "I couldn't ask you to—" she started. With a wave of her hand, she said, "Actually, since you mentioned it, I was going to buy that cheap Wal-Mart you-put-it-together type of furniture. I thought that somehow I could drag the boxes inside."

"No, no." His dark brow line rumped and merged, and he gazed her way with intense interest. "Do you have tools?"

"What kind?"

"Screwdrivers and hammers?"

"No, I don't."

"Woodworking is right up my alley," he said in a unique velvety tone that seemed to drastically affect her heart rate. "I've done a lot of work on my house and this one."

"I would appreciate your help." Dazed with his warmhearted friendliness, she searched within.

"When would you like to go after them? In the morning? Or maybe the afternoon?"

"Morning's fine."

"Sounds good. I'll come over at ten." He went down the steps and crossed the lawn going to his cruiser. "I'll drive my truck. See you."

She smiled and wriggled her fingers a moment before he climbed

into the car behind the wheel. “Thanks, Will.”

He smiled, waved and drove away.

Chapter Six

It was two minutes before ten the next morning when Will's blue Chevy pick-up truck pulled up the lane and parked near Liberty's green Mustang. She'd worn her prettiest white blouse that showed just a tad of cleavage and a good bra. She also wore cornflower blue knee pants and natural beige sandals. The morning sun was warm and the air was humid, and it promised to heat up more as the hours passed.

When he'd strode halfway between his truck and the porch, she stepped down the stairs.

"Hi," he said. He stopped, and a shiny white smile curved his lips. He'd make such a good toothpaste poster boy.

"Hi, yourself."

She studied the red, gold and black decal on his bumper of an anchor crossing slantwise behind the earth: 'United States Marine Corps,' the sticker proudly read. She looked at him and blinked.

Noticing her questioning gaze, he stated in a matter of fact tone, "I was a Marine."

Carrie filled her in on his past. As she strode to her side of the truck and opened the door, she wanted to hear him to tell her. She asked, "So, uh, what did you do in the Corps?"

He walked around to her side and made sure the door was closed. "I was a drill sergeant."

She buckled her seatbelt. "Oh. Where?"

"Twenty-nine Palms." He slid under the wheel and turned the key in the ignition.

She arranged her purse squarely on her lap. "Those guys are tough."

He began backing down the lane. "I was...and am still. I'm honored to have served my country."

Once they'd arrived inside the giant store, Liberty found Will's positive mood infectious and disarming. They joked, had a good time and searched for a desk and drawing board. They found a perfect, light wood "you assemble" computer desk and drawing board. Using her credit card, she paid for the furniture. A Wal-Mart employee carried her purchases out and placed them onto the bed of Will's truck. At Lewis's farm, they worked together getting the boxes up the steps and into the living room.

"Where do you want them?" he asked.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she went over her plans. "Okay." She pointed to a large glassed-in room near the back of the house. "My studio'll be back here. I'd like it facing the window so I can see outside."

"I always liked that room. You've got a hell of a view of the woods. Ol' Sam always kept plants back there. Yeah, I can do it. It'd be a great place for an art studio."

"I'm having a phone put in, too."

"The line is already in. You just have to plug your phones in when they turn on the service."

"Great."

"I'll take the empty boxes with me and burn them behind my house."

"Okay, thanks."

Will began dragging the long narrow box toward the bright room.

After assembling it and the desk, he came into the living room and noticed an electrical outlet that didn't have a plate. "This is not safe. I think I have one over at the house. I'll be right back. I'll put that desk together late this afternoon."

She smiled up at him. "I'm so grateful, Will."

"See you in a bit."

After his truck backed down the lane, she began sweeping last

fall's leaves off the porch and washing the ground-level windows. He returned later and finished the desk and a few odd jobs, impressing her.

* * * *

As the days passed, he began coming in and out at will, patching walls, fixing the plumbing and doing this and that on the Lewis' property. She continued to feel comfortable and safe in his presence; their friendship grew. In fact, she looked forward to his daily visits, and he didn't make any untoward advances.

One mid-August day, Will put new plastic pipes under the bathroom sink while she picked up dead limbs in the yard and carried them to a pile she'd built behind the house. He came outside and began playing rambunctiously with Pirate. He threw sticks for the dog to fetch, got down and wallowed with him in the grass. Pirate ran, growled and barked at him.

On days Will worked, he came over for a couple of hours before or after his shift. With regularity, he painted, cleaned and hauled junk to the dump. She stayed busy, too. Oftentimes she rendered artwork, sitting at her computer. When he came into her makeshift studio and peered over her shoulder, he'd comment positively on her work.

The days passed into weeks; a hot and humid September arrived. He nailed, sanded, put down tiles and patched walls. He had become a trustworthy friend, and they began talking about their dreams and designs on their futures.

One day when he had come into the studio, the discussion turned to the barn. "What's out there?"

"Out where?"

"In that old gray building?"

"There's just junk. I haven't been inside it for years."

"Really?" she asked after he'd left the room.

Liberty had not been inside the old gray barn behind the house

either and ached to know what was inside it. Carrie or Will had not told her what it contained, and she wanted to nose around and see for herself its contents.

Later she heard a noise in the next room. "Will?" She rose from her drawing board chair and walked toward the noise and saw him.

He stood less than ten feet away, holding a hammer, wearing faded jeans and a Marine's T-shirt. His captivating, charming face and deep voice greeted her.

"It's just me. I'm going to put a new drapery rod up before I go to work."

"I appreciate it."

"I've got to go soon and thought I'd get it done. Tomorrow's my day off."

"Really? Good."

"I'll do the yard work tomorrow."

"Oh, thanks." *He's so sweet. Is there some sort of sexual vibe going on between us? Surely not, but I think there is. He's not looking at me with sex on his mind...I'm not ready for it.*

Holding a few nails and the hammer, Will climbed up a step ladder and banged on one end of the drapery rod she'd bought.

"I'm going to check out the barn. I'm just curious."

He stopped hammering and shot her a perplexed look. "Be careful. There's no telling what you'll find."

"Okay, thanks." Liberty felt his gaze attach to her backside as she left the house and crossed the driveway, walking toward the barn. Standing at the planked gray door, she undid the lock with one of the keys that Carrie had given her. A cloud of dust and eerie darkness greeted her when the door opened. She stepped inside and marveled at all the antique items in the barn—old bicycles, garden utensils and black iron lawn furniture. Some items were probably made in the early 1900s. When the door shut with a slam, she jumped, and her heart beat like a tom-tom.

She forgot the noise and oohed and ahed at the items and likened

her visit to stepping into a time capsule. Old traps and strange, rusty implements hung from the beams. A tall, slender Coca-Cola sign had been nailed to a beam. Waving a fireplace poker that she had picked up inside the door, she swiped it through silvery webs. Farther she poked and inched into the recesses of the shadowy fringes. Buckets and jars of jelly and pickles occupied shelves. Rusty license plates littered a planked wall, one was dated 1955.

"Amazing," she said. She turned and walked to the left.

The door creaked behind her. Daylight flashed inside. Spooked, her heart almost stopped, and she turned back and looked. A coal-colored, foreboding silhouette of a man stood in the light. Fear shot through her. *Martin? Oh God, help me!* Screaming, she turned, slammed into a partition and slid down a wall. Pots jarred loose above and fell on her. Tears, hot and harsh, stung her eyes. "No!" She fought Martin's strong hands that grasped her arms.

"Liberty. It's Will! You're okay."

Liberty realized she'd temporarily lost her sanity. "Oh no." Her chest heaved as the rush of adrenalin subsided, leaving her limp, weak and utterly embarrassed. An elongated pause followed. "I'm so sorry."

His tone held caring concern; he was soft and calm. "I can't even imagine all he's put you through. Let me get this." Will took the pot that had fallen on her and threw it aside. He pulled her to her feet and powerfully into his hard arms. With strong sureness she wouldn't soon forget, he slipped his spread hands, palpating her back, moving over her blouse and bra closure. Up her spine his hand traveled, inciting long lost needs. It felt so natural to accept his taut lips when they contacted hers. The feel of his delicious body meeting hers and even his scent stirred needs that were long hidden in forgotten places, just waiting to come out again.

His arms offered such a tender, comfy respite from the dreadful preoccupations and cares that somehow crept into her psyche.

She began to savor and accommodate his plunging, sliding tongue. Feelings of safety intoxicated her. The scratchy lace of her bra

chafed her nipples while they rubbed against his hard chest.

They stood in the warm darkness of a horse stall, their feet planted to the dirt floor, their mouths fused for several heated seconds. Neither Will nor she made a prompt attempt to end it. His hands continued rubbing over her back as the lusty probes of his tongue continued in the recesses of her mouth, stirring her to passion. Her breathing rate increased, and she entertained untoward ideas of letting him fuck her right there. She knew she would forever equate the smell of a musty barn to that moment that he held her in his embrace.

He broke the kiss before things got out of hand by raising his mouth from hers. "Are you okay?" he murmured, his lips hovering a half of an inch above hers. His tickling breath smelled of mint.

She brought her fingertips to her mouth. "Oh dear God."

They lingered a moment more before he stepped back and walked toward the door. "Don't feel bad. It was beautiful." He left her, stepped out of the barn and into the daylight. He peered her way. "Then again, maybe I shouldn't have taken advantage of the situation."

Chapter Seven

Liberty decided to get her mind off what had happened and go into town the next day. After looking up the number of a dog groomer in an old phone directory, she used a minute of airtime on her cell phone calling them. Much to her surprise, the business was still open and there was an opening, so she took it.

Early that morning, she put on a loose, button-up, cornflower blue shirt and zipped up her tight jeans in front, under the tails of the shirt. Her breasts were sore, so she didn't wear a bra. Because her tummy was a little puffy, she turned sideways and looked in a mirror that hung behind the door in the bedroom.

She hooked the leash on Pirate's collar, headed outside and locked the door. She led the dog to the car and had him jump into it.

"What do ya say, boy? Let's go get a haircut. Want to?"

Along the way she stopped at Buck's Convenience Store, parked, went inside and bought a large bottle of Tylenol. Two feet from the hood of her car, she stood on the curb, peeled the plastic away from the bottle and tossed the resulting garbage into a waste can. Upon arriving at the driver's door, she sorted through the keys, found the silver one with the black, vinyl head, and pushed it into the car door lock. Inside, Pirate excitedly barked and hopped into the front seat and started scratching on the window.

"Hello, beautiful," a deep voice said from the window of a cop car stopped behind her car.

She gasped, pulled the key out of the lock and blinked at the friendly face in the window of the squad car. The corners of his lips quirked into an expression of amusement. His eyes scanned her hair,

figure and appearance. She nervously returned the smile, remembering their kiss.

His dangerous expression caused her heart to turn over. She tried to shove the pain relievers into a side pocket of her purse, but during an erratic hand movement, the red and white bottle slipped from her grasp and rolled toward the vehicle next to her. She leaned and snatched it up before it disappeared under the car. "They're my Tylenol. See?" She held up the bottle and shoved it into the side pocket of her handbag.

His brow furrowed. "Headache?"

Liberty shrugged. "Not quite."

"P.M.S.?"

"You're getting warmer, but that's not it, exactly."

"Hmmm."

She couldn't help but laugh; his flirtatiousness and nosiness was cute.

With a hand to the strap of her purse, she raised it higher up on her shoulder so she could again slide the key into the lock. "Hi. So, uh, Deputy, are you going to give me a ticket? Or maybe arrest me for something?"

He gave her a very, very wicked male smile. "We need to talk."

She liked the way he said it. Her lips parted slowly, and she spoke in a seductive way. "Oh yeah?"

The sensual blaze that gleamed his eyes told her why he wanted to be with her. His eyes flicked to her shirt.

She couldn't resist gazing at him either. Her heart thumped like a tom-tom. "You want to tell me what it is here or...what exactly do you want to do?"

"I'd rather go somewhere...private."

She tried to glean a scintilla of understanding and felt frown lines creasing her forehead. They both stayed silent for a few seconds, allowing a noisy motorcycle to pass on the road.

Will shrugged and tapped a finger to his steering wheel. "Over

coffee or soda maybe?"

While he looked on, Liberty turned her wrist, glanced at the time on her Bulova and nodded. She tipped her chin up. "Sure. I'd love to." She drew several escaped strands of raven hair back from her face and glanced up and down the street. An SUV passed, followed by a noisy street cleaner. Her eyes returned to his chiseled features. "Uh, well, I have to take Pirate to the dog groomer first."

"How about meeting at Sergio's Diner? It's not too far off the beaten track. I'm off work for the rest of the afternoon."

"Sergio's? Okay, sounds good. I think I remember where that is. In fifteen minutes, you say?"

"Is that okay?"

"It's fine."

Under the scrutiny of his obvious, bold visual assessment, she dropped her line of vision, remembering how good the kiss felt. Spicy recollections of the titillating moment had teased her soul on occasion ever since it had happened. Of course he remembered it, she could see it in his expression.

"Make it in a half-hour." Between his thumb and forefinger, he plucked up a bit of the fabric of his shirt and said, "I need to go home and change."

"Well—" Liberty grasped the door handle of her Mustang, thinking she liked his uniform. His chest and biceps filled the black shirt just fine. Above all else, she liked how he looked and his personality.

She cleared her throat and said, "Half hour it is, then."

* * * *

A gust of wind caressed the shirt to her chest and outlined the high, proud upward slant of her breasts. Will didn't mean for it to happen, but his eyes lingered at the slope of her neck as she sat in her car.

"Is there something wrong?"

"Oh no. Sorry."

"I thought I may have gotten something on my top."

He changed the subject. "Drive carefully."

"I will." Their gaze caught and held for a moment. "Bye."

Will gave himself a mental shake and took his gaze off her. His interest took him off guard. He cleared his throat and said, "See you in a little bit, then."

After she turned on the ignition and started the car, he gave her his best smile. She wriggled her fingers and drove away.

He walked around to the driver's side and climbed into the cab. Feelings he thought he'd never experience again after his wife died washed over him as he started the engine, shifted into gear and stepped on the gas. He drove through town, glad he'd asked her for coffee, but hoping for more.

Along the way, he cast a sidewise glance at the high school and the white-steeple church that passed in the window, but he barely noticed. Instead, his mind lingered on Liberty. Her delicate, mocha features and her sweet demeanor played on his mind; his cock stiffened. Her eyes sparkled like the brown gemstone, tiger's eye. If she experienced qualms about her future in Metropolis, she held her chin high and hid her misgivings well. However, he detected a trace of uneasiness she felt with him, which was probably normal after all the previous man had put her through.

The temperature seemed hot and laden with moisture; strange weather for late September. He pressed a button, and his driver's side window whirled and closed. He turned on the air conditioning, changed stations on the radio and searched for a weather report, but found none. *If this guy ever comes after her, I'll give him a welcome he'll never forget.*

Chapter Eight

Liberty met Will on time at the diner. Since the seats at the counter were filled, they sat near the window and began reading the menu. The water in her glass hypnotically glittered in the morning sun. In the back of her mind hung the belief that fate had a hand in their meeting that morning.

The diner that had been decorated with a 1950's flair. It boasted chrome stools, and old time jukeboxes in each booth.

They sat side by side and sipped coffee. All of her problems disappeared when she spent time with him. He looked good in his green shirt and dark navy jeans. She even liked his loafers and military haircut. He seemed to be a together man, a man unlike Martin.

"I got off work about an hour ago. Earlier I worked for a friend. We're all the time switching hours."

Liberty felt the side of Will's thigh moving against hers. She yearned for her skin to touch his skin but stayed put, content to toy with the paper napkin on the tabletop before her. "Is he sick?"

"Kevin's wife went into labor. I filled in for him."

"Are you a close knit bunch?"

"That we are."

Liberty listened and intermittently took sips of coffee.

"They watch my back, and I watch theirs." He reached down into his pocket and brought out a small white disk, maybe a breath mint, and popped it into his mouth. "That's how it should be."

"It'd be necessary in deputy work."

"Cops need someone they can trust. There's some bad dudes out

there."

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

He took a sip of coffee and held it up so the waitress would come and give them a fill up. After she filled the cup, he said, "I have a brother and a sister. My brother lives in Albany, New York, and Cheryl lives in Florida. We get together on Christmas some years. Josh is twenty-four. He's the baby. I swear a hard day's work would kill him. He doesn't work. Someone told me that he smokes dope. I know that he gets up late and goes to bed in the wee hours of the morning. Everyone says he's messing up his life."

Liberty looked at him intently, seeing the caring concern that played on his expression. "Is that how you feel?" she asked and finished the last of her coffee.

A noisy breath left his mouth. "I dunno. In a way they're right. But no matter what Josh does, I'll always love him."

"I'd like to meet him someday."

"I'd love to introduce you. Cheryl, my older sister, is tough as nails. She's gay and lives with a female friend."

Liberty's mouth formed an 'O'.

"Do you believe it shouldn't happen?"

Lifting her chin, she took a steadying breath and explained, "People can have same sex partners. It's not my business what they do."

He grinned. "I know. Can you believe she was married for a while, then told everyone she was gay?"

Liberty felt a rush of tenderness for him and fought the urge to reach over and stroke his cheek in a sheer burst of affection.

"Now that takes guts, and Cheryl has them. She's emotionally strong...like you."

"Oh, I don't know about that." Hiding the embarrassment she feared played out in her expression, she looked toward customers who ambled past their table. The waitress approached, so she pushed her cup toward the aisle side of the tabletop.

"Care for some more?"

Liberty shook her head. "Please."

His voice was low and close to her ear. "It's true. I think you are a strong woman," Will murmured. He glanced up at the ceiling and added, "Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"A sister."

"Do you get to see each other often?"

"We write. I sent her a postcard and told her where I moved to. We're too much alike to be super-close. Most of my relatives are dead, except for an aunt, uncle and cousins which I see a couple of times a year."

"That's about it for me as far as family goes."

"Carrie said your wife, Reena, was a black woman."

"She was. I—uh, have a hard time sometimes dealing with her death. For a while, I went through depression. Breast cancer at a young age, too. I'm not over it, exactly, but I've put it aside. 'Compartmentalized' is the word they give it. I'm moving on."

"That must've taken you back. I'm so sorry."

His line of vision dropped. "It's alright."

They chatted on and on about their families, short-term and long-term plans for the better part of a half hour, a cordial visit.

Remembering Pirate, she glanced at the large clock behind the counter. "Eek. Will you look at the time? They're finished with Pirate. I have to pick up my mail at the post office, too. I'd better go." She grasped the strap to her purse and located her car keys.

"Before you get away...", he touched her forearm with his fingertip, causing her to come almost undone, "would you like to go to Lonnie's tonight?" he asked gently.

"Where is that?"

He reached out and ran a finger down her jaw line. "It's a bar. Police types like me hang out. Cops and whatnot."

Liberty paused to think. "It sounds like fun."

"Want to, then?"

Sure, I'd love to." She gave him a sunny smile, hating to part ways with him that afternoon, and she sensed he felt the same way.

"I'll pick you up, then." He brushed his lips across her cheek, causing her pulse rate to quicken. "You can meet some of my friends."

Chapter Nine

On her way home, she parked in a fifteen-minute zone and went into the post office to get her mail. The light bill, an insurance flyer for health care, and a white legal-size envelope that bore on return address in the upper left-hand corner arrived in her box. The envelope had been postmarked four days ago in Los Angeles. It wasn't from her ad agency, because they would send her an email. Carrie would call, and other friends would also send a letter by email.

Who got my address?

Standing in the lobby as people walked by, she tore the end off the envelope, pulled the white stationary out and unfolded it. The blue printed letters read:

Dear Liberty,

I've been sitting here wondering for the last several weeks where the hell you went to. It took some doing, but I found out. Expect me to come by soon.

XOXOXO

Martin

Her heart began hammering. She gasped, put the letter down at her side and muttered, "Oh God no." Her thoughts jumbled and mixed. The fear she had so skillfully avoided had returned. The nightmarish memory replayed in her mind—from blood, screams and pain to the physical assault and mental abuse. *He'll not get a third*

chance. Stinging tears washed down her cheeks. *Damn his sick obsession.* She rushed to the car and drove home carrying the letter. *He knows! Now he'll come after me.*

At home, she packed two suitcases and tossed some extra items she'd need into a plastic sack. *Where'll I go? An Order of Protection doesn't mean a thing to him, except that it's a piece of paper.*

Before she finished packing, carrying her suitcases out and putting them in her trunk, she put Pirate in the front seat and closed the door.

Will's pickup truck approached. She ran out the side door, down the steps and to the driver's window of Will's truck. His brow furrowed, he gazed at her, wearing a worried expression.

"Oh God no, Will! Martin Miller has sent me a letter. He's going to come here. I need to get out of here and fast!"

"I just heard."

"God knows what he'll do."

"He's escaped and killed a corrections officer, and they've got an all points bulletin out. He's in his car. I hope he doesn't get this far. Anyway, get your things. Lock the hell up. You're staying at my house until it's safe."

"I need my computer, so I can work."

"I'll get it." He went in and got the necessary equipment for her work, making several trips. He put it into the back of his truck and closed the tailgate.

"I appreciate this so much," she said through the open window of her car.

"I wouldn't have it any other way. He'll never hurt you again. Promise. It shouldn't take too long to get him."

Chapter Ten

At two o'clock in the afternoon, Will carried Liberty's suitcases up the sweet-smelling primrose-lined sidewalk outside his white, two-story house. Overhead clouds floated like white puffs of cotton on a light cobalt background. The manicured yard boasted six or seven deciduous trees—maples and oaks. It was a neat, beige two-story house located near the same woods that Carrie's farm stood beside.

"I love your house."

"Thanks."

She grasped the banister at the base of the steps that led to the front door. "I need to call Carrie, if you don't mind."

"Sure. How long has it been since you called her?"

"A month."

"Mm. I see." He flashed an understanding glance. "You've been busy."

After they crossed the porch and stopped at the door, he pointed at a device situated above the doorknob. "I've got security. There're motion detectors and silent alarms. One of us can be here in a jiffy. A few other devices, too."

The information soothed her qualms. "I thought the crime rate was low here."

"It is. But my wife's brother was in that business."

"Oh, I see."

"You know, at first, I thought buying security equipment would be a waste. Today I'm glad I did get it."

He unlocked and opened the door and disabled the security, and she followed him inside the clean, newly painted kitchen. "If it's set,

we'll know if someone comes on the property and tries to get in."

"The inside is nice." She loved the shiny brown Formica counter tops in the kitchen and a cozy, four-person breakfast nook situated next to a bay window. It was decorated using male, earthy colors.

"Make yourself at home. Downstairs is the living room, kitchen and dining area. Upstairs are the bedrooms."

In a protective way, he said, "You can sleep with me...if you want...if you'd feel safer... or have your own bedroom."

She searched his dark, navy eyes and smiled. "Oh."

An elongated, tense pause followed as they stood in the kitchen.

Her voice tightened. *He wants me in his bed.* "A separate room is fine."

"Alright." He nodded. "Your bedroom is the second door on the right."

Will carried the bags up the stairway, disappeared and soon returned. He flipped on a few lights and turned on some quiet background music.

"Feel free to use the phone any time you want." He reached to touch her hand. "I've got unlimited calling."

"My family members need to know where I am. My sister, especially."

"Tell them to not say where you are."

"No, never."

He nodded. "Do you mind if I put your computer equipment and desk downstairs?"

"I appreciate it. I'll help you."

"Just relax."

Guilt rippled through Liberty and she bit the inside of her lip. *The poor guy. Now I'm moving in and maybe imposing.* "Are you sure I'm not putting you out?"

"I'm very sure." His voice quieted. He brushed a few strands behind her shoulder. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

Ignoring his pleas to not help, she carried in the computer and

desk. They set her work station up near a picture window that faced the gray, wispy woods.

After they ate a quick sandwich, they drank a soda at the breakfast bar and chatted about politics, the price of gas and how the United States could help starving children in Africa. She felt herself being drawn in by his charm and caring concern for her.

Will showed her where the phones were located, excused himself and went upstairs. He wasn't quite out of sight when he started taking off his shirt. "I'm going to take a shower."

"Alright." She picked up the phone on the breakfast nook and covered the mouthpiece when Will's head popped out. He smiled as he stood around a corner and peered downstairs at her. Through tight lips, he said, "If he comes from California and tries to come around here, he'll wish he hadn't." He disappeared, she guessed to go to the bathroom to finish his shower.

Loving warmth flowed through her. "I feel safe with you, Will."

His head popped out again, his smile beaming. "Thanks." He shortly disappeared.

Liberty picked the phone up off the base and began dialing Carrie's number. Her answering machine picked up the call, and Carrie's cheery voice said, "Hello. This is Carrie. I'm not home at the present time. You know what to do at the beep."

Liberty vowed to speak in an upbeat voice, regardless of the unfortunate situation that she faced. "This is me. I haven't called or heard from you in a month. I'm going to sleep in Will's spare bedroom until they capture Martin. I dunno. Will and I feel that Martin'll show up here. I'll be fine. Will is an awesome man.

"I know what you're wondering. You're detecting a note of more than friendship going on. Right?" She giggled and added, "Uh, well, we're hitting it off real well, and I'll leave it at that."

She paused, trying to think of something to add. "Well, that's about it. Call me when you get back, Carrie. I'll be here, at Will's house. I guess you know the number. Ciao."

Later that evening, they dressed in freshly laundered jeans and shirts and rode to Lonnie's in Will's Chevy truck. In the lovely, dusky bar she met many of his friends at the department. Most were deputies, a couple of those who arrived were detectives. All were drinking and happy to meet her. She drank a mug of cold beer and chatted with them. It shocked her to hear Will introduce her several times to cops. Later in the evening, his hand slipped over hers, and for a while they held hands under the table. Her tummy turned in flip-flops. They drank two or three more glasses of beer, stayed two hours, socialized and drove home, laughing and discussing the fun they'd just had and the gossip they'd just heard. His arm rose to the back of the seat and he touched her shoulder. His lips brushed hers, then a deeper, more fully involved kiss took over her mouth. His tongue slid back toward her throat, and she accommodated it with her own tongue. His interest touched her heart, and made blood surge in her veins.

Several minutes after midnight, after they arrived at his farm, they parted at the top of the stairs in the locked, cool farm home, breaking the romantic spell that had enveloped them that evening. Saying their goodbyes, they engaged in a lingering, deep-throated kiss and separated, going to their bedroom.

"I had a wonderful time," she said before she closed her door. Her lips tingled from his kisses.

He went to her and pressed his lips to her forehead, giving her the last kiss. "I did too," he murmured.

"Goodnight."

"Same to you."

Tired and a tad lightheaded from the three beers she'd had, she went inside the bedroom and closed the door.

* * * *

In the dim light, she stripped and pulled on the tops of a pair of

short pink pajamas and bikini panties and crawled between the cool sheets, her breasts still sore, the monthly precursor to her coming period. She felt she should've taken a couple of Tylenol before she came upstairs but was too tired to go downstairs and retrieve the bottle. Lying in bed, she snapped off the lamp beside the bed.

Her head sunk into the soft pillow, and within minutes she lost all sense of time and place, falling into a dark well of sleep. First the steamy dreams of Will began. He stood before her, his arms outstretched, looking sexy as Brad or George in a Hollywood flick. The dream dissipated and gave way to darkness.

The ambience darkened. Silence surrounded her, smothering and threatening. Martin's dimly lit profile turned. He gazed into her eyes. Blood trickled down his cheek. She gasped. He looked dead! His skin coloring was a purple-gray hue. The sight made her blood turn to ice. He blinked and grinned, his thin blue lips stretched over his gaunt mouth. She couldn't read into his expression what his intent for her was, but it seemed haunting and deadly. Her fear paralyzed her, and she fought to awaken, but he had her trapped.

Somehow he stifled her words and rendered her hands and legs unmovable. She struggled to no avail. She couldn't breathe. There was no mistaking his high-pitched laugh that could now cut into her body like a knife. His hands reached for her throat, and he said, "It's time to join me."

Liberty cried out, tossed and pulled at the sheets and blankets. "Stay away. Help! It's him! He's going to kill me!"

Chapter Eleven

Did I hear a scream?

In bed, no longer dozing, Will's eyelids rose, and he listened. *Liberty?* Down the hall, she moaned. In short order, he climbed to his feet. The soft carpeting crushed underfoot as he walked to the bathroom, grabbed a towel off the rack and wrapped it around his naked lower torso. He hurried to her door and raised his knuckles to the wood, rapped once, and said, "Are you okay?" After a tense, silent pause, he opened the door a few inches. "Liberty? You screamed."

She softly said, "Come in, Will. Sorry."

He crossed the dark room and stopped beside the nightstand adjacent the bed, a couple of feet from where Liberty lay. "Hey, what's going on?" He snapped the light on and sat on the edge of the bed and gazed down into her eyes.

"Ohhh, jeez."

She looked so pretty lying there, partially covered by the white sheet. He ran his fingertips over her damp forehead.

"Is everything okay?"

Tousle-haired and sleepy-eyed, she gazed up at him. Tears wet her cheeks. She fixed her line of vision on his chest for a moment, then closed her eyes. "I saw him."

"Who?"

Her voice relayed her fright. "Martin. He was in a dream." Her chest heaved. "He looks so strange...dead, maybe."

Wanting to comfort her, he slipped his hands under her back and effortlessly drew her to his chest and cradled her to him, showing her his love. She felt so gentle, vulnerable and lovable. Her tears wet the

side of his face. "It was just a dream. It's okay. I'm here."

Sobbing, Liberty ran an open hand up his pecs during the embrace. Her fingers strayed and furrowed through his chest hair. Fiery cum pooled deep in his scrotum; his cock thickened. "Mm. My poor baby."

She grimaced and drew a ragged breath.

Something else bothers her. "What's wrong?"

"I feel so silly."

"Tell me."

"It's my breasts. When you brought me to you...well, they're a little sore. I just get this way every month. The doctor said nothing can be done except take aspirin...or Tylenol. Maybe that's why I had the weird dream, huh? I'm such a bawl baby. I'm sorry. Some women have it worse than others."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"You didn't, Will." His gaze dropped to the round mounds that pushed against the pink fabric of her lacy translucent top. Her succulent nipples, like dark red cherries, rose and fell under the gathers of fabric.

"About a week before my period, they start aching. I wasn't rejecting you. It's just—jeez, I dunno." She sniffed. "Women go through this stuff."

"Do you have some aspirin?"

"Downstairs I do."

"Where are they?" He rose from the bed.

"In my purse. Tylenol. I guess I should have taken a couple."

"I'll go get them. Where is it?"

"Near the computer on the floor. I feel like such a pain in the backside."

"It's no problem." He left the room, went downstairs, located her purse, filled a glass of water and returned with the two caplets on his open palm.

"Thank you."

After she swallowed the two Tylenol with a half of a glass of water, he put the glass on the nightstand and asked, "Would it ease the pain if I...massaged them?"

For a few seconds she remained silent. "It would feel so good."

"Can I raise your top and do it?"

Liberty considered his request. "O-okay." The sensual blaze of her eyes told him she wanted his hands on her body. Her face reflected her soft compliance.

"Better yet, let me take it off," he said. "It'll just get in the way."

Allowing him to do what he wanted, she leaned forward and her hands rose high, her arms outstretched. A hand to each side of her top, he grasped the hem, brought the garment over her head and tossed it on the dresser. She sat before him. Her beautiful, uplifted, full bosom jutted out before her. The sight of her nipples waiting for his ministrations caused him to catch his breath. He adjusted and fluffed the pillows behind her so that she could sit up a little more and get comfortable. The sheet slipped down her body from the movement and exposed the tiny silk triangle of pink that barely covered her pubic mound.

She began to move her fingers to cover her nipples that had tautened to rigid peaks.

"Don't cover up."

She took her hands away.

His towel parted and fell away.

"Oh."

"Your breasts are beautiful." He enfolded her in his arms to make her feel at ease and pressed a kiss to her forehead. "Let me make them feel good." He took a deep breath, fighting back rampaging desire, and mopped her tears away with a tissue that he had plucked from a box on the nightstand.

Using a light touch, he stroked his hands up her sides, stopped and rested against the sides of her breasts, so that she could get used to his touch. "Relax." He cupped and held each breast. "That's it." Her eyes

closed, and her head and upper body dropped back into the pillows.

"You'll like it. Close your eyes, if you want."

He loved their firm feel and shape. Her nipples beckoned his massaging fingers and hands, so with a gentle touch, he rendered first-aid to her pebbled areolas and manipulated her heavy breasts, causing them to move from side to side.

"That's it." A minute or two passed. "Feel any better?"

"Yes...don't stop. A lot better..." she said, breathing her words. Her legs moved apart.

"I don't intend to." His fingers tightened and released. He kept his movements slow and tender until she moaned her delight. Between each thumb and forefinger he rolled her nipples, hoping she felt the sensation deep within her core.

Nevertheless, she flinched a little, turned her head and opened her eyes to meet his heated gaze. "Did that hurt?" he whispered.

"A little."

"I'll be gentler then." He stopped and gave her a long, considering look, bent his head down and kissed her right breast.

She winced. "Don't let it stop you."

"Poor baby," he said.

Her eyelids rose. Her brown irises moved as her line of vision glided over his arms and shoulders. He pressed his lips to her left breast and ran his tongue over the other sore nipple before he raised his head and pressed a kiss to her pouty lips as his own cock hardened. "Want me to stop?" he said in a husky voice.

Liberty said, almost voiceless, "No. I've not ever had anything feel so good." Intimate, incoherent words left her lips as he resumed.

Will wanted the intimate touches to last forever, but he knew if he kept it up for too much longer his cock would explode. Hot cum continued to pool within him. He growled in his throat. The crotch of her panties shifted an inch to one side, exposing a few sprigs of dark brown pubic hair and the top of her slit as his hands massaged.

Liberty began arching her back so that her breasts were more

accessible to his working hands, as though she was caught up in a haze of sexual arousal. He savored the signs of passion in her eyes and expression before he lowered his taut lips to the first nipple, sucked it deeply into his mouth and thrashed it with the end of his wet tongue until her panty-clad buttocks rose off the bottom sheet. The reason for his touches changed from the rendering of first-aid to the blatant need to fuck.

"You like this?" His erection stood high in waiting.

"Mm, yesssss."

The treatment went on for endless minutes, and he switched and gave her other breast equal attention. He grasped the nipple between his lips and lifted it off her chest wall. He lifted his mouth to say, "Does that make it feel better?"

"Ohhhh, do it."

"How about your pussy?" He cupped and smothered her breasts with kisses. "Would you like me to take care of it?"

"Yesss." She squirmed, and erotic moans left her throat. "I need it soooo much," she uttered in soft, sweltering compliance. "Do it, whatever you want to me."

"Would you like me to lick it? Your pussy, I mean?"

"Yes."

Even though Will was about to shoot his load, he kept his climax under wraps, for it would be a massive ejaculation when it came. More importantly, he wanted her to cum first, getting it out of the way, so to speak, to break the initial ice. Feeling he had all the time in the world having her right where he wanted, he traced the outline of her collar bone, the curve of her neck and her jaw, marking a wet trail with his extended tongue. *God, how I love the graceful slope of her throat.*

He sucked her lip as though it were a piece of candy. Sensing her inner turmoil, he moved back down to her breasts, his upper body spreading her legs wide, and suckled her breasts again, this time more deeply. Mercilessly, he sought to stir her. Dotting all the I's and

crossing all the T's of foreplay, he continued until she moaned and called out his name. His heart pounded hard as he envisioned the separated lips of her pussy waiting for his cock. He began kissing her belly. He bit her mons through the fabric of her panties, readying her for the inevitable coupling. *Liberty is so hot*. Her eyelids rose, and she peered down at him while he pleased her. A strangled cry of protest left her throat when he ceased.

* * * *

Trembling, Liberty waited for him to continue. She eagerly needed and waited for the continuance of his hungry, naughty tongue's exploration. Her heavy breasts, still wet with his saliva, heaved in her passion. She felt the band of her panties being raised. His rough, calloused hands glided over her smooth hips, dragging the tiny bit of underwear down her smooth, perspiring legs and exposing her mons along their way. Her pussy clenched when his gaze lazed over her in a visual feast.

On his knees, poised over her hot crevice, his engorged cock bobbed with each of his movements as he tossed her panties onto the dresser, jouncing the bed. A drop of pearly cum oozed from the slit.

"Spread for me." He put his hands between her thighs and lightly pushed them apart, viewing her lips, making room for his head. "That's it." Each side of his face tickled her inner thighs as he moved up, making the gap wider. His face moved in close. By the time his mouth was in perfect position to administer searing strokes to her throbbing clit, she cried out, begging for his tongue to lick her humid sex. The anticipation became almost unbearable.

His mouth at the top of her slit, he licked her clit as he gazed up at her. His line of vision skimmed her trimmed mound, navel, the valley between her breasts, and he looked into her eyes. He raised his mouth, spread her lips with two fingers and blew on her sensitive organ. Her breath caught and held. She spread her fingers, reached down and

grasped his head between her hands when two of his fingers slipped into her. He intimately stroked her, causing her breathing rate to quicken.

"Your pussy's so pretty." He nibbled at the lips while finger-fucking her. His clever tongue licked her pulsing bud for several pleasurable, torturous moments. Never in her life had she felt anything so exhilarating.

Her mouth still tingled from his drugging kisses even as he grazed for the longest of time. "I need this."

Over and over again he lashed it, until her breathing turned ragged and she set off on a remarkable climb to the summit of a volatile orgasm. Liberty's heart thundered in her ribs, her body shuddered and spasmed. Her widespread legs jack-knifed, her butt rose off the bed, and she cried out, "Oh my God, Will!"

He waited for a few moments, allowing her to ride the plateau. Her breathing slowed, and she lay restlessly staring at the shadowy ceiling. She had all but forgotten her sore breasts. He stroked her inner thighs with the fingers of one hand, came up on her body and engaged her mouth with his in a deep, sweet and thoughtful kiss. His cock pressed into the side of her thigh while he did it, reminding her of his need.

The ex-Marine informed her, "I'm giving it to you now."

Liberty had been ready, and she said an unsophisticated, "Do it, then."

Will positioned and lowered his loins between her legs until she felt the head of his cock rubbing against her lips. *Lust...hot lust I feel for him.* Under him, wet and warm, she opened her legs, squirming. The head slightly entered her and rubbed her throbbing clitoris. She raised her hips off the bed, wanting him to push it farther in, but he held back. An erotic chuckle left his lips.

"How does this feel?"

"Oh yeah." Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Mm." A superb lover, his control elastic, she thought as she received his cock, a rigid,

splendiferous shaft into her welcoming body until their bodies fused, becoming one.

"You're so tight."

Pent-up passion that she'd never experienced unleashed. He had to have fire in his blood to make love the way he did.

He began to move himself in and out of her slowly at first, causing delicious friction, the kind women would fight for, against her clit. Faster, he moved. Such a magnificent man, she thought as he continued the rhythmic age-old slide in and out.

"You wouldn't believe how ready I was for this," she whispered into his ear. She had never experienced such spicy, lascivious sensations. "Ride me, baby," she said.

A pro, he took his time, and she believed that her body was made for him. She held on, and they moved as one like they were dancing to an x-rated tango. He moaned with pleasure and she reveled. Faster he moved. Faster. *He's so hot and sweaty for me.* They continued until every fiber and bit of tissue in her sweat-slicked body screamed for an orgasm.

With one last harsh thrust, he pushed them over the ledge onto a floating plateau—massive and superb, like a tide coming in off the ocean. His juices shot deeply into her body, and his guttural laugh followed. Many seconds they held together in suspended animation, until finally his body relaxed and he dropped to her side on the bed. Reaching over, he pushed a damp curl out of her face. "It was so good, and you're so beautiful."

Liberty agreed and snuggled with him. Vaguely she remembered the dream but shoved it out of her mind.

Leaning on his elbow, he brought up the sheet and quilt and nestled to her side, wrapping her in his arms. "I'm going to stay in here with you."

"Good."

Normalcy slowly returned. The clock ticked. Cool air rose in the floor vents, jiggling the drapes, and the dog hopped up onto the bed

and made a place to sleep at the foot. “Pirate, you shouldn’t get on Will’s bed.”

“I don’t blame him. He’s alright.” He raised and snapped off the light and settled beside her again.

Liberty laughed and gazed to his side and hugged the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with. His kisses and hugs were full of adoration, trust and caring, and she realized that no other man could every take his place.

Soon Will drifted off to sleep. Weariness caught up with her, too. She settled more into his arms and fell asleep, happy to be alive and to be Will’s woman. Call it women’s intuition, but she feared Martin would show up once more in her life.

Chapter Twelve

Will traded hours with Deputy Kunce the next night and drove a squad car through Metropolis. Well-rested, he felt relieved that he had a good woman who cared about him waiting at home. Their sex had been out of this world, and their relationship worked. The chemistry had been right. Finally, he'd found the woman of his dreams.

The busy chatter on the radio drew his attention off home matters and put it on work.

Having started work at four, he'd been to several calls: a domestic, a D.U.I., and a missing teenager who showed up at his friend's house to name three. The police radio's frequency crackled and hissed with activity.

He traveled the usual rounds assigned, planning on having a quiet two hours until his shift ended at midnight.

"Six twenty-three needs assistance. Gas Mart."

"Six thirty-four's responding."

"Ten four."

Nearing Hilliard's Gas Mart in Metropolis, he spotted the red sports car in question that fit the description of Martin Miller's '98 Mazda Miata. It was the sixth that week that had caught the department's attention and the license plate run on the computer. Not expecting anything out of the ordinary to happen again, he hung a left into Hilliard's Gas Mart and braked, thinking it was a long shot that the car belonged to Martin Miller. He nodded at the deputy who'd first spotted the car on the Gas Mart's lot. Everyone in the local law enforcement community that he talked to thought it was possible the suspect would show up and try to take Liberty with him, or worse,

hurt her again.

Just to be safe, Will stopped behind the red car adjacent to a pump. Its driver waited to pay at the counter inside. Will peered through the large, bright window and saw the dark-haired white man about thirty or thirty-five standing at the counter who fit Martin Millers description to a T.

He backed into a nearby space and got the car's license plate's number while Deputy Kevin Redd called the dispatcher at headquarters. "I need a twenty-eight."

"Ten-four. Go ahead."

"At Hilliard's Gas Mart...I've got a red Mazda Miata. One-six-five-four-B-Z. That's one-six-five-four-B-boy-Z-zebra."

Within the minute, the dispatcher responded, "It comes back to Martin Miller. Thirty-three. Black and brown. Wanted out of Whittier, California. Fugitive is an escapee. Will extradite. L.A. County. May be armed and dangerous. Use extreme caution. All available units in the area assist two deputies at Gas Mart in Metropolis." After a short pause, "Six thirty-four's close and en route," the dispatcher continued.

A few other cars are rolling this way. The suicidal bastard is here to kill or kidnap Liberty.

Will pulled his service revolver from its holster and made sure it was ready to fire. He took it off safety and got into position behind his opened car door, where he waited for the suspect to leave the store. Several arriving officers got into place, their weapons drawn and ready just as they were trained regarding the apprehension and arrest of an armed and dangerous man. Another officer arrived and snuck in the back door of the Gas Mart and ushered all the customers and employees to safety. The possibility that Martin carried a gun existed, and Will prepared for the worst, hoping for the best.

Martin remained inside. Two, then three cruisers arrived; the lawmen climbed out and got into place. Will recognized Deputy Redd's voice on the radio, giving more information to the dispatcher.

"Ten-four."

"Five sixty-eight is responding." The traffic got busier on the frequency. Illinois Highway Patrol arrived on scene.

"Five sixty-four, six thirty-four and five eighty-four are still en route, five sixty-eight."

Will saw Martin leaving the counter, heading for the double glass doors as though he didn't have a care in the world. Or, he suspected trouble and pretended he didn't. "Ten-four. He's coming out now." Will, his adrenalin pumping, rose and aimed at the wanted man's heart. "Martin Miller, freeze."

Martin stopped walking halfway between the door of Gas Mart and his car. "What the—?"

"You're under arrest."

"No way!"

"Do as we say and you won't get hurt," Will said, meaning to stun him.

His grip loosened on a bag of chips, and it dropped to the concrete lot.

Grinning, he gazed around at the various police units. "It's not my style, man."

"Don't be stupid. Don't make any sudden moves."

"Fuck you. Fuck all of you."

"Drop down."

"No, man. I don't want to live if I can't have her," he muttered.

"Better do it." *He's not gonna go. Damn it.*

"I'm not going back."

"Don't be stupid."

Deputy Redd said, "You're surrounded, Miller. Don't get stupid. Do what we say. Get down on the ground and spread your legs."

"Hell no!"

"Get down on the ground and spread your legs," Deputy Redd yelled again.

Martin's hands lowered. Will, the designated shooter, grimaced, waiting on edge. In a quick series of moves, Martin slipped his fingers

under his belt. Metal flashed; he drew out a handgun.

Will's training kicked in. Having a good shot, he squeezed the trigger. His gun fired, and the bullet hit Martin in his heart region. Martin dropped to the concrete. The small caliber gun he had in his hand misfired. Will glanced around and discovered Martin's bullet had shot toward a field, hitting no one. Deputies and law enforcement officers approached the still body, their guns drawn. Will kicked Martin's gun away, knelt and touched his neck, searching for a pulse. "He's dead."

It sickened Will to see Martin lying on the concrete lot in a pool of blood. Overwhelmed by emotion, he put his gun in its holster and walked to the side of the building. A siren screamed. Out of view of everyone, he vomited in the weeds.

Chapter Thirteen

Liberty puttered around the kitchen making lunch. The harsh sun stabbed through the eastern windows at noon. She felt happy to be alive and living with Will.

After his shower, masculine and smelling of lemony aftershave, Will sauntered into the kitchen, where he put a spread hand on Liberty's ass. She turned into his arms and smiled the most seductive way she could muster. He brought her to his chest so a mere three inches separated their lips. His gaze softened with desire, he leaned and pressed his lips to hers.

"My buddies are having a picnic at Crab Orchard Lake tomorrow. They invited us. They also want a side dish. It's just a get-together before cold weather sets in. The girls sit around and talk, and the guys play football and make fools out of themselves. Boring, maybe. Want to go?"

"Sure." She returned a couple of smooches. "So uh, how about if I make some of my special potato salad?"

"Mm, sounds good." He gave her one last big kiss. "I'm off." He looked sexy in his knee shorts and sandals.

She laughed and made a joke. "No, you're not."

He smiled. "Ask my buddies. They'll say I'm off."

"Sounds like fun." Bacon sizzled in a black cast-iron skillet on the range below. She brought the bread from the bread box and the mayo out of the refrigerator. "Is there any lettuce?"

"In the crisper. I'll get it." Will left and ambled to the refrigerator, leaned over and peered into the clear front of the bin. "Oh yeah. There it is, in back." He gave the head to her, leaned back against the

counter and offered, "Need me to do something else?"

"I have everything under control, I think. Cooking's my favorite hobby, besides rendering art."

"I'd love to be your guinea pig for cooking...for a long, long time."

She chuckled. Their humorous banter continued until she finished making the sandwiches and setting the table. Then they sat down on opposite sides and each ate a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich and drank a glass of iced tea while Pirate whined for a morsel of people food.

She dropped her gaze to her fuzzy friend. "I fed you."

"Your bowl's over there," said Will.

The dog went into the next room and settled down with a bone.

Will smiled. "I guess we convinced him." He took a bite of his sandwich.

"He'll be back. Trust me."

Before they had eaten their last bite, they heard a noise outside. "Sit still. It's Green Thumb Mowers." He headed toward the door. "They want to be paid."

Liberty rose from the table and peered out the window. A truck that towed a trailer had pulled up in the yard, and two men began unloading a mower.

Will said, "I'll be back."

The phone rang, and Liberty answered it, still standing in the kitchen. She gazed out, watching Will interact with two landscapers.

"I've been on vacation and just got back this morning. I saw that you left a message on the machine."

Liberty was surprised to hear Carrie's voice, but her monotone voice troubled her. "Carrie?"

"You won't believe what I've been through and heard."

Carrie blinked a couple of times. "Why? What happened?"

"My apartment was broken into when I was gone. They didn't take anything except my address book and laptop."

"Oh no." Liberty's suspicions rose and her heart skipped a beat. "Martin?"

"Yeah. And that's not all. Then I get a call from Tess Hughes, a cop friend of mine who has connections and spills everything she knows. Well, she told me that when I was gone to Montana, he'd escaped custody last week."

"I heard," Liberty said glumly. "I'm staying with Will until it's safe. He's offered, and I'm accepting."

"When I told another detective that it was possible that Martin Miller broke in and stole my property, and his motives—you, he checked Martin's name out," Carrie said.

"Be careful."

After a short pause, Carrie added, "You too. Oh...I'm moving back to the farm in a few weeks. I've had enough of the big city."

"I'll be glad to see you."

* * * *

Later that afternoon, Will hung his uniform by hanger on the top edge of the bedroom door and readied for the four until midnight shift. He'd traded hours with another deputy, so he went to the white, tiled bathroom, stripped and adjusted the chrome gold knob, and held his hand out, testing the water temperature.

Liberty put Pirate outside and returned to the bathroom, where she undressed and stepped into the shower with him. While the steamy water jetted down on them, Will nibbled at the tantalizing fullness of Liberty's mouth before crushing her lips beneath his. With his hands to her upper arms, he coaxed and pressed her back against the cool tiled wall and kissed her with wanton hunger.

His lips lifted from hers. "You taste good."

"Mm. So do you." Kissing him made her hotter than she had ever been for any man.

His soapy hand slid down to her trimmed pussy for the expressed

purpose of his oral plunder and pleasure.

His nimble fingers massaged her hot flesh, turning her on more and more. An erotic chuckle escaped from deep within his chest as her sensation, raw and explosive, overwhelmed her and caused her breathing to quicken and her pussy to tighten around his fingers as her need intensified. The throbbing bass of the music from his radio on the dresser added to the torturous pleasure that raged within her body.

Greediness showed in his actions. He feathered kisses down from her collar bone and over her still sensitive breasts. Enjoying his attention, she let her head fall back and savored his mouth on her body during his southern-moving quest to find her pussy. She was eager. He was a natural at making love, sweetly competent.

Will got down on his knees, his face level with her mons. He parted the lips and touched her clitoris with short flicks. Arousal spread like a wildfire and blazed in the warm spot between her thighs. Her knees gelled. He pleased her to the brink. Rippling waves of sensation washed through her body.

"Oh, Will. Mmm, yes."

When her climax had ebbed more, he asked, "You liked that, eh?"

Wanting to bring him to the same ecstasy, Liberty eased back into the groove, still shaking from the effects of the climax. Her breath caught after she knelt before him. "Your turn." She took hold of his member, ringing it with her forefinger and thumb. Words silenced. The splash of the water smacked in the floor of the tub. Streams of water flowed down his body and onto her cheeks as she licked the head of his pulsing cock. He lowered his gaze, threaded his fingers into her hair, and she looked into his chiseled face.

He asked in a husky voice, "Do you want to do this?"

"Yes." She opened her mouth and felt his cock slide back over her tongue; her teeth scraped the velvety skin as it made its way back toward her throat. Knowing how much it must drive him wild turned her on. All the while, she gazed up at him and let it happen. He drew several strands of her long hair behind her ear. He withdrew, then

slipped it back in. Her voice hummed in the back of her throat; she made sure she squeezed it tight between her taut lips.

"That's it. Oh, God, yeah."

Liberty backed off it, and as she did, she ran her teeth along its length. When she paused, she heard him groan. It served as a reminder of the sensations she caused him. She teased the corona with the tip of her tongue.

Over her, he murmured, "I love you so much."

Will pulled her up to a standing position, lifted her and carried her out of the shower; she whimpered in her impatience. Dazed and desperate, she wrapped her legs around his mid-section, and he placed her on a shelf. During a desperate, wanton kiss, standing between her legs, he pushed his cock into her, balls deep. He slipped his hands around and under, cupping her buttocks as he worked his cock in and out of her.

Quick, helpless whimpers formed and sounded in her throat. Pleasure sang in her body. *I love what he's doing to me.* Panting, he pushed and withdrew again and again, and she shuddered a sigh and arched into the source of pleasure. *I feel like such a sexy woman when we do this.*

He brought them to the brink, and they tumbled headlong into a major orgasm. Hot jets of semen spurted deep into her, and a raspy breath left his lungs.

"Will, mmmm," she said.

"Yessss," he said breathlessly. "That was fabulous." He leaned to her and gave her a long, slow and lazy kiss. He raised his hand to her messy cap of hair.

I swear I'm getting addicted to this man. Relieved of her need, she fought to breathe and smiled wearily when they relaxed. She became aware of the room around her, even though his kisses still tingled on her lips.

Will brought her down off the shelf and gazed into her eyes. "And just when I think it can't get any better between us...guess what?" An

erotic chuckle followed. He wrapped his arms around her. A smug smile curved his lips.

"Oh my God, I know."

They finished their shower, dried and left the bathroom wrapped in towels.

During the next several minutes, he dressed and kissed her goodbye. "See you at midnight. Bye."

"I can't wait. Love you."

"Love you. And I want you to know there's more to this...."

Puzzled, she smiled. "What do you mean?"

"We have something very special between us." He gathered her to him, kissed the tip of her nose and left for work.

Chapter Fourteen

When Will came home after his shift a couple of nights later, he slipped into bed and scooted close. She read a book, sitting up with her back to the headboard. He whispered in Liberty's ear, "It's over."

"With..."

"Martin. I would have told you sooner, but...it's been difficult." Tears welled, and his emotions darkened. Her heart went out to him. "I hate having to take someone out." A pained expression played out on his face.

"You did it?"

"Yes."

"Oh my God...."

"Yeah."

"I thought about not telling you."

"Aw, Will." *It has to be difficult to kill someone.* "Come here." She hugged him and kissed his nose.

He cleared his throat and wiped away a tear. "My training kicked in. I had to do it."

She sent him a sweet smile. "You did your job. It's okay...it couldn't be helped."

His hand slipped around her waist, and he scooted in close for a kiss. Instead of going immediately for more sex, he said, "You're going to stay here, aren't you?"

She turned to face him and slipped her arms under his. She laughed. "I'd love to."

He flashed a perfect ivory smile. His tears ebbed, and he smiled a sad smile. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

* * * *

Days yielded to passing weeks through fall, and they continued to get along famously. The entire time, she rendered artwork and helped with the bills, designing cartoon critters for clothing tags and purses. Time seemed to pass quickly.

Fall tumbled into winter, and she'd never met his brother or sister. Upon informing Will of the fact, he replied, "Want to meet them?"

"I'd love to."

"Okay. Let me see what I can come up with."

The next day, he invited them to come for the holidays, called the department and took the two-week vacation he had coming so he could stay home and visit with them. Together, Will and Liberty decorated the house with lights, wreaths and shiny baubles, complete with a large Wal-Mart Santa and reindeer in the yard. With it, as if on cue, more snowy cold weather arrived. Liberty personally cleaned every nook and cranny of the house and got her hair and nails done. The Friday before Christmas, Will's relatives planned to come and stay for a week. She dressed in a sparkly green sweater, jeans, a pearl choker and earrings and matching pumps that she purchased at a local department store.

Will appeared in the bedroom, paused and gazed at her while she dressed. "You look pretty tonight."

"Thank you." He wore jeans and a tweedy dark green sweater, looking yummy. "You do, too." *What are these weird vibes about tonight that I'm getting?* She quickly dressed for the upcoming evening. *What is he up to?*

Will's off-duty deputies and their dates arrived promptly at seven. Liberty continued to experience a gut hunch that Will planned something behind her back. Carrie, who had just moved to the Lewis farm from California, popped in early. She'd dressed in a long red

velvet dress and matching pumps and was all bubbly with chit chat. Much to Liberty's delight, she too got acquainted with Will's younger brother from New York, making him feel welcome.

Will's sister Cheryl and her girlfriend arrived from Florida about a half hour after the festivities began. His sister Cheryl came inside, cursing the slick roads and cold weather. A beautiful evening full of soft scents and music evolved, and everyone had fun. In no time at all, Cheryl and her friend began mingling with the group. Liberty had a long, friendly chat with them.

The iced-down beer in Thermos ice chests flowed. Everyone was decked out in various shades of red and green. They mingled, drank beer and wine and ate finger food on catered trays.

A little before ten, Will reached over and drew Liberty to him, surprising her, as the guests she was talking to smiled and looked on. Her mouth dropped open, and Carrie took her wine glass. Liberty shifted her gaze onto his serious expression. "What's going on here? Do I sense a conspiracy of some sort?"

His fellow deputies and their dates formed a semi-circle. Carrie put down a tray of chestnuts wrapped with bacon and winked at her in a way that made her think Will had told her something. "What is going on here, gang?" she asked again.

Revelers hushed. Couples quit dancing. Liberty raised her hand to her cheek and bit her lip as emotion bubbled up inside her. *What in the world?* Tears welled in her eyes. *I think I know.*

Some moody song from the forties that was playing on the stereo system quieted. She felt his heart thudding against her breasts in a close embrace. He stepped back and brought out a small velvet box from his jeans pocket. He spoke loud enough so that everyone could hear. "Ladies and gentlemen, I invited you all here to witness what I am about to do firsthand. I can't believe I kept this to myself all night." Will sank to his knees. Several women gasped.

Liberty's mouth dropped in surprise.

"Marry me. Please. Be my bride." He opened the simple box as

she looked on with glee while other gazes in the living room narrowed on them. "I'll treat you right."

"If he's not a good boy, he'll have me to contend with," Kevin from the department piped up. A few laughs rose from the guests. His voice lowered and sounded more serious than before. "But I know Will. He's always a good guy."

"Thanks, Kev." Will returned his attention to Liberty. Taking great care, his strong fingers moved over her delicate ones, and he slipped a shiny diamond and white gold engagement ring up her finger. "There. A perfect fit."

Liberty trembled as she studied it, murmured her delight and held up the second smallest finger of her left hand. *He's such a good man. I love him so much.* She smiled and held her hand up for all to see. "Oh, thank you. I love it."

"Liberty, it's beautiful. Congratulations."

More kudos rose from the group. Pirate barked and hopped up onto the back of a sofa next to her.

Liberty stopped breathing for a moment. "You didn't tell me." She put the back of her hand to her forehead, feeling privileged to be his girlfriend.

"I'm just full of surprises, aren't I?" An amused expression played out on his face. "It's your present, for Christmas." Marriage made so much sense now; their relationship had evolved, loving and communicative over the last few months. The realization that finding the perfect man to love was no longer an elusive wish, but a reality. Smiling, he rose to a standing position and curled his arm around her waist.

Liberty touched her lips to his cheek, and he entwined his fingers with hers. Breathless, she shook her head. "Yes. I'd be honored. You kept the secret very well."

"I take it you're surprised."

"Very." She squealed with delight.

He picked her up off the floor and reinitiated their kiss. The

moody music again spilled into the room, and they slow-danced while their guests stood next to the walls, clapped and toasted the coming wedding.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

On any given day Carol can be found at her computer writing her next novella. She lives in the Midwest with her husband and rambunctious Jack Russell terrier. She loves Italian food and gangster movies and shows, especially Sopranos and Casino.



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