



Under His Protection

Heart Of Justice

Denise A Agnew

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

Blurb

SWAT sniper Trey MacGilvary likes his women wild and hot...

Trey's adventurous streak once served him wrong, now it makes him dangerous to criminals and devastating to female hearts.

Englishwoman Olivia Scott lives a quiet life as a librarian with nothing more exciting to cogitate on than which video to rent on a Friday night and which pie to create for the local bake off. When Trey rescues her from a disturbed man's brutal attack, and she's left injured and vulnerable, he vows she'll be under his protection from that point forward. The enthusiasm and unpredictability of his life stirs erotic passions within her that threaten to reinvent the woman she always thought she was.

Trey finds the plucky, bookish woman intriguing, but believes he isn't interested in long-term commitment. His attraction to her boils sky high and he battles with emerging feelings he never thought he'd have again for a woman. After all, she's returning to England in six months. There's no way they can forge a lasting relationship, even if they wanted to.

As a vengeful criminal resurfaces with revenge in mind and promises to harm everyone he loves, Trey's skills as a sniper, a brother and a lover are tested. As danger closes around her, Olivia must find a core of strength she never knew she had, and capture a red hot passion she never hoped to find.

Dedication

To my husband, Terry. You inspire the creation of my heroes.

Again, to Lena Robinson for her encouragement and excellent critique skills.

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Chapter One

No one ever told Olivia Scott that being an assistant librarian was a hazardous occupation. She let out a small yelp as two huge books thumped down on the library check out counter in front of her. Chills raced up her spine when she looked into a familiar face.

“Hey, Miss Scott.” The man smiled, as his gaze darted to her nametag.

His grin promised a pleasant encounter. She didn’t believe the promise.

Green eyes, ringed by sparse blond lashes, held a smarmy charm. He looked about as amiable as one of her teachers in school back in England. Poker faced one minute, obsequious the next. Though he looked to be twenty something, there was something used up and old in his attitude.

“Mr. Cohen. How nice to see you today. Weren’t you here yesterday?”

And the day before. And the day before that. Five days in a row.

“I was.” He winked. “Found two more books I need to accomplish my goal. Interesting there are so many law enforcement books in the library.” His expression took on an almost petulant, indignant expression, a man unhappy with what he found. “Why do you suppose that is? Police procedures, police tests, how to study to be a law enforcement officer. Overkill, don’t you think?”

Is that a trick question?

She licked her dry lips, wishing she hadn’t forgotten her water bottle in the back office. She could use a nice cold sip to drown her parched throat.

She shrugged. “Maybe they were donated by police officers who decided they didn’t need them anymore?”

“Or by guys who didn’t pass the test and stopped trying?” Mr. Cohen’s voice held no inflection.

She blinked, baffled at his line of conversation. His narrow face, cadaver pale, reminded her of a man who stayed out of the sun because of a long illness.

Or a vampire.

She blinked. October was the month for Halloween and it was only early September.

“Possibly.” She smiled but he didn’t return her grin.

“Damn shame.”

His voice had a sibilant side, a hiss that emerged when he spoke too fast, which he sometimes did. In five days he’d talked to her many times, and every time she felt uncomfortable. Today he wore a ridiculous navy suit a bit too large through the shoulders and too long in the sleeves. Without a tie, the suit and white button down collar shirt was gauche.

So he’s a bit eccentric. You’ve been accused of that before. She calmed her suspicious mind.

“Did you want to check these out, too?” she asked.

“Yeah, I think they’ll help me with my future plans.” He ran one hand through his hair—what was left of it. His greasy, collar length tresses appeared an indeterminate shade of blond. His hair receded back from a high forehead.

“Of course. You said you’re taking the test for the El Torro County Sheriff’s

Department, right?"

He leaned on the counter, too close for comfort. She edged back a step.

"I figure if I take the test this time, they'll have to accept me. I'm not too old. I'm only twenty-five." Tall, broad shouldered, and slim-hipped, no one could deny he was in good shape.

"Of course you will pass. Good luck with that." She reached for the books.

His palm came down with a smack on top of the books, and she jumped. "Don't touch these yet."

A tingle whispered up the back of her neck, a warning she considered ignoring but wouldn't. Something didn't compute with this guy. She'd suspected the first time he'd checked out books on Monday that Cohen's elevator didn't take a happy ride all the way to the top.

This time he didn't smile, and sweat beaded on his upper lip. *How odd.*

Cohen's voice softened with menace. "You're not going to touch these."

He is joking, right?

Once more he leaned forward and captured her gaze. "You *aren't* going to touch these."

"You don't wish to check them out?"

He leaned on the counter, and Olivia's gaze darted around the small branch library. One old lady had disappeared into the back room to use the Internet computers. Two other people had headed into the stacks earlier and hadn't come out. Come to think of it, one was a strapping, tall young man she'd noticed earlier. Her friends in England would have drooled over the gorgeous American. *Who are you kidding, Olivia? You were drooling over him.* It would be hard not to. He had that all-American look that a good gene mix guaranteed. The quintessential rough and tumble American her friends secretly would die to meet, even though they'd probably be outspoken in their abhorrence of his significant testosterone and lack of refinement.

A black sweater had stretched over broad shoulders and muscular arms. Worn jeans had curved over his body intimately but not too tight, and he wore athletic shoes. Chocolate brown hair with red highlights had waved close to his head, not quite military short.

Maybe if Cohen knew another strong man was in the library he wouldn't get any weird ideas.

She nodded at Mr. Cohen. "Whatever you prefer."

"I don't think you know what I want, Miss Scott." His voice lowered, conspiratorial. "No one does. That's part of the problem."

Ooookaaaay.

He licked his lips, a repetitive, nervous habit she'd noticed every day he'd come here. Now it was Friday evening.

All I want is to rent a screaming scary movie, pop my frozen pizza in the microwave, have a glass of sangria, and enjoy the evening. She wasn't a whiner, but she really, really wanted to whine tonight.

Just let this be over. Let him walk out of here.

"I think you should give me what I need, Miss Scott. You're a nice woman. I think you're pretty, too."

"Me?" The word shot from her automatically.

No one had *ever* called her pretty. Pathetic, really, that the first man who'd said it happened to be crackers.

"You're English, aren't you?" he asked.

She smiled, but it wasn't from amusement. People seemed to ask her that twenty times a day here in small town Colorado. She expected it by now, even though she found it terribly obvious as well. "Yes."

His cold gaze shot from her hair coiled in a bun, to the Peter Pan neckline of her conservative white blouse and navy suit. "You're modest. Not a whore like most other women in Gold Rush."

Dumfounded, she couldn't speak. Never good at snappy comebacks, her frustration came to a head. Not only did he creep her out, he must be off his medicine. She reached for her left wrist and her grandmother's old wristwatch. Cabochons of moonstone felt smooth and the silver filigree felt rough but solid under her fingers. Time suspended, or so she thought, as the old Victorian era library stayed quiet. As if it watched their exchange with the interest of a wise sage and would make no comment.

Please, someone. The strong young man or anyone, just come out here and scare this guy away.

"What's the matter, Miss Scott?"

"Mr. Cohen, if you wouldn't mind, I need to finish some paperwork before closing in a half hour—"

Cohen jumped. Straight armed and leapt over the desk at her like a gymnast springing over a horse.

She gasped and fell back. Her heel caught the edge of a plastic runner, and she fell.

Cohen jerked her toward him, a gun coming out of nowhere and nudging under her jaw. His fingers dug into her shoulder as he swung her against his side.

"Stop! What are you doing?" She wriggled against his hold, fear shooting through her body.

"Don't say another word. You don't know the meaning of good customer service, do you?" he growled the question.

Olivia's heart slammed in her chest so hard she almost couldn't breathe. Her pulse raced in her veins. Cold metal poked her in the jaw, his arm tightened painful on her shoulder. A million regrets ran through her mind.

I never bought a dog like I said would.

I never took up painting like I said I would.

I've never...

I never experienced a warm, loving relationship with a man who cares for me. Never had children of my own.

Tears prickled her eyes, anger roiling in her gut with a sickening nausea. Damn it, this wasn't fair. It wasn't.

A dark angel stepped from out of the stacks. The man she'd ogled—what—an hour ago?

"Who the hell are you?" Cohen said to the other man, nudging the underside of her jaw with the weapon.

She winched. "Please, Mr. Cohen—"

"Shut up!" Cohen tightened his grip, transferring his arm to her waist.

She sucked in a pained breath as Cohen's grip tightened.

The man in the dark sweater stopped a good distance away. He lifted his hands as if he'd been told to stick 'em up.

He smiled like Cohen could be his old buddy. "Mark Cohen? Hey, man, is that you?"

Husky and with a richness that throbbed low, his voice inspired steadiness and confidence within Olivia. Her frantic heartbeat slowed, and she managed a deep breath.

Maybe there was light at the end of this dark, horrible tunnel.

"Mark," the man said again, "Buddy, don't tell me you don't recognize me."

Disbelief kept Olivia as immobile as fear. Was this other guy as mad as Cohen? Cohen's breathing quickened. She could feel his chest rising and falling, his palm flattening over her waist. A tremor ran through her. She almost wrinkled her nose as his body odor caught up to her rattled senses.

Cohen's grip loosened. "Do I know you?"

Mystery man nodded, his expression watchful. "It's Trey MacGilvary. You introduced yourself to me at the Sheriff's Department last week. Remember? I remember you from last year, too. When you applied to the police academy."

Cohen's embrace loosened yet again. "You were ... uh ... you were also in high school with me." Cohen sounded calmer.

"That's right." Trey lowered his hands slowly, as if he feared what would happen otherwise.

"You were on the football team."

"Track team."

"So was I."

As Cohen puffed up his chest, Olivia realized Cohen was bigger than Trey, bulkier. Not good. Scary. After all, Trey stood several inches taller than Olivia, his frame powerful.

Trey inched forward as another smile, as charming as Cohen's had ever been, sprouted on Trey's face. "You were better at endurance racing than I was."

A horrible thought ran through her head. What if they both weren't the brightest bulbs in the box? What if they were enacting an unspeakable joke?

That didn't make sense. If this Trey MacGilvary were a law enforcement officer, he wouldn't do such a thing. Would he?

"What is this, old home week?" The words popped from her without thought, and she gasped when Cohen jabbed the gun to her temple.

Brilliant, Olivia. Just keep your mouth shut.

"Whoa, whoa." Trey held his hands up again. "Easy, Mark. The lady hasn't done anything to you. Why do you have a gun to her head? It's time to let her go."

As Trey came toward them with slow, cautious steps, she noted his piercing whiskey brown eyes. For a second her eyes locked with his, and she saw a message there. A solid request for her cooperation. *Trust me.*

Could she?

"Mark, it's time to let her go," Trey said again.

Olivia realized Trey had now inched so far forward as he'd talked that he now stood at the counter. His hands dropped once more.

Cohen's breath came even harder, as if he'd completed a marathon. "She doesn't understand how hard it is."

"None of us do." Trey's gaze snapped to Olivia again. "But she doesn't mean

anything by it, Mark. She means no harm. Let her go and you and I can talk this out.”

Trey’s presence, oddly enough, gave her a fierce sense of protection, as if she could trust him with her life. He wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her. She didn’t know how she knew it, but certainty grew inside until she almost relaxed in Cohen’s grip.

“No.” Cohen brought the weapon down, tracing her right shoulder, then skimming over the wide collar with the tip of the barrel. “I don’t think so. This town had its chance. Gold Rush had its chance and El Torro County didn’t take advantage of my skills. In fact,” Cohen’s voice thickened. “They didn’t treat me fairly. El Torro said I didn’t pass my tests ... any of them.”

Olivia understood now. Cohen had a grudge against the Sheriff’s Department. Yet she knew something more motivated him. Something insidious and organic.

“I understand. You feel slighted. But why would you want to involve Miss Scott in all this? She didn’t hurt you.” Trey moved around the side of the counter, walking and talking, his voice almost soothing. “She’s an innocent. If you want to be in law enforcement you have to protect the innocent.”

Cohen’s arm left her waist as his hand slid, hot and heavy, to her upper back. His weapon remained under her jawbone. “Don’t fuck with me!”

She jumped, her heart banging violently.

“Easy.” Trey continued to move until the counter no longer proved an obstacle. He now stood within the back opening at the small swinging door. “Why don’t you and I take this outside, man to man? You can even keep the weapon on me the whole time. There’s no need to frighten Miss Scott anymore.”

Yes, please. Please take the bait.

She breathed deeply in and out through her nose and struggled to regain calm. Trey edged through the swinging door. Close, so much closer. What would he do? What *could* he do?

“It’s okay, Mark.” Trey nodded, his voice calm and convincing.

“I don’t think so!” Cohen shoved her to the left.

She flailed, trying not to lose her balance. She stumbled, tumbled forward into a chair on rollers, and went head first toward the counter. She cried out, holding her hands to break her fall. Her arms defrayed some impact, but her forehead smacked the counter edge with a stunning thwack that dazzled her vision and her head hurt like hell. She cried out.

She fell on her butt and plastered one hand to her throbbing forehead.

Battle ensued between the men, and the furiousness of it, the chopping quick, knife-like slashing moves took her breath away.

Trey moved so fast she swore he blurred.

Grunts, cries from Cohen, the wham and bam of flesh meeting flesh assaulted her ears.

Before she could do more than blink, Trey held Cohen’s weapon and Cohen lay on his back unconscious.

Trey grabbed a cell phone off his belt and dialed at the same time he went down on one knee next to her.

Eyes serious and filled with genuine concern, the lightning-fast man cupped the side of her head. “You okay?”

She lowered her hand from her forehead. “I am now.”

His gaze peered at her, examining and assessing. "What's wrong? You winced."

"I hit my head on the way down."

"Damn it."

Her gaze darted from Trey to Cohen. "What ... did you...?"

"He'll be out for a while."

He relayed the situation to 911, requested an ambulance, then cut the conversation and returned the cell phone to his belt.

"I don't need an ambulance," Olivia said.

Trey's handsome smile came unexpectedly, and made her heartbeat quicken.

"Maybe not. But he might."

She grinned ruefully in response.

"Can you stand?" Trey helped her up, his hands strong and sure.

She allowed him to ease her into a nearby chair, his hands cupping her elbows.

He brushed hair from her forehead, his touch incredibly gentle. "Yep, you'll have a good bruise here. Better let the ambulance take you in when they get here. You can't take a chance with a head wound."

She glanced at Cohen, still lying unmoving on the floor. "I am not going anywhere in the same vehicle with him."

By now the other library patrons came to the front of the library, eyes wide and faces pale. Questions ensued, murmurs of horror about what had occurred.

Olivia winced as a dull pain throbbed in her forehead. She was just glad to be out of Cohen's clutches and alive.

Trey stood over Cohen and kept watch. When patrons tried to leave, Trey pulled out ID and flashed a badge. "Stay here. I'm off duty but city police will be here to interview you."

"I didn't see anything," one man said.

Trey's expression hardened with impatience. "Doesn't matter. Have a seat over there."

Grumbling, the man settled onto a sofa nearby.

Before long sirens wailed in the night. Unlike those few moments when Cohen held her hostage and time slowed, now things seemed to fly at her in rapid time. The ambulance came and so did city cops. Before long she'd been twenty questioned by authorities and probed by the paramedics until she couldn't wait to forget tonight ever happened, scamper home and hit the sack. From time to time, she noted Trey MacGilvary in the background, and his solid presence gave her comfort. Not that she wanted the comfort. No, she'd rather drown her misery in a movie from her DVD collection, or burrow under the covers with a good book. Anything to pretend tonight hadn't occurred. But nope. Trey stood there, the cops stood there, and the paramedics declared her healthy. She felt A-number one certain she could escape this situation without—

Too late.

She'd forgotten to call the head librarian Cynthia Horvath, but the police hadn't. Six feet tall of broad, undeniable grit, the blond lioness-of-a-woman stalked through the front door and straight for Olivia. Her boss, blue eyes flashing indignation, moved in like an avenging angel ready to extract an answer or else.

"Olivia!" Cyn flowed through the room wearing a multi-patterned olive green and sunflower yellow dress that ended right above her knees.

Look out, here comes the seventies.

* * * *

The man watched from his car in on the street near the library, waiting for *the* cop to leave the building. The last fifteen minutes had eroded his fortitude as cops and paramedics swarmed the area. Glad he'd decided to pull up along the street rather than in the parking lot, he watched the dance of emergency vehicle lights with an almost hypnotic trance.

He rubbed his hands together, as much to warm his fingers as in anticipation of completing his goal.

Completing the goal. Who am I kidding? This is the cake. The icing comes much later.

He savored the waiting, the planning, and knew with each passing day that taking this process slowly would result in a flawless execution.

Execution, indeed.

Night had descended long ago, bringing with it cooler temperatures. He couldn't fault the cold. He longed for October. October had a way of getting under the skin, of bringing out the ghoul in humanity. He grinned. It certainly brought it out in him.

He'd tracked the cop for a couple of days as his courage gained strength. Yet the timing didn't feel quite right. Nope. He needed more. He needed the right time. He needed the rage that ran in his family to engulf him as it had—

No. Don't think about that. In that direction led explosive hate uncontrolled. And what he needed right now was control.

When a patrol officer approached his car, his breathing quickened, and he rolled down the window and nodded and smiled.

"What's going on officer?" he asked with feigned concern.

"Situation at the library." The cop eyeballed him. "Are you waiting for someone in the library?"

Think fast.

"No. I was just about to go in when I saw the lights and heard the sirens."

The cop's expression eased. "We don't know how long this will take to clear up. The library won't reopen until sometime tomorrow at the earliest."

"Damn." He kept his statement mild, hoping his eyes reflected pure innocence. He nodded and smiled. "Okay. I'll head out then."

The cop returned his nod and smile. "Have a good night, sir."

"Night."

The man drew a breath of disappointment as he rolled up the window. No chance to accomplish his goal tonight. Still, the buildup to the ultimate objective felt good, despite interruption.

He froze in his seat as he became aware of a strange stillness coming over the night. He'd never noticed this kind of darkness before. His heart made a slow thump, thump, thump, his pulse throbbing with a drugging precision as he calmed his mind. He'd learned from the shaman long ago how to regulate his system. The daily meditation that promised to calm the demons in his mind.

He wanted to meditate now as the fiend teased at the edge of his control, promising to undo all the careful planning. As his breaths came quicker, he comprehended that he'd

sat here for far too long. Better head out before the cop who'd told him to move on wondered why he remained here.

With regret, he thought of the rifle bundled with other items in the back of his vehicle. He couldn't use it tonight, but there were many more nights remaining in September.

Chapter Two

What an English mouse. But an interesting little creature all the same.

Trey kept a straight face, hands on his hips, and watched Olivia Scott straighten her spine against the approaching onslaught. As the big woman stomped toward them, Trey stepped closer to the young librarian. Olivia had captured Trey's attention minimally the few times he'd come into the library over the last few months. He couldn't remember seeing her more than once or twice until tonight. Stereotypically conservative looking, she wasn't the kind of woman he found attractive.

Looking at her now, he thought maybe he'd made a serious mistake.

Ah, come on, MacGilvary. She isn't your type and this isn't the time.

She had that slightly uptight, dry as bark Englishwoman thing going for her.

Yeah, but that upper crusty English accent, so crystal clear and pretty...

The blustery older blond woman spouted off with, "There better be a good explanation for this commotion in *my* library."

Trey's blood pressure elevated. Her library? Who the hell was she? A benefactor?

Trey wanted to haul Olivia off to somewhere safe, but he held back. Her dark brown hair reminded him of milk chocolate, but shiny and rich, and piled on her head in a pompadour. Her tweedy brown suit with white collar looked two decades too old for her and maybe too big. She couldn't be more than five foot six maybe, with delicate wrists and finely boned hands and short unpainted nails. What captured him the most were her large, expressive brown eyes, small nose and heart-shaped face. She possessed a china-doll quality that reminded him of Victorian photographs and an old-fashioned look that screamed don't touch. Despite her otherwise buttoned-up appearance, shimmering dark eye shadow enhanced her eyes. A smidgen of defiance in an otherwise implacable façade?

A cross librarian if ever there was one.

Huh.

A rosy tint highlighted skin so pale it added to his impression of her fragility. The glow increased over her cheeks as the older, flashier woman stopped in front of her and placed hands on wide hips.

"Everything is fine now. There was an incident," Olivia said before the other woman could speak again. "I'm sorry I didn't call you earlier."

The other woman's chin-length bobbed hair swung back and forth as she surveyed the area. "This is a mess. Chair broken, the counter littered with—" Her gaze darted madly around the room. "—junk. Honestly, this has to be cleaned up." The woman's plump hands gestured in disgust. "Explain again what happened here." She glanced at Trey. "And who are you?"

Trey liked women. A lot. Even bossy, demanding women had his respect. Up to a point. This lady was pushin' it.

He held his hand out and wore his best smile. "Trey MacGilvary, El Torro County Sheriff's Department." He nodded toward Olivia. "I was in the library when Mr. Cohen took Ms. Scott hostage."

"Cynthia Horvath, head librarian." The woman shook his hand with an iron grip.

“How on earth could this have happened?” The bombastic woman’s voice increased in volume and became more astonished. She glared at Olivia. “You were taken hostage? The police said there was a ruckus, but I had no idea...”

Her voice softened, but her face didn’t. Man, oh, man. She couldn’t be that cold could she?

“Miss Scott was accosted by Mark Cohen,” Trey said. “Cohen’s been trying to get onto the force, as well as the Sheriff’s Department, but a psychological profile pointed out problems. We sent him in for counseling, but he’s still trying to get into law enforcement.”

Though he spoke to both the women, he pinpointed the head librarian the most. He didn’t like how she continued to glare at Miss Scott as if she’d committed a crime.

“Mr. MacGilvary came to my rescue,” Miss Scott said, her voice a soft but determined feminine tone.

Her sweet voice sent soft vibrations through Trey’s midsection, stirring strange needs. Her melting brown gaze dipped to the floor under Cyn’s imperial glare. Trey thought he saw physical pain in Miss Scott’s eyes, and it worried him.

“I see.” Cyn nodded. “Well, I’m sorry you got drawn into this, Mr. MacGilvary. Or is it Deputy?”

“Call me Trey. I’m not on duty right now.”

Miss Scott started to open her mouth, but Cynthia grunted and moved away to look at the damage. She engaged a city officer in more questions.

The young librarian’s lips thinned, and he saw anger flash across her face.

Curiosity overran his common sense. “Is there anyone we need to call for you? A husband or boyfriend?”

Her gaze flicked to his, but darted away. “No.”

Straightforward. He liked that in a woman, though he sensed little Miss English Mouse had hidden depths. Too bad he didn’t want to take time to explore them. Nope, not his type.

She stood. His gaze snagged on her full lips as she spoke. “I’d better get this mess cleaned up.”

Trey clasped her upper arm. “Easy.” He smiled at her the same way he’d grinned at Cyn. “I think you’ve had enough tonight. I’ll take you home. The police have your statement, and you can’t work anymore tonight. This is a crime scene for now.”

Standing so close, he caught her scent, a spicy yet sensual aroma that stirred his libido. His cock went half hard. *Holy shit, MacGilvary. Unbelievable. Stop acting like a freakin’ horndog.*

“I have my own car.” Miss Scott didn’t tug from his grip, but her gaze looked wary.

“Sure you’re okay to drive?”

Those full lips tightened again. “Of course.”

He nodded. “I’ll follow you.”

Her spine stiffened. “That isn’t necessary.”

“Humor me. I’ll feel better.”

Her eyebrows lifted, and he thought for a moment she might smile. Nope. No such luck. Her gaze hardened, suspicion drawing her arched eyebrows into a cynical line.

“You’ll feel better?”

“Yep.” He leaned forward a bit, crowding her intimate space, his fingers still

encircling her bicep. "I don't like seeing women mistreated. It sets me off. It'll calm me down to see you home."

A flush bloomed over her cheeks, and her gaze dropped to his mouth for a moment before traveling back to his eyes. He felt a jolt in his midsection. *Whoa*. Was that interest he saw in her eyes? Maybe Miss Upper Crust wasn't as uptight as he thought?

Her mouth opened in a little startled *oh*, but it took her a moment to speak. "Very well. I suppose it's all part of being a cop."

Though the skeptical look didn't exit her expression, she disengaged from his grip to rummage behind the counter for her purse. She came up with a black handbag and slung it over her shoulder.

As they started around the high-counter desk, Cynthia Horvath turned a hard stare toward Miss Scott. "Where are you going? Your shift hasn't ended."

Unbelievable.

Miss Scott turned toward Horvath and fired off with, "There is nothing left to do tonight that can't be taken care of tomorrow, Cynthia. The police have work to do here and I would only be in their way."

"But—"

Trey followed Miss Scott toward the front door, admiration notching upward inside him at Miss Scott's comeback. He sensed feistiness under that cool English exterior that he admired. A strong woman always intrigued him.

Outside, night descended, taking with it the September fall light. Crisp wind blew through his hair. Gold and red leaves scattered in the breeze across the sidewalk and into the parking lot. Miss Scott pulled away from him and headed down the front steps at a quick pace.

"Wait up." He chased after her. "What are you driving?"

"The Honda Civic over there." She halted abruptly and turned toward him in a rush, her eyes filled with something that resembled remorse. "Look, I'm so sorry you got drawn into what happened tonight. You don't have to look after me any longer." She smiled, but the soft curve of her lips trembled and faded within seconds. "I don't want you to think I'm not grateful for everything you did. You saved my life."

Surprise kept him silent for a second before he recovered his voice. "You saved yourself. You were very brave and cool under fire. I've never seen a woman that well contained in a hostage situation."

Once more he saw the skepticism in her eyes. "Oh? Surely you have."

Her formal way of speaking amused him, but it also intrigued him. Plus, he recognized cracks in her control and the lingering fear in her eyes. "Yeah, you were damned brave. Let's get you home."

"You insist on following me home?"

"Yep. What's your address?"

She gave it to him, and with his photographic memory, he filed away the number and street. Within moments, his black SUV followed her onto the street. As he drove, Trey realized the thought of seeing her home meant more to him than simple duty.

He wanted to make sure she reached home safely, yes. But his body reacted like a predator, a man in need of something ... something primal and furnace hot.

Doesn't make any damn sense, old man. He drew in a deep breath as she drove down Main, turned onto Carmelita Street and into a side of town he didn't like one bit.

Shit. She was heading into the Ely district, the part of Gold Rush where bad things happened just because people were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

She lived here?

Damn. Damn.

* * * *

Olivia parked her car in the single space designated for her car in the apartment complex on South Carmelita Street. Under streetlights, the newly renovated apartment complex, once a warehouse, gleamed pink and gray. Cheerful, really.

Okay, not at this time of night in the Ely district. She shrugged and sighed. She was home. Such as it was. She shivered as the memory of Cohen's hateful glare stalked her. Her breath came a bit too fast, and a strange panic lingered and threatened her control. She recoiled at the idea of losing composure. She simply refused.

No. No. I won't become a statistic and obsess over what happened. I won't let this matter.

Still, her heartbeat triple-hammered as she glanced at the cars around her, hulking in the darkness and only illuminated by the apartment parking lights. Something dark and unbidden lurked inside her, wanting to roar out displeasure, feeling angry and used and disappointed in—what? That she hadn't kicked Cohen's ass on her own? No, Olivia Scott never did anything untoward. Unladylike.

Her mother's voice echoed in her ears. *Darling, a lady never admits to extreme feelings in public. Never.*

She certainly had that down to a science. She'd maintained control at the library, even when Cynthia had given her those nasty looks. That she'd almost buckled under to the woman's overbearing personality really twisted her knickers. Olivia, just once, wanted to tell that awful woman to sod off in no uncertain terms. In a truly nasty, officious tone. No. She couldn't afford to lose this job right now.

Headlights swept over her car and then turned away as MacGilvary's SUV pulled into a visitor parking spot across the way behind her.

Bloody Brilliant. She didn't want to do this. The entire time Trey MacGilvary watched over her in the library she'd bounced from emotion to emotion. First came embarrassment. After all, did he think she couldn't take care of herself? Second, straight into amazement at his attentiveness. A man had *never*, quote never, protected her like this cop. He'd saved her from Cohen, no matter what modesty forced him to say, no matter that he worked in law enforcement and was paid to protect and serve. Then he'd stepped in front of Cyn's obnoxiousness more than once and deflected the blowhard woman's callousness. Part of that stung. She didn't need him watching out for her.

Before she could do more than unlock the car and shoulder her handbag, the cop stood at the driver's side door. Quick and efficient. She'd noticed that about him, including too many other things she'd rather *not* notice. Like how wonderful he'd smelled when he stood near her, how his protectiveness stirred feminine feelings she struggled to reject. The way those thickly-lashed dark eyes expressed fierceness or absolute warmth and gentleness.

Those qualities never combined in one man.

At least never in her limited experience.

What does it matter? I'm going back to England in six months. There's no future in

becoming interested in an American.

"Hey," he said as she locked the car and headed for the sidewalk.

"I'm home now so you don't have to stay."

"Uh-uh. Where's your apartment? I'm walking you to your door."

Bossy.

She bristled and almost snapped out with a never mind. Her father's chauvinistic leanings made her hypersensitive to men who showed too much machismo.

She sighed. "This way."

As he followed her to the third floor, his presence behind her added a security she'd never experienced since living here. One way or the other, she needed to grow a pair, as her American friends would say. Of course feeling safe and being safe totaled two different things.

"Damn." His rough-edged voice rumbled close behind her as they made it to the third story landing. "Don't they have lights up here?"

"They've been out for two weeks. We're trying to get the superintendent to fix them, but he keeps ignoring us. Doesn't make any sense for a nice place like this."

"It is nice ... just not in a great area of town."

She opened her flat door. "It's very nice of you to walk me to the door, Deputy MacGilvary, but I'm fine. I have a black belt in karate."

"What?"

She didn't miss the unqualified disbelief in his voice. She glanced at his surprised face and smiled. "I'm having you on."

A charming grin flashed over his features. "Good one."

"I don't have too many good ones on file, but sometimes I come up with the proper comeback."

His eyebrows tilted in surprise. "Proper?"

"You're not one of those annoying people who can always think of the perfect comeback, are you?"

"Yeah, pretty much."

She sighed. "Bollocks." Before he could speak, she took the words from his mouth. "Don't say it. Olivia Scott does not have a potty mouth." She winked. A really, really bad attempt at a wink. "Surprise, she does."

His chuckle followed her as she opened the door and flipped on the light. "I don't think saying 'bollocks' qualifies you as a potty mouth. Especially not in the United States."

He walked in behind her without asking, and flash fire annoyance combined with a weird excitement. She was tired. That was it. "It is possible I'm too knackered to care."

She closed the door and locked it. She turned to the cop and his gaze danced over her with interest.

"Something wrong, Mr. MacGilvary?" She placed her purse on the phone table near the couch. "You're staring at me like one of those museum oddity pieces on display to fascinate the masses."

He broke into a big smile and laughed. His hands went to his waist. "You *are* fascinating."

"Why?"

He crossed his arms and tilted his head to the side slightly. "I don't meet many

Englishwomen in my line of work or in this town.”

Her mouth twitched in a smile. “I daresay that’s a good thing.”

His gaze darted around her apartment, then his eyes narrowed. “Nice place. Homey and comfortable.”

“Thank you.”

“Casual, but there are plenty of pictures of family here.” He walked over to the small bookcase with pictures lined up on the top shelf. “Cozy.”

He turned back to look at her, those eyes suddenly assessing her with a curiosity that sent a warm wave of interest into her belly.

Uncomfortable with his scrutiny, she slid her suit jacket off her shoulders and laid it over her forearm.

“I’ll bet there’s even a little old lady in the apartment complex that you buddy around with on occasion,” he said.

She made a scoffing noise, her disbelief and surprise warring with an instinct to lie. “Whatever makes you say that?”

He shrugged. “I get hunches about people. Call it a cop’s gut feeling.”

She smiled. “I’m friends with Madhula Chopra two doors down. We play poker sometimes. She’s in a wheelchair but I don’t take care of her. We’re friends.”

“Were you supposed to play poker tonight?”

Her hands went to her cheeks. “Oh, blast. I forgot.” She looked down for her watch. “Oh no. Where is my watch?” She looked around.

“Did you leave it at the library?”

Dismay curled inside her. “Maybe it came off in the struggle with Cohen. But it had a safety catch on it. It was my grandmother’s.”

He strode toward her, and she held her ground. “Don’t worry. You’ll find it tomorrow.”

Tears prickled her eyes, and that annoyed her more than anything. “It means a lot to me.”

“I’m sorry.” His eyes softened and so did his voice.

He could have spoken other platitudes, made additional noises of sympathy. Instead he watched her with those intense brown eyes, and somehow she believed she would find the watch. The warmth of his expression sent desire jumping around inside her. Any red blooded woman would find his attentiveness and kindness stimulating. Plus, the way he looked at her didn’t feel detached or clinical, but as if he wanted to root around in her mind and understand things about her even she didn’t know. His gaze dipped to her mouth and held for a long second. Her belly warmed, and she felt her cheeks go hot.

Shrugging off her disappointment at losing the keepsake watch, she retrieved the phone on the breakfast counter and dialed the number she knew by heart.

“Maddie, it’s Olivia.”

“Hey there, Jaan, how are you. You’re late. I was about to get worried.”

Her friend’s Indian accent lingered in her words, but thirty years of living in the United States had dulled the sounds. Her nickname for Olivia, translated roughly to life, spirit, sweetheart, and a few other endearments. She preferred Olivia call her Maddie rather than Madhula, saying that she liked the simple name. Maddie always said it made life easier since few people could pronounce, much less spell, Madhula.

“I’m fine,” Olivia said. “There was some trouble at the library earlier tonight and I

just got home.”

“Trouble? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re certain?”

“Absolutely. How are you?” Olivia threw a glance at Trey, who sat on the couch, head tilted back and eyes closed.

“Playing solitaire and watching a rerun of Magnum P.I. They don’t make men like that anymore.”

Olivia giggled, a soft sound, but definitely a giggle. She put a hand over her mouth and glanced at Trey again. A curious smile touched his mouth as he watched her.

“Well, they don’t,” Maddie said, assurance in her voice.

“I’m not so sure about that.” Olivia’s gaze, ever restless it seemed, strayed to Trey again. His attention didn’t waver, as if he could ferret the meaning from her words.

“Why? Oh, ho! Did you find a new man?” Maddie’s voice turned conspiratorial.

“I never had an old one.”

“Pfft. That’s hogwash and you know it. What about that nice young man in the glasses who works at the library?”

“Dean? Oh, no. He’s gay.”

“My goodness. Well, then. Hmm. We’ll find someone for you, Jaan. Don’t worry.”

“I’m not looking for anyone, Maddie.”

“Men don’t just drop into your life out of nowhere.”

Olivia smiled. “Sometimes they do.”

“Wait—did you meet a man tonight? During the commotion in the library?”

“No hiding anything from you, Maddie.”

Maddie hooted. “That’s wonderful. Who is he? What does he do?”

“It’s not like that. He’s not my type.”

“Right. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Olivia sighed. “Can I tell you tomorrow? It was a rough day.”

“Sure, doll. You sleep tight.”

After Olivia hung up and swung back to Trey, she pondered her friend’s statement that men didn’t fall into a woman’s life. Well Trey had, but not the way Maddie meant or wanted for Olivia.

Trey stood, and once more wandered her way with that casual walk that screamed sensual male. “How’s your friend?”

“She’s good.”

He moved in, his attention on her razor sharp, a touch of teasing in his eyes. “Who isn’t your type?”

She rubbed the back of her stiff neck. “You’re being inquisitive, Deputy MacGilvary, or is this part of the investigation?”

Not a drop of irritation flared in his eyes. If possible, he looked even more intrigued and amused. “Nosy.”

“Maddie is always trying to set me up with a man. She takes every mention of a male in my life and tries to twist it into a tryst.”

“Tryst? Didn’t think anyone used that word anymore.”

Irritation made her lean back against the kitchen island. “I use a lot of words other people don’t. It’s the librarian in me. Besides the fact I’m English, which really tends to

confuse people here.”

He grinned. “I’ll bet it does. Are you learning any American phraseology?”

“Quite. I’ve learned that most haven’t the slightest idea what I mean when I say blinkered. They think I mean someone is drunk when it means someone who is narrow minded.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Don’t sound so skeptical. It’s true.”

“I believe you.” He planted his hands on his hips. “Now back to my original subject. Maddie thought you’d met a man tonight?”

“I told her I did, just not in the way she thought.” Perhaps she needed to set him straight right away. “Dominant men are not my type. My father is extremely overbearing and overprotective. If it were just because he loved me, I’d have some understanding. But he doesn’t think most women have a brain in their head and has implied many times that I don’t.” She placed her hands on her hips. “Add that to the fact that I’m only in the United States another six months. It’s not like I’m immigrating here. Dating an American isn’t a good idea.”

Trey frowned deeply, and she saw something in his eyes, a primal shift that warned her not to let down her guard. “I am protective of women.” He shrugged. “But it sure as hell isn’t because I think they’re stupid or unable to take care of themselves. Maybe it’s good you met a man tonight.” He reached out and his finger gently traced her eyebrow just under where her head had hit the counter. “Is there anyone you can call to come and stay with you? I heard the paramedics say if you didn’t go to the hospital you needed someone to check on you throughout the night.”

“No. And I wouldn’t disturb Maddie with something like that.”

His gaze examined her with precision she would expect from law enforcement, thorough and relentless. Was he one of those people who never missed anything?

This close—and he stood way closer than she found comfortable—MacGilvary towered over her. She wasn’t short, but she guessed he stood near six foot two or three. She couldn’t say for certain.

With unease she said, “There’s no one I can call. I’m fairly new to Gold Rush. I’ve been here six months on a library exchange program.”

Long enough to make more than one friend. She could almost hear his wheels spinning.

He nodded. “I’m staying then.”

Surprise jolted her. “You’re what?”

“I’m staying.”

She wavered between saying yes too fast and refusing to allow him to stay. “Show me your badge again.”

He laughed, his head tilting back, eyes dancing with merriment. The rich, deep sound of his laughter generated hot spirals in her stomach. *Oh, no. You’re turned on, Olivia. Admit it.*

No. She couldn’t be attracted to a man she’d just met a short time ago ... at least not one like this. A powerful, sexy man. Under that sweater, his chest looked strong and sculpted, and his biceps were carved just right.

You’re barmy, Olivia. Barmy.

“I’m not going to hurt you, Olivia. I’m a cop.” He flipped out his wallet and revealed

the badge and identification once more. "And even if I wasn't a cop, I'd still never hurt you."

She waved her hand in dismissal. "I've seen your credentials. The city cops knew you."

He held one hand up. "I'm not leaving you alone with a head wound."

"You don't know me from Eve, Mr. MacGilvary." She moved away from him, her breath catching as she caught a whiff of his clean, manly scent. "What if I'm a dangerous femme fatale?"

He glanced around the room, assessing before his penetrating gaze returned to pinpoint her. "I've dealt with femme fatales before. They don't scare me."

"They should."

His carved, dangerous-looking mouth charmed her with another cocky grin. "I see you as more of a Moneypenny rather than a Bond girl."

"Gee thanks."

As she eased onto the side of her bright royal blue couch, he stayed put in the middle of the room. "Look, I'll leave if you insist. But I'm not getting any damned sleep tonight anyway. I'll be up all night worrying."

Astounded, she shook her head. "Do you always treat crime victims this way?"

"No. Just you."

"Why?"

"Because you're vulnerable. There's no family member or friend to care for you. Plus, I sense you aren't as together as you're trying to show."

She scratched her nose. "All I want is to curl up in bed with a DVD."

"Done. You head to bed, and I'll crash on the couch. I'm harmless, I promise. I'll check on you in a couple of hours."

Olivia couldn't help but smile as he tossed her an innocent grin that didn't reach his eyes. Instead his gaze swallowed her up—whether he knew it or not, he looked at her with heady, steady interest. She didn't believe it—*couldn't* believe it. Gorgeous cops did not find her attractive.

She closed her eyes, the day's events spinning around in her head like a top.

"Harmless. Right."

"You okay?"

Her eyes popped open. "I'm fine." She sighed. "All right. You can stay. But let me say again you're one bossy, stubborn man."

"I've been called worse."

She nodded. "No doubt. As a cop I'll bet you take a lot of abuse from the public."

"Sometimes on a daily basis. I could write a book on excuses for speeding."

Olivia erected her bravery and stood. "I'll get you a pillow and blanket."

Once in the hallway, she dug through the small linen closet, all the while cogitating on the fact a man would sleep on her couch tonight. That thought blew her away. A unique experience for her—men never slept on her couch. Never slept in her bed. At twenty-nine she'd started to feel like a reconstituted virgin.

Sex.

Oh, God. She wouldn't think about shagging simply because one of the most intriguing men she'd met in a long time stood here right now in her apartment.

What *was* sex anyway? She didn't know anymore. She realized she'd been staring

into the linen closet without doing anything. How long had she stared at her grandmother's quilt like an idiot? She grabbed the quilt, a blanket and pillow and marched back to the living room.

Trey had pulled back the curtains on her front window and stared into the night. Long shadows mixed with moonlight and framed his big body. Danger seemed to surround him.

He turned back from the window, and this time his face lacked that underlying humor. Seriousness darkened those eyes into cobalt. "Hey, if you've got a nightly routine I'm disturbing, go about your business." He walked toward her and removed the quilt, pillow and blanket from her arms. "Don't let me interfere." He glanced at his watch. "It's nine o'clock. Early for me to sleep. I only need four hours of sleep a night anyway."

"Four hours? I wish I were like that. I need a solid eight or I feel like a zombie."

Trey arranged his pillow on the couch. "Whatever works to keep us movin', eh?"

"Oh, dear, I should have brought you a sheet."

"Nope, don't worry about it. Don't need it. I can sleep anywhere, anytime. I'm the master of catnaps."

"I thought you only needed four hours of sleep."

"Four hours total. If I sleep one hour here, I only need three hours some other time during the day."

"Wow. I've never heard of anyone like you before."

He folded his arms and walked toward her. A warm smile broke over his face. "I hope not. After me they broke the mold."

She yawned.

"Damn, and here I thought you were tellin' me I'm an interesting guy."

Heat rose in her cheeks. "Well ... um ... I'm sure you are. I ... uh ... think I'll go to bed."

She turned away before embarrassment swamped her.

"Sleep well." Trey's deep voice rumbled as she headed down the hallway.

Chapter Three

Cohen held Olivia tight to his body with the gun pressing to her temple. Her skull ached. The library wavered around her, the bookshelves too close, the counter lower to the ground than it should be. Crazy. Even the lighting flickered, the enormous cast iron chandelier dangling over the counter with precarious closeness. Crowded and with growing urgency, she tried to move. Nothing happened. Fear strangled her breath. Her limbs stayed immobile. Maybe this wasn't a dream. Maybe this was all real and everything else in her life imaginary. She struggled with Cohen and shouted. A loud blast went off, and she froze. He'd shot her. Shot her in the head and killed her—

Olivia broke from her nightmare with a gasp. She sat up, heart pounding and breath short. Her face felt damp, and she palmed her cheeks. Tears. Her eyes burned as if she'd cried a long time, and not just during an annoying dream. She fumbled for the bedside lamp, and as light illuminated the room in a rosy glow, she grabbed for her water bottle before remembering she hadn't brought one to bed. She'd forgotten.

Because of Trey MacGilvary. His off the cuff humor, his masculine presence disrupted her routine. Her safe, sanctified pattern. She could return to bed, but the dream haunted her. She glanced at the clock. Barely two hours had passed since she'd fallen asleep. Unnerved and desperately wanting a drink of water, she decided to head to the kitchen. With measured movements, she eased open the bedroom door and used the hall nightlight to navigate. She'd reconnoitered through her own apartment in the dark more than once, so making it to her fridge would prove a piece of cake. Moonlight streamed through the open drapes on the sliding glass door and threw eerie daggers across the living room floor. Trey sprawled across the couch, one foot on the floor, one arm thrown over his eyes. She almost tiptoed into the kitchen. After easing open the fridge door, she snagged a bottle of water.

"Olivia?"

She jumped about a foot as Trey walked toward her through the darkness. Momentary panic leapt into her throat—after all, he was a man. A big, strong man and—
Half naked.

She held the water bottle to her chest as she watched him ease through the moonlight. She grappled for the light switch and snapped it on.

Big mistake.

Illuminated, Trey represented a clear sexual threat. Her gaze darted up and down his body. His wide shoulders, powerful arms, and impressive chest took her breath away. A sprinkling of dark hair covered his molded pectorals, and skated down a six-pack stomach and disappeared into ... open jeans. Yep, the button on his jeans hung open, but thank God they were zipped.

Trey's gaze pinpointed her like a laser, and those eyes heated as he started at her head and slipped downward with thorough assessment.

Oh, bugger. I should have worn something old and ratty.

Instead she'd forgotten she had a guest and had jumped into her usual nightwear, a silky sleeveless nightie that cupped her breasts and only came down to the tops of her thighs.

I might as well be naked.

She crossed one foot over the other, aware of the cold floor and her vulnerability.

"Everything all right?" He hesitated at the kitchen entrance as if he worried he might spook her.

Too late, he already had.

"I'm sorry if I woke you up," she said.

"You didn't. I can't sleep, and it's all your fault."

"What?"

"Sometimes, after a SWAT operation, I get keyed up."

Shamelessly, the girly part of her melted. "You're on a SWAT team?"

"Yep."

Right. That was *hot*.

"I didn't know the Sheriff's Department had a SWAT team."

He nodded. "Yep. It's not a full time thing, just when there's a situation that requires SWAT assistance. Normally I work out to bleed off some of the tension after a big situation like tonight. I go to the gym and practice Keysi with friends."

"Keysi?"

"Keysi Fighting Method. It's a type of martial arts. My brothers and I know it and work out together sometimes."

"You should have worked out. You didn't have to stay with me."

He smiled, this time with a teasing edge. "No, I didn't have to. I wanted to. Don't worry, I'll live. It was worth it to stay here and make sure you're okay."

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling, exasperated. "Other than my father, you are the most annoyingly protective man I've ever met."

He stuffed his hands into his jeans. "You think I'm bad, you should see my brothers. My oldest brother Mick dotes on his fiancée like you wouldn't believe. My younger brother Craig is like a bulldog. He doesn't take flack off anyone, and when it comes to women, he's extremely protective."

Overbearing, probably. She knew the type. Half the men she knew in England were like that.

He stepped over the threshold into the kitchen. "Did you have a bad dream?"

Startled by his insight, it took her a moment to answer. "No. Why?"

"Your hand is shaking."

She looked down at the hand clutching the water bottle and it trembled the tiniest bit. "Oh." Holding the icy bottle to her flaming cheek, she fixated on the tile beneath her bare feet. "All right. I had a bad dream."

Instead of asking about the content of the dream, he came even closer, until she took in his delicious, earthy male scent. His hair stuck up in several places, unruly and thick. Untamed and glorious. Those eyes drew her in, their scrutiny disturbing and flattering at the same time. His gaze went to her hair, which tumbled over her shoulders and down to mid back.

To chase away her nervousness, she unscrewed the bottle and took a long sip.

He stopped within a foot of her, gaze concerned. "How's the head?" Before she could answer, he tilted her chin for an examination. The brush of his fingers along her skin generated sweet sparks in her belly. "You're already getting a bruise above your left eyebrow. Your eyes look okay, though."

“My eyes?”

A small grin flitted over his lips and he released her. “Sorry. I have some EMT training. Quite a few guys on SWAT do. I was checking your pupils. Head injury you know.”

“Thank you, but I’m good. I don’t even have a headache now. Really, I may have hit my head, but I fell mostly on my bum.”

Another cocky but sweet grin spread over his face, and a blush heated her face. His gaze darted downward, as if he wouldn’t mind seeing her bum right now.

“Right. Lovely,” she said by way of defense, not at all certain what was either right or lovely about the situation.

As she stared at Trey, her gaze snagged on his chest. *God, but I need to give these hormones a lobotomy.* Warmth coiled low in her belly, and she recognized high-test arousal. Deep, primal interest that came from somewhere she thought she’d shoved aside for a long time. That silly lust that consumed a body on short notice, demanding feral attention, flushing the cheeks, warming spots that hadn’t blasted off in so long she couldn’t say for certain if they existed anymore.

“You want to talk about it?” he asked.

Her lust for his bod?

“About what?” She managed to squeeze the innocuous question out of her throat.

“What happened tonight? Your dream?”

Avoidance worked well, and she’d become an expert at it, but a new urgency inside her craved a listener. Anyone to listen. No, not anyone. Someone she could trust. Though Olivia didn’t know Trey well, she figured she could trust him as much as anyone. Trey had reliable and dangerous all over him. How could one man be both?

She walked past him and into the living room. Stopping in a ray of moonlight, she gazed at the full moon outside. “Do you believe more crimes are committed during a full moon?”

“Planning on committing any?”

At first her sense of humor didn’t come on line, and his question caught her off guard. She smiled. “Oh, well, you found me out.”

“It’s my Spidey sense.”

“Actually, I prefer Batman. Smoldering looks and scarred psyche.”

Trey stopped right behind her, and his heat touched her from head to toe even though their skin didn’t touch. She shivered.

“No superhero here. I’m just a cop. As for the full moon, I know it’s unscientific, but I’ve seen pretty weird stuff happen during a full moon. Tonight at the library was a good indication.”

Shifting away from his heat, she sat at her small cherry wood dining table. Trey settled not across from her, but right by her side. Obviously this man’s sense of personal space was smaller than hers. As she glanced up at him, she twirled the bottle around on the tabletop, letting the emerald green damask tablecloth absorb the condensation.

“Was the dream frightening?” Trey asked, his gaze probing for answers she didn’t know whether to reveal. “You can trust me.”

Trust. Wow. Maybe his Spidey sense was good for something if he could read her mind like this. She explained the dream in full detail, and he listened without interruption.

When Olivia halted, she took a long sip of her water, parched and eager to cleanse the words from her mouth.

Trey leaned his forearms on the table. "I can see why you're restless. If I'd had a dream like that, it would keep me awake, too."

She spoke without thought. "You? A big SWAT cop?"

Even in the semi-dark, she saw hurt flicker through his eyes. "I'll be disappointed if you tell me you believe in stereotypes. SWAT cops have balls of steel and no emotions? We're trained killers with automatic weapons?"

Regret slicked deep. She drew in a deep breath. "I'm sorry. That was ... I wasn't thinking. You're right. I used a stereotype. My last boyfriend, Randy, was quite the ... he was one for overstating his abilities. For exaggeration and bombastic claims. He was always trying to shield me from things."

"In other words, like your father."

"Right."

He grinned, forgiveness as clear in his eyes as the hurt had been a few seconds before. He flexed his biceps and winked. "There is one thing that isn't exaggeration. The balls of steel part is right."

She almost choked on a swig of water, sputtering and coughing. "God, you're something else, Trey MacGilvary."

His broad grin refused to abate as he wagged his eyebrows. "Something else all right. But no one's ever told me *what*. Some women get off on the idea of a man with a big weapon."

She stared at him, mouth open. "I'll pretend I didn't hear you say that and that you didn't mean what you said. I'll assume it's the fact you're American and I'm English and the language barrier is the problem."

A twinkle in his eyes told her he understood the double entendre. A flush filled her cheeks as an image came to mind of Trey's ... *weapon*. She wondered, with a boldness she hadn't experienced in some time, if his cock would be large and thick. How it would feel inside her.

Oh, God.

She flushed again, and angry at her over-the-top reactions to a man she barely knew, she concentrated on the small scar along his left temple, an almost hair-thin line. "Is that scar on your forehead a well-earned badge?"

His gaze clouded, and she marveled at how his eyes reflected so many emotions without hesitation. He didn't seem to hide much of anything. "Yeah. A few months back a bullet grazed my forehead."

She frowned, trying to imagine the world without him in it. She wasn't sure she liked the thought one bit. He was so...healthy. So full of life. "I'm glad you're all right..."

"Thanks. I was damn lucky."

This time humor didn't return to his expression, and Olivia sensed his discomfort with the subject. Maybe Trey had secrets, too.

She yawned and stood. "I'd better get some sleep. Work tomorrow comes early."

Trey also stood. "Wait. You're not working tomorrow are you?"

"I'm sure Cyn would say something about it if I didn't. In case you didn't notice, she's something of a..."

"Tyrant?"

She nodded, not willing to put a finer point on it. “She runs a tight ship at the library.”

He snorted. “That’s a nice way of putting it.”

Olivia shrugged and went back into the kitchen. She tossed her empty water bottle into the trash under the sink. “The library runs well.”

“You like your job?”

“I’m content with it. I was in a position like Cyn’s back home in England. It was high pressure and I—”

Don’t go there. Just don’t go there.

Trey blocked the exit, his stance loose but sure, that powerful, delicious chest tantalizing her in ways she hadn’t felt in so long. Maybe never.

Once more Trey absorbed all the space in her small kitchen, his physical presence only part of the equation. No, his personality alone gathered her near, demanded she feel him, smell him ... oh, God. *Taste him.*

She took a chance. A huge chance. She walked toward him. He didn’t move.

When she stopped in front of Trey, their bodies so close, she smiled. “What are we doing here, Deputy MacGilvary?”

His gaze danced over her face, heat undeniable as a caress. His attention landed on her lips. “Trey. Call me Trey.”

As she stared up at him, she dared him to touch her, to do something that would wipe away the barrier between them.

Trey took the challenge, one hand drifting up to cradle her face. “You’re dangerous, Olivia.”

“Why?” Her breath came shorter.

The blaze in his eyes increased. “Because I want to kiss you.”

She didn’t pull away, didn’t deny the spark that inexplicably danced and flared.

As his mouth hovered over hers, his breath puffed against her lips, hot and arousing. She lingered on the precipice of unruly, exotic emotions beyond her experience. She craved that knowledge. Died for it. A place in her stomach reacted, throbbing low, burning with a desire she hadn’t felt in—

Have never felt.

With exquisite gentleness, his mouth found hers. Coaxing, he brushed with lingering tenderness. His mouth touched with one sweep, then another. Each foray, each search brought their lips into deeper contact. He melded their lips together, and her mind went blank. Hard, tight muscles flexed under her hands as she searched over his chest. Crisp hair teased her fingers and ignited primal needs. His fingers plunged into the loose tumble of curls at her neck. Suddenly she pressed up against a wall of male strength, his body overwhelming with size, heat and strength that never seemed to end. He wrapped that maleness around her, one arm gliding around her waist, his other hand still anchored behind her neck. Their kiss went on and on, and when his tongue mated with hers, arousal shot straight to the heat gathering like a knot in her stomach. She moaned and clutched at his shoulders, again his tongue plunged, demanding a response. His hand slid over her nightie toward her breast.

Searing heat poured through her as his fingers pressed so gently, the weight of his big hand closing over her. Trey’s thumb swept upward and passed over her nipple with the lightest of caresses. She gasped into his mouth as sweet fire prickled sensitive flesh

and her nipple beaded tight. Her hips arched into his, and she couldn't ignore the long, thick press of his erection. A low rumble came from his throat as his hand cupped her butt and squeezed. He bent his knees a little and there—

Oh, God. Even her panties couldn't protect her from the press of his cock against her clit. Heat burst through her at the realization of where this could head. His thumb tested her nipple again, then he lightly pinched. She groaned into his mouth as hot arousal stirred like wildfire in her body. She moved without restraint, wanting, needing, desiring. His cock pressed between her legs again. Wild imaginings burst inside her, the fantasy fueling more liquid desire. She ached to wrap her legs around him and feel his naked flesh inside hers. To understand a passion she'd never known. Her tongue mated with his, asking, taking, receiving. His fingers, so gentle, teased her nipple again and again, gently plucking and brushing. She shuddered in pure excitement.

Too much. Too quick.

She drew back from his kiss with a gasp and pushed gently at his chest. As he released her, she slipped from his arms. Trey ran both hands through his hair, his eyes hot, his chest rising and falling as he heaved a breath. His eyes reflected amazement, as if she'd stunned him.

But she was the bewildered one. This man had swept her away, made her forget the last few hours trauma, made her long for a connection she hadn't considered in a long time.

Her breathing came fast, a heat wave rolling over her as the desire she felt remained. "I'm sorry."

Trey reached up and swept a length of hair behind her ear. "For what?"

"That was ... I shouldn't have led you on like that."

"Were you?" His voice held the husky tone of arousal, as if he couldn't shake it off. "You didn't mean to kiss me?"

"I ... you kissed me."

He grinned. "Yeah, I did. Look, I think it's been building between us." He sighed. "But you're right. This probably wasn't the best thing for us to do. You suffered trauma a few hours ago, and you need to take it easy and sort things out."

There. He had that right. Suitably returned to sense, she nodded and started past him.

He clasped her forearm gently. "Hey, it's okay. Things happen."

Things happen. Great. He called one of the most amazing kisses of her life a 'thing.' He probably experienced kisses like that at least once a week or more.

Not sure how she wanted to respond to that, she nodded. "Good night."

After she closed the door to her bedroom, she leaned back against it and closed her eyes and let the embarrassment wash over her.

God. I told him I don't want to get involved with an American and yet I kissed him. She closed her eyes and admonished herself. "*Get your kit sorted out, Olivia.*"

Chapter Four

Olivia shuffled into the kitchen at five a.m. the next morning, and Trey thought she was the cutest damn thing he'd seen in a long time. She yawned, covering her mouth politely. His groin tightened as he recalled his first sight of her last night in the kitchen. A white terry cloth robe was tightly belted at her waist, but he remembered the red, silky slip she wore under it. And her little, painted red toenails. Jesus, did he ever remember it.

He never imagined her wearing a skimpy thing like that to bed. No, this was the type of woman who wore flannel pajamas, not material that looked soft and clung to her full breasts, rounded hips and revealed a length of shapely, pretty legs. When he'd stared at all that beautiful flesh barely covered, he'd noticed her nipples poking against the fabric, and everything male in him had reacted with primal instincts.

A sexy librarian who wore conservative outerwear yet was a sex goddess at night? Who knew? He grinned.

This morning her hair fell in waves over her shoulders. Parted on the side, the non-descript dark brown wouldn't win a fashion model award. Yet he remembered the thick, silky strands against his fingers. God, he wanted to feel that hair sliding over his body, down over his cock.

Jeez, MacGilvary, there you go again. Maintain, man. Maintain.

When he'd woken her up every two hours by turning on her bedroom light, he'd leaned over her bed and checked her eyes to make sure she was all right. She'd always had the covers pulled up around her neck, and that was probably a damned good thing. Each and every time she'd looked self-conscious, and he wondered at the contrasts he noticed in her. Half sexy, confident woman, half mouse and demure.

She's too much like Danella. Danella the delicate and charming. Danella the so-called innocent, calm and collected. The one time he'd let his guard down, had fallen in love with a sweet face, he'd gotten taken for a damned ride.

Better to stick with women who laid it out on the table. Keep things simple.

Sex. No commitment. A hell of a lot safer.

If she were only here six months, that would insure that a sex only arrangement would work. But her sweetness, her vulnerable side called to something inside him that scared the shit out of him. If she was too much like Danella he couldn't take the chance she'd rip his heart out. Nope. He couldn't do it.

She stopped at the kitchen entrance. As he stared at her, a small expression of self-consciousness spread over her features. She tightened the belt on her robe.

"Hey." He continued scrambling eggs. "How do you feel?"

Blinking slowly, she licked her lips, and cleared her throat. "Splendid."

"Head all right?"

"It's fine. A little sore in that one spot." She moaned, and the sultry, sexy sound eased through his body like a fine whiskey. "Is that coffee I smell?"

"Just made. You don't drink tea?"

She rolled her eyes and tossed him an impudent smile. "Not all English drink tea. Actually, I've never been fond of tea, especially not iced. I much prefer having a coffee, thank you."

He grinned. "Got it. Want some breakfast? I made plenty."

She glanced around, eyes growing a little wide.

He grimaced as he ladled scrambled eggs onto a white plate and snatched bread out of the toaster. "Sorry. My mother says I can't butter bread without trashing the whole kitchen. Sit down. I'll bring it out to you." As she ambled to the table, he continued, "What do you take in your coffee?"

"Cream, please."

After adding cream, he handed her the coffee and then settled across from her at the table. "I know, don't say it." He spread strawberry jam on his toast.

"Say what?"

"I was presumptuous making breakfast. I missed dinner last night, and I'm starving."

A warm smile eased over those soft, kissable lips. Lips he'd tasted and craved with a furious ache. "You were presumptuous. But that's all right. I would've offered you breakfast anyway."

"Good. I'm not in the doghouse."

"Not yet." She bit into her buttered toast with a relish that sent hot arousal rushing to his groin.

Holy shit. Watching a woman eat had never turned him on like this. He tried thinking about work and what he needed to do later today, attempted counting backward in his head. Didn't matter. Last night's encounter had awakened more than protective instincts. It didn't make sense, though. She wasn't his usual type at all. Too serious. Still, he'd thought he'd go nuts when he'd felt her full breast in his palm and hard nipple between his fingers. He longed to feel her hot, wet center wrapped tightly around his cock.

As she chewed and gazed out a window, his attention riveted on her throat, the pale skin, her jaw line, her nose, the curve of her small ear. *Oh, man.* His body refused to ignore the attraction.

Kissing her had been a big mistake he wouldn't repeat.

Not if he was going to lose his mind over this little, cute English mouse.

Olivia's gaze met his as a pink glow touched her cheeks. "You're staring."

He grinned. "Can't help it. You're pretty."

Ah, shit, MacGilvary. Way to go.

The pink in her cheeks deepened, and she averted her gaze. "Thank you."

Olivia polished off her breakfast in record time as silence threatened to stretch into infinity.

She stood. "I should get to work."

"I thought you weren't going today."

"No. *You* said I wasn't going."

He winced. "I did, didn't I?"

"Yes." A smile warmed her expression. "I'm working late afternoon to early evening for another week before I switch to days. But Cyn will want me to come in early and help with cleanup."

Damn Cyn. The woman should clean up the mess herself.

As he helped her place dishes in the dishwasher, her silence worked on him, and gave him more to think about. He'd acted like a Neanderthal kissing her—women like her didn't react to full frontal passion with wild enthusiasm and a "fuck me" attitude like women he sometimes dated. He'd lost his mind. Time to screw his head on straight.

As she turned on the dishwasher, he said, "Look, I need to apologize."

She turned to him, her back against the sink. She crossed her arms. "For what?"

"I shouldn't have assumed you'd take today off, even if I think you should." He eased closer, drawn by Olivia's sleepy-eyed expression. "I also let things get out of hand last night. I shouldn't have kissed you. It was damned unprofessional of me. Plus, you're leaving the country in six months." Trey brushed her hair back so he could see the bruise on her forehead. "You must have thought I was trying to take advantage of you."

"No ... I ... why did you kiss me?" she asked softly.

Trey stayed close, in danger of kissing her again. He hadn't expected this question. "There's something between us, Olivia. I don't know what, but I was too aggressive last night. I'm used to women who..."

Warning flickered in her eyes. "Who what?"

He shook his head. "You're a nice woman, Olivia. Sweet."

Anger flickered in her eyes, sharp and unforgiving. All softness in her expression vanished, shuttered like barriers against a storm.

She shook her head. "Don't worry Deputy MacGilvary. You don't have to worry about me getting the wrong idea. I get it. You're sorry you snogged me and it was a fluke."

Regret speared him. He almost reached out to her.

With that, she moved past him. When he heard the bedroom door close, he stood in the kitchen and tried to understand why he felt so shitty. After all, he didn't do relationships with cuddly, shy, English librarians. No way.

Remember Danella.

So why the hell did he feel like someone had kicked him in the gut?

* * * *

Trey,

Call your mother. She didn't want to leave a voice mail.

Mary

The message lay on Trey's desk. Mary Banovic, wife of another SWAT member, worked at the front counter today and had left the note. Trey sat in his chair and inspected the note. He frowned in confusion. He didn't recognize the phone number, and his mother always called his cell phone if she needed to reach him. Odd. He sank into his chair. Sheriff department sounds faded to the background. Shrugging, he grabbed his cell phone and called her cell phone.

She answered on the second ring. "Hello, Trey, what a pleasant surprise."

"Hi, Mom. You okay? I got your message."

"Message?"

"Mary Banovic left your message. But this number doesn't look right, so I called your cell."

His mother's soft chuckle soothed him. "Everything's fine here, Trey. I'm grocery shopping. But I didn't call you. Are you sure Mick or Craig isn't pulling a joke on you?"

"Nah. Not a good enough joke. You know they're into more complicated stuff." He read her the number.

"I've never heard of that number, dear. Oh, wait."

"What?"

"I wonder..."

Trey waited, his confusion growing.

"Hmm ... you don't think it could be your birth mother?" she asked.

Trey came to reality with a solid thump. "I didn't think of that. But why would Edie call me? Our last meeting wasn't a huge success." He heard the venom in his tone and took a deep breath. "Besides, that was ten damn years ago."

His mom sighed. "Well, Trey, that's no guarantee she isn't interested in making contact again."

"I don't want to talk to her."

"Dear, I know how you feel, but maybe you should call and see what's going on. She could need help."

"She always needs help." His voice turned uncompromising. "Last time I spoke with her, I told her I wanted nothing to do with her."

"I know. Ten years can change a person, though. You know that as well as anyone."

He did know. Down to the heart and backward and forward. In her own gentle way, she admonished him for forgetting his own background. Still...

"Give her a chance," she said. "You might find you feel differently after talking to her."

"Damn." He gritted his teeth. "I'll think about it."

"Good. Now, are you coming over this next Saturday after the SWAT competition?"

"I'll be there."

"Good. Everybody is coming."

"What should I bring?"

"Wine or dessert. Speaking of which, I'm entering some pies in the bake off in a couple of weeks."

"You hate to bake," Trey said in surprise. Hell, she didn't like to cook much at all.

"I'm turning over a new leaf. I feel very domestic these days. I'm going to give baking another try."

Conversation meandered to more mundane matters for a couple of minutes before they signed off.

Trey's older brother Mick wandered by Trey's desk. "Hey, bro. What's going on?"

Trey leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers over his stomach. He showed Mick the note and explained. "Not sure if I want to call her."

Mick's leather belt creaked as he shifted. "I can understand that. Mom gave you a hard time about it?"

"Yes."

Mick grinned. "Sounds like her."

Trey groaned and rubbed his hand over his face. "All right. I'll do it."

"Hey, how's that librarian you saved last night?"

Trey gave a nonchalant shrug. "Fine, I guess."

"Craig said you stayed with her."

Trey tried a smile but it fell flat. "She had a head injury. She needed someone to wake her every two hours." Mick's knowing expression drove Trey nuts. "That's all it was. Don't get any ideas."

"With you, buddy, I always have ideas. But a librarian? That's a bit tame for you."

Irritation welled. "Not like I'm going to date the woman."

Mick looked doubtful. "Yeah, but you stayed overnight. You wouldn't do that just for anyone."

Trey didn't want to admit it, but Mick would extract the truth from him one way or another. "No, I wouldn't. She just ... I don't know." He shrugged. "She seemed vulnerable. Olivia suffered a head injury and didn't have anyone to check on her during the night."

Mick's cocky smile eased. "Olivia, eh? Well, I'll be damned. Her name even sounds like a librarian."

Trey's gut clenched. He remembered Olivia's kiss. Warm, supple lips, the taste of her tongue twining with his. *Ah, God*. His hands remembered how soft she'd felt, how her breasts had pressed into his chest, those tight nipples—*damn*. She'd felt like heaven, a wet dream in the flesh. She might be innocent, but her response had been hot and ready.

Trey swung a withering look on his brother. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that?"

Mick held his hands up. "Okay, I surrender. You coming to Mom's house after the SWAT competition?"

"Yep. She corralled me. Speaking of plans, when are you and Celeste setting a wedding date?"

"We're announcing that this weekend at Mom's."

"Good deal. Now get outta here. I have to call ... Edie."

Trey waved as Mick walked away. "Talk to you later."

It took Trey another ten minutes after shuffling paperwork on his desk before courage made him reach for the phone. He dialed the number on the message, grabbing gumption by the throat.

Come on, dude. You're a SWAT cop. A phone call to your birth mother shouldn't turn you into a pussy.

A woman's voice came on the line after two rings. "Hello?"

His throat went tight. He could barely speak. "Hi. It's Trey."

"Trey!" Her voice, once so familiar to him, sounded husky and tired. "Sweetie, it's so good to hear your voice."

"Yeah." What else could he say? His throat screwed even tighter.

"It must be a shock to hear from me after all this time. I had to do quite a bit of hunting to find out where you worked. Anyway, I'm glad I found you. So you're a police officer?"

"Deputy Sheriff." He managed to shove a few more words out of his throat. "Why did you call? It's been ten years."

He heard the accusation in his own voice.

"I know. It's ... it's hard to explain. I'd like to meet up with you."

"The last time we met was a disaster."

"I know. But you don't have to worry about that happening again."

"What guarantee do I have?" Anger started a slow boil inside him.

"My word."

Your word was never good before.

"Where are you?" he asked.

"I'm in Gold Rush. I'm staying at the Thistle Bed and Breakfast Inn. Actually, I'm interviewing for a job at the hospital and thought Gold Rush might be the perfect place to

put down roots. To be close to you, my son.”

His discontent rose, old demons crawling out of a hellish environ and poking at him with pitchforks. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“Trey Phillips—”

“Trey MacGilvary. My name is Trey MacGilvary now. It has been since I was adopted.”

“I know that. It’s just ... look, there’s a lot I need to tell you. I want ... I want a reconciliation.”

Reconciliation. A big word. Lots of syllables. “I don’t know if I can do that. Not after all this time.”

“I understand how you feel.” Her voice went huskier. For a moment, he thought tears filled her voice. “Trey, I’ve made some big mistakes in my life. I’m owning up to them. I want a chance. Can’t you just meet me here at the Thistle tonight?”

Trey tried to wrap his mind around his chaotic feelings. “No. I—not tonight. I have a previous engagement. It’ll need to be another night.”

“Monday night?”

“All this week I’m tied up. Next weekend I’m in a SWAT competition at Veteran’s Park. How long are you in town?”

“For a long time. The following Monday night perhaps?”

“That’ll work. You’ll be at this number?” he asked.

“It’s the number in my room. I haven’t got a cell phone yet.”

“Okay. I’ll ... call you next Sunday night. I have to go now.”

“All right, son. I’ll see you soon.”

He hung up the phone. He realized, as he looked at his hand, that it shook with a fine tremor.

He clenched his fingers into a fist. “Shit.”

* * * *

As Olivia sank into the routine of checking out books, a headache throbbed in her temple near the bruise on her forehead. She wished she’d slept in later like she usually did and gone in to work later. She’d high-tailed it out of the apartment soon after Trey left. *Trey*. It wouldn’t do to think about him. She’d go mental remembering his kiss, his intimate touch on her breast. The sweet tingly sensation as his fingers had gently plucked and squeezed her nipple.

Then she recalled the disappointment when he’d rejected her. *You’re a nice woman, Olivia.* Sweet, he’d said.

“Enjoy your book.” Olivia handed the man at the counter his gardening books.

The man nodded and left.

Minutes after she’d arrived, her fellow librarians Carl, Stella, and Dean descended on her with questions and concern. She couldn’t ask for better colleagues. They’d marveled at the mess, but at least among the toppled papers and books they’d found her grandmother’s watch.

The city police completed their investigating, and she was set to testify in court at a later date. Cohen would face charges of assault, kidnapping, and other criminal damages.

Cyn hunkered down in her office most of the day, her disapproving scowl foremost whenever she ventured from her office. Of course, in her typical hands-off fashion, she

didn't participate in clearing the mess at the front counter. She'd stalked the library like a queenly yellow puma with serious kitty attitude.

Dean wandered over to the counter after helping an older woman find some Agatha Christie novels.

"Thank you, Dean," the petite, thin woman said as she stood at the counter. "You're a doll."

Dean preened and waggled his cinnamon eyebrows. "Sure thing, Mrs. Prescott. Glad to help."

Mrs. Prescott turned to Olivia. "Horrible business last night. I'm surprised to see you here."

"So am I." Dean's sardonic tone and half-smile showed his skepticism.

"No need to worry. I'm fine."

Mrs. Prescott reached into her large tote bag and brought out a tissue. She dabbed her nose. "I don't know if I'll come out at night ever again." Her voice rose and fell dramatically. "Gold Rush isn't safe anymore."

Dean handed the woman her books. "Isn't that the truth, Mrs. Prescott?"

Mrs. Prescott hefted her stack of five hardbacks. "Well, my husband's waiting for me outside. Night everyone."

After the lady left, Dean leaned toward Olivia and altered his voice to sound like an imperious old woman. He put his hand on his hip and affected a passable English accent. "Lordy, we'll all be murdered in our beds."

Olivia laughed. "You're potty."

Dean returned her smile with a goofy eye roll. "I hope that means I'm crazy?"

She grimaced. "Yes, sorry. It does."

"But you love me anyway. Is it just me, or do half the people here tonight seem like looky-loos at the scene of an accident?"

She gazed around the library at the twenty or so patrons still left in the library. "It's Saturday. Contrary to what you'd think, there are more people here tonight rather than less. You think they'd be like Mrs. Prescott and not want to come out."

Dean's kind blue eyes grew serious. He crossed his arms and looked every inch the GQ model with his classic good looks, green vest, red bow tie, and black corduroy slacks.

"You shouldn't be here. Why don't you go home early?" he asked.

She rearranged books on a cart. "Don't you start."

"You never should have worked alone last night."

"Don't feel guilty. I'd say your stomach ailment was a good excuse not to be here."

"Cyn was supposed to be here, too."

She shrugged. "Well, she runs everything. No chance of her getting sacked. Things happen."

"You're philosophical about your life being threatened."

As she scoped out the small library that served one side of town, she continued with, "Cohen could have walked into the main library instead. I just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Dean wrapped his arm around her shoulder and squeezed. "Cohen was obsessed with you, I think."

"A man obsessed with me? Not likely."

"You sell yourself short. You're gorgeous."

She snorted. "Rubbish."

Dean grinned as he looked toward the front doors. His eyes brightened. "Speaking of a man." He whistled. "Girlfriend, now there's a man."

Amused, she glanced toward the object of his admiration. A tall, muscular hunk wearing a long-sleeved brown Sheriff's Department uniform and dark brown cowboy hat strode toward them.

"Trey," she said softly.

Dean stepped away from her. "You know him?"

"He's the deputy that helped me last night with Cohen."

"Um-um. He's edible. A piece of good lookin' man flesh."

"Don't get any ideas, Dean."

"Why? You have dibs on him?"

She made a soft snort and shook her head. "No. But he's *not* gay."

"How do you know?"

Trey was too close for her to answer. Besides, she didn't want to confess to Dean that she'd shared a snog with Trey.

Trey's expression went from serious as hell deputy, to an affable smile as he reached the counter. "Hi, Olivia."

"Hi," she said.

Dean held out his hand. "I'm Dean. Olivia tells me you were very brave last night when you helped her."

"Pleased to meet you, Dean," Trey said.

Trey's grin didn't fade as he shook Dean's hand. Amusement twinkled in those striking eyes. Good. She thought maybe with the way they'd parted this morning he might decide never to see her again.

Oh, Olivia. Maybe you shouldn't be interested either.

Trey took off his hat. "I'm glad I was here to help."

"I'll restack the books. Nice to meet you." Dean rolled a cart full of books toward the stacks.

"What brings you here?" she asked.

"I'm off duty for the rest of the night and hoped you'd have dinner with me. Unless you have plans to play cards with Maddie."

She could lie and say she did, but what would that accomplish? "Maddie's Red Hat Society is having a special party for a friend who is getting married."

His eyes captured hers and held, and her breath did a telltale hitch. Nope, the magic hadn't worn away. Maybe she needed more time apart from him so she could forget how horny he made her.

"Then you can have dinner?" he asked.

Why not?

"All right. Where?"

"My place."

His place. Oh, now, that was dangerous. "Where do you live?"

He gave her directions. "When do you get off work?"

She glanced at her watch. "An hour."

He nodded. "Good deal. That'll give me a chance to shower and dig out Mom's favorite stir fry recipe."

Stir fry didn't fit his personality. Well, perhaps what she thought she knew of his personality. On the other hand, what did she honestly know about him other than he was rugged and brave?

And so handsome he took her breath away.

She needed to keep a lid on the drool factor or he'd know how he affected her.

"Sounds delicious. I missed lunch."

He peered at her, concern evident. "You look tired. No wonder if you didn't eat."

"I guess I was a bit wound up today. I didn't feel hungry until a bit ago."

He squinted at her in that I'm-a-cop-and-you-can't-fool-me look. "You okay?"

"I've got a headache. That'll go away once I eat."

"Glad I'm feeding you then. I'll see you later." He flashed that cocky, flattering smile that held contained megawatts of heat. He turned back. "Hey, you found your watch. That's great."

"Yes." She tilted her wrist and looked fondly at the watch. "Thank you."

He stayed in place, still staring at her like he was trying to figure a puzzle. "I gotta ask one thing. I saw Dean with his arm around you. Is he ... interested in you? I mean, I don't want to butt in on anything if you guys are involved. I don't want him to think—"

"That we're going on a date?" She laughed. "God, no. But actually, when you came in he was going on about your manly attributes."

Surprise flashed over Trey's face. "He's gay?"

"Yes."

"Uh-huh. Well, tell him I'm not his type."

Trey's cell rang and he looked away from Olivia as he retrieved it from his belt. She watched him talking on the phone, yet she didn't hear what he said—she noticed too much about his external appearance. Observing him took plenty of energy—if she thought he appeared merely good-looking before, she'd scratched the surface. Though short, his thick, wavy hair tumbled around his forehead in mild accidental disarray. A man like him wouldn't take great lengths to style his hair. He needed wash and wear without fuss. Tall, dark and handsome was well and good, but this male possessed confidence both in a mental capacity and in sheer animal physical power. She wondered what it would be like to see him in action performing the Keysi Fighting Method. She'd never seen it done, though she'd heard of it.

Not likely to happen, Olivia. Not likely that you'll have a reason to see him fight again. When he'd brought Cohen down without blinking an eye, a primal part of her roused to his strength.

"What?" Trey seemed to stiffen, eyes betraying caution. "When?" Trey paused then said, "What did the note say?" Another lengthy pause. "Bizarre. All right. Craig is checking into it for you? Okay. Mom, just keep your eyes open. Call me if you need anything. Right. Bye."

When he turned back to her, clear worry darkened his expression.

"Is something wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Probably not. My mother just found a really weird note on her car when she came out of the grocery store." He shrugged. "I'll tell you about it later."

Trey plopped his hat on his head, winked, and walked away.

She sighed and couldn't help watching his ass as he ambled out the door.

She was so dead.

Chapter Five

Olivia chewed on her lower lip for a second after she rung the doorbell at Trey's condo. She couldn't believe she'd given into this idea after last night. But a girl had to eat, and her stomach continued rumbling nonstop. She could have dinner with Trey without touching, kissing, or allowing more dodgy emotions to emerge. God, she didn't know how to date well, to date without complicated issues.

No. This was not a date, but dinner between friendly acquaintances.

When the door snapped open, she jumped.

Trey stood at the door, another engaging smile curving that mouth. *Oh, my.* He wore a light navy sweater that clung to his muscles, worn jeans, and ... no shoes. Wouldn't you know? Even his feet looked great.

He opened the door wide. "Hi. Come on in."

"Thank you." As she took off her long blue coat, she shivered.

"Cold?" His gaze danced up and down the emerald green sweater set that skimmed over her figure.

She'd taken a leap, a big leap, wearing this outfit. She didn't usually dress like this at work. Hell, who was she kidding? She rarely even bought outfits like this that showed off her figure.

She felt his admiring assessment all the way from her toes to her blushing face. "A bit. Fall is here."

"That it is. Give me your coat, and I'll hang it up."

Trey's apartment impressed her. With dark wood furniture, thick rugs, and amazingly luxurious emerald colored curtains, his traditional, rich style surprised her. He returned from the hallway. She placed her small purse on the couch.

"This is beautiful." She walked into his kitchen and ran her fingers over the granite countertop and admired the stainless steel appliances. She touched the dark cherry wood cabinets. "Wow."

When she caught his gaze, she saw something different in his eyes. Satisfaction? Admiration? A sweet pang of delight wrapped around her. Somehow, in the short space of a few minutes, she'd walked into comfortable surroundings where she felt both safe and yet unsettled. Trey intrigued her, yet at the same time made her nervous.

"You like my place?" he asked.

"You splashed out for this place, did you? It's beautiful. I love it. This is something like what I want someday."

He reached into the refrigerator. "Not what you expected?"

Embarrassed, she said, "No. Did you decorate it yourself?"

"Me?" He drew vegetables from the refrigerator and placed them on a cutting board. "No. A friend ran across this new condo for sale. It's bigger than I need, but it was a foreclosure and a deal I couldn't pass up. It has two bedrooms and about eighteen hundred square feet. She helped me decorate it."

"She was a decorator?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Were you dating her?" The question burst out of her without much thought.

He chuckled as her face heated.

"No, don't answer that. It's not my business," she said.

"It's okay. Yeah, we dated. Actually, I knew her before I found this place. So we were already involved."

Involved. "Oh."

He shrugged. "We burned out after a few months."

Burned. Yeah, she understood the high temperature Trey generated in a woman. His sexual aura, the male potency pouring off him felt like a drug.

"Anyway," he said, "I knew what I wanted but didn't have a clue how to put it all together. Danella helped me."

Danella. The name screamed glamorous.

Not boring librarian like Olivia.

Damn it, Olivia. Quit being pathetic.

He paused and looked up at her, his gaze penetrating. "She was a lot like you. Demure and careful and dressed conservative."

Okay, maybe not glamorous.

It hit her then. Maybe he didn't want to be involved with her because of Danella? Olivia didn't care to be compared to a woman she didn't know or any other woman for that matter. *After all, he doesn't really know me that well, does he?* Talk about stereotyping. That was something her father did, too. Just as well she had no plans to date Trey. If he could make judgments like that about her ... she sighed.

"How long have you had this condo?" she asked.

"A year. I was tired of renting."

Uh-huh. So he'd probably dated this Danella around a year ago.

"Want something to drink?" he asked.

"Please."

"Coffee, milk, water, orange juice, diet cola."

She chose bottled water, and as she sipped, she helped him chop vegetables for the wok.

"How long have you lived in Gold Rush again?" he asked.

"Six months. The exchange is for a year."

"Where did you live before?"

"England. Huntingdon, England. Not far from Cambridge, really."

"What made you move? Especially to a whole other country?"

"Quite the interrogator, aren't you, Deputy MacGilvary?"

"Please stop calling me that. It's Trey to my friends." He smiled, but his words sounded serious.

She was his friend? Well, that made sense considering he'd told her last night he didn't want a romantic involvement.

Wind rattled the windows.

"Forecast said we might get some snow soon," she said.

"Colorado weather can be weird."

"Far more turbulent than England in some ways. It's one of the reasons I love Gold Rush. It's so different from where I grew up."

"So you moved from England because...?"

His prompting made her gut clench. She didn't like the interrogation, but what could

she do? Like the cop he was, he'd keep at her until he discovered the truth. *Out with it, Olivia. Honesty first.*

She sighed. "You might change your image of me as a sweet, nice woman if I told you."

And the more he realized she wasn't sweet and demure—at least not as much as he imagined—perhaps he'd decide he wanted even less to do with her.

He stopped chopping veggies, and she glanced up him long enough to witness his curious expression. Instead of probing her for answers, he picked up his cutting board and turned to the wok, where hot oil sizzled. He slid the veggies into the wok. She followed with her cutting board and soon he operated the wok like an expert. As she set to work nuking rice, the silence stretched.

Finally, he spoke. "Did something bad happen in England?"

Wind rattled the window again, as if it, too, demanded answers. "Several bad things."

"Sometimes it helps to talk."

"Not about this."

He stopped stirring long enough to hold up one hand in surrender. "Okay, okay. I surrender. No more questions."

"What about you? How long have you lived in Gold Rush?"

"All my life. I was born just outside of Gold Rush actually. My dad had a big spread."

"A ranch?"

He grinned. "One of those places dressed up and smelling like a ranch, but not a working ranch." He shrugged. "But you don't want to hear about it."

She cocked her head to the side. "I do. But I suppose that's payback for me not telling you my history."

"You got it. The only way I'm telling you a thing is if you tell me something about you."

"Sort of like strip poker." She winced as the words escaped her mouth. "I show you skin if you show me skin."

"Exactly like that. But not nearly as much fun." He turned off the wok, and his gaze caught hers. Trey's gaze scoured Olivia with pure sexual interest, as if he imagined her naked.

She wanted to groan as her body responded with treacherous heat. Her nipples peaked tight against her bra and arousal pulsed to life low in her belly. For several seconds his attention devoured her, until it felt like a physical touch. An exploration as exciting as his hands coasting over her again, exploring secrets.

"Let's eat," he said, the low, potent huskiness in his voice adding an erotic element to the suggestion.

Eat. She imagined him licking her nipples, his talented tongue between her legs. *Oh. My. God.*

Astonished by the force of her daydream, she hurried to set the table in the dining room. It gave her distance. Much needed distance. Any more innuendo, and they'd have to call the fire department to extinguish the flames.

Once they settled at the table, Trey sitting to her right, a smooth jazz selection playing on his sound equipment across the room, she relaxed.

"This is delicious," she said. "You're a good cook."

"Thanks. Mom taught me that, too. Kickin' and screamin'. I hated to cook, but then she told me that unless I planned to take women out to dinner all the time, I'd better learn more than how to grill a hamburger."

She laughed softly. "Smart mum. Speaking of that, you said at the library that she got a strange note on her car?"

His brows lowered as he stirred his food with his fork. "Yeah. When she came out of the grocery store a threatening note was tucked under her windshield wipers."

"Oh, my God."

He nodded, lips tight. "The note said that because of my incompetence, she should watch out. Quote, 'You need eyes in the back of your head.'"

A shiver coasted up her spine. "That's very strange. It's threatening but not enough to be specific. How does she know what to watch for?"

He chewed before answering. "Exactly. A sheriff's deputy is going to keep an eye on her when he can. We'll rotate driving by her place." He smiled as some of the concern left his eyes. "Dad taught her self defense a long time ago, and my brothers and I taught her some more. She can take care of herself. She's very observant."

"That's good. Still, it has to be unnerving."

"For the average woman maybe. But I think it worries her family a hell of a lot more than it does her."

In contrast, Olivia thought of her mother. Sometimes spineless, complaining. Weak. "Your mum sounds wonderful."

He grinned. "She's the best."

They ate in silence for some time, and curiosity made her plunge into a reckless question. "Why am I here, Trey? Why did you invite me?"

His eyebrow quirked. "I wanted to make sure you were okay after last night."

"That's very nice, but you could have just called."

"Yeah, but..." He drifted off, shoving food around on his plate with his fork. Finally he looked up. "Look, I don't want you to think I'm a stalker or anything creepy. I needed to apologize, too. This morning I wasn't too damn slick. I hurt your feelings."

Now it was her time to gape at him, surprised by the turn in conversation. "You didn't." She took a drink of water to cool her throat and stall for time on her next words. "I'm not that fragile."

Trey placed his fork on his plate. All trace of amused, joking Trey disappeared. "I saw you in operation. How you handled Cohen with raw courage. Many other people would have babbled like idiots. You were cool under fire."

"Outwardly. Inside I was scared I'd make a real cock up of things."

He grinned, and then she knew where his amusement came from. She blushed. "I mean, I was afraid I'd mess things up."

"I know what you meant. Doesn't matter. You did the right thing, said the right thing and kept your head on straight."

"Thank you."

"But what I said this morning, it was all true. You're not my usual type, Olivia."

"What is your type?" She took a sip of water. "I'm curious."

"Uncomplicated."

"Shallow?"

He blinked. "Not necessarily. Just women who aren't looking for a ... commitment. I'm not in the market for serious. Danella twisted me up in pieces. She..." He shrugged. "She pulled me right in and I fell for her hook, line, and sinker. She—"

"Yes?"

"I was down to proposing to her, all right? I thought I loved her and then she did something I couldn't forgive."

"Which was?"

He hesitated, but finally said, "She said she loved me, but two weeks later, when I was ready to propose, she called me and broke up over the phone. She said she'd lied about loving me. She said she couldn't date a SWAT cop because the job is too dangerous." Eyes filled with regret, he looked down at his plate. "Then I found out she'd been seeing a city cop and sleeping with him, too. Turned out she really loved the other guy and not me."

Strong sympathy wended through Olivia. "How did you find out?"

"I saw her with him a day after she broke up with me, and that's when some friends of mine in the city police department told me she'd been dating him at the same time she was dating me."

Disappointment that he'd think of her in the same terms made anger return. "And you think I'd do that to you? That I'd lie to you like that. What she did was wrong."

His eyes darkened. "I'm just not in the market for serious right now. And you're the type of woman who needs a serious relationship. You don't date for fun."

She bristled. "You mean I don't date just to have a bed partner?"

"Right."

Renewed ire drew her to sit up straighter, to pin him with an exasperated expression. "So you've known me less than a day, and I'm complicated and looking for a commitment?"

"I ... no. Not necessarily."

"Exactly."

He had the good grace to look sheepish.

She stared into her rice and vegetables. "Obviously you aren't over what Danella did to you. I understand that." She shrugged. "You are not my type either."

He nodded. "I didn't word my..."

"Rejection?"

He smiled. "It wasn't a rejection."

"Yes it was, but that's all right." She attacked her stir fry. "You didn't play games with me. I appreciate an honest man."

Part of her wanted to continue the illusion that they dated because her hormones did a happy two-step whenever she came within eyeshot of him.

"This is an apology dinner," she said.

"Yep."

"Well, it's delicious. And I accept the apology."

Relief filled his face. Maybe she could be friends with this big, tough, rough-and-ready but gentle man. Maybe.

Just stop thinking of him as a sexual object, and you'll do fine.

"Time for dessert." He stood. "I'll warm it up in the oven."

As he walked away, she couldn't help ogling his world-class bum. Tight and outlined

by his jeans, his butt looked squeezable. *Oh, boy. So much for not thinking of him in a sexual manner. Hopeless.*

"What's for dessert?" she asked.

"Apple pie."

"That's my favorite."

"Store bought, but what the hell. Apple pie is apple pie."

"I beg to differ." Her entire being rebelled at the idea. "I make a mean apple pie. In fact, the pie bake off in the park is coming up soon."

"You're entering a pie?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"So is my Mom. She's always disliked cooking much, but she's decided she wants to give baking a try."

"Good for her. It's always good to learn new things."

She polished off another bite of dinner while he preheated the oven and read the instructions on the pie box.

He ripped open the box and removed the brick hard pie. "This frozen thing will probably offend you, then."

"I think I can handle it. I'm prejudice free when it comes to dessert. Sometimes the sugar rush is the best part."

His husky chuckle sent sparklers dancing through her nerve endings. Did the man have to possess a delicious laugh, too?

As the pie cooked, they cleared away their dishes and headed into the living room. Trey settled down on the couch, and she sat way on the other side with her legs crossed.

Gathering silence unnerved Olivia, so she started the conversation with the only thing she could think to say. "So you're a SWAT cop."

"Through and through. Hey, you should come to the SWAT competition next weekend. We'll have some of the events at Veteran's Park. Teams from around the state are competing against El Torro County."

"What kind of competition?"

"Obstacles, driving, firearms, repelling. You name it." Trey's face reflected confidence. "Our team is going to kick some major ass. We've won three years in a row."

His enthusiasm made her smile. "That's wonderful. What do you do on the SWAT team? Aren't there different jobs?"

Trey hitched his leg up on the couch so he faced her. "Yep. I'm a sniper."

A strange, uncontrollable arousal rolled through her like an unexpected storm surge. Sniper. Scary, but in Trey's case an undeniable turn on. "Did you learn that in the military?"

"I was never in the military. I've always been good with firearms." He crossed his arms, and those luscious muscles bunched and flexed.

"That must be a difficult job."

"It can be, but I've never wanted to do anything else." Seriousness left his eyes, replaced by his trademark playful gleam. "Did you always want to be a librarian?"

She turned toward him, her legs now uncrossed. "I went to business school at first, then discovered I hated it. I convinced my parents that I needed to change to library science."

"But you like it?"

"I really do. At least I did until last night."

"Hey, that was just a fluke. It'll never happen again."

"Thank goodness." She placed her arm along the back of the couch, her fingers tracing along the dark brown leather. "Why did you become a cop?"

Trey's eyes flickered to hers, then darted away. Reluctance burned there. "I grew up in a crazy home and my father was..." When Trey's voice drifted, his throat worked hard, as if he swallowed a bitter pill. "My real father was a great guy, but he had issues. It's a long story."

"His issues made you want to become a cop?"

"No. The man who adopted me was an El Torro County SWAT team leader. My real father came to a ... bad end." His face turned bleak. "My adoptive father was ... killed during a SWAT call out."

A soul-deep empathy twisted her heart. "I'm so sorry. You lost both your fathers. That's terrible."

She wanted to slide over to him, to touch, to caress his face and provide comfort. *No, you can't. If you do he'll think you want more from him than you do. It'll send him running far and fast. Besides, you might get the idea you want more, too.*

He blinked, taking away the intensity of his gaze. "Yeah, it was awful. For a long time."

Curiosity pushed her to ask, "Were you an only child?"

"Until I was adopted." He smiled. "Believe me, it was weird to enter a family that had two boys already."

"Did you get along with them?"

He grinned. "No."

"Uh, oh."

Trey laced his hands behind his head and leaned his back against the couch arm. "The first six months with my new family I challenged the hell out of them."

"Did they start out as foster parents?"

"No. They met me once, heard my sob story, and put in the papers to adopt me. My foster parents were never so glad to see the back of anyone."

"Oh." What else could she say? "So your adoptive parents were very brave."

"They should have gotten a damned medal after what I put them through. I'm surprised they didn't throw me back like a salmon."

"What did you do?"

"Was a real pain in the ass. Tried to skip school, got in trouble, you name it. I was well on my way to full blown delinquent."

Curiosity wound deep inside her, demanding she discover inch by inch why he'd given his adopted family such trouble. "You were angry that you lost your real parents?"

Undeniable pain crossed his face. "I was *enraged* that I lost them. I was fourteen, rebellious, and had a bad ass attitude."

Olivia shifted on the couch. "I think I can imagine you that way."

"Oh yeah?" He leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. "With a take me or leave me attitude?"

"Absolutely. In fact, I can still see some of that in you. I think it might make you a good cop."

Trey's eyes held the truth, and she saw mutual curiosity take hold. "Maybe. I haven't

given it much thought. I try not to be that angry fourteen-year-old anymore.”

“Were you punishing yourself when you were a child? Did you think you were responsible for your parents leaving you?”

Recognition blossomed in his eyes. “Probably. I was a real shit. I played other people off of each other. I was a manipulator.”

“Your adoptive parents must have seen something in you worth saving.”

He gave her a lopsided smile. “Did they? Or did they feel sorry for me?”

This took her aback, and she frowned. She perused the leather couch, looking anywhere but into his eyes. “I doubt they felt sorry for you. Compassion. A desire to help. And I’m sure they grew to love you.”

When she dared to meet his eyes, warmth filled his gaze. “Thank you. I know they loved me. They proved that in thousands of ways.” He scrubbed a hand over his jaw. “Sometimes I let cynicism take over. Helps me in law enforcement, though.”

“Everyone has traits that either help or hinder their job.”

“Like your quiet, almost shy way helps you in the library?”

“That’s a good analogy. Although I don’t think I’m nearly as quiet or soft as you might think.”

Mischievousness grew in his gaze. “I’d like to find out.”

A blush heated her face. *Warning. Warning. Deploy avoidance technique.* “So tell me more about your family.”

He blew out a long breath. “My adopted brothers are cops like I mentioned before. Mick is the oldest, and Craig’s the youngest. My adoptive mom is great. You’d love her.”

His gaze widened a bit as he met Olivia’s gaze, as if he couldn’t believe he’d revealed so much.

He didn’t say another word, and she received the message loud and clear. “You don’t need to tell me anymore if it’s too painful.”

He shook his head. “Not painful so much anymore.”

By the darkness lingering in his expression, she didn’t believe a word of it.

While the pie cooked, they switched their conversation to local events. She discovered he loved soccer and so did she, they both didn’t have much use for American football—a sacrilege to Trey’s brothers. He hated golf, and she loved it. They both loved to read science fiction, and she also gobbled up romance novels, which didn’t come in quite so much variety in England. She couldn’t ski worth bollocks, and he vowed to take her skiing this winter on the slopes nearby Gold Rush. They agreed, after tasting the pie, that it couldn’t compete with homemade.

Before long, she yawned and decided she needed sleep. She rose from the table and stacked her plate and fork in the dishwasher. “I’d better head home. Tonight I’m catching some quality sleep.”

She started to pass him in the kitchen, when he clasped her hand and drew her toward him. What was he doing?

“Wait. Don’t go yet.” The heat in his eyes spelled trouble. “Are we still friends?”

“Of course. Why wouldn’t we be?”

“I know I stepped in things badly last night and tonight, too. I don’t want you to think that I’m rejecting you as a woman. Because you’re smart and pretty and…”

“Nice?”

“Yep.”

“Damn it, Trey MacGilvary, you are the thickest smart man I’ve ever met.”

His mouth fell open. “What?”

His brow furrowed, and his frown said she’d better have an explanation. But the way his hand cupped her waist distracted her. The mere heat of his body near hers messed with her head—well, the man smelled and looked so delicious she could have eaten *him* for dessert. In her imagination, she saw him naked on a bed, his arms and legs sprawled in abandon, that wicked gleam in his eyes. And she had a can of whipped cream ready to—

Do. Not. Go. There.

She walked away, back to the living room and out of reach. “Trey, you don’t have to keep making the point that you want to stay friends, but you don’t want to date me. You find a certain type of woman attractive. I’m not the 38 double D, stacked, long-legged thoroughbred. Never have been, never will be.”

He came toward her, and she edged around the couch. “Olivia…”

“I’m a 34B, average height, average-looking woman. Not ugly, not drop dead—”

“That’s not it.” His brow lowered, disagreement and anger in his eyes. His mouth was a solid slash of disapproval. “I’m a man, so yeah, I do notice beautiful women and appreciate them. But beauty isn’t the only thing I like in a woman.”

She made it to the front of the couch when he snagged her hand and drew her toward him.

“Stop running away.” His voice had a husky ambiance that tingled and popped inside her.

Her next words escaped without forethought. “Why are you chasing me, Trey, when you want me to go?”

“See, that’s it. You should go. I should want you to.” He cupped the back of her neck. “I can’t help it. I have to do this.”

Chapter Six

Olivia knew what he wanted, and yet it took her by surprise. Hadn't they decided they shouldn't do this?

When his lips found hers, she expected a light, friendly kiss. A tribute to friendship and acknowledging a tiny, itty-bitty, miniscule—a fragment of attraction.

Instead, his mouth molded and caressed, then his tongue sank inside with one hot, delicious stroke. She moaned softly as the sensual slide of his tongue against hers drove her deeper into his arms. He braced her against his wide chest. Her hands slipped over his shoulders, felt the strength that rippled and bunched under her touch. His power, his ability to take frightened her on a fundamental level, yet it thrilled her with a wild jolt all the way to her toes.

Without restraint she fell into the kiss, returning the passion, meeting his tongue as they mimicked a more carnal encounter. Every movement of his body created a symphony of desire, a powerful wish to connect. His erection pressed into her belly, and she teased with a twitch of her hips. His warmth swallowed her fear until nothing seemed to matter but expressing their physical link and letting it travel however it wished, to the ends of the earth or beyond.

He tore his mouth from hers and buried his lips in her neck. As his hot breath sizzled over her skin, she gasped. He cupped her ass, his hands kneading a second before sliding over her hips. His attention wandered everywhere, in her hair, at her neck, upward over her ribcage. Teasing close to her breasts but never quite touching, lingering on her shoulders as his mouth coasted over her throat to her ear.

"God, you're delicious." He moaned softly, and that animal groan stirred the fire until it boiled over.

She clutched at Trey, hanging on to what she felt, but not understanding it.

"No." He broke away. "Damn it." He stepped back a good three feet, his chest heaving up and down, his hands hanging at his sides. "I'm sorry."

They stood watching each other, and within his eyes she saw that he still wanted her. Did her eyes reveal the same? Finally she broke away from his mesmerizing stare. "My coat."

"Of course." He hurried to the closet.

As she waited for him to return, she realized her hands shook. But not from fear. From aborted passion.

Trey strode into the living room. As she slipped into the coat, he stuffed his hands into his jeans and stared at the floor. "Olivia ... I ... look, there's no excuse for what I did. I kissed you when I promised—"

"No." She shook one hand in dismissal and bold words found her lips. "Don't take on more than your share. I kissed you, too. I *let* you kiss me. If I was the type of woman who could shag a man just because I found him physically attractive, then I'd be ... we'd probably be in bed right now, wouldn't we?"

He stared at her for a few seconds before he nodded, the movement almost imperceptible.

She retrieved her bag and slipped it over her shoulder. She gazed down at her low-

heeled black pumps, then managed to meet his gaze head on. “You’re right, Trey. This wouldn’t work for us. We want different things.”

His lips parted, a statement clear in his eyes, but she turned away. She opened the door and slipped out.

“Wait,” he said. “I should walk you to your car.”

“Trey—”

“Humor me, okay. For safety’s sake.”

He put on shoes and they headed into the parking lot. The night smelled fresh and cold with the promise of winter. Olivia couldn’t appreciate the clean scent or the stars flickering in a carpet of black sky. Inside she writhed with turmoil and emotions she didn’t want to acknowledge.

She unlocked her car and slipped inside. “Goodnight, Trey.”

“Drive safe.”

She closed the door, locked it, and buckled up. All automatic things she did every time she entered her car. Yet as she drove away from Trey, her mind couldn’t wrap around her bizarre relationship with the bold, sexy cop.

You don’t have a relationship, remember? He doesn’t want one.

* * * *

The man trained the sniper rifle on the woman in the car, his sight targeted in the best spot to kill. Through her right ear. She’d die instantly, and if things went right, the bullet might pass through her skull and into MacGilvary as he stood by the car.

The man’s finger twitched. He could squeeze off a shot right now. Could take it and put an end to the fury that raged higher inside with each passing day. The bastard had taken a shot like this not so long ago. Would he feel the same pain as he watched this woman die? Or would he fall to the ground writhing in pain and care only for himself?

Anger simmered inside the man until it reached a steady boil, a fermentation of loss and need for revenge. Restraint hung on a fine edge. What would the cop do if he took out the woman right now? Instinct told the man to fire and wage war on MacGilvary and his loved ones. After all, MacGilvary had waged war on him and his loved ones.

The man hesitated. Waffled.

Watched the woman drive away.

Almost as if it had a mind of its own, the scope centered on MacGilvary’s head.

Yeah.

Take the shot.

Take it.

Finish it once and for all.

The man lowered the sniper rifle and placed it next to his gardening books.

Fuck MacGilvary. He’s a dead man soon enough.

* * * *

“Hi, Mum, how are things?” Olivia swallowed hard, her mouth dry as bones buried in the desert for a century.

“We’re splendid, darling. Your father is doing well. We’re sorry you won’t be coming to England this month.” Mum sighed across the phone lines, the irrefutable sound

mothers had used for a millennium to express displeasure without actually stating it. “We miss you. Are you sure you don’t want to come back to Huntingdon and find a different position?”

Olivia reached for the cola can on the table next to the couch. “You know I can’t do that. Everyone there thinks I’m off my trolley.”

“Well...” Her mother’s voice trailed off, and Olivia knew that her mother’s admonitions would come out soon. “Darling, you do have to admit that your actions caused some ... discontent.”

Bloody hell! Couldn’t Mum just let out her true feelings with a little fire? Without icing everything over like cold custard?

Olivia stood and walked toward the fantastic window view of the mountains that surrounded Gold Rush in a secure, beautiful serenity. She knew such tranquility could break and fall at any moment, but chose not to dwell on might-have-beens. The rugged individualism of this place had worked its way into her heart. As much as she loved England, she did not want to go back there to live. At least not yet.

Right. That’s why you can’t get Trey out of your head.

“Olivia?”

Her mother’s voice jerked her to the present. “Sorry, Mum. I was just thinking.”

“About coming back to England?”

Olivia struggled with her temper. “Prodding me about coming back to England isn’t going to work.”

Mum cleared her throat. “Your father misses you terribly.”

What about you, Mum?

“Tell me, how is dad *really* doing?”

“He’s crabby. But his medicine always seems to do that.”

“Hasn’t he gone to the doctor? It seems like a bizarre side effect for arthritis medication. He should have an examination.”

“You know him.”

She did. “I can hear him now. ‘I’m stubborn as a bull and almost as ugly, girl.’”

“That’s what he would say.”

Olivia gazed into the darkening sky and made a wish—a prayer if you will—for her father to see the light and realize overdoing it wouldn’t help his arthritis.

She turned her thoughts to the next item. She really, really didn’t want to tell Mum about Cohen’s attack. “I thought I’d let you know what happened last week.”

“Happened?” Her mother’s query sounded cool.

She explained, without too many details, how Cohen had taken her hostage.

“Olivia, that’s *dreadful*. Terrible. You *should* have called us right away.” Funny how her mother’s voice didn’t change, didn’t sound worried. No, there was nothing but condescension.

“I would have, but if I know Dad, he would have hopped a plane.”

“You’re right, *he* would have.”

Olivia took a last swig from her cola can, then headed for the kitchen. “Cohen is in jail awaiting trial.”

“You weren’t injured?”

“A bump on my head. But a friend stayed with me that night to make sure I was fine. Which I was.”

"Thank goodness. Are you sure you're fine? After Cameron almost died..."

Please don't, Mum. Please don't make this about Cameron. The past is the past. Please just drop it.

"After Cameron almost died we should have taken that counseling," Olivia said.

"We would have saved ourselves a lot of grief."

"Your dad would never allow that."

Frustration roared up from somewhere in the bushes, ambushing Olivia with its animal strength. "*You* could go for yourself if you wished. You could take care of your emotional needs. No one is stopping you."

"I don't want to talk about it."

Olivia threw back her head and gazed at the ceiling, taking a lungful of air to drown the albatross that hung around her neck like a live noose. "Very well."

"What you do for yourself is all well and good, but your father and I don't think spilling our inner thoughts to a stranger is always the best way to handle a situation."

Olivia was used to her mother's detached coolness, but she wished to hell she'd figured out how to regulate her own annoyance when her mother acted this way.

"You always were excellent at taking care of *yourself*," her mother said softly.

Her mother's words, though perhaps not meant to sting, did. A casual observer might never perceive her Mum's subtle taunts and reminders of the past. Amazing how a woman as emotionally constipated as her mother could always accuse Olivia of being the same.

Time to cut this short. "I need to go, Mum. Say hello to dad for me."

"It's nice talking with you, Olivia. Give us a call soon."

After Olivia returned the cordless phone to the cradle in the kitchen, she stared out the kitchen window until a strange sensation rolled up her spine. The back of her neck prickled, crawled with an eerie awareness that rolled over her in a sickening wave. She searched the scenery outside, but saw nothing but the next apartment building over. No one watched her from any of those windows, but disquiet stayed her constant companion. She drew the shade and frothy Irish lace curtains over the window. She worked her way around the rest of the apartment making certain she'd fastened each window and locked it, and that she'd drawn every curtain.

The phone rang and Olivia rushed to grab her bedroom cordless. Maddie's voice came on the line quickly. "Hello there, how are you doing?"

"Good. Now."

"Now? You weren't earlier?"

"I was talking with my mother."

Maddie groaned. "Ah. Say no more."

"Are we still on for cards this evening?"

"How about something different. My son brought over some DVDs to watch. Not the usual stuff I like, but I know you like action adventure movies. I thought we could share some popcorn. You could educate me on why these shoot 'em up movies are so popular."

Olivia grinned. "Sounds like an excellent idea. I'll be right over."

Dressed in her most comfortable lightweight sweater and jeans, with her hair piled into a bun, Olivia grabbed her purse and hauled ass next door. Maddie had the door open already and let her inside.

As they closed and locked the front door, Maddie grinned and smiled. Olivia leaned

down to hug her friend, who sat in her wheelchair like it was a throne.

Maddie maneuvered her wheelchair toward the kitchen. "Come in, come in, Jaan. I've got the sangria ready, the popcorn is on the coffee table, and the DVDs are stacked up, too. Which one do you want to see first?"

Olivia tossed her purse on a chair and sat on the couch. She smiled as she took in the comfortable surroundings. Somehow she always felt better in this apartment than she did her own. Maddie's old country flavor showed in the exotic prints on the wall depicting scenes from India, the furniture had an exotic flare, and the entire apartment felt as welcoming as ever. Luckily this apartment complex had a few units designed with wheelchairs and other disabilities in mind, and Olivia felt glad Maddie had found this place. Not only for Maddie, but for the fact Olivia had met her because of it.

Olivia riffled through the DVDs. "We have Delta Force, Speed, SWAT, and Sahara. I like all of these except Delta Force." Her stomach did a dip as she thought about Speed and SWAT. Both movies featured SWAT officers. "I think we should watch Sahara."

"It's a deal." Maddie rolled into the living room.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Let me help you with the drinks."

After they had food and drink readied and the DVD already in the machine, Maddie used her strong arms to swing onto the couch. Within moments they'd ensconced themselves in movie heaven, laughing at the humorous moments and thrilling to the adventure. The film wound down and the credits rolled.

"That was fun." Maddie placed her sangria glass on a coaster on the coffee table. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes. "Now, you want to tell me what's wrong?"

Olivia should have known her friend would notice. Maddie opened her deep brown eyes and tucked her shoulder length salt and pepper black hair away from her face. Maddie didn't look much older than fifty, though Maddie confessed to sixty-eight. Even her gray hair gave her a silvery, almost heavenly glow. A few lines around her eyes also betrayed her age. Not even a wheelchair could stop this indomitable lady.

Olivia sipped her second glass of sangria to stall for time. How did she answer? "Never could hide anything from you."

"Darn right you can't." Maddie winked. "Now tell me what has put circles under your eyes and that glum look on your mouth."

"Is it that obvious?"

"Very. Is it the library and what happened with that Mr ... what's his name?"

"Cohen?"

"No. The sheriff's deputy. The one you're attracted to."

Floored, Olivia stared at her friend for several seconds before she could form a word. "I'm not ... well, all right, I am attracted to him. But he's not interested, so it isn't going any farther. We had a meal, we talked, we..." She drifted off.

Maddie, always mischievous when it came to relationships, leaned forward. "You what?"

Olivia flashed a quelling look. "We didn't do anything other than talk and get to know each other. He's interested in women that don't want a permanent attachment. He's afraid I'll get too attached to him."

Maddie's eyes widened as she reached for a handful of popcorn and crunched noisily. "He said that?"

"He said he likes things easy and non-committal in a relationship. He's a very nice,

honorable man, but he's looking for an easy shag and no attachments. So he isn't for me."

Maddie finished crunching popcorn before she said, "He said he was looking for easy sex?"

"No." Olivia rolled her gaze and sighed.

"Own up, Jaan. There's something you're not telling me. Did you sleep with him?"

"God, Maddie. You are *so* blunt."

A big smile creased the older woman's face, and her eyes twinkled. "And nosy, too. But you know that about me already."

"I didn't sleep with him. We've just..." Olivia felt a blush heat her cheeks, but didn't know why. She'd always been open with Maddie and felt comfortable telling her things. What was different about this time?

"Just enough for you to know you're attracted to each other physically."

"Enough for me to discover that he's one hot, sexy man. But that doesn't mean he's attracted enough to me. If he was, he wouldn't keep backing away."

"Are you following him?"

Olivia laughed and almost dropped popcorn she'd scooped from the big bowl between them. "I'm not a stalker."

"You know what I mean, Jaan."

"I don't."

Maddie sighed. "Have you ever considered it might be good for you to have sex with him without any attachments?"

Olivia's mouth dropped open, and she uttered a sound of astonishment. No other words would form.

Maddie scooted to the edge of the couch and heaved herself into the wheelchair. She maneuvered around the coffee table and headed to the television and DVD player.

She busied herself with extracting the DVD. "Sorry I sprang that on you." Maddie looked up. "No, I'm not. There comes a time in a woman's life, even if she hasn't found the love of her life, when she needs to cut loose and have pleasure. This could be your time."

Rebelling against the very idea, Olivia said, "I don't fanny about with men, Maddie. You know that." She wiped her hands on a paper towel. "I decided when I was a teen that meaningless sex wasn't for me. Besides, I can't have an affair with a man who doesn't want one."

"I thought you said he wants no attachment sex?"

"Yes, but not with me since he can tell I want more with a man than a one night stand."

"And he believes the only way *you'll* have sex is if you're in a commitment."

"Yes."

"You tried that once, didn't you?"

Olivia felt her cheeks coloring again. "You know the story."

"I do, but I think you're defining yourself by that one event. You're allowing that one time in your life where you lost control, where you felt needy and went a little nuts to dictate the rest of your life."

"Maddie, I thought that's what growing up meant? Taking responsibility for your life?"

“Taking responsibility doesn’t mean sucking the enjoyment and spark from your existence. Listen, what I’m about to tell you, I have never told anyone else.” Maddie put the DVDs into the cabinet nestled against the television. She tuned the television to a digital radio station that featured a variety of new age music. “When I was young, I had a meaningless fling, and it was the best thing I ever did.”

Once more Olivia found her mouth hanging open, her mind dumbfounded. “Oh?”

Maddie maneuvered to the couch, but this time she stayed in her wheelchair. “Even I have some secrets. You remember what I told you about escaping India with my parents after the radicals took over in our town?”

Olivia clasped her icy glass and nodded. “How could I forget? You were twenty-eight, right?”

Sadness entered the woman’s eyes, and Maddie sensed the heaviness before her friend could relate the story. “Twenty-eight. My fiancé Saakaar died the year before fighting the radicals. I thought I’d never love again. But when I met Kanal, he bowled me over. I was wildly attracted to him, far more than I ever had been with my fiancé. Often in our culture sexual love is not looked at the same way it is America.”

Olivia nodded. “You mean here it’s hyped and people are afraid of it at the same time. There’s a puritanical element. I can’t believe how afraid of sex Americans can be. They’d rather watch twenty bombs go off in a love scene than a graphic sex scene.”

Laughing, Maddie reached for her drink and brought it to her lips. “That’s true sometimes. What I experienced with Kanal was far more intriguing, more enlightening, more enjoyable than any relationship I’ve had before or since.”

“Kama Sutra satisfying?” Olivia winked at her friend, a smile firmly set on her lips.

“Better.”

“What does that have to do with my situation?”

“You’re attracted to a man who wants you. You want him. How long has it been since you had sex?”

“Maddie!”

“Sorry, sorry. But it’s a relevant question.”

“Not since I left England.”

“Ah, so over six months of celibacy.”

“More like a year because Randy was ... he wasn’t that interested in sex toward the end of the relationship. But I’m not going to run up to Trey MacGilvary and tell him I want sex with him. I won’t betray myself that way.”

Maddie sighed and unexpectedly tears glistened in the woman’s eyes. “It is up to you, but I think if you both gave each other a chance, you might discover things about each other you never expected. You see, Kanal and I had sex. But then we fell in love.”

Olivia had never heard this from her friend and realized Maddie wouldn’t have told her if she didn’t think it important.

Olivia left the couch and sank to her knees in front of her friend. She took her hands. “Oh, my God, Maddie. What happened? Why isn’t he with you now?” Olivia feared she knew the answer.

“When the radicals came through and burned his house, they did more than shoot me in the back. They killed him. They killed him the way they murdered Saakaar.”

Tears blurred Olivia’s vision as she saw horrible memories fill Maddie’s eyes. “I’m so sorry. That’s when you and your parents left India?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before?”

Maddie’s hands squeezed hard enough to hurt for just a second. “Because I don’t dwell on it. I have a good life. Good friends. My parents are old but still alive. I have my health.” She smiled. “I live every day like it was my last. It was horrible to lose Kanal, but I am grateful for the time I had with him. Though we were never married, and we started off with a physical attraction, it grew into more because we allowed our feelings to flow. To give our attraction a chance. If it had burned out and never grown to anything more, that would have been the end of it. As it was, we learned more about ourselves along the way. I don’t regret a day I had with him. I had my son as a result of our liaison.”

Her friend’s tragic story, filled with yearning and hope, gave Olivia food for thought. “Trey seems to think I’m this ridiculous stereotype English rose. Delicate and breakable. Like I said, I’m not his type.”

Maddie snorted and drew her hand from Olivia’s. “Here give me that pitcher so I can make more sangria.” Maddie rolled into the kitchen while Olivia followed. “I hear there’s a SWAT competition in town this weekend.”

“What? What does that have to do with what we were talking about?”

Maddie retrieved the ingredients for sangria from her fridge while Olivia held the door for her. Maddie poured the ingredients haphazardly into the pitcher. “Is your man on the team?”

“Yes.” Olivia sputtered. “And he’s *not* my man.”

“I’ll bet he is. On the team, that is. I have two tickets, but I don’t think I can go. My parents want me to come up to Denver to see them.” Maddie snatched her purse off the small dining room table and dug around. “Ah, here there are. Take them. Invite a friend or go by yourself and enjoy the sight of all that rippling male flesh.”

Olivia stared at the tickets like she’d been offered a snake. Suspicion reared its head. “Oh—wait, you bought these with no intention of going, you little wretch.”

Maddie wagged her eyebrows. “Sue me. Now take them and enjoy.”

“Oh, no, no, no.” Olivia backed away. “In England I made a mistake like this and look what it got me.”

“You learned a lesson, but in that case it wasn’t a good one. You lost your way with that man in England, but it shouldn’t have destroyed your trust in all men forever. Can you trust Trey?”

“Well, I could trust him with my life. But my heart...” Olivia shook her head. “I’m leaving in six months, Maddie. There is no point in pursuing a relationship with an American.”

Impatience and amusement warred on Maddie’s face. “You are so proper, Jaan.” She groaned and held the tickets out again. “My friend Sylvia bought them for me because she knows I like to support charity events. Plus, she also knows I like to watch hot SWAT guys. Since I can’t go I can at least know someone else is enjoying watching hot SWAT guys.”

“Why you wicked girl. I never knew.” Olivia took the tickets.

“I may be old but I’m not dead. Now enjoy.”

Olivia went into the living room and shoved them into her purse. She turned back to Maddie as the older woman returned to the living room with the sangria. “I don’t

understand how watching hot SWAT guys is supposed to cure what supposedly ails me.”

Maddie refilled their glasses. “Well, look at it this way. Even if you don’t catch Trey’s attention, you might meet another hot SWAT guy there who *is* interested in a long-term commitment *and* sex.”

Olivia laughed. “You are something else, Maddie Chopra.”

“I’m something all right. Now let’s turn this television on and watch SWAT. I think I need a dose of Samuel L. Jackson.”

“What about Colin Farrell?”

“He’s all right, too.”

Chapter Seven

Trey knew someone watched him as he stretched on the sidelines of the SWAT competition at Veteran's Park. He'd switched in the locker room from wearing a white t-shirt and navy shorts that said SWAT on one leg, to dark navy SWAT pants, boots, and tactical vest. An unusually warm October morning caused sweat to bead on his upper lip. He wiped it away as he glanced at the crowd. The park overflowed with spectators, constant chatter and commotion. Last year he didn't pay much attention to the crowd. This year, an unsettled sensation rippled up and down his spine. He hated the feeling; trepidation didn't enter his life much if at all. While this feeling didn't resemble fear, he sensed someone out there in the mingling masses hated his guts. Not cops in particular. Just him.

A set of bleachers stood on his side of the field, holding mostly spouses, girlfriends and kids. Other spectators chose to stand behind the posted line.

He scanned the crowd with suspicion. He wondered if his birth mother would turn up to see him, but only saw his adoptive mother in the second row with Dace's wife Mary and Mick's fiancée Celeste.

Shrug it off. Remember the team needs you and you need the team. Now is not the time to get creeped out over nothing.

The event brought in a huge amount of money every year for a half dozen charities. Police and Sheriff's Departments around the state enjoyed the competition and loved the opportunity to make money for a Widows and Orphans fund, along with a domestic violence organization always in need of money.

Trey liked being a part of the solution.

Even if today his body and mind didn't quite measure up.

He hadn't slept worth a damn last night. Or the night before. Or the night before. He hoped grogginess wouldn't hose his chances to help El Torro SWAT win this year. With ten teams from around the state joining in, the competition would prove fierce.

The day started off with a fitness challenge. They'd demonstrated upper and lower body strength and flexibility for individuals and then for teams. First place individual fitness went to his brother Craig, who worked out like a fiend. Second place went to Trey, and third to Dace. Several other competitors from other parts of the state had rounded out the top ten. When all was said and done, El Torro SWAT had the top score for fitness overall. The fact that El Torro took the top five spots in the competition had wowed the crowd and bolstered egos. They knew, though, that other teams would come after them like charging bulls.

Trey signed up for Super Sniper and Super SWAT cop later in the day. Up next, El Torro would compete as a team in Hostage Rescue.

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder, and he jerked around, fight response in full mode.

"Whoa, whoa!" Craig and Mick stood next to him, amusement clear in their eyes. Both men had suited up just like him, ready for the Super SWAT team event. "You're jumpy, bro."

Trey heaved a sigh. "Sorry."

Mick peered at his younger brother, concern in his eyes. “You all right? You look pale.”

Trey was about to admit to feeling as if evil eyes watched him. “I didn’t sleep well last night, that’s all.”

Kelso arrived with Dace and joking commenced.

Kelso threw Trey a smile. “You’d better be ready. Our wives are up there watching.”

Dace flexed one biceps. “Be ready to give them a show and win this competition.”

That’s when Trey glanced into the bleachers again and saw Olivia in the nosebleed section of the bleachers, toward the top. No one sat with her.

“What do you see?” Mick asked.

“Olivia Scott,” Trey said automatically.

“Uh-huh.” Kelso slapped Trey on the shoulder. “Try and keep up. You might impress her then.”

Trey glowered. “Who says I want to impress her?”

Before anyone could do more than toss him a know-it-all grin, the speakers at the top of the stands erupted with a welcome to the crowd and an introduction to the rest of the day’s events. First up was Hostage Rescue.

After donning eye and sight protection, teams of six men, one sniper and five entry team members demonstrated what they knew about rescue. Each entry team wore a gas mask during the event. Trey posed as the sniper, of course, while Dace, Kelso, Craig, and Mick worked as entry. Everything went like clockwork, and their team worked together with a precision they could be proud of. Toward the end of the event Trey tripped and felt his right ankle twist. He gritted his teeth through the quick pain. The dull throb remained, but he ignored it.

After the event, as cheers and claps from the crowd ebbed and scores were tabulated, Trey’s gaze strayed to the bleachers. He didn’t see Olivia, and disappointment spiked inside him.

Great. What did he expect? *It shouldn’t matter, damn it. She’s not my girlfriend.*

Okay, so maybe he could count her as a friend. He’d still like to see her.

The winner of Hostage Rescue was another county Sheriff’s Department. They’d squeezed out El Torro by a small margin. Next came an obstacle course that also required them to arrive at shooting positions from which each team member engaged a moving target. Trey liked the firearms part the best—hell, he acknowledged he had an aptitude for it.

Especially due to his firearms skill, El Torro’s score reached passed the closest team’s numbers and El Torro won the event.

Full of piss and vinegar, they moved on to the next event, Officer Rescue. They flew through it, negotiating a difficult course engaging multiple targets with different weapons and rescuing a downed officer in a simulated chemical environment. Trey’s ankle ached, a pounding annoyance that wouldn’t let him forget the damage he’d done earlier. They came in second, making Trey even more eager to win the next event.

By the time they started on the Tower Scramble, his ankle throbbed a maddening beat. Again he ignored it.

I’m gonna make this.

In this event a five man team consisting of Trey and Kelso as snipers, and three other team members as Assault Element headed into the competition. All members began at the

start and finish box. As Trey climbed the tower, his speed slowed when sharp pain lacerated his ankle. He started to slip, caught himself, and powered up the tower. Banishing the pain in his ankle to the back of his mind, he hurried into rappelling gear and worked his way down that side of the tower in good time. When he reached the area where he used his sniper rifle, his body went into automatic, full-alert gear. He loved this part. Lying on his stomach, his weapon on a short tripod, his body relaxed but not relaxed. His eye fixed on the target through the scope.

Time running out.

Take the shot.

Taking the shot now.

The boom of the weapon, which used frangible ammunition, still sounded loud as hell with ear protection. Once he'd completed the course, his energy level shot up. He *knew* he'd done well.

When the scores came in, the judges confirmed he'd done an excellent job and so had Kelso in the sniper section.

Filled with energy to take on the next challenge and determined to ignore his injury, Trey stood on the sidelines talking with his team members and drinking water. He poured an entire plastic cup of ice water over his head.

And that's when he saw her.

Olivia.

She watched him from a vantage point near their group. When she caught his gaze, he saw naked admiration on her face.

Whoa.

Sizzling, heated assessment that trailed over him from head to toe. Flash fire excitement darted around his body like a bullet ricochet. He'd react the same way to any beautiful woman looking at him like she wanted to eat him—hell, make him her own special ice cream cone.

Yeah. I don't think so, sport.

Her gaze locked on his and she smiled, a sweet, come-home-with-me grin that melted him into his athletic shoes. He took a step in her direction and pain zapped through his ankle. He pulled up short, grimacing and unable to keep a groan from escaping his throat.

He rotated his ankle. "Shit."

"What's wrong?" Mick asked, looking down at his younger brother's leg.

"I twisted my ankle in the Hostage Rescue. It's no big deal."

"Shit," Mick said in an echo of Trey. "Sit down."

"Nah, I'm fine. I'll wrap it up, and I'm good to go for the rest of the competition."

"You've been running on it like that?" Kelso asked, disbelief in his voice.

"Medic!" Dace waved over an EMT.

As his teammates gathered around him, Trey wished he'd never said a thing.

"Sit on the bench and let the medic take a look," Mick said, his voice gruff.

"I don't need a medic." Trey gritted his teeth again as another pain rolled in an ache up his ankle into his knee. "We've got another event to go. We can't afford to do this with one team member out."

No one agreed, but he knew they understood.

"We'll get someone to stand in." Mick ever the one looking out for his baby

brothers, kept a stern expression.

"I can do it," Randal Mercer, a fresh-faced recruit new to the SWAT team said.

Trey wanted to growl at everyone to leave him alone. He could do this. "I'm not giving up."

"We'll see about that." The EMT/Paramedic crouched next to Trey's foot as they removed his boot and sock. "Let's take a look at the damage."

Trey's ankle was starting to swell, and his heart dropped.

"You need to get this x-rayed," the EMT said.

Trey rotated his ankle again. "It's not broken."

The EMT shook his head. "Just a precaution. I'll tape it."

After the EMT did a secure job of protecting Trey's ankle, Trey stood and tried to take a step. "It feels better."

"Not good enough for competition," Dace said. "You wouldn't be allowed to participate in an operation with that much damage to your ankle."

Trey knew the truth when he heard it, but he didn't like it one damn bit. "You guys need me."

"It's non-negotiable, MacGilvary." Mick stood on one side and glared at him, while Craig stood on the other, hands on hips. "It's not worth doing more damage."

"We'll make do without you," Craig said.

Trey tried to take another step and the pain snaked through him so hard he hissed in a breath. He muttered a vile curse under his breath.

Dace clapped him on the shoulder in apparent sympathy. "It ain't worth it."

Pissed, Trey limped to the bench. "I'm staying to watch. At least I can cheer for the rest of you."

As Mercer prepared to take his place, Trey held back his resentment at the situation. Once more he felt someone watching him, and he turned around to look. He didn't even see Olivia.

Disappointment doubled.

* * * *

Olivia watched from the sidelines, glad she'd left the hard seat at the top of the bleachers. She also observed Trey as he limped, pain on his face evident before he covered his reaction. When she'd watched the medic taping his ankle, she knew something was wrong. Now, with another SWAT team member taking the field for the next event, she saw potent emotions cross Trey's handsome face. Disappointment. Maybe even a little boy petulance. She smiled. He'd revealed another side of himself.

At the same time, she worried about him.

Time to put up or shut up, Olivia. Talk to him. At least, that's what Maddie would say.

She wended her way through the rest of the crowd and headed toward the bench. Trey was the only one sitting there. The rest of team had moved away to begin the next event.

"Hi there, MacGilvary," she said as she came around the side of the bench.

When he saw her, the half-expected frown cleared to a charismatic smile. His eyes filled with warmth. "I thought I saw you in the bleachers. What brings you here?"

"Maddie had tickets and twisted my arm into taking them."

“Is Maddie here?”

“No, she decided to visit her parents this weekend instead.” She gestured to the bench. “All right if I sit here?”

“Sure. I could use the company.” His mouth twisted in a sardonic expression. “My ass is grounded.”

“I’m so sorry. You’re doing so well out there and so is the whole team. How’s the ankle?”

He tilted his head to the side, a twinkle in his eye. “The EMT says I should have it x-rayed but I doubt it’s broken.”

“Then what are you doing here? You should leave now and have it looked at.”

He made a growling noise. “No way I’m missing this.”

“Even if your injury gets worse?”

Appreciation lit his eyes. “Thanks, but I’ll be okay.”

The next event started, and before they knew it, the El Torro SWAT team took first place in the Obstacle Course. She could see Trey’s commitment to his team, even though he couldn’t participate. He cheered, he clapped, he cajoled his brothers and the other men to fight on.

During the entire display of masculine power, Olivia had to admit Maddie had a point. Watching these men in action did bring out the female appreciation inside her. She’d loved watching Trey. His muscles rippled, his body responded with lightning speed. Her body didn’t care that she was supposed to remain friends only with Trey. Her lower stomach tingled, her nipples beaded, her heartbeat quickened when she watched him.

His brothers were fine male specimens that almost any woman with blood in her veins would have difficulty ignoring. Mick stood the tallest, his pitch dark hair cut short, his craggy features giving him a dangerous but devastatingly good-looking appearance. Craig, with military short blond hair, was the shortest of the three brothers, but that didn’t say much. He still stood taller than most of the other men on the team. He didn’t smile as often as Trey or possess as much charm, and she imagined a woman would have difficulty breaking down his armor to discover his true personality.

Trey, though, captured her attention the most. Sitting on the bench next to him caused her heart to thump like crazy. She felt way too euphoric.

When the awards section of the program wrapped up, the El Torro SWAT team came in a solid second place. Trey groused, but overall he couldn’t complain much. Once or twice he apparently forgot his ankle and stood, only to sit down again with a wince.

As his teammates came up, they smiled conspiratorially at Olivia. Trey introduced her one by one to his brothers and the other team members, and the men surrounded her. Suddenly she felt like a tasty morsel at a lion hunt. Too much testosterone threatened to overwhelm, until their good-natured ribbing and genuine friendliness made her feel at ease.

Dace Banovic’s wife Mary came down from the bleachers with Mick’s fiancée Celeste, and Trey’s mother. Olivia found herself surrounded by them as well. Olivia, who didn’t always feel comfortable with people until she’d spent more time with them, experienced an instant liking for all three women.

Arlene MacGilvary, Trey’s mother, was beautiful, trim and about Olivia’s height. Silvery blond interlaced through golden blond in casual curls that tumbled over her

shoulders. She remembered Trey mentioning that she was fifty-five, but the woman looked younger.

Arlene took Olivia's hand in hers and smiled widely. "So pleased to meet you. Looks like you're taking good care of Trey for me."

Olivia couldn't help but return the woman's friendliness. "He does very well taking care of himself and everyone else."

Trey groaned. "Yeah, right. I was damned clumsy today. You'd think I was a rank amateur at this stuff."

"Don't sweat it," Mick said. "Could have happened to any of us."

Trey snorted.

"Don't let these men intimidate you, Olivia," Mary Banovic said. She smiled as wind tossed her shoulder length ash brown hair. Amusement danced in her brown eyes. "They are animals."

Dace looped his arm around his wife's shoulders. "Hell, that's what we train for. Intimidation." He winked. "We're hell cats."

Mary wrinkled her nose. "To the shower with you, kitty cat."

Dace laughed. "Okay, I'm going."

"How is your ankle, darling?" Trey's mother asked him, stern mother face in place.

"You're getting it x-rayed right?" Craig asked, his face also no nonsense.

Trey grunted, his expression mutinous. "Yeah, I guess so."

"They could cart you in the ambulance," Dace said with a grin.

Trey made a face. "No way. I'm not that hurt."

"I can take you to hospital." The words slipped from Olivia without a moment's thought. Her cheeks heated as she realized what she'd blurted out.

Everyone went silent, attention centered first on her, then on Trey's answer. He didn't hesitate. "Thanks. I'd appreciate that. Hey can someone take my car back to my place?"

Craig put up his hand. "I can do it. I came with Mick and Celeste, so I don't have a car to drive back anyway."

"I'll follow you, Craig," his Mom said, "and take you home."

Before too long everyone headed out. They decided that since Trey needed an x-ray and couldn't join them to party after the event, they'd wait.

Olivia envied the wonderful affection Trey's family and friends held for each other. She didn't detect any of the tension that always surrounded her and her parents. Of course, no family was perfect, but these people had a special bond she wished she could experience on a regular basis.

Craig and Mick insisted on helping Trey to Olivia's car so that he didn't put much weight on his foot. Once settled inside the car with Trey, Olivia felt a new nervousness descend on her.

She was in close quarters with this man again.

* * * *

Evening shadows slipped across Trey's condo as he settled on the big sectional couch in his apartment. Olivia snapped on another light next to the couch and pulled the curtains on his windows to shut out intrusive eyes.

She thought Trey looked like a big panther as he lay half prone on the couch, his big

foot wrapped and propped on two pillows. He'd taken a shower and changed into sweat pants and a plain white t-shirt that didn't hide his muscles one bit. He looked like an Adonis. *No, Adonis is a Nancy boy in comparison to this man.*

She stood over him. "Anything else you need? I'll bet you're famished."

"Not really. Not for food anyway."

Trey's eyes sparked with mischief as well as appreciation. Now that he was out of the urgent care center, x-rayed at hospital and then home, he seemed happy.

Heat filled her face, but she pushed her inherent shyness to the background. She planted her hands on her hips. "Oh? Explain yourself MacGilvary."

"A man sometimes needs release after his testosterone has been running full blast."

She rolled her gaze to the sky before she said, "Are you saying that even with a swollen ankle you feel like sex?"

He winced. "Pretty shallow, eh?"

"Very. So exercise makes you horny?"

"Partially. But most of it is just because you're here." His gaze toured Olivia in blatant sexual interest.

While she didn't consider the mid rise jeans and the close fitting, fire engine red long-sleeved knit top all that sexy, his interest said *he* did.

"Don't let me stop you. I can leave and you can call a ... friend who will accommodate you."

Once again his gaze danced over her, searching and warm. Raw pleasure overwhelmed her. Her body didn't care about the resolution they'd made before to remain platonic. Heat coiled in her lower belly, swirling like a cyclone. She needed to get out of here, even if for a few short moments.

"Well, all you're getting is pie, mister," she said.

"What?"

"I'll go home, take one of my pies out of the refrigerator, and bring it back. I think you need dinner and sugar more than anything." She dared smile, keeping it evil and saucy. "I've already made some pies ahead of the bake off coming up next weekend."

He leaned his head back against his pillows. "Damn, that sounds good, Olivia. I'd love pie. Take my extra key and you can let yourself back in."

Oh. Having possession of a key to his apartment sounded too ... intimate. "All right."

"It's in the box on my dresser."

I'm going into his bedroom. Oh, dear. The familiarity shook her in a way it shouldn't.

As she went into his bedroom, she immediately saw it resembled the stereotypical man cave. While it was decorated as well as the rest of the condo, the king-sized bed hadn't been made and couple of clothing items lay on the floor. A small flat screen television dominated one wall, as well as some computer equipment and sound system components. His spicy, musk scent, devastating on her senses, permeated the room. She breathed in. *God, he smells wonderful.*

She opened the small, dark wood box on his tall dresser. She bypassed a watch, some coins, a wallet, and saw a single key. After grabbing the key, she returned to the living room.

She also grabbed her coat, purse and hastened to the front door. "Back in a flash."

*

Trey lay back and closed his eyes as Olivia left his condo. He liked having her with him tonight, even though he admitted circumstances weren't ideal. His biggest problem, though, was keeping his damned mouth shut. He kept flirting with her, wanting her even when he shouldn't.

Face it, buddy. You aren't having sex with her even if you want it so bad you can't see straight.

His stomach growled. A sandwich and some pie. That's what he needed to strangle his libido. Self-chastisement worked for about all of two seconds. He visualized that tight red top she wore. It cupped her breasts like his hands wanted to shape and mold her. He could almost feel her silky flesh.

The phone rang, and he hobbled to the phone near the breakfast bar and grabbed it before the answering machine could pick up. "Hello."

"I'm watching your girlfriend, MacGilvary. She's mighty cute. A little plain in the face, maybe. But what a bod. Have you screwed her yet?"

Trey's anger flared off the charts as he growled out a response. "You sick fuck! It won't take me long to find out who you are."

"She's wearing a nice outfit. Curves against her body. Yep, she'd be a nice lay."

"Listen you asshole—"

"You'd better keep a watch on that woman of yours, MacGilvary. Because I plan to take everything you love, just the way you did to me."

Chapter Eight

The caller hung up.

The asshole was watching Olivia.

Trey's heart started banging in his chest. *Olivia*. Worry for her shot up inside him. Jesus, this couldn't be a prank call when the jerk described what she wore. Instinct fired to life inside Trey. He grabbed his cell phone and dialed her cell phone number.

It rang. Rang again. Continued ringing.

With each ring his internal alarm rose higher. Images, horrible imaginings flashed through his mind. A car accident. The asshole might have run her off the road. Dragged her out of the car. Or maybe the creep had forced his way into her apartment. Maybe—

He realized his breath was coming fast and he was losing control.

The phone switched to her mailbox and he said, "Olivia, this is Trey. Call me immediately."

He paced the room clutching his cell phone, his ankle hurting. He didn't give a shit. Where was she and why hadn't she answered? If she didn't call soon, he would look for her. No way would he sit on his ass and wait. His stomach tied up in knots.

Damn it. He dialed her again.

It rang once. Twice."

"Hello?" Her soft, distinctly accented voice came on the line.

Relief slammed Trey. "Olivia? Are you all right?"

"Of course. What's wrong?"

"Some ass wipe just called me saying he's watching you. He described what you were wearing. Where are you now?"

"I'm driving back. I didn't answer before because I had stuff in my hands."

"Damn it, I wish I was with you. Just be careful. Keep your eyes and ears open and lock your car doors."

"They're locked. I'm not that far away now. Less than ten minutes."

"Good. If you think someone is following you, head to the nearest police station, don't get out of the car, just honk your horn until a cop comes out."

"You're scaring me."

"Just the cop in me. Drive safe."

"Will do. I'll see you shortly."

After they hung up, his anxiety didn't ease. His heartbeat thumped in his ears.

After fifteen minutes passed and no sign of Olivia, he growled, "Fuck."

He called her again. When she answered right away, he let the relief take him once more.

"Olivia, what's taking so long?"

"I just got stuck in a traffic jam, and I'm taking a detour. Do you want me to stay on the phone with you until I reach the parking lot?"

"No. It's dangerous to talk on a cell phone while driving."

She laughed softly. "See you in a minute."

*

After she hung up, Olivia frowned. While the situation unsettled her, and she sensed

Trey hadn't revealed everything said in the disturbing call he'd received, she felt more secure knowing Trey had her back.

The detour didn't take much longer. When she pulled into a guest parking space, she noticed how the night surrounded the buildings in an eerie cloak. Wind rustled in the trees, and the whisper called to her like ghostly voices. She shivered and looked toward Trey's condo.

The front door opened and there he stood, silhouetted by the light behind him, strong and solid. She'd never been happier to see anyone.

A shadow loomed up next to her car, and she gasped in fright.

Craig waved as he walked by her car, a stern but pleasant enough expression on his face. Relieved, she opened the car door. After gathering her pie, she locked the car and headed toward Craig and Trey at Trey's front door. She heard Trey explaining the phone call.

Craig looked around, his expression now far more menacing than friendly. "You're kidding me?"

"Nope. He called right after Olivia went home," Trey said.

Even wearing sweats, Craig looked lethal. "You know who it might be?"

Trey took Olivia's bicep in a proprietary hold and urged her through the door and behind him, as if he could shield her from any harm. "I'm not sure."

Craig handed the car keys to Trey. "Here you go. Look, you guys need anything you let me know. If you get any more phone calls..."

"We'll call the cavalry," Trey nodded.

Trey's mother drove into the parking lot and retrieved Craig. She waved in a cheerful fashion, oblivious to the small trauma that had occurred. After returning the wave, Trey locked and closed the door.

"You're not supposed to be on your feet," Olivia said.

"Screw that," he said, his tone gruff and his frown deep.

Well, okay then. Obviously, with his grizzly bear attitude he was seriously upset. She placed the sack with the pie inside it on the breakfast bar. Trey limped over to her, and before she had a chance to remove her coat, he slipped his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck and tugged her forward.

His sweet, soft kiss on her lips took her by surprise. He drew back quickly, but his hand kept her close. Concern and desire mingled in his gaze. "You okay?"

Breathless, she managed to say, "I'm splendid now that I'm here."

He sighed and let her go. He looked down at the floor, his hands on his hips. Flushed from the taste of his lips on hers, she slowly took off her coat and looped it over the arm of a chair.

"You changed your clothes," he said, his gaze taking her in with clear interest.

"Yes, I did. Let me get this pie in the oven to heat up." She headed for the kitchen.

For the first time in some time, she considered her appearance with an eye for improvement. When she'd taken time to change her clothes at the apartment, she'd given herself a critical assessment and decided she wanted to look especially good for Trey. She knew her hair could use a trim. She'd let the thick, dark tresses grow to mid back. No way in the seven levels of purgatory would she cut it. The monthly trims that kept it healthy would have to do. The curly fringe over her forehead could be swept more to the side for a smoother, less librarian style. She could wear her hair down more often instead

of in her more traditional, schoolmarm, *Little House On The Prairie* presentation. The eye makeup was good; she'd always managed to achieve that smoky-eyed look with ease. Shades of copper eye shadow complimented her eye color. A rosy lip gloss made her mouth seem fuller. It screamed innocent and yet ... not. Mineral foundation evened her skin tone. Cyn would have a fit very quietly and covertly if Olivia dressed less conservatively. Sly comments and put downs would come her way.

Stop being a stropky cow, Olivia. The idea is change for you. She swallowed hard. Okay, the idea is to make Trey MacGilvary look at her a second time and find something to admire. Right now, how she looked was the least of her worries.

"So you got a strange call?" she asked.

He limped over to the couch and settled down, propping his ankle on the coffee table. "Yeah." He explained the call, and his mouth kept a grim line. "When he described what you were wearing when you left here, I wondered if he was near you."

As the oven heated, she said, "You're not telling me everything the guy said, are you? It must have been bad or you wouldn't have kept calling me. If I hadn't been on the road already, I have a feeling you would have told me to lock myself at my place and not come back out."

He went silent, his gaze into space telling her Trey either wanted to avoid her question or had entered deep into thought. Sighing, she opened his fridge. "What would you like to eat for dinner?"

"I was thinking steak." He started to rise.

"Sit down." She kept her voice firm. "I can make salad and steak for both of us. That is if I'm invited to dinner."

His brows lowered, he threw an intense gaze her way. "Of course you're invited. But you don't need to take care of me."

"You're hurt. You need to keep off that ankle. It's not broken, but it's still injured."

He grunted. "Tell me about it."

"Do you need a pain medicine or something?"

"No. I stay away from them. I don't want anything to dull my senses."

"Is that a cop thing?"

"It's a Trey MacGilvary thing."

She sniffed. "That's a bit macho."

She waited for his sense of humor to return, but that concerned, purposeful look remained. "Maybe, but I don't need anyone to take care of me."

"I got that impression. Your family and friends were trying to make sure you were all right, and you turned into a gruff ole bear. You even refused crutches."

He glared again. "Don't go there."

She grinned. "All right. But let me be a little help tonight. After all, librarians are very good at organizing, cataloging and keeping things together." That statement didn't produce a smile, so she tried, "I even promise to tell you my plans to travel to Italy next year if I finish saving up enough money."

This perked him up. "I'd love to travel overseas. Part of my ancestry is from Scotland and Wales. I'd love to see England, too."

Glad she'd found a way to angle the conversation away from weird stalker-like calls, she rummaged in the fridge for everything they'd need. Maybe his trademark good humor would return if they discussed her trip and not weird phone calls.

After she'd set the table, chopped the lettuce, cut tomatoes and mushrooms and found everything else she needed for the salad, she made certain the pie was heating well. The steak took longer, of course, and throughout her stint in the kitchen he stayed quiet. Finally dinner was ready.

"Come and get it," she said. "I'll let you limp over here, since no one takes care of you."

He slanted a glance her way, edged with danger. "Keep it up, Olivia, and you'll regret it."

She made a mock sound of surprise and fear as he shambled toward the table. "What are you going to do, *MacGilvary*?"

"Don't worry. I'll think of something."

Enjoying their banter, she grinned. "Oooh, I'm scared."

"You should be." He sat at the table, a wicked look in his eye. "Be afraid. Be very afraid."

She shivered at the low, husky sensuality in his tone and the hot promise in his gaze. God, the man knew how to turn her on with one word. One look.

As she sat across from him, she knew this meal wouldn't be an easy one. Something was still sticking in his throat, and he wasn't doing anything to get it out.

As they ate, the silence grew uncomfortable. "I've always wanted to go to Italy," she said. "I've saved for a few years. If I can save the last little bit I need, I'm going next year, perhaps in December."

The intensity in his eyes cleared into curiosity. He downed a piece of tomato. "Why have you always wanted to travel to Italy?"

"Few people ever want to know the real reason."

"I do."

"Part of my ancestry a few generations back is from there, and with the genealogy work I've done, it made me want to visit that much more. My family isn't too adventurous." She shrugged. "Mom and Dad never want to go anywhere on holiday other than to visit other relatives. This will be an adventure."

Trey grinned, and she enjoyed the breakthrough. "Yeah, my real mom and dad were like that."

She heard a million underlying stories in that statement, but didn't push for more.

"You taking someone with you when you go to Italy?" he asked.

She chewed a fork full of salad before replying. "I don't think so. Adventure is something I've needed for a long time, but I've eased my way into it. If I took someone with me, I couldn't be impulsive."

One of his dark brows winged up. "You're impulsive?"

She put her fork down slowly and gave him a hard look. "Isn't everyone at one time or another?"

"Yeah, I suppose."

"What was the most impulsive thing you've ever done?"

"I'm sure I haven't done it yet. I figure there's always the future to do one more wild and crazy thing."

"I could see you thinking that way. You'd make a terrible librarian."

"And you'd make a terrible cop."

Fear from earlier slithered along her skin like a creepy-crawly insect. She shivered.

“Do you know who called you and said they were watching me?” Suddenly she wasn’t very hungry. She stood and headed to the kitchen to check on the pie. “Was it someone you arrested?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I’ve been thinking about it but haven’t come up with anyone I can remember in particular.”

Uncertain, she turned the oven light on and stared at the pie. “I think I’m actually afraid. I know I shouldn’t be...”

“I’m sorry I scared you, but I freaked. I don’t take kindly to people threatening people I care about.”

The rough tenderness in his voice thrilled her.

“This is a stupid question, but should we call the police?” she asked.

She expected him to laugh or smile in his normal carefree, confident way. Instead, when his silence continued, she turned to observe his grave expression.

Like the panther he reminded her of, he watched her. “I *am* the police. There isn’t a thing we can do. It was probably some jerk I arrested one time that decided to get off on trying to scare me.” He pushed his chair back from the table. “But you know what pisses me off the most?”

She was almost afraid to ask. “What?”

“That it frightened me. A hell of a lot. Here I am with this damned ankle. If you needed me, I’m not in the shape I need to be in to keep you safe. *Shit*.” He looked away. “Sorry. I don’t usually curse around women.”

“You’ve cursed around me before.”

“That’s a problem, Olivia. I know better, but you twist me up. I seem to be saying and doing a lot of things I don’t normally do.”

“So you said before. But you’re sweet to worry about me.” She went to him, leaning over to kiss his forehead as affection and impulse dictated. “Thank you, Trey. You’re a lovely friend.”

As his eyes met hers, she saw his eyes turn melting hot. He reached out and tugged her down onto his lap. She squeaked in surprise.

“You don’t mean lovely as in pretty,” he said.

Somehow she found her voice. “Definitely not.”

Sitting on his lap, surrounded by his powerful arms, did odd things to her stomach. Needy. Delicious things. She stared at him in amazement.

“As I called you my hand was shaking.” The softness in his voice went gravel hard and husky. “I need to kiss you. But I won’t take it from you. I only want what *you* want to give.”

Astonished by the fierceness of his feelings, yet comforted by those same emotions, she touched his cheek. “Trey.”

She leaned forward and restraint dissolved.

His mouth took hers, the kiss catching fire like a building imploding. A back draft of emotion exploded through her, shocking Olivia with the intensity. He cupped her face, holding her with gentleness that thrilled and overwhelmed. Though she’d experienced kisses before, tasted a man’s passion more than once, nothing prepared her for the connection she felt now. Her heartbeat quickened under his exploring kisses, the scorching heat that broke loose. Arching, she moaned. Heat swirled in her belly, reaction to his strength and potent maleness. As he palmed her hip, the heat and hardness of his

fingers made her shift on his lap. She couldn't ignore the length of his erection pressed to her bottom.

He gave her his touch, brushing with an exploration that aroused her senses. He tilted her back until she lay on the couch, his hard body leaning over her in a protective yet predatory fashion. Continually, he conquered her mouth with thrust after thrust. She eagerly joined in his dance as sparklers of need tingled and danced in her blood. Her hand met his chest and explored across cloth-covered muscles. Swells and curves met her touch, contours and contrasts.

He broke their kiss and said with a gasp, "You taste so good." He urged her to straddle his waist, and as her body pressed tight to his erection, he hissed in a breath. "Feels good."

"Your ankle?"

"Screw my ankle. I'm not feeling any pain."

Kissing her throat, he worked his way to her ear, where his hot breath and tongue tortured. He swept his tongue over her earlobe, then sucked it. He dipped into her ear, and she shivered and moaned as pleasure raced over skin. His hips arched, pressing him deeper between her legs. Her breath caught in her throat as pleasure made her writhe on the thickness pressing between her legs.

With growing wonder, Olivia reveled in his uninhibited enjoyment. It mingled with hers, it fueled hers, driving arousal higher. His hips moved, and she discovered his pace and joined it.

As he kissed the hollow of her throat, she burrowed her fingers into his short hair. "Trey, this is..."

"I know..."

"So incredible."

He moaned. "*You're* incredible."

Words died in her throat. She couldn't think, couldn't express the emotions and physical sensations bombarding her from every direction. Nothing could capture the present, but at the same time it blended into one wonderful, never ending moment. She wanted this for eternity.

With his kiss, he drank in each breathless gasp of pleasure. He teased around her breasts without quite touching. Finally he cupped her left breast, weighing her in his palm. Her Balconet bra sheltered against his touch until he eased the stretchy red jumper over her breasts and over her head. He tossed aside the garment.

Trey devoured with a look so admiring, Olivia absorbed it with pure pleasure. Obviously he liked what he saw, and he wished to see more. Revealing herself to a man, whether emotionally or physically, never proved easy for her. Until now. With a sense of rightness, she drew the bra straps down her shoulders. His worked the back of her bra loose and seconds later cupped her nakedness in his big hands. His touch, so tender and light, treated her with a reverence she'd never experienced before.

"Beautiful. So soft." He punctuated his observations with small kisses pressed to the tops of her breasts.

She shivered under one caress, then another. He took his time plumping and cupping and her nipples beaded into tight buds. She clutched at his biceps as Trey flicked his thumbs over the highly sensitive flesh.

She gasped and closed her eyes. Pleasure tightened her nipples and sent a sharp tug

to her belly. Warmth pooled between her legs. Squirming on his lap, she tried to find ease, but the constant slide of his fingers on her flesh drove her nuts.

He groaned as he licked one nipple, teasing the other with exquisite, gentle tugs. His tongue traced an erotic path. Again and again he tormented her with raw passion. He suckled, held her close as he painted hot licks back and forth between her nipples.

“Please, Trey.” Her voice whispered a shaky plea.

He pressed his forehead to hers, his eyes closed. “I want to please you.” His voice went raw with husky sexual need.

She pushed him back with a gentle shove to his chest. “Your ankle ... you’re hurt. We should stop.”

He cupped her face in both hands. “Baby, we’ll stop if that’s what you want. All you have to do is say the word.”

He planted a kiss on her forehead, her nose, her lips. His chest heaved up and down with barely leashed passion.

Olivia smoothed her hands over his solid chest. “We said we wouldn’t do this.”

He nodded, and yet the heat didn’t leave his eyes. “You’re right. We did say that.”

The oven started beeping, announcing that the pie had heated through.

Rationality returned. She’d come close to throwing aside the caution she needed to rule her life. She slid off his lap and gathered her clothes. “I’ll ... um ... be right back.”

As she left the room and headed for the hall powder room, she wondered why she thought she needed to hide. He’d just explored her breasts so thoroughly. She closed the bathroom door, leaned back against it and closed her eyes. The skylight above gave the small room provided enough light to show her nakedness in the mirror. She saw her wide eyes, the flush on her cheeks, the rosy quality of her lips. Her hair fell in mussed waves. She remembered every second of how his lips had caressed her forehead, her nose, her cheeks, her lips. Her breasts seemed rounder and fuller, the nipples still hard. The sexy American cop had branded Olivia with his touch in a way she doubted she’d forget no matter what happened in the years to come. She ached from head to toe with a yearning that throbbed in her veins. Stunned, she hurried into her clothing.

* * * *

“The pie was delicious.” Trey chewed another bite of Olivia’s apple pie as he sat on the couch with her.

“Thank you.” She didn’t meet his eyes, and her soft reply seemed more subdued and diminished than he liked. “Most American’s find British desserts ghastly. And many British love American desserts. I think it’s because Americans traditionally put more sugar in their desserts. I like to use real butter and not that horrible margarine.”

He snorted. “What, you don’t have margarine in England?”

“Of course. I just don’t use it. I discovered how to make great American style pie from an American friend several months back. I’ll leave the rest of the pie here.” Olivia gathered her coat and purse from their spot on the chair near the couch.

Trey wanted to growl and make demands. After she’d gone into the bathroom and redressed, he knew what they’d done scared her. Leaving to dress away from him proved she wanted to establish distance. He wished he’d continued to kiss her until he’d seduced Olivia into his bed. God, how he wished it. His cock still ached. Had ached for the last three hours while she fed him delicious apple pie, plumped pillows behind his back, and

engaged him in conversation. The only way he could make sure she was safe was to keep her in his arms.

“Don’t go,” he said.

She slipped into one sleeve of her cardigan. “What?”

“I’m going to worry like hell if you go. It’s late and dark. Stay here tonight. You can take the guest room.”

Uncertainty colored her pretty eyes. She’d dressed far less conservative tonight than any other time he’d seen her. Her hair, loose around her shoulders in a beautiful thick wave ... well, she looked far less buttoned up and more assessable in every way. Tonight she’d set him on fire and destroyed any misconceptions he might have about a cold English rose.

“Trey...”

“Okay, I’ll walk you out.”

“Your ankle isn’t up to it. I’ll be fine. I can take care of myself.”

He picked up the phone at the breakfast bar. “I’m having a police cruiser follow you home. No arguments.”

She sighed. “Right. Okay.”

It took some time for the sheriff’s deputy to arrive and check in with them. The deputy waved from his position near her car.

Trey brushed his fingers over her jaw line, then kissed her forehead. “I’ll watch from here until you get in the car, all right? Call me when you get home so I can make sure you made it safely.”

“Thank you.” She pressed his shoulder in an affectionate squeeze. “Call me if you need anything?”

“Will do.”

He watched until she pulled out of the parking lot, and scanned the area. Other than a dog barking in the distance, all remained quiet. He closed the door, locked it, and engaged the security system.

He recalled the strange sensation of being observed earlier in the day, and wondered if maybe it wasn’t his imagination after all.

Impatience ruled him until Olivia called him from the apartment and said everything was all right. “The deputy is pulling away from the apartment complex now. Looks like he’s going around the back.”

“Probably checking for suspicious characters.”

She laughed softly, and the sultry sound echoed through him and made his body tingle. “That sounds like a line from a mystery novel.”

Trey grinned and yet he didn’t feel the amusement. “Are your doors and windows locked?”

“Yes, worry wart. I always lock the windows and doors. I’m really very cautious, you know. Not the adventurous type.”

Trey heard the teasing in her voice. “Okay. Then good night. Call me if you hear anything suspicious or you’re scared. I can be there ASAP.”

“Will do.”

Despite her assurances, Trey’s mind worked overtime and his thoughts kept him up late. He called his brothers and told them what had happened just to keep them in the loop.

Was the person who left the note on his mother's car the same man who'd made the threatening call tonight?

Chapter Nine

The phone rang Sunday morning, and Trey hobbled across the bedroom. Dripping wet from the shower, he grabbed the phone.

“Hello?”

“Hello, Trey. It’s Mom.”

The voice belonged to his biological mother Edie, and his stomach tightened with nerves.

He sank to the edge of the bed. “Hi.”

“I know you said you’d call me and we’d get together next week, but I heard that you were hurt at the SWAT competition yesterday. I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

“I sprained my ankle, but it’s not that big a deal.”

“You can walk?”

“I limp around, yeah.”

“You won’t be going to work for a couple of days, I hope.”

“My supervisor said I’m off for a week.”

“I can imagine you don’t like that.” Amusement colored her voice.

“I told my supervisor I’ll be in to work in a couple of days rather than a week. I have an appointment to check my ankle.”

“You’re hard working, Trey. You’ve always been that way.”

“No, I haven’t. My dad drilled that into me.”

“Jackson was ... he had a gift for bringing out the best in everyone. Except for me.”

Trey closed his eyes and allowed anger to wash over him. “You already know what I think about that.”

“You made that clear ten years ago.”

Tension rose inside him. He wanted to pace, but couldn’t with his ankle. He stayed silent, uncertain what to say.

Finally, he asked, “How did you find out about my ankle?”

“Someone who attended the competition came into the inn today and mentioned a SWAT officer hurt themselves. When I asked who, they mentioned your name. I tried to call last night, but your phone was on answering machine.”

“You didn’t leave a message.”

“I hate answering machines.” She sighed. “Sweetie, I’m sorry. I do want to start over with you. I want to find what we’ve lost.”

She sounded different than she had in the past. Not sour or resentful or even righteous. She continued. “I know I made a lot of mistakes ten years ago, and before that ... well, when I left your father, I soon discovered it was the worst decision I made. I should have stayed and worked things out. I should have ... well, shoulds can’t be changed. I can only work with what I have right now. I want to stay in Gold Rush, Trey. I want us to be family again.”

This news surprised and flabbergasted him. His mouth opened, then closed as he tried to formulate a good answer. Hell, *any* answer. Conflicting feelings danced around inside him. Resentment. Anger. Hope.

Hope.

He shoved that aside.

He lay back on his unmade bed. "I already have a family."

As soon as the words slipped from his mouth, he winced.

She sighed, and the resigned sound came over the phone clearly. "I have an interview at the hospital this Wednesday. I'm still interested in being a nurse. I've been a nurse in Philadelphia for the last ten years."

Good ole irresponsible, impulsive Mom. "You didn't try to find a job before you quit your last one?"

"No ... I ... if I can't find a job as a nurse, there are other things I can do. My first priority was coming back to Colorado. I feel very confident about the new job."

"That's good." He didn't know whether it was or not. "Maybe we should put off meeting until after you see whether you have a job or not."

"Trey ... I'd really hoped to see you before that. In spite of that."

Everything inside him rebelled, but he remembered what his "other" mom had told him. He needed to keep an open mind. See if his biological mother had changed. He swallowed his desire to reject her.

"Do you have time to come over tomorrow night?" he asked.

Her voice softened. "Oh, that would be wonderful, Trey. I would love to."

They made a date for her to stop by his condo. She promised to bring him dinner, and he didn't discourage her. Doubts continued to run through his mind the rest of the morning.

Later that day, Trey lounged on the couch watching a sports channel. His heart leapt with anticipation when the doorbell rang.

It's not Olivia, damn it. Don't get your hopes up.

Since Olivia left last night, restlessness ruled him more than any other time in his life. He didn't like it.

Get over it.

He shoved off the couch and limped to the door. He looked through the peephole and grinned.

He opened the door. "What are you guys doing here?"

A chorus of hellos and explanations echoed as he admitted Mick, Celeste, Craig and his mom, Arlene. He welcomed hugs from Celeste and mom and ribbing from his brothers.

"We couldn't let you just sit around and rot," Mick said with a full-fledged teasing grin. "You can't come to the party, so we brought it to you."

Mom trailed him back to the couch. "Sit down, Trey. Keep your weight off your foot."

Trey acquiesced. "Yes, ma'am."

Juggling grocery bags, Craig and Celeste headed for the kitchen.

Mick sank into the chair next to the couch. "You look like shit, bro."

Trey knew his hair stuck up, as tame as porcupine quills, his grey sweats wouldn't win a fashion award, and his ankle looked black and blue. He didn't care. "What you see is what you get."

"Be nice, Mick. Your brother is hurt," Celeste said from the kitchen as she unpacked grocery bags.

Mick gave a half laugh. "He's a tough bastard. He can leap buildings in a single bound."

"Hell, yeah." Trey got into the spirit of things. "I refuse to wear the cape and tights, though. Not manly enough."

A series of witty comments went back and forth between the three brothers.

Celeste rolled her gaze as if to punctuate her disdain. "Now boys, play nice."

Craig snorted as she shuffled pots and pans. "Who says we're nice?"

"Where's Olivia?" Mick asked.

Trey tensed. "At home, I guess. Why do you ask?"

Everyone went quiet and stared at him. He felt like a prisoner under inquisition.

"What?" Trey asked when they remained quiet.

Mick shrugged, his face impassive. "No reason."

Trey had almost called Olivia this morning, then decided the mother hen act would be going overboard.

Trey switched gears right away and grabbed the remote. "You're missing the game."

Mom sighed. "Football? Ugh! I'll help cook."

"I already had breakfast." Trey flipped channels. "Don't make any for me."

"Told you we should have called." Mick placed his hands behind his head.

"Mick." Celeste's voice held a warning, but she returned his amused expression.

Mom opened the fridge and rummaged. "You need dinner."

Trey leaned his head back on the couch. "Where's Dace and Mary?"

"Taking a test." Craig banged a pan and grimaced. "Sorry."

"A test?" Trey shifted his ankle and groaned as an ache rolled through his abused joint.

"Craig MacGilvary." Their mom speared him with a look. "You shouldn't say anything more until they know for certain."

Trey's curiosity hit a high note, but so did his worry. "Is something wrong? Are they okay?"

Mom waved one hand. "Now look what you've done, Craig. You've worried your brother unnecessarily."

Craig gave a half smile that faded as he stirred something in a bowl. "Nothing like Catholic guilt, eh?"

Mom's eyes twinkled with genuine amusement. "Nothing Catholic about my disapproval, my son. Mine is pure *motherly* disapproval."

Trey closed his eyes and gave up. "Never mind. I'm sure they'll tell me when I see them."

Less than ten minutes later, Dace and Mary arrived and when they entered the condo, Mom and Celeste descended on them.

"Tell us," Celeste said. "We can't wait."

"Yeah, please tell us what's up," Trey said. "The ladies are about to burst."

Mary beamed, her eyes crinkling a bit at the corners she smiled so wide. Dace's expression varied between elation and stark-raving fear.

"It's official." Mary clasped Celeste's hands. "I'm pregnant!"

A chorus of hoots went up as everyone gathered around to congratulate the parents-to-be.

Trey didn't try to stand up. He just smiled and responded with best wishes.

“Congratulations.”

Craig opened a six-pack of beer he'd brought and everyone celebrated with a toast.

Dace shook hands with Trey. “So when are you going to find a woman and settle down?”

Trey snorted. “As soon as Craig does.”

Craig wandered back into the kitchen. “Not likely.”

Trey held up his beer in salute. “Here's to bachelorhood all the way.”

Everyone laughed, but Trey felt uneasy under scrutiny. He knew his family pondered his association with Olivia and knew that Danella had made him gun shy as hell. Mom, though, was almost more hands-off when it came to the brother's girlfriends than one would expect. Celeste had discovered early that Arlene MacGilvary made a great friend, but Trey suspected when Mick and Celeste finally got hitched Mom would be ecstatic. Mom loved Celeste and thought her the perfect match for her eldest son.

As Mick slipped his arm around Celeste's shoulder and squeezed, Trey couldn't miss the love in his brother's eyes for his woman and Celeste's dreamy-eyed expression. Trey remembered too well the day Celeste's ex-boyfriend had taken Celeste hostage a few short months ago. Though Trey was posted as a sniper away from the mobile command center, he'd heard Mick's anguished tones when he thought Celeste's ex had killed her. By that time Mick was already deeply in love with Celeste.

Trey remembered how worry and anxiety had sliced through him last night when he thought Olivia could be in danger from some whack job.

Easy, buddy. Remember, you're not in love with her. There's a big difference. Sure, you care about her. That's all.

Craig and Mick brought up Trey's weird caller from last night.

“Everybody needs to stay on alert,” Craig said.

Trey sobered. “He said that he'd go after Olivia. But I think he's interested in anyone I care about ... family or friends. So please be careful.”

Everyone agreed to keep an eye out. Trey saw his mother's happy-go-lucky attitude change in a flash. *Damn it.* What could he do? Nothing. He'd rather Mom stay on guard than to assume the call meant nothing.

Olivia remained vulnerable, and that bugged the hell out of Trey.

He switched topics as they gathered around the dining table. “Edie is coming over tomorrow night.”

Everyone shut up. Various expressions filled their faces.

Mom sipped her mineral water. “Darling, that's wonderful. I'm glad you're getting together with her.”

Trey's cynicism remained. “We'll see. She said she wants to be a family again.”

“That's encouraging, isn't it?” Dace asked.

Dace's real family was thick as thieves, so he didn't have the background of contention Trey, Mick and Craig experienced as younger kids.

“Trey's being cautious and testing the waters, right?” Mary asked as she sat next to her husband. “Sounds like something I would have done.”

Mary would understand, since her family environment wasn't the most secure influence.

Trey pointed at Mary. “She understands me.”

Craig settled down next to Trey and elbowed him lightly. “Nobody understands

you.”

Thereafter followed a good five minutes of intense brotherly riposte, until Mom admonished them to eat their brunch of coffee orange juice, eggs, hash browns, toast, cinnamon rolls, ham, and other side dishes enough to make a man gain a hundred pounds. More joking and teasing followed after they finished eating as the guys sat in the living room and watched sports. Celeste, Mary, and Mom stayed in the dining room to make “girl talk,” as Mom called it. As their laughter echoed back to him, Trey let the good feelings soak into him. This was his family. He didn’t want to dwell on what might have been with Edie and Dad. He’d done a damn good job of leaving the past in the past until Edie called.

Damn it. He didn’t want to do the angst. Just didn’t want to do it.

He turned his attention to the present and the mysterious phone call that had alarmed him the other night.

Trey leaned forward and eyed his brothers and Dace with concern. “I’m more worried about this call than I let on earlier.”

Mick frowned. “The caller directly mentioned what Olivia was wearing, right?”

Trey nodded. “Yep.”

“So he was watching the condo,” Dace said.

“And from what the caller told you, it sounds like he means business,” Craig said as he scrubbed one hand over his short hair. “It’s tricky to know if he just wanted to scare you or he meant it.”

“Exactly.” Trey’s gut clenched.

“Olivia knows to keep her eyes open, right?” Mick asked Trey.

“Yeah, she knows. She’s cautious and smart. That doesn’t mean I’m not worried.”

Mick snapped his fingers. “Could it be that psycho she ran into at the library? What was his name?”

Trey lifted his ankle onto the coffee table. “Cohen. It’s not likely. He’s in a facility getting evaluated. His trial won’t be for some time.”

Mick grunted. “Doesn’t mean he couldn’t make a call if he’s not on maximum security.”

“Don’t remind me,” Trey said.

On second thought, maybe he *should* keep Olivia closer to him.

* * * *

When the doorbell rang at five p.m. Monday evening, Trey’s entire body tensed. Not because he expected a threat. Well, okay, he did. But not the criminal kind.

The kind only one’s mother can inflict.

A thousand nervous thoughts had run through his head in the quiet hours leading to Edie’s arrival. Now that she had arrived, his trepidation reawakened.

Come on. I can face down gunfire but not my own mother?

He hadn’t seen her in ten years. So much had changed.

Yeah. Except for my resentment. That hasn’t changed.

He took a deep breath as he limped to the door, checked the peephole. A woman about the right age, in her fifties, stood at the front door. Definitely his mom. Through the strange, distorted view granted by the peephole, she looked sharper and more professional than he’d expected. In one arm she held a large white sack. He opened the

door.

"Trey," she said softly as she stepped forward, her large brown eyes so much like his and warm with enthusiasm.

"Edie."

Edie Swift Phillips hadn't changed much physically—she was still five two and slim. Her shiny brown hair, the same milk chocolate as his, was clipped short to just below her ears. It gave her classically beautiful face a pixie appearance. Last time he'd seen her, she'd worn a severe bun most of the time to tame wild locks of long hair. Today she wore a mixed color top and solid blue pants. She looked dressed up in comparison to his jeans and red t-shirt.

Their embrace came out of nowhere for him—suddenly her right arm looped around his neck and his arms went around her waist. The sack rustled between them and a delicious scent wafted from the bag.

She held on tight, and he heard her sniff. When he backed away from her embrace, she wiped away tears. And to his mortification, his eyes moistened, too. He ruthlessly pulled back the response, unwilling and unable to tolerate it.

"It's so good to see you, Trey."

He couldn't say it was good to see her. Mind-bending. Confusing, maybe.

"How's your ankle?" she asked before he could respond.

"Better. I have a doctor's appointment tomorrow. Supervisor's orders. He says I have to get it checked out before I can come back to work."

She patted his shoulder. "Well, I can look at it for you. Remember, I'm a nurse."

He smiled but didn't agree. "Come in."

Trey offered her something to drink, and after she said she'd have whatever he planned to have, he dug around in the fridge until he came up with iced tea.

"What did you bring?" he asked, trying to lighten his voice.

"Dishes from Chicago Market. If I had a home right now I'd fix you a home cooked meal. This was as close as I could get with takeout."

"You always were a good cook."

She smiled, and a different light entered her eyes. She didn't seem as bitter, as cynical. As hardened as she had been ten years ago. "Thank you."

Before long they'd set the table, talking about inconsequential things like the weather. He wondered how long it would take for her to say why she wanted reconciliation with him.

Easy. Throttle back.

As they settled down to eat, his stomach growled. Hungry, he tucked into the meatloaf, mashed potatoes, and salad. "This is good."

"Glad you like it. So, tell me what's been happening all these years. Ten years is a long time."

Trey remembered his graduation from University of Colorado with a Criminal Justice degree, and the debacle that had almost ruined his graduation party. The wild behavior of the woman sitting right in front of him. But he wasn't going to bring it up. "Right after the last time we met, I came back to Gold Rush and hired on with El Torro Sheriff's Department. And then four years ago I became part of the SWAT team."

"That's such dangerous work. But I can tell you love it. And you're good at it."

She hadn't been reacquainted with him long enough to know whether he could do

the job well or not, but he wouldn't dispute her compliment. "It's dangerous work, but I love it."

"And what do you do on the team. Aren't there specialized jobs?"

"In some ways." He drank his iced tea. "I'm a sniper. My adopted father taught me how to shoot a long time before I even graduated from college. I'm pretty good at it."

She smiled, and he saw the sincerity warm her gaze. Then, he thought he saw the sheen of tears. "I'm so proud of you. You've accomplished so much since Arlene and Justice adopted you."

An ache centered in the middle of his chest, as if someone had laid an anvil there and demanded he try and breathe. "Thanks. I appreciate that."

She reached across the table and placed her hand over his. "Trey, I know I have a lot to make up for. I know that nothing can erase that I abandoned you and your father. I take the blame for what happened back then. But I hope this will be a fresh start." She drew her hand back.

He could see the truth in her eyes, and yet he didn't trust himself. How could he? Ten years ago he'd hoped his mother would start fresh with him when she came to his graduation. "You've got to understand how hard it is for me to trust what you've said. When you came to graduation and everything went to hell, it put a stamp on that day. On my memory. I want to move past it, but first I have to believe that I can trust you."

Sadness darkened her eyes. "I understand. I didn't expect you to accept me with open arms right away. In fact, when I called you the other day I was terrified that you'd just hang up on me. I haven't given you any reason to believe that I'm a different person than I was when I left your father and when I ... when I made the scene at your graduation."

He took time chewing his next bite before he asked, "What's made you change?"

"I realized that a big part of my problem was my self-esteem. You know something about how I grew up." She laughed half-heartedly. "My parents, as you probably remember, were unreliable, cold people. So I grew up thinking that's how all families were. Even when I had evidence to the contrary, I resented other people's happiness. I was more interested in playing the victim than I was at doing something about my own mess of a life. Your father had such a happy upbringing. God only knows why we were attracted to each other."

He'd never heard her open up like this before, and it encouraged him against his will. "Maybe you thought you could have that happy life. That you could create the environment you never had as a kid."

She nodded. "Makes perfect sense. It does." She sighed. "Anyway, I stayed the manipulative, passive-aggressive woman up until after I messed things up at your graduation. It was like a ton of bricks hit me after you said..."

Yeah, he remembered.

But he'd only said those words when she'd started whining about how he didn't understand her, that she only needed money from him until she got on her feet.

"You're a lucky man, Trey. You always seemed to have everything handed to you on a silver platter. While I've had to work for everything I got.

That had pissed him off.

"I work damn hard for everything I get. Nothing is handed to me. I believe you get what you put into life. I hate what you are. I hate what you did to Dad's life and my life. I

never want to see you again."

Tears had spilled from her eyes and she'd turned away. And until she'd called him this last week, he hadn't seen her, hadn't talked to her.

Recalling the heated exchange of words made his throat close up.

Those tears shone in her eyes again, but she didn't let them fall. She looked down at her plate, as if the shame of it all kept her from meeting his gaze. "I got therapy for low self-esteem, started meditating, took psychology and communication classes while working as a nurse. It took some time, but I learned that I'm responsible for what happens to me, and I have no one to blame but myself." This time she met his eyes. "I learned that I want my son to know who I am now. That I want to know him for who *he* is now."

Stunned, he couldn't say a damned thing. Residual mistrust lingered, but a new emotion welled inside him for his mother. Affection. A desire to understand the life she'd carved for herself. Trey hadn't expected the upwelling of emotion as she bared her secrets and soul. If there was one thing Edie Phillips had always been, was an unemotional, cool character. This time, though, her feelings spread out on the table like a deck of cards. She hadn't made excuses. She'd answered his questions.

Wait. Just wait. Make sure this isn't smoke and mirrors.

He didn't trust her completely despite the revelations.

"I know this is a lot to take in." She put her fork down, her meal only half eaten. "I don't expect you to accept it. I did want to tell you know what's happened." She heaved a big sigh and attempted a half-smile. "My life is very full these days. I'd like to do some volunteer work here like I did back in Chicago. I really enjoyed that."

"That's great." He tried a smile but it wouldn't quite form. "Thanks for telling me all this. I appreciate it."

"I sense you don't know whether to believe me or not."

"I'm being cautious."

She nodded. "I understand. Well, tell me some more about you. Do you have a girlfriend?"

His head jerked up. How did she know about Olivia?

Olivia is not your girlfriend, jerkweed.

When she stared at him, curiosity alight in her eyes, he cleared his throat and answered. "No."

"Hmm. Well, your job is demanding. I can understand that a lot of women wouldn't tolerate it."

"True. Mick's fiancée Celeste had a lot of trouble at first with his career." He shrugged and took a drink of iced tea. "I have plenty of dates. Nothing serious."

"Maybe someday."

He smiled. "I don't even think in that direction. I don't think it's in the cards for me."

"Why not?"

"Because I like variety. I don't know that I'm a one woman guy."

She stirred her fork through the potatoes on her plate. "You can blame your father for that."

His head snapped up, instant defensiveness ripping through him. "Why?"

"Darling, he married five times. Living with him, having women coming in and out of your life every few years must have messed with your concept of relationships."

Shit. He'd never thought of that. "Right. It makes sense." He shrugged. "Dad was a good example of why some people aren't cut out for long term relationships."

She picked up her fork again and dug into her meatloaf. "Jackson was a wonderful man, but he always kept a part of himself in reserve. A woman could never get through to the core of him. He held something back. Something essential."

In that moment, Trey wondered if *he* left women hanging with a feeling of incompleteness? Of not giving them enough? His defensiveness dissolved in the face of facts. As a cop he dealt in concrete facts. This was one of them.

Her face turned sad. "You know, when he died I was devastated. I was ... I still loved him."

Returning anger swamped him. "You didn't come to the funeral."

She nodded, her eyes haunted. "I know. At the time I didn't think you'd want me there."

"You didn't bother to ask."

She nodded once more, hurt plain to see. "I was wrong, Trey. So wrong. Forgive me."

He struggled with the concept. "I ... let's just take it slow, okay? I need more time to sort this out in my head."

She sighed, but the sound didn't come across as oh-pitiful-me. Instead she sounded resigned and willing to wait. "Of course."

A full minute passed before he said, "Dad wasn't perfect. Not by a long shot. I know that your running away wasn't all your fault."

"I could have spent more time explaining to you why I needed to run away. Why I ... had the affair and left with the other man."

"Sometimes we don't do the right thing at the time."

"Ah," she said, "but like me, you can choose to be your own person. Don't let your parent's mistakes be yours, my son. Don't let my mistakes and Jackson's mistakes mark you for life. You are your own man."

This time, when Trey smiled, he meant it. "You're a smart lady."

She laughed. "Thank you. That's the best compliment I've received in a long time." When he stayed silent, she continued. "Trey, if you want to, I'd like to keep meeting with you for dinner sometimes. Are you going to the pie bake off this coming weekend?"

"Probably. Mom is entering a pie in the contest, and another friend is, too. They'll hurt me if I don't go."

She grinned. "Excellent. Then I'll see you there." They finished dinner, and as they cleaned up, she said, "Getting to know the new me might take a while. And I'm sure there are things that are different about you that I'll need to get used to. We'll take it one day at a time."

It was a guarded, tentative beginning. But he took it.

Chapter Ten

“A bake off isn’t my idea of fun, but I’ll survive,” Trey said as he followed his mother and Celeste through the crowd at the twentieth annual Gold Rush Great American Pie Bake Off. Just saying the title was enough to give most people oxygen deprivation.

Celeste punched him on the arm playfully. “Be nice, or my husband will hurt you.”

He groaned and shifted his brown paper bag to his other arm. “I’m so scared.”

“You’d better be,” Mom said. “Because if Mick doesn’t pick on you, I will. Now be nice.”

Trey smiled. “Yes, ma’am.”

As they wended through the crowd, he wished he did have male companionship to help him survive this girly event. Sure, eating the pie was manly, but watching judges rate pies bored him. Several other law enforcement officers, some from the Gold Rush Police Department, the Colorado State Patrol, and El Torro County Sheriff’s Department had female friends and relatives participating. If he saw any he knew, he planned to hang with them while the judging commenced. Amazing how long it could take to judge pies. Mom, though, had promised him he’d enjoy the culinary benefits of eating pie while at the event. How could he ignore such a bribe? He’d driven himself to the park, while Mary, Mom and Celeste had brought the pies in another car.

He’d checked with the city police working the event, and learned they’d done a sweep of the area with bomb sniffing dogs. The K-9 officers had reported the area was clear. Plus, police officers on duty kept a watch on the crowds.

Satisfied everything was as safe as it could be, he decided he could relax a little.

His ankle still ached, but the doctor told him he mended fast. He could return to a desk job next week, then maybe back to SWAT. It would depend on his progress.

“Too bad your brothers and Dace can’t enjoy the day out here with us,” Mary said as she brought up the rear.

Trey chuckled. “If they weren’t working, they’d probably be watching a game instead of this.”

Mary came up alongside him. “I wouldn’t be too sure. I would have added it to Dace’s honey-do list.”

Celeste laughed. “If Mick wasn’t working, he’d be here.” She batted her eyelashes. “I have ways of making him conform.”

Too much information.

“Damn,” Trey said in lighthearted regret. “Remind me to never get married.”

Mary threw a conspiratorial look his way. “Is Olivia going to be here?”

Now why did they insist of bringing up her name every time he turned around?

He shrugged. “Last weekend she said she would.”

“You haven’t talked to her since then?” Mom asked.

“Nope.”

She sighed. “Well...” She left it at that. “What about Edie?”

“When I talked to her last, she planned to be here. She isn’t into her own place yet, so she couldn’t bake and enter a pie.”

Edie and Olivia had a hold on his thoughts. He’d thought about them frequently this

week, and he'd almost called Olivia more than once. Better to stay detached. After all, as a purely friendly association, it's not like they'd spend too much time talking or in each other's company.

"I guess pie bake offs are popular." He smiled. "There are even a lot of men here."

"See," Mary said with a smug expression.

Though he'd attended more than one of these bake offs, Trey felt like this one could prove different. He didn't know why, but there it stayed, lingering in the back of his mind. As a cop he understood hunches worked well when he paid attention. He remained vigilant. During his down time, he spent time researching who might have made the threatening call to him. He'd arrested a lot of people in his career. Who would be stupid enough to phone a cop at home and threaten him and the people he cared about? So far he hadn't come up with anyone in specific he could name. Criminals in this category were all in jail.

Although he hadn't talked with Olivia specifically, he'd asked Craig and Mick to keep an eye on her without her knowing it. They'd cruised by her place of work and her apartment and reported back that she was fine.

Shit. He didn't want to think about danger on a pleasant day with temperatures in the sixties in this high-mountain community. After the ladies headed into the tents to mingle and arrange their pies, he stayed outside to observe.

Crowds filled Veteran's Park. Every imaginable type of person wandered the grounds. People with dogs, some scraggly individuals who looked on hard times, some older men on the arms of spouses eager to watch the event. A few younger men, enthusiastic about the pie events since they might get to eat dessert, mingled with their girlfriends and acquaintances. Damned if men didn't react like Pavlov's dogs whenever pie came into the conversation.

Hell, men stalked this event because they knew tons of women would be here. Good place to find a date? Maybe. He shook his head. *Yeah, right.*

He glanced around, uncertain why he felt compelled to watch the crowd. Observing people fell into his job description, yet he had no reason to think he needed to stay on watch today other than instinct. *Go figure.* He shook his head and tried to ignore the creepy sensation. Was he being watched again?

His ankle ached, so he started toward one of the pie tents where he'd seen his mom disappear. As he entered the tent, he came to a dead stop. Across the huge expanse, Olivia stood with a man. The man slung his arm around her shoulders, his smile large, and her expression even bigger. The guy holding Olivia stood over six feet and the dark sweatshirt he wore couldn't hide a muscular build.

Before Trey could take a deep breath, two emotions he didn't expect slammed him in the gut.

The guy had his arm around Olivia.

The guy was *touching* her.

Trey stood, mouth open, hands on his hips, in shock at the jealousy searing him like a flame. Second, the desire to protect erupted full-blown, an animal reaction Trey recognized.

No way. I am not jealous.

Oh, yes I am.

That jealousy plus the desire to protect had him striding toward her in two seconds

flat.

So much for detachment, MacGilvary.

* * * *

The man sat in the parking lot within the confines of Veteran's Park, waiting and watching for opportunity. Today his urgency increased, fueled by a need to destroy Trey MacGilvary's sense of security.

This vendetta, if he admitted it to himself, had as much to do with creating fear as it did killing MacGilvary and his loved ones. He liked telling his psyche this, because confessing that he'd made a huge mistake warning MacGilvary over the phone about his intentions—well, that wouldn't do, would it?

Dumb fucker.

The words echoed through his head flavored by more than one voice.

Sometimes the demon spoke, sometimes his wife did.

Not that his wife had ever said such words. But she'd had the look in her eye lately. Disrespectful. Insubordinate.

While I'm at it, I could put my wife on ice, too. She's been such a fuckin' nag lately.

No. His wife, his family, they must all remain untouched by more violence, by the horrible thing MacGilvary had done to them.

When MacGilvary's family died, only MacGilvary would know the pain.

From this point forward the pain would come dribble-by-dribble, bit by bit until the final culmination.

* * * *

"Who is that man?" Cameron asked as he released Olivia. "He's walking this way as if he's ready to kick my ass."

Olivia glanced around in confusion as her brother's arm slipped from around her. Trey walked in their direction from across the tent, his eyes steely, his expression hard and unforgiving.

"Trey MacGilvary. He does look incensed."

Cameron's normally jovial expression turned worried. "Where do you know him from?"

"He's the SWAT officer that helped me with Cohen."

Cameron shifted his big body so he stood slightly in front of her. "He looks angry enough to chew bark."

She grabbed his forearm. "Cameron, what are you doing?"

Her brother was younger than her, but when it came to protecting his sister, his size and his love never failed.

When Trey reached them, Olivia felt the testosterone pinging between the two men like firecrackers. She could almost cut it with a saw, it was so thick on the ground. Time for intervention.

She stepped away from her brother and smiled at Trey. "Hello, Trey."

Trey didn't smile. In fact, he looked almost as kick-ass as he'd appeared when he'd dealt with Cohen. "Hey." He stuck his hand out toward Cameron. "I'm Trey MacGilvary."

Cameron's hand went out immediately, his green eyes glacial. "Cameron Scott. I'm Olivia's brother."

Then something happened that blew Olivia away. Trey's watchful face switched to an animated, happy grin.

Trey shook Cameron's hand with enthusiasm, then released him. "It's great to meet you, Cameron."

Cameron's eyes cleared of caution and went to amusement. "Nice to meet you, Trey. I want to thank you for assisting my sister at the library when she was taken hostage. I'm very grateful."

Relieved the two men comprehended the lay of the land, she wondered why Trey had come on like a bulldozer. It didn't make sense unless...

No, it couldn't be.

Could he have seen Cameron with her and thought...

Had he been jealous?

It doesn't seem bloody likely.

"I'm glad I was there," Trey said, "But she was holding her own very well. You've got a smart, tough sister."

Cameron tossed a teasing look her way. "She is. Tough as boot leather."

"Thank you." She rolled her eyes. "Always nice to be compared to foot apparel. I suppose you'll compare me to muddy wellies at your next opportunity."

Cameron threw her a teasing grin. "Too right. Sounds like a capital idea."

She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow. "Now you sound just posh."

Trey's gaze turned to her, and what she saw there surprised her once more. Warmth. Tenderness. "She's beautiful and smart."

Olivia beamed and blushed at the same time. "Flattery will get you another slice of pie, MacGilvary."

"It's a deal. Mom's bribed me with pie today already." Trey looked around the tent. "My biological mother will probably turn up, too."

Before she could stop herself, she asked, "Oh, how is that going? Are you getting on with Edie?"

Trey frowned a bit. "I'm testing the waters. I'm not sure yet."

She wanted to ask him more, but decided not to with her brother standing there.

"What brings you to Gold Rush?" Trey asked Cameron.

"I'm a software engineer from a British firm that has interests in Denver and they sent me on this business trip."

"Of course, he knew his big sister would be angry if he didn't visit Gold Rush while he was in the States," Olivia said, pressing her brother's wide shoulder in affection.

"I fly back to England tonight. It's my son's first birthday Monday. Don't want to miss that."

Olivia watched the two men converse. Her strong brother, so confident and at ease with Trey's intimidating charisma, didn't miss a beat.

Suddenly Trey said to Cameron, "Keep an eye on Olivia, will you? Make sure she's safe."

Cameron's eyes narrowed. "Is she in danger?"

Apprehension welled up, but she attempted to disguise it with a wide smile. "Blast it MacGilvary, don't scare him."

Cameron threw a concerned look at Olivia. "What's going on? Why should I be worried?"

She patted Cameron's shoulder. "You shouldn't be."

Trey related the phone call he'd received. "Stay on alert, okay?"

"It's not that bad." She turned to Trey. "Can I speak to you outside please?"

"Sure," Trey said.

"Be right back Cameron." She waved a hand in a ta-ta gesture, then exited the tent.

She paused several yards away from the tent near a copse of dense trees.

Trey placed his hands on his hips. "What's up?"

She mirrored his stance. "Why did you have to scare Cameron about the phone call?"

"Why not bring it up? I thought you would have told him already."

"I try to keep my family as uniformed about my life as possible."

"Why?"

"It's a complicated story."

"Does it look like I'm busy?"

Frustration ate at her resolve to keep her temper. She sighed, uncertain whether to reveal details. "It's complicated. My parents are meddling people. That's one of the reasons I left England. Trying to compromise with them, see eye-to-eye with them on any situation is impossible. They've been begging me to come back to England even though I've only been here six months. When I tell them I'm loving it here in the United States and especially in Gold Rush, they are appalled."

He grunted. "They have something against the United States?"

"Not specifically. They just don't care for the fact I like it so much I want to stay. My exchange program is for at least a year. Plus I..." She swallowed, trying hard to eject the next reason. "The position I had back in England is gone and will never be open to me again."

"You said you were a librarian there, too, right?"

"Yes."

His eyes turned to cop mode. Time for interrogation. "Why did you leave your other job?"

"Reasons I'd rather not go into right now. Second, my parents pester my brother into telling them everything because we email regularly. My parents refuse to get email or use the Internet, so it's more difficult to stay in touch with them. He's getting better at not giving into all their demands, but he isn't as strong as me in that respect." She put her hands up in supplication. "They ask him things like, 'Is she eating enough? Does she have any friends? Does she have any boyfriends? They're afraid I'll lose this job. They never understood why I had to run to a foreign country. They believe that leaving Huntingdon was one of the worst things I've ever done.'"

Trey looked taken aback either by her partial confession or the vehemence of her objections to her parents. "I know parents can be trying. Take my Edie for instance."

"Oh?"

"That's a long story, too. One you don't have time to hear right now."

They went silent, and his gaze stayed intent on her. Out of nervousness she said, "Sounds like we both have a lot of baggage we'd rather not discuss."

He nodded, his gaze more understanding. "Seems so."

Curiosity pushed her. "How is your ankle?"

“Good.” He explained his supervisor’s plan to put him on a desk job next week. “At least I’ll be back to work. As far as I’m concerned, a week of sitting around was more than enough.”

She smiled, allowing her gaze to cruise over his broad shoulders and the proud tilt of his head. Attraction swept over her, a feeling she couldn’t staunch no matter how much she tried. Trey’s mouth tightened, and he crossed his arms. Wearing a ruby red cable jumper and worn jeans with athletic shoes, he looked casual. At the same time, she acknowledged Trey could never represent ordinary. No matter when she saw him, he always had an aura of pure power and competence.

Like it or not, I’m attracted to him. Intensely.

“Didn’t you catch up on your reading while you were at home?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah, I did.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe it was good for me to have down time. But now I need to get back to work.”

“And straight into the fire.”

“Yeah.”

“Have you had your blood pressure checked lately?” She threw him a teasing smile.

“What? Yeah, my doctor checks it whenever I go in. I have textbook blood pressure.”

“Hmm. It’s just that sometimes you’re so intense ... so well...”

Blast, Olivia. Just shut it.

Before he could respond, she said, “I didn’t mean to sound like a harpy wife. I just wondered if the phone call from that nutter wiped away your sense of humor.”

Genuine amusement danced in his eyes. “Look, I’m sorry if I came on strong about your brother looking out for you. I go by my gut, and ever since I’ve been here today I’ve felt something strange.”

“Strange?”

“Like something’s not right. So just keep your guard up.” He rubbed the back of his neck again. “I wasn’t going to say anything more because I didn’t want to scare you.”

“I’m very difficult to frighten.”

Another grin flashed over his mouth. “I know.”

An urge to tease him emerged full strength. “The way you tromped toward us put my brother on alert. I told him who you were, but you looked so furious.”

Trey’s eyebrows popped up. “Yeah?”

“Why were you charging toward us like a bull?” She forced herself to meet his eyes, to learn what she could from the intense scrutiny in his dark eyes.

This time, though, he glanced away, a sheepish and unusually vulnerable look on the strong, carved line of his handsome face.

When he returned his gaze to her, he confessed. “I just reacted. Call it instinct if you want. I saw this guy with his arm around you. You were smiling and looked happy. I didn’t think his touch was unwanted. Logic told me to leave it be. My gut made me charge forward.”

Out with it Olivia. Just ask him what you want to know.

“Why did you charge forward?”

He sighed. “Protective instinct after that guy called and threatened me and people I care about.”

She reached out and clasped his forearm, enjoying the enticing curve of powerful

muscle. "Thank you for being concerned, big brother."

Trey's gaze narrowed, burning with a dangerous heat. His voice lowered to a sensual vibration. "I am definitely not your brother."

Her body tingled from head to toe at his husky declaration. "Oh? What are you then?"

He moved in closer, and she kept her hand on his arm. "A good friend. If you're ever afraid, you can come to me anytime."

"Of course."

He tilted her chin up with his index finger. "I couldn't stand it if anything happened to you."

A thrill shot up her body as his gaze caressed her. She wasn't wearing anything overtly sexy. A long-sleeved green t-shirt that fit slim against her body and jeans. Nothing fancy. But his attention gobbled her up, all fiery eyes and passion.

"That's sweet, Trey. Thank you."

"What I'm feeling right now is damned far from sweet."

She almost didn't ask, afraid of the answer yet wanting it all the same. "What are you feeling?"

"Crazy. I'm starting to feel like—what do you Brits call it—like a nutter." His voice deepened, an almost guttural quality laced with seduction. His gaze latched onto her mouth. "Forgive me."

"For what?"

"This."

He leaned in and caught her mouth with his, a quick, burning kiss that tasted by way of a tease. His tongue parted her lips, stroked inside to caress her in one flaming touch. She returned the kiss just as he pulled back. He stepped away, looking for all the world like a male animal reacting to primal drives. His chest heaved up and down.

Breathless, aroused, she waited for ... what? Blast it, she had to know why he'd kissed her where anyone could see them. She'd never felt this driving need with another man, one that pushed her to do and say and react in ways her librarian personality should have found too forward.

That's it, Olivia. Refuse to go arse over elbow over this guy.

"You kissed me." Accusation rang in the statement. "If you're only a friend, why did you kiss me and act so territorial when you came toward me and Cameron? I was laughing with my brother and you must have seen that. You didn't really think I was being threatened, did you?"

"First instinct said yes, then I saw you smiling." His gaze came up to hers, a melting heat in his eyes that washed through her in a warm wave. "I was jealous when I saw another man holding you, all right? I admit it." Uncertainty crossed his face. "My restraint seems to be shot to hell around you, Olivia. You know I find you sexually attractive. There's no doubt about that, right?"

Her mouth popped open, but it took her a few seconds to respond while the reality sank in. Whether she wanted it to or not, the fact that he was sexuality attracted to her thrilled her. "No."

Trey's intent look unraveled her second by second. "There's no doubt that I want you, that I care about you. I just can't give you what you need. A relationship that goes much beyond sex isn't in the cards for us. What I can give you isn't what a woman like

you deserves.”

Suddenly, the attraction bubbling inside her like a volcano ready to erupt mixed with anger. “You think you know what I need, Trey MacGilvary?” She lowered her voice to almost a hiss. She poked him lightly in the chest with her index finger. “Maybe you’re not as savvy as you think.” Poke. “If you can’t give me what you think I need, then stop touching me.” Poke. “Stop kissing me. Stop tempting me until my head spins.” She heaved a deep breath. “There. Now that we’ve straightened that out, you know where I stand.”

Instead of returning her ire with additional anger, a full grin flowered over his face. The passion in his eyes remained. Damn the man.

Trey crossed his arms. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah. I’ll stop telling you what I think you need.”

“Good.”

A woman’s voice over the loud speaker announced that judging of pies would commence in less than ten minutes.

“I’d better get back to the tent.” She started to walk away.

He followed alongside. “You brought a pie?”

“Of course. Actually, I brought two. One blueberry, and your favorite apple.”

“You’ll be up against my mother on the apple pie. Glad I’m not a judge. I like both your pies.”

“Brilliant.” She switched back to their original topic, eager to make him understand her position. “Please don’t be like my parents trying to protect me from ghosts that aren’t there. It didn’t do them any good, and it won’t do you any good either.”

She could tell he wanted to ask more, to understand what she meant.

“Come on,” she said, “I’ve got a grand prize to win.”

“Confident?” Trey ambled alongside her as she headed back to the tents.

“You’ve tasted my pie. What do you think?”

“I think it’s as delicious as you are.”

Her face flamed. “Trey, I’m talking about pie.”

He gave her an innocent look. “So am I. What did you think I was talking about?”

Chapter Eleven

Olivia watched from the pie participant's area on one side of the tent, settled on her hard plastic chair. Judges went from pie to pie as "cutters" sliced smidgens of desert for the judges to taste.

"I think your pie is going to the next round based on what Trey told me," Arlene MacGilvary said as she leaned to her right and whispered, "He loved your pie."

Olivia smiled and whispered back, "Thank you."

Olivia enjoyed the woman's company. In fact, the time she'd spent in the participant's area with her, trading quips and conversation had proven pleasant.

On the other side of Olivia sat Edie, Trey's biological mother. She'd come rushing in at the last minute with a ready smile and breathless. Trey had seen her and escorted her to a seat next to Olivia. This sort of surprised Olivia, because with Trey's somewhat secretive past, she didn't expect him to want Edie in close proximity to Arlene. Arlene had welcomed Edie with kindness and no trace of animosity. Just in a short time, Olivia was starting to enjoy both women's company immensely. They had plenty of time to chat before the event started, and when Olivia mentioned to Edie and Arlene that she was considering a makeover, the two older ladies had offered to help.

"Hurrah!" Arlene's clan cheered as her apple pie made it to the next round of judging. Her other pie hadn't done as well, but Olivia could tell the woman loved participating regardless. The fact she'd done so well even though she wasn't an experienced baker was fantastic.

Edie grabbed Olivia's hand. "Oh, your pie is up next."

"Don't worry, you'll do well," Arlene said.

Olivia chewed her lip. Sure, she'd told Trey she'd win a Grand Prize, but she said that to cover how flustered she'd become after his kiss. She knew that Trey was a trustworthy man, and not the least dodgy like her last boyfriend Randy. But why did Trey keep tantalizing her when she'd told him to back off? He would bloody well make up his mind. This game wouldn't work for her.

Still, she could feel him behind her, sitting in the back row with Celeste and Mary.

Just because you are attracted to a man doesn't mean you should pursue a relationship.

She knew that, but it didn't mean she liked it.

Olivia held her breath as the judges continued their tastes. "This is nerve wracking."

"That's for certain." Edie's voice sounded shaky with excitement. She'd entered a pie, too because the inn had allowed her to use their kitchen.

Before they knew it, the judging on Olivia's pie completed.

"Voting is in!" The announcer's voice came through loud and clear. The older woman smiled broadly. "The apple pie baked by Olivia Scott passes to the final round."

Arlene, Olivia and Edie let out a combined squeal. Clapping and hooting from the sizeable crowd filled the air. A breeze fluttered through the tent. Cooler temperatures had moved in and darkening clouds promised moisture.

As they enjoyed that only five pies qualified for grand prize, Trey, Celeste and Mary came to the front to congratulate them. All around people chattered.

“Everyone may I have your attention,” The female announcer said. “There will be a twenty minute break while the other pie tents finish their selections and the grand finale begins.”

Arlene stood and stretched. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I missed lunch. I’m heading to the chow tent and grab something really awful for me like a donut and coffee.”

Mary groaned. “I’m with you. Decaf for me.” She patted her stomach. “I think the baby would like a donut, though.”

“Me, too.” Celeste chimed in.

“Can I join you?” Edie asked.

A chorus of agreement made Edie smile.

Olivia stuffed her hands in her jeans pockets. “I’ll meet you over there. I’m making a run to the little girl’s room.” She shivered. “Then I’m grabbing my jacket out of my car. It’s getting cold.”

“I can grab your jacket,” Cameron said.

“Wow, what a nice brother,” Celeste said.

Olivia shrugged and winked. “He’s all right. I’ll keep him.”

Olivia hurried out of the tent. She heard Trey’s warm laugh as he chuckled at something Celeste said. Olivia had to admit that she enjoyed her time with Trey’s family. She found it hard to believe they’d embraced her as one of their own so readily. She did wonder if they had the wrong impression about her relationship with Trey. If one of them had seen him kissing her by those trees...

She heaved a sigh and headed for the portable johns. She didn’t want this kind of complication. Good thing she planned to keep her distance from now on.

Olivia saw a man exit the trees after she walked away from the portable toilets and natural caution roared to life.

A long, unkempt beard covered his face, as did a thick mustache. He wore a ragged red plaid flannel shirt and blue, baggy carpenter’s pants. He started toward her. “Hey, lady.” He flipped open a switchblade. “You got extra change?”

His eyes, dark with intent, sent her heart banging against her ribs. Because she wore a fanny pack—she could never get used to the very American term—she had full use of her arms to defend herself.

It wasn’t like she hadn’t faced down a weapon before.

Despite that, her heart picked up speed and her mouth went dry.

* * * *

Trey’s cell phone rang as he stood inside the tent waiting for his friends and family to return. Probably one of his brothers calling to tease the hell out of him because he was stuck here.

Craig’s name popped up on his phone, and Trey answered. “You’d better not be calling to rub it in. Besides, I’m here where the pie is and you’re not.”

“Trey,” Craig’s voice sounded urgent, “Listen to me. Mick and I are on our way down there to the park.”

The stress in Craig’s voice sent up an instant alarm. “Why? What’s wrong?”

“A call came in to dispatch a few minutes ago. The man who called said he planned to hurt your woman. Who did he mean, Trey? The only person I could think of was—”

“Jesus.” Trey moved quickly, dodging around chairs. “Olivia.”

* * * *

Olivia hesitated, her answer evolving slower than she wanted. “No. Sorry, I don’t.”

The guy stood between her and the tent area. Sneaking around him didn’t appear to be an option.

He grinned, and for a second genuine warmth seemed to touch his eyes. Maybe there was a real person behind the grime. “Hey, you one of those Brits?”

“Yes. Now if you’ll excuse me—”

He took a step forward. “I had a pretty English girlfriend once—”

She stepped back.

“Look, lady. Don’t be afraid of me. I ain’t gonna hurt you if you give me your money.”

He stank like something rotten. Eggs maybe. She wrinkled her nose. She didn’t want to know. Olivia gave him a half-hearted smile and backed away.

As she turned, he grabbed her arm. “Don’t turn your back on me, lady. That was the problem with my girlfriend, too. All prissy and stuck up—”

“Let me go.”

He held the switchblade up between them. “You’re that librarian.” He leered in her face, and his bad breath wafted over her face. “I seen you before at the library. Come on, man. Don’t you have something in that fanny pack?”

His fingers tightened with a cruel bite and pain arched to her elbow.

Just then the man snatched his hand back as if her skin burned him, his expression startled.

Seconds later she heard footsteps running toward her from the direction of the tents. “Olivia!”

Trey. Thank God. She turned enough to see him running toward her, a mobile phone in one hand.

The homeless man backed up, his expression scared as he closed the knife and jammed it in his back pocket. “Hey man, I wasn’t doin’ anything.”

Trey marched past her and headed straight for the man. Trey’s face held murder, his jaw tight, eyes blazing. Ferocious was written all over him. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

The man put up his hands. “Hey, hey, I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just askin’ her if she had change, man.”

Trey towered over the skinny man. Trey’s hands clenched at his side, his feet spread apart in readiness. “Did you call the Sheriff’s Department and threaten to hurt Trey MacGilvary’s family and friends?”

“He said he recognized me from the library,” Olivia managed to say.

The man shook his head, fear drawn on his skinny face. He still held his hands in front of his body as if he expected Trey to punch him. “Who the hell are you?”

“El Torro County Sheriff’s Department.”

Disbelief kept Olivia immobile. Flashing lights to her right caught her attention. A Sheriff’s Department cruiser pulled into the parking lot. *Thank goodness.* She rubbed her arms as shivers danced over her skin.

The vagrant looked around, as if he searched for avenues of escape.

“Don’t even think about moving,” Trey said to the man.

Potential for violence sent uncertainty and renewed fright rippling up and down her skin.

Craig and Mick left the cruiser and headed for them. Soon, all three men surrounded the homeless guy, cuffed him and began interrogation. Trembling wracked her limbs, her body ice cold.

“Listen man, there was this guy at the library. He paid me two hundred bucks to scare her. I wasn’t really goin’ to do anything to her. I ain’t no murder or robber,” the scruffy man said.

“Who was the man?” Mick asked.

“I dunno.” The guy’s voice had become a wail, a pitiful victim voice. “He was just some man.”

“Come on,” Craig said. “Let’s take him in. We’ll get answers.”

Trey moved away from the man and came toward her, his face stamped with irritation. She’d seen this face before, and while she knew he didn’t direct this anger at her, it didn’t reassure her either.

“Are you all right?” He reached for her shoulders, clasping her gently and gazing into her eyes.

She nodded. “I am now. Thanks for coming to the rescue. How did you know?”

“Craig and Mick contacted me and said a call came in threatening my woman.”

Shock made her unease notch upward a level.

“God,” Trey said, “You’re freezing. Come here.”

He slipped his arms around her shoulders and before she knew it, Trey snuggled her tight. Her arms anchored around his waist, and she closed her eyes to absorb the delicious warmth and security. He smelled wonderful and his embrace held tremendous comfort and strength. Trey *was* safety.

She heard footsteps and chatter behind them. Trey pulled back slightly. “Here comes a crowd.”

She would have moved out of his arms, but he held her to his chest. Arlene, Celeste, Mary and Edie hurried their direction. Trey loosened his grip on her until his arm circled her waist, and they turned toward the approaching group. Everyone’s face reflected concern.

“What’s going on?” The question ushered from more than one throat at a time.

As Trey’s family surrounded her, peppering them both with questions, their caring and Trey’s embrace eased the tension inside her. Queries piled on about her safety, and she quelled concerns.

Cameron approached, her jacket in hand. “What’s going on? What’s happened?”

They made a hasty explanation. Cameron handed Olivia her windbreaker, and she slipped her arms into it. Part of her didn’t like putting the coat on—Trey’s arms had enclosed her in lovely warmth. The coat didn’t do the trick.

“Who is Craig is hauling off?” Celeste asked.

“Maybe the suspect calling in threats against my family.” Trey glanced back as Mick headed toward them.

Mick entered the crowd. “She okay?”

Olivia waved one hand. “I’m all right. Is he the guy?”

Mick anchored his hands on his leather belt. “He swears he’s a down and out guy

looking for a handout. His backpack has two library books in it. So he's definitely been in the library before. He doesn't have a cell phone, but he could have called in on a payphone at the city park building over there. Frankly, I'm not sure he's guilty, but we're hauling him in for questioning. Olivia, you feel like giving us a statement?"

"Now?" she asked.

Mick nodded. "I hate to do this to you during the bake off but..."

"I'll take her," Trey broke in.

Olivia nodded. "Of course. Can someone look after my pies?"

Arlene reached for Olivia's hand and squeezed. "Of course, dear. You just take care of what you need to do."

Olivia decided to lighten the mood—she didn't care for grim faces on her friends.

"Save Trey at least one piece. I promised him."

Trey grinned, but humor never reached his eyes. "Yeah, I'll need the sugar later."

Cameron stepped up. "Do you want me to go with you?"

"Stay and have fun." She rummaged through the backpack to locate her car keys and handed them to Cameron. "I'll meet you at the flat later."

"Wait," Trey said to the departing group. "Since we don't know if this guy is the actual suspect, everyone be careful. Nobody go off alone." His gaze took in Arlene and Edie. "Mick, we need a family plan."

Mick pulled Celeste close for a minute and kissed her lightly. "Stay close to mom and Mary. Don't let each other out of your sight. Call me as soon as you get home."

"Of course." Celeste's gaze lingered on her husband's face.

"I'll be happy to stay with the ladies and look after them," Cameron said.

Mick nodded. "Thank you. That's much appreciated."

Within a few moments they'd made plans to back each other up, but as Mick headed back to the cruiser and Trey lead Olivia toward his car, Olivia wondered how effective their plan would prove against someone who wanted to hurt them.

* * * *

The drive to the Sheriff's Department enlightened Olivia more than she expected. Trey's face reflected simultaneous emotions, ones she didn't expect mixed with those she did. Anger. Exasperation. Worry. And most unexpectedly, fear.

Her muscles tightened again, as if expecting a new threat. She breathed in slowly and deeply. *That's it. Relax before you snap like a taut string.*

She watched Trey's hands clasp the steering wheel, then unclench. Maybe he needed reassurance that she wouldn't require his undivided attention while at the Sheriff's Department.

"It's going to be all right," she said.

He didn't even look in her direction.

Odd.

She shifted in the car seat, the shoulder strap hitting her across the breast. She adjusted it. "You're worried about your family. Cameron will look after the ladies, and they're good at looking out for themselves."

He nodded but kept his attention on the road, almost as if he hadn't heard her at all.

Another minute went by in silence. "I can't believe I'm asking this, but did I do something wrong?"

His gaze snapped to hers quickly, surprise in them and then denial. “Hell, no. What gave you that idea?”

“You’re as quiet as a cadaver in a tomb. I was just about to check your pulse.”

Her attempt at humor went by him like a speeding train, because he didn’t smile or crack his own rejoinder. Maybe she should leave him alone with his thoughts.

Less than ten minutes later they arrived in the sizeable parking lot next to the older façade of El Torro County Sheriff’s Department. Apprehension stirred in her stomach.

She reached for the door handle to exit, but Trey captured her forearm. “Wait.”

“Oh, *now* he’s going to talk to me.”

“I’m sorry. It’s just...”

He enfolded her left hand in his, and the heat of his palm enclosing her flesh sent arousal spiraling like a top in her stomach. Despite the incident with the homeless man, she found Trey’s presence stimulating on more than one level. The memory of him charging to her rescue and then embracing her like she was someone infinitely dear to him ... she still couldn’t wrap her mind around the concept. It thrilled her at one level and scared her on another.

He kissed her hand. “It’s nothing. Let’s get inside.”

They left the car to enter the Sheriff’s Department. Walking into the small station gave Olivia a sense of unreality. Trey kept an eye out, his expression as watchful as a hawk. His hand pressed lightly at the small of her back, a possessive, intimate signal she couldn’t ignore. Yet she liked his touch, *wanted* to experience his brand of protectiveness regardless of what she *should* desire. She *should* desire independence and self-reliance and this situation sucked the wind out of her sails.

After the receptionist acknowledged them, Trey led her back to his area and had her sit in a plastic chair next to his desk. Curious eyes cut through her—these cops had razor sharp attention. Mick and Craig entered a short time later, and she moved to Craig’s desk as he filled out the report. Mick and Trey went away to interrogate the suspect, she assumed.

It didn’t take long to fill out the report. She decided not to press charges if the suspect wasn’t the man making the threatening calls.

Trey returned shortly afterward and stood at the desk. “We’ve identified the suspect as Harold Glimmerman. He claimed to be at a soup kitchen during the time those threatening calls were made, and we confirmed it with the soup kitchen. He’s not our man. He didn’t have access to a phone of any kind while there. Plus, they found the two hundred dollars cash in his pocket.”

A few seconds later her cell phone rang. “It must be Cameron,” she said, looking at her flat number on the small screen. “Hello.”

Cameron’s voice came over the line. “Sis?”

“Hi there. What are you doing?” She smiled.

“I’ve got bloody bad news.”

She glanced at Trey and Craig. “What’s happened?”

Her brother’s heavy-duty sigh sounded ragged. “I just got to your flat a few minutes ago, found the door ajar and there’s a woman here lying on the carpet and the place has been trashed—”

Alarm spiked through her. “Oh, my God.”

Trey touched her shoulder, his eyes hard and questioning. Craig stopped typing on

his computer.

Her brother was still talking. "The cops are already here. The woman is unconscious. She was knocked out of her wheelchair it looks like."

Horror clasped her by the throat. "Maddie." She stood up. "I've got to go to her."

"What is it?" Trey asked.

"Cameron, just a minute." She turned to Trey and Craig and explained what had happened. Tears welled in her eyes. "Do you think it could be the bastard that's calling you?"

Trey's expression, grim and concerned, hardened even more. "Very possible."

As she returned to Cameron, her heart banged in her chest. "Cameron, I'll have Trey take me to the hospital so I can check on Maddie. Will you be all right there?"

"Of course. I'll see what I can do to secure the apartment once the police leave."

"Cameron, please watch your back."

When they signed off, she trembled from head to toe as she explained everything Cameron said.

"Jesus," Trey said as he stood and put his arm around Olivia's shoulder. "That's it. This has gone way beyond fuckin' prank calls."

Craig pinned her with a hard look. He pushed back from his computer. "You live alone, right?"

"Yes."

"Is there somewhere else you can stay? With friends or family?" Craig asked.

"My family is all in England and Maddie is really the only close friend I have here."

"She'll stay with me," Trey said.

Trey's definitive answer stopped her cold, but before she could voice an opinion, he continued. "You don't have anyone else to stay with, and I'll feel a hell of a lot better if you're with me. You said your brother is going back to England tonight, right?"

"Yes."

"After we check on Maddie, we'll take your brother to the airport."

Craig's cool expression flickered for one second to amusement as he glanced back and forth between them. "Trey's right. You shouldn't be alone right now. If this homeless guy isn't the one making threats..." He allowed the unspoken caution to hang in the air. "Someone broke into that apartment either to hurt you or just make certain you knew they could get to you. Maybe Maddie tried to stop them."

She twisted her fingers together in nervous revolt. "I don't understand why someone would do this."

"I'm a cop," Trey said. "That's enough for some people if they get a wild hair up their ass."

"Anybody in particular who might want to make your life miserable?" Craig tapped his ballpoint pen on the ink blotter. "Maybe in the last few weeks?"

Trey clasped his hands over his stomach and perused the idea. Eventually he shook his head. "Nothing I can pinpoint with any certainty. I've spent this week trying to figure it out."

Calls to Arlene and Edie ascertained they were safe and sound.

In less time than expected, Trey and Olivia were traveling toward the hospital. Trey stayed unexpectedly silent. She'd never seen him this brooding. Once they reached the hospital parking area, he reached into his glove compartment and pulled out a holster and

weapon. He strapped it on while still in the car. His gaze darted everywhere.

He opened the car door. "Wait until I come around to the other side of the car."

As they walked into the hospital, Olivia's worry for Maddie grew into a gargantuan lump in her throat. She tried keeping the tears back, but they burned her eyes and spilled over.

"Damn it," she said as she reached into her purse for tissues. She stopped in the hallway.

As tears poured down her face, she glanced up at Trey and caught the softness and concern in his eyes. Gone was the hardened warrior. She dabbed at her cheeks, and as her vision blurred, his arms came around her. He held her gently to his chest.

"It's all right," he whispered. He kissed the top of her head. "Maddie will be all right."

Olivia allowed his caring, his strength to steady her. Eager to see her friend, she looked up at Trey and nodded. He led her toward the front desk.

Chapter Twelve

Seeing Maddie sitting in the examination room without a scratch on her was the most wonderful thing Olivia could ever remember. When her friend smiled, something that had turned to solid rock with Olivia softened and released. She started to cry again.

“Maddie!” Olivia rushed to her side and the two hugged.

Trey took the other side of the exam table and smiled at Maddie. “Sorry we had to meet this way, Maddie. I’m Trey MacGilvary.”

Maddie shook his hand and smiled. “I’m sorry we had to meet this way, too.”

Olivia patted her other hand. “They told us you have a very mild concussion and they’re keeping you here overnight.”

“My son will be here as soon as he can. He’s coming from Loveland. When I called him just a bit ago he about came unglued. He’s been trying to get me to move out of that neighborhood forever.” She sighed. “I guess now is as good a time as any. He wants me to move closer to him and his wife.”

Olivia liked the sound of that, even if she’d miss having her friend close. “I’m just so glad you’re safe now. What happened, Maddie?”

“The police are going to want to know soon enough,” Maddie said.

As if she’d conjured an officer from a genie bottle, a city police officer appeared at the doorway. He let them stay while he asked Maddie questions. Maddie explained that she’d heard noises coming from Olivia’s flat. When she didn’t get an answer on Olivia’s phone, she came outside and that’s when she saw Olivia’s door open. “I was a bit stupid then, I’m afraid. I charged right in there like a mother hen thinking someone had broken in and Olivia might be in danger. Some man in all black, including a stocking mask, was trashing her place. He grabbed me before I could move and tossed me out of the chair. I landed on my head. Do you think he’s the bastard that is threatening you, Trey?”

Trey nodded. “It’s a possibility.”

The officer finished taking Maddie’s statement and promised to keep Trey and Maddie in the loop.

After the officer left, Maddie said, “What are you going to do, Olivia? You can’t stay in that messed up place.”

“She’s staying with me,” Trey said without hesitation.

Olivia almost objected to his assumption, then decided she’d have it out with him later. She kissed Maddie’s cheek. “I’m so sorry you’re caught up in this.”

Maddie’s grin amazed Olivia. “Jaan, if this is the worst thing that happens to me, I’ll be lucky. I’m alive, you’re okay, and you have this young man to look after you. I’m glad you’re staying with him.”

They remained with Maddie until her son and daughter-in-law arrived. After assuring Maddie they’d stay safe, Olivia and Trey relinquished Maddie to the loving attention of her son.

Olivia called Cameron and discovered the police had finished at the flat. As they drove toward her place, Olivia said, “I don’t have to stay with you, Trey.”

“Yeah, you do.” Trey’s no nonsense voice came out implacable. “I’m not going to argue about it.”

His tone set her off. "Where do you get off thinking you have the right to tell me what I'm going to do?"

He sighed and she saw his fingers tighten on the steering wheel as they drove through the night. "Damn it, Olivia, don't be stupid. I'm not trying to lord it over you like your father does. After this break in at your apartment and Maddie being hurt, it's clear the threat is more than an annoyance. I don't think it was a coincidence that your apartment was trashed. Staying with me makes practical sense."

Although she knew he was right, she held her purse to her chest and fired back in anger. "I'm stupid? Well, it's nice to know what you think of me."

Trey gave her one exasperated look and then his face went cool and unreadable. Roiling with anger and regret, she couldn't think of a thing to say that would sound rational. She feared if she opened her mouth again all she would do is spout inflammatory words.

Before long Olivia and Trey met up with Cameron at the apartment. The place *was* trashed. Vases broken, furniture overturned, glassware in the kitchen smashed. Olivia couldn't cry again, even though she wanted to rage and blame and scream.

Cameron brought up where Olivia would stay. "Say yes to Trey's plan. Otherwise, I'm not leaving. I know how bloody stubborn you can be when it comes to thinking a man is trying to tell you what to do. Your apartment has been trashed, and you have no family or friends nearby. Surely you can't believe you should stay here alone."

Olivia knew she didn't have any practical or sensible reason to refuse Trey's protection. But staying with Trey could be dangerous in its own way. Her attraction to him was growing stronger by the hour.

She couldn't say no, however, because anything else would be foolish. Besides that, she felt safe with Trey. "Cameron, you have to get back to your family and job."

"No, I don't. I'm not leaving you here without protection. I'll call my work and explain. They'll understand."

Trey broke in. "I'll protect her."

She held up one hand. "I'll stay with Trey if it makes you happy, Cameron."

Cameron looked torn.

Trey said, "You know she'll be safe with me. I won't let anything happen to her."

Cameron nodded, his frown solid and no-nonsense. "You bloody well better not."

Olivia saw the equal determination on Trey and Cameron's faces and knew that even if she wanted to defy them, they'd find a way to convince her. Frankly, she didn't want to fight it. She went into her bedroom, which hadn't been touched by the interloper, and packed a suitcase.

All of them headed to Trey's place and decided they had enough time to heat up a pizza before taking Cameron to the airport.

They ate in silence for quite some time before Cameron threw the crust down on his plate. He never ate the end crust, and it made Olivia nuts.

"You fancy that crust?" Olivia asked.

Cameron's eyes sparkled. "You know I hate crust."

She snatched it off his plate and chewed, trying to avoid saying anything one way or another about today's huge tangle of events.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay?" Cameron asked.

Olivia smiled, though she didn't feel it. "I'm fine, Cameron."

All humor left his face. "Stop saying that. I'm worried, Olivia. When mom and dad hear about this there'll be a royal row."

She shrugged. "Can't be helped. Try and leave out the gory details when you talk to them."

"Stop pissing around." Cameron turned his gaze to Trey, who sprawled in his chair, long finished eating. "I'm warning you this one is a hand full."

Trey kept a straight face, sense of humor absent. "I figured that out some time ago." He left his chair and took his dishes to the sink. "Your sister has a stubborn streak a mile wide."

Cameron grunted. "Don't I know it."

Olivia made a noise of derision. "Smashing. Are you two happy you've got it all sorted?"

"Yes," both men said at once.

Before they'd sat down to eat, Trey had called his brothers and received an update on plans. At first Edie planned to stay with Trey, but Craig suggested he move in with Arlene and that Edie move in with them temporarily for safety. Mick would, naturally, guard Celeste.

Secondary to the day's drama, Trey had discovered who won the pie contest. Olivia's pie came in fourth, and Arlene's came in second. Edie's pie won. Trey talked with Edie and congratulated her, and promised they'd see each other soon.

"You know what?" Olivia said. "I don't even care about my pie finishing fourth. It just doesn't seem to matter in the scheme of things. Especially when there were twenty other pies behind me." She tried a grin, but once again, both men remained stogy-faced. She glared at Cameron. "If you tell Mum and Dad I'm living with a man, they'll go mental."

Cameron's eyebrows shot up as he pushed his chair back. "You want me to leave that out, then?"

"Go ahead and tell them."

"You're wicked." Cameron reached over and chucked her gently under the chin. "I think you love getting a rise out of them."

"It wasn't always the case."

"No, but you learned your lesson. Mum and Dad are a lost cause that way."

The drive into Denver took forty-five minutes, and another forty-five minutes across the city before they even reached the airport. By the time they left Cameron there, it was getting late. Once more, Trey was cautious. He didn't take the easiest route to his place, and made certain to have his weapon accessible when they reached his home. After he'd locked them inside the condo and engaged the security system, she felt better.

Who am I kidding? I felt one hundred percent better when I agreed to his bodyguard scheme.

On the other hand, losing some independence didn't feel good either.

Trey moved through things mechanically, giving a tour of the guest room and grabbing towels. Once they'd accomplished that, they paused in the doorway to the guestroom. Standing with him like this felt too intimate. Scary and yet secure. She didn't know whether to like the feeling or to find fear in the vulnerability.

He ran his fingers through his hair. "We need to talk, but I think I'll grab a shower first. Make yourself at home."

While he took a shower, she changed into a chocolate brown velour sweat-suit. She felt ruffled, her hair a mess and uncooperative. She stopped in the adjoining bathroom to check her appearance in the mirror, and then wondered why she cared. Honestly, making it through the day when someone wanted to hurt you ... well, she was grateful for so many things right now. Mostly, she was grateful that Maddie hadn't been harmed more than she was.

She wandered into the living room and sat down on the couch. She stared at the portrait above the fireplace, but didn't pay much attention to it. Instead, she contemplated something she shouldn't. Trey in a shower, naked and slick with water and soap. Her breathing hitched. She brought herself up short. It didn't matter he was hot as hell. She was still mad at the way he'd manhandled her into this arrangement.

Before she knew it, Trey wandered down the hallway wearing nothing more than ubiquitous grey sweats hanging low on his waist and nothing, absolutely nothing on his torso. *Damn.*

How could a woman think straight with yards of wide shoulders, hard pecs, and jaw-dropping abs flaunted in her face? A smattering of dark hair spread over his pecs and down over his stomach, and she caught herself staring.

"Can I get you something to drink?" he asked as he walked into the kitchen.

"No, thank you."

He entered the living room a few moments later with a bottle of water and planted his gorgeous butt on the couch next to her. He sighed.

"That bad, eh?"

A crooked smile, the first smile she'd seen from him in hours, warmed his face.

"Yeah. How are you holding up with all this?"

She turned on the couch so she almost faced him. "Which part? The part where I'm rooming with a man, or the part where maybe the only way to keep *alive* is by rooming with a man."

"Does living with me bother you?"

"No. Yes."

"Which is it?"

"Both."

His eyes grew worried. "You're not afraid of me I hope?"

"Afraid? How could you ask that? Of course not. You're *totally* safe."

He managed a half smile that came and went in a flash. "Well, I don't know about totally."

She didn't want to go there.

"In order for this to work, there are some things I need you to agree to. I'm a cop and my experience with this makes me the expert."

"Very well."

"Good." He looked relieved. "First, we need parameters. You'll need to call your employer and let her know what's up, of course."

Olivia winced. "I forgot about that. She's *not* going to be pleased. She'll blame me if anything goes wrong or she feels the situation reflects on her in any way."

He grunted. "Too bad. Your safety is more important than her happiness."

"How long will we do this ... me rooming with you?"

"As long as it takes to catch the bastard who wants to hurt those I care about."

She tucked her hair behind her ears. "This is complicated. Are you going to drive me to work every day? How does this work with your schedule?"

His grimace made it clear that answers didn't come easy. "You'll drive yourself to work. We should have brought your car over here, but we'll do that sometime tomorrow when it's light. I'll teach you how to make sure you aren't followed to and from work."

She nodded. "Good. I'm naked without my car."

His gaze slid over her, slowly and with furnace heat. Her body responded, nipples hardening and low tingling in her belly. Even when she still felt pissed at him, he turned her on.

Aware of his continuing curiosity, she hastened to her next question. "What else do we need to do?"

"We'll need a password."

She wrinkled up her nose. "Password?"

"When we're out together in public, if you hear me say 'my back is killing me' you're to leave me immediately and call the cops. Tell them to send backup and also tell them what I'm wearing so they don't confuse me with the bad buy when they arrive and see me with a gun."

She tilted back against the arm of the chair. She looked down at her grandmother's watch, at the interesting Celtic design inlaid with marcasite. Somehow having this familiar token made her feel better. "Got it."

He leaned forward. "Tell me about your grandmother."

"Wow, quick change of topic."

"That's all we need to plan for right now. I've seen you fondle that watch more than once."

"I do that when I'm nervous."

"Why are you nervous now?"

"Probably because I'm sitting next to a hot man with a gorgeous chest."

He grinned and laughed. He beamed and tilted his head to the side. "You really think I'm hot?"

She heard the masculine ego emerging, as well as smidgen of little boy uncertainty. "Come on Trey MacGilvary. I've seen how women look at you. You're gorgeous and you know it."

His grin disappeared. He leaned closer, and she drew in his delicious scent. Like an elixir from a fairy tale, this man's aura tranquilized at the same time it drove her into a tizzy.

"You don't exactly keep me calm either, Olivia. Being near you is like a ... a drug. I'm addicted and can't get enough."

Her pulse rate skyrocketed, her heartbeat a drum in her chest. "Thinking like that is dangerous."

"I like danger."

"No you don't." She shook her head and strands of hair tumbled onto her cheek.

"You looked grim earlier when we drove here."

Using his index finger, he tucked the unruly hair behind her ear. "I'll admit I'm worried by all this. But we'll get through it. I promise you I'll keep you safe."

His gaze searched her face, as if he wanted answers. Deep answers. When his gaze dipped to her mouth, she panicked. Strong feelings ... arousal foremost among them,

built inside her in a rush of mingled emotions. She stood and walked to the mantle, ready to examine the beautiful painting. She liked the dramatic landscape, snowcapped mountains with a cabin next to a creek.

"You wanted to know about grandmother. Anne Baker Scott. My father's mother. She was a super woman, from everything my parents told me. I don't remember her very well. She died when I was only five. I do remember sitting in her lap reading stories, and her lilac scent and her pretty voice. I always felt safe with her. Mom said I should have her watch and ever since I've been old enough, I've worn the watch."

"Sounds like a fantastic grandmother."

She heard wistfulness in his voice and turned toward him, leaning against the mantle. "Your childhood was complicated, wasn't it?"

"You could say that."

"And you don't talk about it much, do you?"

"No. What's the point?"

"Because it still influences you. I saw how you are with Edie. There's a lack of trust there."

Way to go, Olivia. Just jump right in.

He surprised her by nodding. "Yeah, that's true. The trust part anyway."

"If I'm going to stay here, don't you think I should know?"

"You're a fascinating woman, Olivia."

"Oh?"

"When I first met you I saw this strong but quiet woman. Never imposing, like the background. I was wrong. You're far more direct than I gave you credit for."

She shrugged. "Common problem. Most men find me inscrutable."

He smiled a little. "Now I know you're a librarian using big words like that. But go ahead. It turns me on."

Heat filled her face. "You're trying to distract me from the point, MacGilvary."

"Is it working?"

"No. I take it your parents had a tempestuous relationship?"

"That's a good word for it. They fought all the time. Dad was an insurance agent and didn't bring down much money. Mom was a nurse, and we all know they don't get paid much. Anyway, dad didn't know the meaning of saving money and mom was always nagging him to save."

"Is that what broke them up?"

"It was a piece of the pie. Dad didn't like mom's nagging. Mom didn't like all kinds of things Dad did. It escalated into shouting matches. One day she decided to have an affair with a doctor at the hospital."

She heard the hurt in his voice, even if he tried to hide it. "How old were you?"

His head went back and he closed his eyes, as if doing so would block a deep-seated pain. She saw it, though, in the tightening of his mouth, in the hardness in his eyes.

"I was ten. She didn't even try to cover it up. She came home one day and told Dad she was leaving him for the doctor. She ran off with the guy in the middle of the night without saying goodbye to me."

"Oh, Trey. That must have hurt."

"A lot." His lips tightened, his somewhat pinched together as anger flared in his eyes. "Over the next several years Dad married four more times. As soon as he could

push a divorce through, he married again.”

Shock kept her from speaking.

“I know.” He sprawled out, arms and legs akimbo as he dominated a good portion of the couch with his big body. “Hard to believe, right?”

“Yes.”

“Every wife seemed reliable at first, but one by one they all cheated on Dad. It was incredible how Dad picked the same type of woman over and over.”

“They were all nurses, too?” she asked in astonishment.

“No. His second wife was a childcare worker. She ran off with the man who owned the childcare business. The third wife was a grade school teacher. She had an affair with a janitor. His fourth wife was a museum curator here in Gold Rush. His last wife...” His voice broke, but then he cleared it.

Sadness filled his eyes now, and she wanted to remove the bleak clouds from his gaze. “And?”

“His last wife was a librarian, and she murdered him.”

“Oh my God.” Olivia couldn’t believe it.

Trey’s expression varied from amusement at the irony to outright anger at the memory. “Yeah. Pretty weird stuff.”

“Do I ... are you reminded of your Dad’s death because I’m a librarian?”

“Partially. But don’t sweat it. You’re nothing like her.”

“Thank you. But I’m so sorry about your father. I can’t imagine ... it must have been terrible.”

He nodded. “I went to foster homes because I had no other living relatives. I was tempted to join a local gang, but at the Boy’s Club in town I met Arlene and Justice MacGilvary. I bonded with them right away, and they adopted me.”

“Edie didn’t want you?” Olivia began to understand Trey’s guarded behavior around Edie.

He shook his head, eyes filled with regret, and maybe resentment. “At first she said she did want me. She lived in Chicago at the time. The doctor she’d run off with was long gone. Anyway, then she said because I’d been getting into scraps with the law she couldn’t handle me.”

Olivia rubbed her cheek, feeling the cold, hard bite of rejection as if it belonged to her. “That must have been...” She shrugged. “Indescribable.”

“It was a bitch. But the silver lining was Arlene and Justice and staying here in Gold Rush. In the long run I’m glad they adopted me. They were great, and I think I’m a much better person because of them.”

“And your brothers? When were they adopted?”

“At the same time.”

“All at once?”

“Yep. They have their own interesting, if long, stories.”

“And Justice was killed in that SWAT operation?”

Trey leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs. “Yeah. From that point forward, Mick, Craig and I decided we wanted to keep our father’s legacy going, and we vowed to go into law enforcement.”

“And now you’re SWAT.”

“Yeah, you know the old saying.”

"No, I don't."

He stood and walked toward her, his muscles rippling, his skin golden under the low light. "Well, then I'll have to educate you. You're either SWAT, or you're not."

"I see." He stood so near his heat seemed to surround her.

As he smiled at her, she had to know one more thing. "And how did your father ... Jackson, I mean ... how did..."

She couldn't say it, decided not to finish asking when lines of pain entered his face.

"He ... his fifth wife had an argument with him and didn't like the way things were going. He didn't like the fact she was flighty and was a bad mother to me." Trey's voice went soft and raw with emotion. "One day she came home with a gun and shot him in the chest."

"Oh, no," She whispered, her throat aching. "You weren't home at the time I hope."

"No, thank God. I was at school. She might have shot me, too. Instead, she shot herself. Neighbors heard the commotion. They came in and found them in the bedroom." He rubbed his palm over his forehead. "The principal told me in his office."

She cupped his shoulders and then touched his face. Five o'clock shadow tickled her fingers. She allowed her hand to slide away from his face and savored the rough whiskers rasping her fingertips. "Trey. I'm so sorry you had to go through that."

"There's more. At my graduation from the university ten years ago, Edie showed up without even calling ahead to see whether I wanted her there. She shows up at my apartment and starts arguing with me before the graduation. Says that she doesn't need to apologize for leaving and that she had to come and see if I'd changed from a lazy, deceitful boy." He snorted in disgust. "First she asked me for money."

Olivia closed her eyes for a moment and groaned. "She didn't."

"Yeah. It put a dent in my graduation. We argued, and I basically told her to get a life and never speak to me again. So it's been ten years since I saw her or talked to her. Until the other day."

Speechless, she couldn't think of a thing to say, either in comfort or advice.

Trey's eyes held a promise as he eased closer. "Now you know all about me."

"I think I've only touched the surface, Hot Lead."

His eyes widened slightly. "Where did you hear my call sign?"

"Arlene mentioned it today when we were chatting about the SWAT competition."

"Uh-huh."

"It fits."

"What does?"

"You're a sniper. Hot Lead. Makes perfect sense." She cocked one eyebrow. His returning grin held sultry promises, and the flirt came out in her. "Does the call sign have a duel meaning?"

He kept the grin, and slipped his fingers into the hair at the back of her neck.

"Maybe. Depends. I think you have secrets, too. Tell me some of them."

Under his caressing touch, she closed her eyes and mulled over his request. "I don't think I want to. I'm still a bit mad at you."

"What?" he asked softly. "Why?"

She opened her eyes and saw the incredulous expression on his face. "You insisted I was going to stay with you. You didn't ask, you ordered me like a cop with a suspect. I don't allow men to treat me like that anymore, Trey. Not my father. Not my old

boyfriend. Not even you.”

His frown didn’t ease, but the heat in his eyes upped a notch.

His fingers slipped across her cheek, gentle and caressing. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I was just so damned worried about you. And there’s no damned way I’m letting another man try and keep you safe.”

Trey’s soft apology and the warmth in his eyes melted remaining anger.

“I confessed my past to you, Olivia,” he said. “I showed you mine, now you show me yours.”

Chapter Thirteen

Trey's demand slid like silk over her, and Olivia couldn't think straight. She wanted to do anything he asked. She dared meet his gaze.

He didn't take his touch away, and the closeness of his hard, strong body wore away at her ability to think.

She reached for his forearm and held him there. "My parents don't trust me to do things right. They don't trust me to take care of myself."

His eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

"It's a long story. Sure you have time?"

"I've got all night." His touch slid away. "Come on, sit down."

They returned to the couch. She took up position against the arm. Trey sat close and slid his left arm about her shoulders. Once more his hand returned to her nape, hot and caressing.

"Tell me." His demand was soft, but there was steel in his eyes.

"All right. Don't say I didn't warn you."

The humor fell flat—his gaze stayed serious and unrelenting.

"I'm an introvert, but we know the world doesn't respond well to introverts. As a librarian I enjoy the background. Anyway, I left England because I lost my position there. I was accused by the head librarian of taking funds and sexual harassment."

Trey's hand stilled on her skin, and his frown deepened. "Sexual harassment. Against the head librarian?"

"One of the male librarians is a real tosser, and when I wouldn't date him, he decided that he would get revenge. He is the head librarian's son, and she believed him. Neither of them could prove the harassment other than my word against theirs. When that wasn't enough to get me sacked, they took cash from the till and then tried to frame me. It worked because the head librarian was highly respected. Her credentials, and dare I say it—the fact that she'd read English at Oxford seemed to qualify her to know more than I."

She inhaled deeply as hot tears bolted into her eyes. Her heart ached as memories she'd suppressed refused to stay entombed.

"Shit." Trey's syllable said everything. "Didn't you have to go to college to get your librarian degree?"

"I did get a degree in library science but sometimes the stratosphere is very high in England, Trey. More so than here."

"How does that tie into your parents not trusting you? Did they believe the lies?"

"No. But they believed that my carelessness, my inability to look out for myself contributed to it."

"That's stupid."

"Is it?"

Once more his soothing touch took the sting out of bad memories. "There's something else. What happened to give them that crazy idea?"

"Another long story. Dad was metropolitan police officer with long hours and few parenting skills. Mum is a hypochondriac. I spent most of my childhood taking care of

Cameron. There's six years between us. I'm twenty-nine and he is twenty-three. When he was five we were in the front yard playing. I was distracted when my mother called for me. She was in the house. Cameron opened the front gate and stepped in front of a car."

Trey's brow wrinkled. "Ah, Christ."

She could still hear the tires shrieking, her brother's scream. "It was horrible." Olivia shuddered, and Trey rubbed her back. "Cameron suffered multiple contusions, bruises, a broken collarbone, and a broken right leg. He has a permanent limp because of it. It took him months to recuperate."

"I noticed the limp and didn't want to ask him where he got it."

"He's not sensitive about it and it doesn't restrict him from activities. I think he's scarred less by what happened than I am. He says he never thinks about it."

"Maybe he doesn't."

"Mum and Dad haven't forgotten it."

"I'm sure they were scared out of their minds. Their son was almost killed."

Though she knew he wasn't the enemy, she pinned him with a stern look, and her voice turned cooler. "I can understand that. But from that day forward they blamed me for what happened to Cameron."

"You're kidding?"

"I wish I was."

"How do you know they blamed you?"

"My parents thought I was still asleep, and I guess they didn't realize how far their voices would carry." She swallowed hard and stared into the cold, dark hearth. Her heart twisted, as chilled as any time in her life as she recounted what happened next. "I heard them talking about me. Dad said Mum shouldn't have let an irresponsible girl take care of Cameron. Mum was mad, and at first I thought she'd defend me. Instead she said ... and I'll never forget the words ... she said, 'I'll never forgive Olivia for letting Cameron go out into that street. She must really hate him to allow that to happen.'"

His eyes burned with an amalgamation of surprise, astonishment, and disgust. "My God. She said that about a—Olivia, you were a little girl. You never should have been responsible for watching him in the first place. Your mother shirked her responsibility and blamed a child for what happened."

Tears blurred her vision, and as one dropped on her cheek, she tried to wipe it away fast. "Sometimes I still feel guilty."

Trey cupped her face, turning her chin so she couldn't escape his gaze. "That's not it. Your parents were responsible for what happened. They weren't looking out for either one of you. Even then, adults can turn away for a second and bad things can happen. Expecting a child to take care of another child is insane."

"But you see, they were right, Trey. I did hate Cameron."

"What?"

Olivia touched his big, beautifully constructed hand as it lay on his thigh, smoothed her touch over the strength. She loved touching him. Yet touching him couldn't banish a memory's pain.

"Cameron was difficult when he was five. Always getting into things, never listening to my parents. He irritated me so much, I had thoughts that morning..."

"Thoughts?"

"The morning he was hit by the car, I wished him dead."

Understanding filled his intense eyes. She half expected loathing. Instead a warmth, a very human sympathy crossed his features. "You were a child, Olivia. Kids have feelings like that sometimes and no one explained them to you. You don't think you caused his accident?"

She shook her head. "No and yes. Back there in the darkest places in my mind, I think I still believe it. But my adult mind knows that logically the only ones at fault were my parents. And sometimes accidents just happen."

Trey groaned. "Damn. You have gone through a lot. But your parents must love you, or they wouldn't worry so much, right?"

She shrugged, and he caressed her back with strokes that sent sensual enjoyment flowing through her skin like a smooth river. "I tried talking with them around the time I was fired from my job. I tried explaining how much it hurt me to know what they said all those years ago."

"And that didn't go well?"

"They both denied it, and my mother got sick again. She always does that when she'd rather not deal with a problem."

Trey's silence stretched and lengthened until he said, "We both have a lot of shit in our background, don't we?"

She laughed softly. "We do."

"Maybe we understand each other because of it."

"I think I understand you better."

He smiled. "Do you?"

"You experienced significant trauma in your life when your father kept remarrying. It makes you wary of women in general and librarians in specific."

"Yeah, I guess it does. And I think I understand you." He brushed his index finger over her collarbone. "To you cops are often cold ... like your father. Some of us are, and some of us aren't. Intellectually you understand you weren't to blame for Cameron's accident, but emotionally there's a part that says you are. Parents have big impacts on kids, Olivia. I know it and you know it. We're a long way from figuring it all out, but we don't let it cripple us."

"That's why you think serious relationships are rubbish," she said. "Because you saw your father go in and out of relationships. There's part of you that still thinks that's the way it's done."

The light bulb went on, or at least she thought she witnessed a glimmer of total understanding filling his eyes. "Maybe."

Silence wrapped them in a gentle fold for several moments until she couldn't resist asking, "What are we doing here, Trey?"

He leaned forward, eyes slumberous with sensual intent, with a compelling desire she felt hungry in her loins, in the twisting of her heart in her chest. She couldn't resist when he looked at her as if she was the only woman in the world.

"This," he said. "This."

His mouth took hers, warm and luxurious, satin and sin. When he'd kissed her before, restraint always held him back ... held her back. Now, with thoughts and feelings more in the open, the drugging sensuality of his kiss wrapped around Olivia and held her in a prison she didn't wish to escape. Iron-hard arms drew her close and yet with tempered strength, arousing her with their power. Red-hot need swirled in her belly.

Transformation overtook her, demanded she reveal more layer-by-layer. His lips caressed at the same time they plundered, teaching her new things with each twist and turn. His fingers plunged into her hair, his hands intimate explorers as he touched, searched, caressed. She wanted more, her heart pounding harder, her breath coming faster. Trey scooped her onto his lap with one quick, efficient move.

“Oh.” Her breathless reaction made him smile, then his kiss found her again.

His tongue plunged deep, caressing with a relentless fervor she matched second by second as her body moved, twisted, tried to come closer. Senses overwhelmed until nothing came between the gliding caress of his mouth upon hers, or the sensation of his hands coasting over her body.

Slowly he pulled down the zipper on her top, and she gasped into his mouth as the material parted. He plumped her fullness, weighed it, then his thumb brushed over the satin-clad tip. Sensation zinged hot and arousing. She gasped again and he took advantage, tongue pumping, caressing, making love to her mouth with relentless strokes. Heat built between her legs, and she squirmed. His cock, fully aroused, pressed against her bottom. The merciless stroke of his fingers over her nipple made her groan softly. He plucked the tip, and Olivia felt a rush of heat build between her legs.

Her bra loosened, and when he let her go, she saw the red hot question in his eyes. They wouldn't stop this time. Or would they? She shrugged the top off her shoulders and tossed it away. The bra disappeared, whisked off her body in a quick movement.

Trey gazed at her breasts and for a moment she felt shy. She shouldn't. He'd seen them before. Then, with a groan, he leaned forward and enveloped one nipple into the hot oven of his mouth. She writhed under the sweet, sensual tugging. He alternated between licking like a cat and sucking deeply until she could no longer stand it.

“Please, Trey.”

*

Trey couldn't stop touching her, stop drawing his tongue over those sweet, tight nipples. They tasted like the purest damned honey, the most delicious, erotic wine he'd ever allowed past his tongue. His body shook, his cock rock solid and aching to sink inside her depths. More than anything he wanted her hot walls tight, pulsing, yielding to him. He wanted her body writhing beneath his, her voice begging for it. Harder. Harder.

Having her safe in his arms was all that mattered.

Her hands coasted over his chest, tracing each muscle as if she treasured him and wanted him more than any man. As Olivia's light touch swept over his nipples, he almost growled with the pleasure. A wild, primitive need welled inside, demanding that he take her. Fuck her until she couldn't remember any other man who'd ever touched her.

Mine, damn it. She is mine.

A haze of animal need roared through him until he thought he would shake apart. Barely in control, he drew back. He cupped her face and stared deep into her sweet expression—her eyes blazed with undeniable desire. Her lips parted and soft breaths panted between them.

His fingers glided through the silky, chocolate locks as they spilled over her pale skin. As her pretty hair tumbled about her face, her pretty, delicate features reminded him of a princess. “I like how you're leaving your hair down.”

“No more posh librarian?”

He smiled. “No. It's so beautiful.” His voice sounded low, gravely to his own ears. “I

want you.”

Hunger swamped him as he pressed urgent kisses to her forehead, nose and lips.

“Yes.” Her consent came soft and low, sweet and real. “Yes.”

Trey’s mind and body screamed to the rooftop with victory. She wanted him.

Without a moment’s hesitation he lifted her into his arms and headed for the bedroom.

* *

For Olivia, the trip in his arms thrilled. A man had never carried her in his arms before, never reacted to her as if she weighed no more than a feather. It worked on her like an aphrodisiac. She clutched at him, holding tight, excited by discovery. Her body tingled, ached between her legs—she was eager to feel him, to bring him into her body and learn where this passion would lead.

He slipped into the master bedroom and in the dimness found his way to the king sized bed. Trey laid her down gently and reached for the bedside lamp. Soft, golden light spread over the room.

She sat up. “Trey. The light ... I’m...”

He smiled gently. “Are you shy?” He shucked his sweat pants and black briefs.

“We’ll take this as slow as you want.”

The sight of so much heart-stopping male flesh made Olivia speechless. Yes, she’d already seen his naked chest, yes she’d seen the outline of his tight, fine backside and muscled thighs and under clothing. But, oh my, the full presentation sent razor hot desire coiling in her body and roaring to life. Hard and ready, his body betrayed his keen desire. Heat spread from her belly up to her face.

Bravery came from somewhere inside her, and she sat up and slid off the bed. With deliberate movements, she smoothed the velour pants down her legs along with her panties. She stood in front of him, naked to him both in body and mind.

She laid back on the bed, stretching like a feline, arms above her head.

Trey’s heated gaze roamed her breasts, learning them with eyes that caressed as much as a touch. “Beautiful.”

His admiration heated her from within. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

His gaze took in her stomach to the curls at the top of her cleft. Everything tingled under his observation. “Olivia.” His voice rasped low with emotion and desire.

Time slowed to an exquisite yet aching moment as she absorbed the rapt expression in Trey’s eyes. She’d fantasized that maybe one day she’d discover a connection like this. That a man’s desire would send her reeling, and penetrate her soul. Oh, she’d wanted it all right. But never quite believed it until now.

Trey came to her, lying on the bed and gathering her into his embrace. He brushed back her hair and smiled into her eyes. Such tenderness, such exquisite understanding filled the way he looked at her.

When he kissed her, she fell into the taste of him with abandon. His touch roamed her ribcage, her breasts, her sensitive nipples. His fingertips grasped her nipples, teasing and testing the limits of her control. Trey never stopped kissing her, his long, drugging tastes making her body sing with sensations too raw to bare. Olivia gasped as excitement escalated, and she twisted under one exploratory touch and then another. His touch was everywhere, relentless. She knew he was driving her to the edge and daring her to fall over.

He worked his way to her ear, his breath hot as he said, "I need to touch you."

He smoothed his fingers between her legs, each touch over sensitive folds making her shiver with new ecstasy. She ached for more, for the sweetest taste of heaven. It dangled out of her reach, brought to a head over and over by Trey's skilled lovemaking.

"Oh, Trey."

"Feel good?" came his husky question.

She gripped his shoulders, her palms savoring taut muscles. "More."

He chuckled softly. "Oh, yeah."

One finger slipped deep, thrusting with gentle cadence. Olivia wriggled, hips moving as pleasure wended through her and wouldn't let go. Pressure increased as he inserted another finger. "God, you're so hot and wet." Once more he whispered into her ear, "I can't wait to sink deep into you."

The passion-taut quality of his voice caused her to quake with hot need. It coiled in her belly, a serpent biting with sharp and relentless demands for fulfillment. Deep within her muscles clenched and released, aching with a soul-wrenching craving to feel hard cock. Trey seemed determined to draw out the torture, to bring her to release only after he'd driven her to within an inch of begging. Whatever came before and whatever came after, she would never regret this moment.

As she explored his arms and delighted in the power under her fingers, she managed to say, "So strong."

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "Keep talking like that and you'll give me a big head."

She boldly reached down, found his cock. Her fingers encircled thick, satin over steel flesh. He gasped and she caressed the rounded tip. "I think you already have a big head."

"God, baby." His voice held husky promise, and a guttural groan left his throat as he kissed her.

His tongue plunged deep, and as he made love to her mouth, his body joined with hers in safari.

She closed her eyes as she enjoyed the sweet sensations he generated inside her. When he touched her clit, she gasped. Scalding need caused her to clench tight, and she pushed into the rhythm.

The gentle movement of his fingers set her on fire, and the swirling motion of his thumb over her clit sent her arousal spiraling higher. He kissed all around one breast, tempting, tasting, until his tongue rasped over one nipple. Hot with desire, she couldn't stop moving, shaking, falling into the pleasure that built with every passing moment. Her heart banged in her chest, her breath caught in her throat as he led her through one plateau of pleasure to another.

Wanting to give him as much bliss as he gave her, she touched his body with reverence, with intent to drive him crazy with lust. Nothing mattered more than this moment and discovering completion. A rainbow of needs bombarded her as his hands slid over her, discovered sensitive places with purpose and an erotic abandon that served to increase her excitement.

His hand trapped hers and stopped the pumping motion as she gripped his cock. "No. If you keep that up, I won't last. I want to be inside you when I come."

"I..." She swallowed hard as she released his cock. Self-consciousness returned.

“I’ve never. It’s not easy for me to...”

One of his dark eyebrows twitched upward. “What is it?” He his question with gentle kisses on her lips, her chin, her forehead, then trailed down to nibble on her neck.

“You’re soft. Beautiful. So damned sexy.”

Heat filled her face, and that tight coil of need in her stomach blossomed into a volcano. “I can’t ... I’ve never come with a man inside me.”

“Oh, babe,” he whispered against her mouth. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you. You’ll come when I’m inside you.”

The self-assured tone, filled with masculine arrogance and sexual nuances, fired her libido.

As his fingers danced on her flesh, and he inserted two fingers deep inside her once again, she cried out at the exquisite feeling.

“Come,” was his husky demand.

Heat coalesced, built, a firestorm raged. One more soft flick over her clit and she exploded.

Chapter Fourteen

Climax sent pulsating waves of bliss to rocketing inside Olivia. She shivered, shook, as bliss-filled cries left her throat.

As she came down from the fire, Trey kissed the swells of her breasts, discovering her softest, most sensitive places. Like an adventure with no beginning or end, his attention set her alight. Showed her possibilities she'd never dreamed.

He parted her thighs, and in the dim light his eyes glittered with a predatory male desire. "Has a man ever kissed you here?"

"No."

"Time to change that."

At the first wet, warm touch of his tongue over her folds, she jerked. "Oh."

"Like it?"

She groaned. "Yes."

"Mmmm."

She fell into the deliciousness of his touch, the discovery of new passion yet explored. Soft licks explored and flicked over her tissues. Her hands clutched at the sheets and held on for dear life as she wriggled. Moans, groans of pure pleasure left her lips. She'd never felt anything this wonderful, the intimacy stunning. *Incredible*. She'd imagined this but the reality far surpassed midnight fantasy.

Shivering on a precipice, she didn't know what to ask for or how to beg. If only ... oh, God...

His tongue dipped inside her, thrusting like a cock. In. Out. In. Out.

As each venture teased and caressed, she writhed, unable to keep still. He was relentless, eating her out with long licks, gentle forays, maddening probes into her body that drove her to within an inch.

She wailed as hot orgasm trembled, shook her to the foundations. While she still floated in the aftermath, he slipped two fingers inside her again and his mouth sealed over her clit and he sucked.

"Oh!" She bucked and the hot pleasure soared as another orgasm gripped her.

Like a supernova she burned brightly, hovering on an ecstasy filled edge as her body quaked and her cries echoed in the room.

"That was so hot," he said as he pressed kisses to her inner thighs.

As she panted, coming down from the heights, he leaned over and opened the bedside drawer. She floated on a dream, her head fuzzy, her heart still banging in her chest. The crinkle of foil, and seconds later, he came down over her. Balanced on his forearms, he lowered his hips between her thighs. Trey probed, the hard tip slipping inside her.

"Yes." The syllable left her throat in a soft growl. She grasped his back muscles, feeling the power, absorbing it. "Please. I can't stand it. I need to feel—"

He thrust.

Hot, thick cock stretched and glided. She was so wet and aroused he pushed down, down with ease, pressing all the way until he seated inside her.

"God, Olivia. Oh, man."

Wordless, she held him tight; his hips began a subtle movement that stroked rather than thrust, caressed rather than demanded.

Few times in her life had Olivia ever forgotten her surroundings, forgotten the outside world. This time she did. Concentrating on the moment, she centered all feeling, all sensual awareness on the steady, inner caressing of his body pressing deep over and over. Trey stirred his hips, and she returned the movement.

“Oh, please.” She couldn’t stop the plea, the raging escalation. “Please, Trey.”

“That’s it. Take it. Come on my cock.”

She heard the desperation in his voice. He wanted her to come apart around him, but she didn’t know if—

He picked up the pace, his hips moving faster, pumping time after time through tight muscles, stoking the fire. Each thick inch of his cock spread her wide and deep, hot and so hard her muscles clenched and released around him in pre-orgasmic flutters.

His breath rasped, and she felt the sweat build on his flesh. She clutched, writhed, her inner muscles pulsing around the hardness moving inside her.

“Trey?” As the anxious question came, she strained for release.

“Don’t fight it.” His whisper rasped hot against her ear.

Seconds later bliss burst upon her, and a scream of pure ecstasy erupted from her.

* *

Trey groaned low in his throat, his heartbeat a jackhammer as he thrust deep and held still. As her walls contracted in fast pulsations, he almost came. Instead he rode it out, gritting his teeth. Sweat beaded on his body as heat waves engulfed him. She drove him wild, she pushed him to the limit, but he wanted her to come again, and she would. Determined, he pulled back slowly, then entered. Thrust, retreated, forced himself to slow the beat, to savor the sensation of cock moving inside a silky, tight grip. Trey’s cock ached, hardening even more. He gazed down upon her, and in the dim light saw her parted lips, her eyes closed. She clasped his ass cheeks and squeezed and cupped. Trey came unglued, his thrusts picking up speed. He stopped his thrusts and pulled out of her.

“What—?” He muffled her soft question with a kiss.

“Ride me.”

With a smile he lay back, and Olivia complied. She came down on him, sliding smooth as silk over his cock and pressing down. *Oh, Jesus. Yes.*

Seated to the hilt, he arched his hips. “Ride me.”

As her eyes closed and her hands splayed over his chest, her thighs tightened long his. Muscles deep inside her contracted against his cock, and he almost lost it then. He groaned as he struggled to stay in control.

He watched her as she rose up, then plunged down, taking him with the steady beat of a woman settling in for a long, slow ride. Hot woman enveloped him, and he clenched his teeth, unable to stop the grunts, the groans as fulfillment threatened to tear him apart. He clasped her nipples, playing with the tips, and she gasped loudly. Her body shivered, and she rode him harder. Harder yet. He learned her pace and thrust his hips upward.

Her felt her coming around him, and her body trembled as she came down with one last lunge. He thrust up again, again, again, spearing as deeply inside her as he could go. As her tight flesh trembled around him and she gasped with pleasure, he roared out his orgasm. Hot waves of soul-shaking bliss wracked Trey. Hot release shook his frame as his hips jerked and his cock released pulse after pulse.

She sank into his arms, and as an afterglow settled over Trey, he knew this woman had done what no other woman had. She'd wedged a place into his heart. His little English mouse, the type of woman he once thought never would appeal to him, had just given him the best sex of his life. His head still fuzzy from a brain-blowing orgasm, he tightened his arms around her. She was his to protect, and he felt that need even more fiercely than before. His fingers glided through the cool strands of her hair as it tumbled about her shoulders and down her back. She felt more real, more precious than any woman he'd held in his arms. This was different. Damned different, and it scared him to death.

* * * *

The LCD television flickered as the man changed channels with spasmodic impatience. Flip. Flip. Flip.

He took a swig of beer and swallowed, then coughed and sniffed. Images of people pansy dancing ran across the screen. He changed channels again. Reality television on practically every fucking channel. Hour after hour of the ridiculous, mindless, simplistic tripe. How did people stand this shit?

Nothing fuckin' else left on television except for that public television high-brow crap as an alternative. He could watch sports, but even the sports channels featured reruns this time of night. He changed channels until he came to a station featuring hunting with compound bows. He licked his lips and brought the beer to his lips for a long swallow.

Now this is more entertaining.

Savage.

Stalking.

A true hunter's heaven.

He hadn't been bow hunting in a long time. Too bad he couldn't get close enough to MacGilvary with his bow. Damn interesting way to take the dumb fuck out. Death by broad head arrow. Hell, death by a regular arrow. Either way, he knew how to kill deer or elk that way, and he could do the same to a man given the right circumstances.

Watching MacGilvary's darkened condo would have heightened the fun of his plans to kill him.

But the timing sucked. Warning MacGilvary meant other cops, including MacGilvary's brother.

Hatred made the man's gut clench. How had this spiraled out of control? He wanted to take his rifle, kick down MacGilvary's door, and simply pick off the piss ant MacGilvary and his slut.

You stupid ass. He shouldn't have called MacGilvary and warned him, but the temptation had proved too much, and then when he'd threatened him while watching him at Veteran's Park ... well, that had broken the camel's back for certain.

At the same time, he loved tormenting MacGilvary. Sure, just offing him with a body or head shot would satisfy revenge. But it wouldn't feel as sweet as making the bastard suffer.

Again, old self-confidence problems strangled him with demands to give up this struggle. Despair tightened restrictive bands of pressure around his skull. Pounding. Pounding. Asking for a reason for this horrible need to seek revenge.

He hadn't always been this way.

A plaintive, faltering voice stirred inside him. *Stop. You can stop this right here and now before you do something more reprehensible than you already have.*

Tell someone. Confess.

It would mean arrest. Incarceration. He would be defaced in front of his family. What would his son think of him? His precious and only son.

No. The protestation roared through his brain, scattering weakness that threatened to derail his plans against MacGilvary. He couldn't be feeble and forget the main goal of his battle plan.

Maim MacGilvary both body and soul, until he understood the pain that buzzed and rattled and destroyed.

He took another drink of beer, chugging, chugging, until he gasped at the last gulp. He coughed and hoped the alcohol would soon do its work and spread the forgetfulness, eliminate the pain of uncertainty.

"What are you still doing up?" a crabby female voice asked from behind him.

He jumped, startled and irked. He waited until she came around and stood dead center in the middle of the television. Light danced behind her as the television flickered. He glared at her, disgusted not by her slim, still youthful body wrapped in a red velvet nightgown, but by the irritation he couldn't prevent. His fingers clutched the empty beer can and it collapsed in his hand.

"I was watching TV, until you showed up." His words sounded raspy. Ugly with contempt. "Get the fuck out of the way."

Her pretty mouth opened, a parody of shock. But he knew she wasn't shocked because she'd heard his trash mouth before. He just didn't give a fuck if she cared.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that." She planted her hands on her waist and scowled. Her gaze flicked to the two other cans of beer on the table next to him. "You're drunk."

He snorted. "No shit."

A headache started to blossom in his temples, and he could feel it with every throb of blood pumping through his veins. This bitch would never learn.

Her face started to crumble, the tears rising in a wet sheen. And he allowed his gaze to travel over her blond curls as they tumbled in a messy fall over her shoulders. Under the dim light they seemed washed out. Plastic. A wig perhaps. If he didn't know better, if he hadn't been married to her for what seemed eons, he'd think her pristine and beautiful face wasn't real. A ghost. Yes, that was what she was. She wasn't really standing here in front of him accusing him like she used to all those years ago.

He dropped the beer can on the floor and pressed the heels of his hands to his forehead. "Go away. Go away." His voice trembled, his throat ached as fear came from nowhere. "You aren't really here. You aren't really here."

When he dared open his eyes to look, she'd vanished. But he heard her footsteps echoing on the basement stairs. They faded until he heard nothing but the television squawking and his own breathing.

* * * *

Olivia awakened, her body aching enough to remind her she'd used muscles she didn't know she possessed. She shifted on the sheets, stretching a hand out and finding an empty bed. Her eyes popped open and she glanced around the room. The shade was

pulled, but the beginning of morning light spilled in enough that she could see well. She rolled to her left and stared at Trey's bedside clock. Five am.

Where was Trey? She closed her eyes for a moment and remembered their heated lovemaking. The one session had ripped the top off her expectations, had bent her mind, had shown her a new world. Nothing in her limited sexual experience prepared her for the feelings now dominating her. Trey's lovemaking had taught her more about her body's responses, her body's needs, than she could have imagined.

Yawning, she slipped from the bed. She was still rather knackered, but she didn't think she could afford to lie in bed any longer. She hadn't unpacked last night, and she needed a sleep t-shirt from her suitcase. She wandered into the hall and heard Trey's voice murmuring quietly into the phone.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's right. I don't know. I only know that if I let her out of here, the bastard could do anything to her. That scares me."

She froze to the spot. She rubbed her arms, aware of the cool air brushing her skin. The heater kicked in, and the warmer air bathed a path across her skin. Still, with his words echoing in her mind, the renewed warmth didn't feel like enough.

Deciding it was rude to listen in, she emerged from the hallway into the living and dining area. Trey sat on the couch, naked as the day he was born.

She gawked, her body responding to all that glorious flesh.

Desire coiled like a spring in her stomach as she stared at him. He stared back, grinning like an unrepentant boy as he held the phone to his ear. His perfect chest, broad shoulders, the six pack stomach, the muscular length of his thighs ... and God, what lay between his thighs. Last night she'd felt all that hard, hot masculinity within her arms and writhed like a crazy woman when he'd thrust inside her. Remembering how it felt, how each inch caressed her, drove Olivia to walk toward him. If she didn't stop staring at him, he would wonder if she was off her trolley.

"Yep. Talk to you later, sir." Trey clicked off the cordless phone and it landed on the sofa next to him.

"Hey," he said, smiling.

"Hey." Self-consciousness threatened, her vulnerability as she stood naked a constant reminder of how she came to be here.

Because she needed his protection, and he wanted to shelter her from harm. It might be nothing more, and longing for deeper affection was dangerous to her heart.

His eyes caressed, starting from her mouth, down over her breasts, and landing most certainly on the triangle of dark curls between her thighs. Desire twisted, turning like a wind-up clock. Moisture gathered between her thighs. Just like that, she saw his cock go rock hard.

Whoa.

"Who..." She swallowed hard and licked her lips. "Who was that on the phone?"

"My supervisor. He told me to come in for the desk job on Monday rather than today." He sighed, then smiled. "But maybe this is a blessing in disguise."

"How?"

"More time with you."

Delight spread like a wave inside her. "I thought you were independent and didn't like attachments, Trey? If I'm staying with you..." She shrugged. "Won't people get the wrong idea?"

He shrugged once more. "Do you really care what other people think?"

She winced. "Sometimes I do, even if I shouldn't."

"Why?"

"I haven't set all my boundaries. I need to resist the tendency to do what I think others want."

"God, I hope last night you didn't think you had to sleep with me." He plunged his fingers into his hair, serious worry etched on his face. "You didn't think—"

"No, no." She smiled and waved a hand in dismissal. "If I hadn't wanted to, I would have pulled away. I wouldn't have let it go this far."

He nodded. "Good. You can back out of this. All of it. If you don't want my protection, you can leave anytime. But God, I hope you want to stay. I'll go nuts worrying about you otherwise. You've become a good friend."

Olivia admitted to herself that the term friend stung a bit. Such a word held connotations of distance. "Friends with benefits?"

"Yeah, definitely benefits."

Naked and a bit cold, she straddled his lap. His cock nestled between her thighs. As his arms slid around her back, one hand plunged into her hair. He kissed her, his lips sliding over hers to seal them together. Her tongue met his in a bold dance, his touch restless as he cupped her back, her shoulders and finally her butt. He squeezed the cheeks, bringing her tighter into the kiss.

When she came up for air, he buried his face in her neck, his kisses spreading like a wildfire driven by extreme winds. As he peppered kisses over her collarbone, he lifted her hips and brought her down. The broad, hot tip of his erection thrust between her folds. His lips took hers and he thrust upward. As he surged to the hilt, she groaned into his mouth at the exquisite sensation of hot thickness piercing deep into her heat. She was so aroused she immediately started moving. She undulated under his touch as his fingers caught her nipples, tugged and twisted lightly. Under his onslaught she started a hot ride that caressed his naked cock deep inside her.

Naked.

She halted, shocked they'd gone this far without protection. "We have to stop. We need a condom."

She lifted herself off of him, and his eyes opened in awareness. "Ah, damn it. I'm sorry honey."

She followed as he headed down the hall. Once in the bedroom, he retrieved a condom. She lay back on the bed, but he put a hand out to her. "Take a shower with me."

Olivia smiled, anticipation searing her with liquid fire as she took his hand. She couldn't wait to discover something new—she'd never taken a shower with a man before.

Trey's bathroom was luxury, with thick towels, a deep whirlpool tub, a large glass block shower, and double sinks. Amidst the beautiful surroundings and bright lights, her nudity left her vulnerable. His admiration poured over her in waves as he smiled, wicked, hot and undeniably interested.

Trey turned on the shower and stepped in, and as she followed, he enveloped Olivia in his arms. Warm spray poured over them. As water cascaded softly, Trey soaped her body. She did the same for him. Suds and water streamed over their skin in a sensual delight.

She cupped his face and drew him down for a kiss. He tasted like toothpaste, and she

leaned in to savor his body along hers. As her breasts pressed into his solid chest, she enjoyed the prickle of hair over her nipples. He dipped his head and covered one nipple. She arched and gasped as he feasted relentlessly on her breasts, teasing and licking one moment, sucking the next. He reached for the condom and sheathed himself.

He urged her to turn and place her hands on the wet tiles. He gathered her close, cupping her breasts and stroking her nipples. She reached behind his head and drew him nearer. One strong thrust sent him deep inside her. She moaned softly. It felt so good. The back and forth, the steady movements of his flesh pushing deep, retreating and returning, drew her into pleasure so quickly, she gasped and moaned in excitement. He felt incredibly thick, and the fullness and friction drove her insane, the pleasure was so good. She moved in his arms, driven to a sexual madness as he plucked her nipples and thrust in slow, torturous glides that sent swirls of hot desire to throughout her body.

She gasped as arousal drove her toward the edge, and with a scream, she exploded in heart-stopping climax. Trey picked up the pace, holding her hips as he slammed deep, over and over until he growled and shook as bliss overtook him.

* * * *

Trey watched Olivia cooking him a Sunday omelet, then later in the day she insisted on tuna fish sandwiches for lunch, too. She kept their meals simple, and he liked that. He didn't want her slaving over a hot stove for him. At the same time, having her near felt like nirvana. The last couple of days blew him away.

As he watched her putter around his apartment wearing the velvet-looking sweat suit that curved over her beautiful body, he took in glances of the football game on the tube. She straightened a picture on the wall that tilted slightly; she seemed to have enough energy to make a light bulb glow. Her quiet personality had changed somewhat in the short time he'd known her—he felt he'd known her far longer than mere weeks.

You gave in.

You freakin' took her to bed and enjoyed every damn minute of it.

Oh, yeah.

Well, just because he'd enjoyed every minute didn't mean he should have done it. At this point, though, he didn't care. Missing out on Olivia's wild side would have been a damned shame. She could be his friend and his lover without upsetting the status quo.

She halted in the middle of the living room and blocked his view of the television. Her attention pinpointed on the sliding glass doors that lead to his small patio, and she didn't appear aware of where she'd stopped.

His eyebrows shot up. "Hey, you're blocking the game. What's wrong?" he asked when she didn't speak.

She shook her head and turned her head to look at him. "Sorry." She sat on the couch and faced him. She clasped her hands between her knees and looked as serious as a woman waiting on a cellblock for execution. "I feel restless. I need to go outside."

"No way."

Her eyes narrowed. "What?"

"We need to stay indoors until this nut who is threatening us is caught. I know it's not easy to stay inside."

As soon as he said the words, she frowned. Wrong answer. *She looks like a little mouse ready to go for the cheese even when there's a trap waiting to snap off her butt.*

"Only because we allowed this prat to get away with it." Olivia's sweetly innocent-looking face showed sheer determination. Her eyes sparked, her mouth pressed into a harder line. He wanted to kiss the displeasure off that mouth until she went pliant beneath him.

Oh, yeah. God, I want her.

He ached with it.

"We're not helpless," he said in defense. "We're taking this step by step."

She nodded, but didn't look at all convinced. "Being sensible."

"Right."

"I don't think I can pretend that everything's going to be all right. There's a dangerous man out there. We can't sit around and wait for him to make another move."

"We aren't helpless."

"We're certainly acting like it." Her voice held fire and brimstone. "Isn't there anything we can do to help ourselves?"

He slid over on the couch and wrapped his arms around her. He kissed her temple. She stiffened, but he turned her face to him and gently kissed her.

When she eased into a pool of compliance, he kissed her mouth again and eased his tongue deep. *Oh, God. Yeah. She tasted like coffee and cream. Delicious. Sexy.* He wanted—

Easy, boy. Down. She's going to hate you if you ignore her worries. But then she kissed him back, meeting his tongue and teasing him. She thrust her tongue into his mouth in retaliation, and he groaned as pure desire shot up his spine and turned his cock to iron.

He drew back with a gasp. "You're like wine. You make me drunk."

A smile flickered over her mouth. "Are you saying sex fogged your brain and you aren't thinking straight?"

"Yep. That's my excuse and I'm sticking to it."

She pursed her lips. "Don't blame sex, mister."

He grinned. "I tried. Come on. Let's get dressed and head over to the Sheriff's Department to follow up on some leads."

The phone rang, and Trey grabbed the cordless handset.

"Hello," his mom's cheerful voice came over the phone. "How are you, dear?"

"I'm great. How's everyone doing there? Getting along?" He could hear classical music playing in the background.

"Edie's absolutely wonderful, Trey. We've been eating way too much pie, of course. I'll have to work out twice as hard next week. Craig is resisting the urge to pick up after Edie and I, and we're tolerating the police scanner he brought over with him."

"Ah, jeez. He brought the scanner?"

"I swear that boy lives and breathes police work. I think he needs to find a girlfriend."

Trey grinned. "That's what I keep telling him. He just sort of grunts."

"Uh-huh. I've noticed. How is Olivia?"

"Fine."

"Oh, let me talk to her will you?"

Trey passed the phone over, and Olivia looked surprised. "It's my mom."

"Which one?" she mouthed silently.

“Arlene,” he mouthed back.

“Hello,” Olivia said into the phone, her tone cheerful.

Trey didn’t know what brand of girl talk his mom had planned for Olivia, but he gave her privacy. He changed into jeans and sweater in his bedroom.

When he came back, Olivia waved the phone at him. “Edie wants to speak with you.”

She returned the favor by leaving him alone with the telephone. “Hey.”

“Sweetie, it’s good to talk to you.” Edie’s strong voice came on the line, filled with purpose and warmth. “I can’t tell you how wonderful Arlene has been to me. And your ... um ... brother Craig is quite the watchdog. Very serious, but very nice.”

Trey smiled. “Yeah, he’s a bulldog.”

She talked his ear off about the pies, as Olivia returned to the room wearing a multicolored bright sweater and jeans that hugged in all the right places.

His mouth opened, but when Edie spoke to him, he realized he hadn’t heard a word she’d said in the last thirty seconds. Olivia had wiped his memory bank clean.

“Sorry, Edie, what did you say?”

“I said, when are you going back to work?”

“Tomorrow. I have a desk job.”

“Will we see you today sometime?”

He hadn’t thought of that. “Maybe. Olivia and I are going over to the Sheriff’s Department for a while. We’ll call you from there.”

After he hung up, Olivia sidled up to him and enveloped him in a big hug. “I’m so glad you and Edie are getting along now. She seems like a nice lady.”

Trey went speechless for a few seconds. “She’s ... yeah, she seems like she’s changed quite a bit.”

Olivia pulled back. “The jury’s still out, though?”

“Yeah. I guess I’m not one hundred percent ready to let go of all the bad feelings.”

She chewed that luscious bottom lip, and he wanted to kiss her. Instead, he let her say, “Arlene and Edie want to help me with a makeover.”

His eyebrows went up. Was he going to like the sound of this? “Makeover with what?”

Her deep eyes looked into his, as if searching for a way to tell him the answer. “Me. I need a makeover.”

“What? You do not.” He allowed his gaze to travel over her slim form, his attention settling on every sexy, beautiful curve. “There’s nothing wrong with the way you look.”

Her mouth tightened in that way he was starting to think of as distinctly English disapproval. “Thank you for the vote of confidence, Trey, but a woman doesn’t always have a makeover because there is something wrong with her. Sometimes a woman does it for herself. To make herself feel better.”

He pushed his fingers through his hair, and Trey knew a pained expression must be on his face. “What are you going to change?”

“I’m not certain.”

“When?”

“They’d like me to come over later tonight. We could have dinner together.”

He frowned, but then said, “How bad could it be? It’s not like they’re professional makeover people, right?”

She rolled her gaze to the ceiling and sighed. “I’m sure they won’t make a hash of it, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

She huffed and grumbled somewhat as they prepared to leave, and he grimaced. If he didn’t watch out, he’d have a very unhappy little English mouse on his hands, plus two *mothers* kicking his butt.

They bundled up in preparation for the wintry weather. Snow clouds threatened, but other than being colder than a well-digger’s ass, the weather wasn’t bad yet.

Trey kept a close eye on their surroundings—he feared for Olivia’s safety until his cop’s cold attention to detail couldn’t remove the rock hard lump in his throat. He would die first before he allowed anything to happen to her. He mulled over what this meant. Things were changing around him so fast his head was spinning like Linda Blair’s in *The Exorcist*. First he’d run into his little mouse, and Olivia was a hot, delicious, amazing woman. The sex he’d experienced with her far surpassed relationships he’d once had with other women. Guilt assaulted him. It stung like a bitch to realize his mistrust of women on a deep level had ruined potentially satisfying relationships with other women. He craved a rewarding connection, and he thought he’d found it with Olivia.

Then, in a crazy twist, he visualized Olivia pregnant. With his child.

His gut clenched, his cock hardening as he imagined with a feral intensity sliding his naked cock deep into her hot, tight body. Primal urges surged so brutally it shook him to the core. An animal need bombarded him. He wanted to press inside her and come hard and heavy until he’d spewed come so far inside her his seed would take root.

Holy shit, MacGilvary.

He didn’t know whether to laugh like an idiot or run like hell.

Chapter Fifteen

As Trey drove them toward the Sheriff's Department, he couldn't keep it in any longer. He'd swallowed his feelings, ones he'd denied for too long. "Olivia, I was an ass the other day when I ordered you to stay with me."

"Not an ass exactly." She turned her face toward him, and her eyes sparked with mischief. "On the other hand, you're pretty commanding when you want to be. When I first met you I was amazed how a rough and tough cop could also be so happy-go-lucky."

He wrinkled his nose. "Happy-go-lucky? Sounds like a pussy."

She laughed. "No, it's ... what is the word I'm looking for?" She threw her hands up in surrender. "You have a great sense of humor. You're also gentle, sexy, hot ... simply amazing. I'm running out of descriptors here."

"My head is swelling."

"Which one?"

To his mortification, heat filled his face at the same time his cock started to harden. "Damn it, sweetheart, if you keep talking like that—"

"What?"

"If we were back at the condo—"

"What would happen?"

"I'd kiss that pretty mouth until you were so damned breathless you couldn't talk. Then I'd rip your panties off and fuck you until you were exhausted."

He glanced over. Her cheeks flamed, her lips open in astonishment. The red lip gloss made her mouth look so damned juicy. He imagined those lips sliding over his cock. Damn it, but she was beautiful. His heart ached with the knowledge and his body went rock hard.

She swallowed hard. "Well, that's a mighty tall order, sir. But I'll take you up on it later."

He grinned, pleased as hell. "You are a feisty little mouse."

"Mouse?" The indignant tone warned him that he'd used the wrong term.

He glanced at her quickly—that luscious bottom lip pouted just a tiny increment. Enough to make him want to suck it, lick it, kiss it until she writhed under him and around him.

Jesus, God.

"Okay, I apologize. When I met you I thought you weren't my type, remember. You were..." How did he explain this without shitting in his mess kit? "I thought you were pretty, but conservative. Maybe a prudish English rose. Obviously, I was somewhat wrong."

"Somewhat?"

He shrugged. "The women I've dated in the past were all..." He couldn't come up with the right word.

"I know. You told me I'm complicated."

"You are. You're smart, funny, and there's something vulnerable about you that makes me want to protect you."

She went silent.

As they pulled into the Sheriff's Department, and he found a parking spot, he said, "Are you pissed?"

She blinked. "That does not mean the same thing in England as it does here."

Now it was his turn to blink. Then he grinned. "Oh, yeah. Are you mad?"

"One might say I have lost my mind, yes. But I don't think you mean that, either."

He groaned. "Damn it, mouse—"

She took mercy on him. "Yes, I am angry. Have you heard the saying that if a man is alone in the woods and gives an answer to a question and a woman doesn't hear it, is he still wrong?"

He sighed and winced. "Okay, I get the picture."

How did he win this conversation? He couldn't. Better to cut his losses.

Trey's boss growled when Trey showed up at work, but relented when Trey explained he couldn't sit at home any longer and wait for something to happen. The man agreed, and soon Trey and Olivia sat at the computer and logged on to case files entered into the computer.

Trey and Olivia delved into the last two years of arrests Trey had made personally, but none of them seemed to stand out. Craig and Mick came into the department late in the afternoon as the sun descended behind the Rocky Mountains, its cylinder of fiery warmth giving a last gasp before night came.

Olivia sipped a can of diet cola, while Trey drank some awful sludge the Sheriff's Department dared to label coffee.

Craig ran his hand over his hair as he sat on the front of the desk. "Any luck?"

Trey shook his head. "Nope."

"We have an idea for you. I thought of it on the way back here," Mick said, tucking his thumbs into his waistband. "Remember when you had to take out that guy who was holding his wife hostage several months back?"

How could he forget? He hadn't shot anyone in a long time before that, and certainly hadn't since then. Things had calmed around Gold Rush lately with the exception of Olivia's encounter with the nut case in the library.

"Yeah. Roland Compton. I remember."

"Do you think anyone in his family might have a grudge?" Craig asked.

Trey rubbed his chin. "Shit. I don't know. Anything is possible."

Olivia watched their exchange with an interested expression, but she didn't interrupt their conversation.

"Remember his brother said on television that he thinks you should have been indicted for murder for shooting his brother?" Craig asked.

"Oh, God," Olivia said as she placed her can of pop on the desk. "Really?"

Mick grunted. "Really. Hamilton Compton, unlike his brother, is an upstanding citizen. He was a Sheriff's Deputy here for years and had a good reputation."

"Had?" Olivia asked.

Trey answered with, "After I shot his brother, her seemed to wig out. Beyond the normal grief, that is."

Craig nodded. "He resigned from the Sheriff's Department and has been working security over at the superstore on Gilbert Avenue."

"Rent-a-cop as you call them here in the U.S.?" Olivia asked.

Craig leaned back in his chair and it squeaked. "Yep."

Trey scratched his nose. "I never cared for him. He's a little older than us ... in his forties. Thinks that he knows everything and likes to make sure other people understand that."

Olivia looked disturbed. "That makes him more dangerous."

Trey bristled. "Bastard doesn't know who he's up against if it's him."

"Damn straight," Craig said.

Trey glanced at his brothers and took in their no nonsense expressions. "I could turn up at his doorstep with questions."

Olivia grabbed his sweater sleeve. "No!"

Trey glanced at her sharply, as did Mick and Craig.

She released Trey and looked sheepish. "I just ... that could be dangerous, right?"

The brothers all looked at her as if she'd grown two heads.

"Danger is a part of our business," Craig said.

She took a deep breath. "But you have no proof it's him."

"Not a damn bit." Mick said what Trey wouldn't.

All of them went silent.

Trey finally said, "One component we didn't think of, Olivia. Working at night isn't a good thing for you. There are times when you'll have to drive yourself home from the library, and I'd rather that you didn't do it at night."

She chewed her lip. "I didn't think of that. Cyn won't like it. She'll have to switch Dean or someone else to nights."

"Call Dean first and ask him if he'd mind," Craig said.

Trey nodded, his leg bouncing up and down in a high-energy movement. "Excellent idea."

"I'll do it right now," she said.

She half expected the guys to move away, but they didn't. She felt a like a suspect trying to fly under the radar with these guys. Having Trey stare at her while she flipped open her mobile and located Dean's number was nerve-wracking enough. Having all three MacGilvary's staring her down caused vibrations to ripple through her.

Right. It isn't just because they're law enforcement with enough testosterone to jumpstart any female heart. It's because they're hot, they are protective, and they are nice men. Well, Trey and Mick were nice. Craig seemed nice but rough around the edges, as if he needed some corners sanded off to smooth his bristly exterior.

Olivia ignored their stares and called Dean. When Dean answered, she hurried to ask him if he'd mind switching with her to a night shift. She explained what was happening, and Dean's concern showed clearly in his agreement to help.

"If Cyn will allow it," Olivia said, rubbing her neck as muscles tightened.

"She'd better. I'll give her an earful if she doesn't," Dean said.

"Please don't put your job in jeopardy."

"Nah, it's no problem. She likes my work, so she won't hold it against me."

"All right. I appreciate this, Dean."

"Absolutely. So, is that big, hunky cop guarding you?" Dean asked, teasing clear in his voice.

"Um ... yeah. He's right here."

"Good. Let me speak to him."

"What?"

“Come on. I won’t bite him.”

Olivia laughed. She held the phone out to Trey. “Dean wants to speak with you.”

Trey’s eyebrows went up.

Trey took the phone. “Hey, Dean. Thanks for helping Olivia out.” Trey paused for a few seconds. “Oh. Um, yeah. Thanks. Of course I’ll look out for her.” Trey’s eyebrows shot up. “Of course. She means a lot to me, too.”

Trey’s confession, in full hearing range of his brothers and her, surprised her. She blushed as pleasure ignited inside her.

After Trey handed the phone back to her, she said to Dean, “You’re a good friend. I’ll let you know what Cyn says.”

They signed off. When her gaze traced over the cops in front of her, their faces all held varying stages of amusement. “What?”

“Is that the guy who has a crush on Trey?” Mick asked, his lips twitching.

She grinned. “Yes. He thinks he’s gorgeous.”

“Whooo doggie,” Craig said, a real smile curving his lips and actually making him handsome.

“Shut up.” Trey growled. “Now let’s call, Cyn. She’s the real challenge.”

Olivia’s call to Cyn didn’t go as well. Cyn flat out said no, even after Olivia told her Dean agreed to the idea.

Olivia’s anger boiled upward. “The Sheriff’s Department recommended this to me, Cynthia.”

Cyn huffed. “Honestly, I don’t see what difference it makes. If a man is after you, he can get to you whether it’s day or night.”

The reality in that statement stung.

Trey’s eyes narrowed. He mouthed, “Let me talk to her.”

Olivia shook her head. She would take this bull by the horns this time. She continued talking to Cyn.

“The Sherriff’s department thinks it’s necessary for my safety and that of my co-workers that I work during the day, since it’s more likely he may strike at night. And I agree with them.”

“Well, you have to make decisions for yourself and not let those cops throw their weight around,” Cyn said.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “Of course I understand scheduling for the library is important. However, safety for our customers and myself should be a priority. I know nobody can force you to change the schedule. I’ve already spoken to Dean and he’s agreed.”

“No. It’s a done deal. I’m not changing the schedule.”

Olivia shook her head and pursed her lips in frustration. “All right. Have it your way. Goodbye.”

“I take it the bitch won’t budge?” Trey asked.

“You got that right.”

“I could throw my weight around, but that would get my ass in a sling.”

She sighed. “No, don’t do that. We’ll think of something. Somehow, I’ll have to pound into her pompous stubborn head that it’s not only my safety we’re concerned about, but also the customer’s and hers too. Right now, she just wants to push her weight around and show she’s boss.”

Trey logged off the computer system. "Right. We'll talk about this over dinner."

"I need to get home to Celeste," Mick said.

"She's tough, Mick. You don't need to worry about her," Trey said, even though he understood his brother's concern one hundred percent.

"She'll be fine." Olivia's reassuring voice and smile made Trey smile.

Mick returned Olivia's smile. "Definitely tough. Doesn't mean I'm not worried. Let's think about this Hamilton dude overnight."

"I second that idea. I'd better get home to Mom and Edie." Craig stood. "Everybody be careful and check in when you get home."

"Arlene and Edie wanted me to come over this evening," Olivia said.

Craig nodded. "We'll see you there."

With that, Trey's brothers headed out.

"Let's go pick up your car," Trey said. "And you'll need to pick up more clothes."

All the way to her flat, tension crawled up her back. Now that they had an idea of who might have a vendetta against Trey and his family, she realized Trey and his brother's hadn't mentioned the details of the shooting. She decided she'd ask him later after they returned to Trey's condo for the evening.

Once inside her flat, she packed more clothes into her suitcase. At least a week's worth of clothing. Before they could leave for Arlene's house, her cell phone rang, and she answered.

Cameron's name came over the display. "Hey, little brother. How's your Sunday? A little early in England to call isn't it?"

"Yeah. But I was worried."

She sighed. "Everything is okay here." Her cheeks heated as she recalled her time in the shower with Trey. "You'd better get to bed so you can celebrate little Cam's birthday later."

"Couldn't sleep."

An ache started somewhere deep inside as she wished she could be there for young Cameron Junior's party. "Wish I could be there."

"Truthfully, is everything okay?" he asked.

"It's fine. Trey and I get along well. He even picks up after himself. Amazing."

Trey threw her a face, wiggling his eyebrows in a way that almost made her giggle.

"An extraordinary man, indeed," Cameron said, his tone droll. "Look, there was something I was thinking about on the flight home."

"Yes?"

"You know the trip you want to take to Italy? I'd like to give you the rest of the money you need for the trip."

Stunned, she almost couldn't speak. "What? Why?"

She saw Trey frown, but she ignored that, too.

"Because I know ... I know Mom and Dad treated you like it was your fault I was hurt all those years ago and that's just barmy. But I want you to know I don't blame you at all. I never did."

Tears surged into her eyes unexpectedly, and before she could stop them, they spilled over. She wisely kept her gaze away from Trey, afraid of what she'd see on his face.

"No."

"No?"

“I mean, thank you for saying that. I’m so happy you don’t blame me.”

“I should have said something years ago. I’ve been a coward. I didn’t know how to say it. Seeing you so happy pushed me over the edge. You still feel a little guilty and I can tell. I can’t stand that. Please, please stop feeling that way.”

She sniffed. “Okay. I’ll try.”

“Try harder.”

She laughed through the tears that poured down her cheeks. “I will. But you can’t give me quid for Italy. It’s too expensive.”

“Yeah, I can. Samantha and I want you to have it. Can’t a brother give the best sister in the world a gift to show his appreciation?”

She groaned and wiped at the tears still running down her cheeks. A tissue box suddenly appeared in front of her, and when she looked up, Trey held it out to her. His eyes burned with worry and questions. She took the box and grabbed one.

“Are you crying?” Cameron asked, brotherly horror in his voice.

“Yes, damn it.”

“Oh, bugger. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Maybe it’s hormones.”

“Well, as I heard someone say in the States, ‘too much information.’”

“Okay.”

“What?”

“Okay, I’ll take your gift. Thank you.”

“Brilliant. Hey, I want you to go on that trip and enjoy it. Take Trey with you.”

Her gaze flew to Trey, who still sat beside her with pure concern radiating from his eyes. “No. I mean, he probably won’t do that.”

“You’ll never know until you ask.”

She sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

A baby’s shriek came over the line. “Oh, bollocks. I’d better go.”

She sighed. “Kiss the Camster and Tina for me.”

“Will do.”

After they hung up, she turned tearful eyes toward Trey. He reached up and cupped her cheek. “Hey, what the hell happened?” He kissed her forehead with such tenderness she cried harder. “Is everyone all right at home? Why are you crying?”

She smiled through happy tears. “I’m fine. Everyone is fine.” Olivia explained that Cameron wanted to give her a gift of money for her trip. “I can’t believe it. It’s a dream come true, but I thought it would be a while longer before I could go. I feel guilty taking the money.”

Trey kissed her, sipping at her gently and stirring renewed desire. “Take it. I think he’s great for giving you such a wonderful gift.” He smoothed her hair back. “I can see how happy it’s made you even though you’re crying.”

She grinned, tears drying one by one as she dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“Indeed.”

“All right now?”

“Yes.” She drew in a deep breath. “Let’s go.”

Chapter Sixteen

Olivia needed her car and felt secure with Trey driving behind her. They stopped at the hospital to visit with Maddie and learned she'd be released the next day. Her son and daughter-in-law planned to take her back to Loveland with them. Once Olivia realized Maddie would stay safe with her son, she felt much better.

Trey and Olivia headed back to their cars. Olivia watched him move, and that smooth, athletic stride made her belly flutter in appreciation. Although he wore a green turtleneck sweater, brown leather bomber jacket, and jeans, that's where the laid-back ended. Under his jacket a shoulder holster held his weapon. He was dark, dangerous and every wonderful alpha male cliché she could imagine wrapped in several delicious differences. Despite his huff and bluster, this man also possessed a reservoir of affection for his family and for her. He would do anything for the people he loved.

Love.

Her heart turned over at the very idea, problems notwithstanding. She couldn't afford to fall in love with Trey MacGilvary. An ache burned in her stomach at the idea of leaving Trey behind.

When they reached Arlene's house, Olivia anticipated her makeover. She wanted to do something to take her mind off her problems for the moment and to make life seem less complicated. She smiled wondering what Trey would think of the makeover.

Spending more time with his family, though, sent a message that she didn't know if she could endorse. When it came down to it, she had a strange relationship with Trey. They hadn't officially dated, yet they had a physical relationship. They'd jumped into the deep end of the ocean without a canoe, a boat, a sail or a paddle.

"I need my suitcase," she said as she exited the car.

Trey's face screwed up in a frown. "Why?"

"For my makeover. I need the makeup and outfits."

Trey shook his head and grinned. "Girly-girl stuff."

She returned his smile and punched him playfully in the arm. "Be nice."

He grunted in that universal way men had of expressing 'whatever' in very caveman terms.

Trey kept his razor-sharp attention on their surroundings as they negotiated the sidewalk and when Craig opened the door, they didn't waste time standing at the door. Craig reengaged the security system the minute they entered.

Arlene and Edie came out of the kitchen and headed straight for them, hugging Trey and then Olivia as if she'd known them for decades rather than a short time. Both women made her feel important and cared for, a cozy sensation she'd never experienced in her own parent's home back in England. It brought tears to her eyes, but she shoved them back.

Craig snagged Trey's arm and hauled him toward the living room where a television blared a football game. "The game's on. I have a feeling whatever Mom and Edie have in mind is going to take a long time."

Olivia caught his male distain in his voice for anything too girly and smiled.

"This way, dear." Arlene led the way down the hall with Edie and Olivia in tow.

“We have some excellent ideas for you.”

“Did you bring some outfits?” Edie asked as they entered a bedroom.

Olivia wagged her suitcase. “In here.”

Olivia’s mouth opened in a big O when she saw Arlene’s large bedroom, dominated by a bay window with a chaise and table for relaxation on one end and a king-sized bed on the other. Though the curtains obscured the night, the recessed lighting in the ceiling lit the room with brilliant clarity. Hues of butter soft yellow and blue created a feminine but not fussy ambiance that fit Arlene’s personality.

“Beautiful room,” Olivia said.

Arlene beamed. “Thanks.” She gave a tour of the big bathroom with double sinks, a huge whirlpool tub, and large shower. “This is my pride and joy. Justice and I redid the bathroom not long after we adopted the boys. The house needed work and the bathroom was horribly outdated.”

“It’s a lovely ... bathroom,” Olivia said. She hesitated to say what a lovely toilet, because the British word for the entire bathroom made American’s wrinkle their nose in subtle disgust.

Olivia placed her suitcase on a large, tufted cushion at the foot of the bed and soon the ladies rifled through her makeup and clothing.

Edie placed Olivia’s makeup on the vanity. “You’ve brought a lot.”

“I should wash my face first and start fresh,” Olivia said.

“We’ll see what we can do with your wardrobe,” Arlene said as Olivia headed for the bathroom with cleanser and moisturizer.

When Olivia emerged with a scrubbed clean face, she wondered what Arlene and Edie had in mind for the makeover.

“What about this top, dear?” Arlene held up a clingy emerald green top that Olivia had worn once.

“It’s revealing,” Olivia said with a shrug.

“Low in the front.” Edie tapped her chin with her index finger. “But not too low. You’ll look fantastic.”

Arlene held the sinful garment up to Olivia’s torso. “It’ll be great. And this black skirt goes with it, doesn’t it?”

“It’s clingy, too.” Olivia spoke the words in defense.

Arlene’s well-shaped eyebrows pinched together a bit. “Honey, are you saying you’d rather wear something more reserved? It’s up to you, of course. There’s nothing tasteless about this top or skirt, though. They’re sexy.” Her gaze danced over the utilitarian sweater and jeans Olivia wore. “And if you’re looking for a new hot look—”

“That is what I want. New. Hot.” Olivia grinned.

She did, didn’t she?

Edie’s eyes twinkled. “I’d be crazy not to ask this, Olivia. What is the goal of your makeover?”

Standing in the middle of the room, Olivia contemplated her reasoning. “I’ve decided that I’m tired of my more conservative look. It doesn’t reflect who I am so much as it follows the stereotype of a librarian. Events lately have made me realize this old look doesn’t fit me anymore.”

“This wouldn’t have anything to do with meeting Trey, would it?” Edie asked.

Olivia’s cheeks grew hot. “I ... like him very much. But this is for me. Only for me.”

Arlene's smile grew wider by the minute. "Trey is crazy about you. Edie and I were discussing that after the pie bake off."

Olivia gulped, her gaze darting between the women in front of her. "You were?"

"Most definitely." Arlene nodded vigorously. "Trey attracts women. It's his natural charisma. Even when he's broken up with the girls or they've drifted away from him, most of the break ups weren't tempestuous. I have a feeling if he let you go it wouldn't be like that at all."

Olivia sank onto the edge of the fluffy bed. "Oh?"

Edie's nod added confirmation.

Arlene continued. "Trey's a wonderful, loving man. I think you've figured that out by now."

All Olivia could do is nod.

"The way he looks at you is different," Arlene said.

"I've only known my son again for a short time." Edie sat on the bed next to Olivia. "But I can already see he cares for you a great deal."

Arlene sat on the other side of Olivia, and Olivia could have felt trapped. Instead she experienced their affection pouring into her like a balm she hadn't known she craved until now. Olivia's heart warmed, stumbled, and took the final plunge.

What these women might not understand is even though Trey cared for her it didn't mean their relationship would develop into a more serious attachment. "Well, neither of you has to worry. I won't break his heart."

Both Arlene and Edie nodded as if they understood.

Oh, no. You don't understand.

Suddenly, Arlene popped up. "Come on, Edie. We're sticking our nose where it doesn't belong. What Trey and Olivia decide to do is their business."

"You're right, Arlene." Edie slipped her arm around Olivia and gave her a squeeze. "Let's dress you up, tinker with your hairstyle and redo your makeup."

Olivia retreated to the bathroom to change into the clingy emerald top and black skirt. She stood in front of the big Victorian style mirror in Arlene's bathroom for a long time. The emerald top smoothed over her shoulders, hugged her toned arms to the wrists, plunged down to a wicked V at the neck and revealed enough cleavage for the Balconet bra to show off her assets. The pants hugged her hips and butt with loving attention, and swished down to wide flares at the lower ankles. Sexy black pumps completed the package. A small princess cut Peridot necklace she wore dipped right into her cleavage. She slid on a set of three matching Peridot stack rings on her right ring finger.

When she popped out of the bathroom and turned in a circle for the ladies, they made approving exclamations.

"Wonderful," Arlene said.

Edie clasped her hands together and beamed. "Oh, my son is a dead man."

Olivia blushed as she sat in the small chair in front of the makeup mirror. "You are two of the most intriguing ladies I've ever met."

"Why is that?" Edie asked.

Amazed, Olivia gazed at them in the mirror as they hovered on either side of her.

Arlene crossed her arms, her grin unrepentant. "And what are we doing here?"

"It's very innocent," Edie said. "We just want to help you with the makeover. No ulterior motives whatsoever."

“Oh, very innocent,” Olivia said, not believing a word. She held her hair up in a bun at the back of her head. “Let’s get on with it then.” She let her hair drop back to her shoulders with a sigh. “What shall I do with this hair?”

Arlene rubbed a strand of the thick hair between two fingers. “Nothing. It’s beautiful just the way it is.”

“I agree,” Edie said.

“Right. Lovely. How about the makeup?” Olivia looked at the assortment of colors in front of her.

Edie squeezed Olivia’s right shoulder. “Now that we can help with.”

Olivia wrinkled her nose. “I don’t fancy too much makeup.”

Arlene shook her head. “Of course not, dear. Just enough.”

* * * *

“Whoa.” Craig shifted on the couch, his attention drawn away from the loud football game on the wide screen television. “Uh ... Trey?”

Trey heard his brother’s awed exclamation, then saw Craig’s mouth drop open. This was not an expression he witnessed often, if ever, on Craig’s face. The younger MacGilvary simply wasn’t impressed by much of anything. That alone captured Trey’s attention.

“What?” Trey followed Craig’s riveted gaze toward the source amazement.

He saw Edie, Arlene, and Olivia in the kitchen, but other than three chattering women, he didn’t understand the big deal.

“What?” Trey said again.

Craig leaned toward Trey and said in a lower voice that wouldn’t carry over the football game, “Take a better look at Olivia next chance you get.”

Trey frowned. “Why?”

Craig’s stony expression transformed into indulgent amusement. “Just take my word for it. Look at Olivia’s makeover. She’s hot.”

Craig discussing any woman in terms of being a babe, a hottie, beautiful ... well, it didn’t happen. Not because Craig didn’t like women, he was just so freakin’ serious most of the time that he didn’t make flippant statements about a woman’s attributes. At the same time, Trey didn’t *want* Craig to think Olivia was hot. *Nope*.

He glared at Craig. “Don’t even think about it, bro.”

Craig’s grin expanded, which also didn’t happen often. “Not to worry. I won’t try and take her away from you.”

Trey glowered. “As if you could.”

Craig laughed and took another swig of his non-alcoholic beer. “Don’t be so sure.”

“You guys want some snacks to go with the game?” Arlene asked from the kitchen. “Here, Olivia. Would you mind taking these out to the boys?”

“With pleasure,” Olivia’s soft and elegant voice said.

Trey refused to look at her as she sauntered in, but then she stood in front of him and Craig with a large plastic bowl of blue corn tortilla chips and *oh, holy crap*.

Trey practically swallowed his tongue.

Olivia’s top clung to her slim torso in all the right places and drew his attention straight to her full breasts. Trey tried to rein in an immediate response but failed miserably. His groin tightened, his breath quickened and everything male in him roared

into life like a well-oiled engine in a tricked out sports car.

As Craig took the bowl of chips, the world went into slow motion. Trey took in Olivia's appearance with a lightning fast assessment he reserved for sizing up a criminal situation.

Material cupped her breasts and a green necklace highlighted the shadowed dip in her cleavage.

"Thanks," Craig said to her as she smiled.

"You're welcome."

Trey caught her gaze and held for what seemed an eternity. She'd done something new with her makeup. Her eyes seemed deeper, the color more intense, her lips red and delicious. Parted and ready for him to take a long, hungry taste. Her smile faded when he said nothing, and she turned and started to leave.

Trey caught her hand. "Wait."

With her fingers nestled in his bigger hand, he allowed his gaze to caress her without shame. He didn't give a flying squirrel's ass what anyone thought. His breath snagged as his gaze followed down over the black pants that nipped in at her small waist. He imagined cupping her hips, her butt—*ah, shit*. If he imagined any more he'd have a coronary right here. He'd desired her before, and yet this small change, this seductive edge jump-started his primal urges.

He leaned forward and kissed her hand. Her breath hitched inward, and a telltale flush filled her cheeks.

"You're beautiful, Olivia," Trey said, hearing the throaty sound in his voice that betrayed true feelings. He managed to squeeze the next sentence passed his lips without sounding strangled. "Thanks for the snacks."

As he released her hand, she licked her lips. "Oh, um ... thank you and ... you're very welcome."

She turned and he watched that sweet little butt until she disappeared around the kitchen counter. He swallowed hard. *Oh, man*. He glanced at Arlene and Edie. Both women had knowing smiles. Damn it, his family had to know how much he desired Olivia. Even if they hadn't guessed before, they'd have to know after he'd eyeballed her like a salivating teen and blurted out that she was beautiful. He'd let the proverbial cat out of the burlap bag.

When Trey looked over at Craig, Craig's stern face stayed in place. Craig passed the chip bowl. Trey didn't think he could eat one, though, or he really *would* strangle.

Chapter Seventeen

Olivia couldn't ignore the way Trey's attention seemed riveted on her the rest of the evening. They stayed for salad and homemade chili, and though she had a wonderful time, her body stayed flushed with heat. *Damn Trey. It's his fault.*

In fact, when she'd brought the bowl of crisps to Craig and Trey, she'd witnessed both men's reactions to her. She couldn't mistake Craig's admiring gaze, but it surprised her. She had the impression he was a cold one in that department, but maybe Craig had more hidden depths. A woman would have to work hard to discover what lay behind all that brawn and steely-eyed attention. Good thing she didn't care.

Now Trey's expression ... now that was the bomb. When he'd kissed her hand, she'd trembled all over; his admiration and declaration that she was beautiful almost melted her into her shoes. As they returned to Trey's condo, Olivia decided she'd stop pretending that arousal wasn't pinging between them.

Now or never, Olivia.

After they parked their respective cars and entered the condo, she stripped off her coat.

"Here, I'll take our coats," she said.

When she returned from the coat closet in the hallway, Trey had started the gas fireplace, and he'd sprawled out on the couch with that primordial male expression back on his face. His legs were spread out, both arms along the back of the couch. She felt the heat thrumming in the room like a live thing, and she decided to take the next step in hand. She walked to his stereo and flicked on the music. Smooth jazz, low and throbbing with a sinful sound, filled the room. *Perfect.*

The blatant arousal in his eyes gave her what she wanted. She strolled slowly and caught his gaze with hers. Though part of her trembled at her boldness, the other part rejoiced. No more pretenses. No more pretend.

She stopped in front of him. "When you said I was beautiful earlier it surprised me."

"Why?"

She shrugged. "Compliments always surprise me. I'm never ready for them."

"The men in your life must have been dumber than a box of rocks if they didn't tell you every day how beautiful you are." Naked male approval heated his eyes. "It's the truth. I love that look on you, mouse. You are so ... God..."

"What?" She kept her voice soft. "Different?"

As his gaze smoothed up and down her body like hot butter, she shivered with sensual awareness. She balanced on one leg and with one hand against a wall so she could slide the zipper down on one boot and then the other. She tossed the boots aside. His eyes widened as she neared. Her heartbeat throbbed in her ears, her breathing quickening as she made a command decision to take the situation in hand. So few times in her life had she made the first move on a man. She stepped between his legs and then straddled his lap.

His eyes widened, but a slow and sinful grin parted his mouth. "Olivia." Without a second's hesitation, his hands glided down and cupped her butt cheeks. "Oh, baby."

The whisper, so deep and husky, stirred new fires inside her. "Trey."

“You’re different tonight. Why?”

She shrugged, hearing the challenge in his voice and willing to take him on. “Why not?”

He shook his head, his gorgeous eyes gleaming with uncertainty. “You confuse me.”

“I like keeping a man on his toes.”

He grunted. “You’ve done this with other men?”

A little resentful, she answered with the dubious. “Why do you ask?”

His fingers plunged into her hair, those eyes darkening at her tough tone. “Are you challenging me to a duel, mouse?”

She huffed. “Blast it, Trey MacGilvary, maybe you aren’t as smart as you think you are. Has it ever occurred to you that I’ve *never* been the mouse you imagined me to be?”

“Hell no.”

She smoothed her hands over his shoulders and leaned forward. “Then let me show you how wrong you’ve been.”

“You’re making it hard to resist you.”

“I don’t want you to resist me.”

Did she imagine the conflict in his voice? Uncertainty laced with longing?

“Mmm.” His response muffled against her lips as they slipped into a passionate meeting of lips. She longed for him, wanted to understand him on a warmer, more significant level. When they’d made love before, they’d found a plateau of desire she couldn’t deny. Now she wanted the connection they had to make a bridge between them more complete.

Touch after touch, they melded together. His hands did a foray up to her neck, and the sweep of thumb and fingers over her skin sent shivers of hot, divine desire tossing and rippling until she couldn’t pinpoint where it began. She tipped her head back and fell into the moment, writhing in a slow, sensual movement as music purred over the speakers. She’d never experienced freedom like this before. Her heartbeat jumped as she dared to open her eyes and watch his reaction. His eyes narrowed as fire burned in the depths and took on a conflagration all its own. Restraint snapped, and she dove in for a kiss. All librarian inhibition broke loose and control forgotten, Olivia showed him what she wanted. Her kisses were feverish, and part of her worried Trey would push her away and tell her he couldn’t do this. As his touch searched her, as his kisses intensified, she realized her fears meant nothing. Trey wasn’t pushing her away.

His tongue caressed hers in a frenzy, his fingers stole caresses, darting to her nipples to twist gently, to tug, to tease. The sweet sting made her moan, made her long for the lash of his tongue on her nakedness.

She yanked at his sweater and within seconds it flew over his head and onto the floor. Her silky top disappeared and floated to the couch. Trey shifted to the edge of the couch with her perched on his lap, and in a show of masculine power, he stood with her wrapped around him. She gasped, but words didn’t come, only driving physical demand. To put out the fire, to learn his body in ways new and exciting. She allowed her legs to release him, and as she slipped down along his body, he reached for her waistband. The smooth fabric eased over her hips easily as it slid down and pooled at her feet. She smoothed the knee high stockings off her feet and kicked them away along with her pants.

They paused as he took in the fire engine red bra that presented her breasts and

pushed them upward. Fire hot, his gaze devoured. As his fingers caressed the tops of her breasts, she gasped at the tingly feeling. He buried his face in the bounty, his tongue a feather of sensation as he licked and teased. Seconds swished by as he drew the straps down her arms, kissing as he went, each press of his lips a sanctified touch. Each motion as he unhooked the bra took on new significance, as if they'd never made love before this moment and perhaps would never do so again. She forced away thoughts of yesterday and tomorrow, amazed at the utter beauty of the moment.

Only now exists. Forever this time would remain, a second that lasted an eternity. This truth echoed inside like a promise beautiful and sweet, a candy treat on her tongue.

Clad in red lacy panties, she leaned forward and took reverent stock of his hard torso. She palmed his shoulders, drank in the sight of muscled pecs and six-pack abs. Yet all his power seemed to melt under her touch as she swirled her fingertips over his nipples and his breath hissed inward. His head went back as he groaned. Her lips tasted, nibbling on his chest, her touch tracing through hair-roughened planes. She kissed downward until she reached his belt. Before she could touch it, he worked to undo it, then the button and zipper came undone, and he shoved down the jeans and white briefs. Taking his cue, she stripped her bikini panties away.

They stood naked, drinking in one another. Though she'd seen him nude before, something was different. Maybe it was a freedom, a newfound goal to make him hers, to brand her flavor on him until he couldn't remember another woman's taste or touch. She wanted him with a staggering intensity. She wanted him to feel that way about her. So she would give him something to remember her by, no matter where they might go or where this relationship might end. With a flash of realization, she understood this time might never come again, and she wanted it to stay in her mind like a crystal prism sparkling in the sun, a brilliant shimmer incapable of being diminished by time.

She stayed on her knees and reached for the long blade of masculinity between his thighs. Hard, thick, it stood out from a nest of dark hair, a bold statement of sexual prowess. Any shyness she might have once felt in a sexual capacity vanished, as if a strong breeze had torn it away. She eased closer until she touched his rock hard thighs.

His hands went to her head, the fingertips gentle. He didn't hold there ... just waited for what she might do next.

Oh, yes. If they made men in England like this, she'd certainly never met one. And she wouldn't let this one get away. She took him in her mouth and circled him with her grip. As she worshiped him with everything she had, Trey groaned, he gasped, he plunged his fingers into her hair.

His breath rasped. "Oh, fuck."

She laughed softly, and he groaned again as the vibration went through him. She didn't relent. She couldn't. She wanted him begging. Each lick, each suck brought her to a new height of power. Her femininity felt anew, as if she'd never quite understood it before. A heady release beckoned, one she wanted with everything inside. She drew back and stood, her arms going around his neck. Before she could speak, he lifted her in his arms and marched for the bedroom. She'd pushed him to the edge—she felt it in her bones, in her flesh, in the pulsating heart beneath her fingers. The trip down the hall seemed to take forever.

Within seconds they lay on the bed, sprawled in each other's arms. Trey lovingly attacked her breasts, cupping, stroking, his mouth a hot invader. She writhed under

sensations that threatened to overwhelm. The sheets were cool under her skin, but the man attending to her was hot and naked, a primal force. His power, his passion scaled upward in every touch. He licked one nipple, sucked it into the heat of his mouth. She gasped. One thick, long finger slid deep into her, and the heated slide caressed sensitive surfaces so exquisitely she squirmed and gasped. She pulsated, the strength of her arousal reaching heights she couldn't recall having before. His finger felt so good as he smoothed her arousal over her inner lips, then tested her clit. She moaned, almost coming unglued.

"Trey..." Her breathy plea escaped. "Please."

"I want you." His statement came out gruff, a male animal demanding.

"Yes."

But if Olivia expected him to take her immediately, Trey had her fooled. She wriggled as he slipped his finger from her and then moved downward on the bed.

Oh, oh, yes.

As he pressed lingering kisses to her torso, to her belly, she sighed with bliss. He urged her thighs apart, and when his lips claimed her, she cried out. She wanted to growl, to beg, to demand. Instead, she whimpered as his lips kissed so gently, his thumb sweeping over her clit with soft strokes. Every touch and movement betrayed her vulnerability, as her throat uttered one sigh, one moan of shivering desire and then another. Trey stabbed his tongue inside her and his thumb flicked her clit.

She panted, she gasped, and the flames roared upward so quickly, they slammed Olivia like a freight train. Orgasm claimed her, taking her into possession. Pleasure rushed from the heat between her thighs and throbbed in bursts of mind-twisting ecstasy. She didn't think she would come together again, her heartbeat banging, her breath catching as the pleasure went on and on.

In those few moments ecstasy broke her apart, untainted paradise washing over her.

Trey left for the bathroom as she lay on the bed in contentment. Yet she yearned for more, and when he returned a few moments later, sheathed in protection, she welcomed the hot, slick glide of his cock between her thighs. He thrust deep and hard, and she arched into the possession. *Oh, God.* This was what she wanted and needed.

Her arms wrapped around him, and as he rolled them over and she came up to straddle him, she started to ride. Gone was the tenderness in the heat that burst upon her like a supernova. A primitive female, she took the male. She pumped, she plunged, she fucked him like she might never have another chance.

He clasped her butt and rasped an order. "Fuck me."

She didn't hesitate, riding the bull as Trey's hips bucked. It was harsh and raw, but before the storm could burst upon her, he turned her over with a quick flip. She lay on her back as he stayed buried deep within. In the dim light, she caught the primitive force in his eyes, and knew her time of reckoning had come. Something feral and totally male burned in his eyes, the kind any woman would fear, or long for with all she possessed.

He pulled away, and she moaned in disappointment.

"Turn over." His gruff request didn't surprise, but it did excite.

Gladly she turned over, on hands and knees and vulnerable to the core. He palmed her buttocks, smoothed his fingers over her wet core. "So pretty."

His reverent voice, filled with a gentleness that turned her heart over a hundred times, brought tears to her eyes. Before she could voice any sentiment, he slipped inside and plunged deep. *Thick, hard, oh, God.*

She pushed against the impalement, eager to start a rhythm, but he moved his hips in a stirring, churning gyration, a stroking that rubbed against a point deep inside her. A stroking, a pleasuring that teased rather than fulfilled. His arms wrapped around her as his strong thighs wedged between her legs, spreading her wider for the taking. A sudden plunge hit a spot deep inside, and she wondered with a wild sense of excitement if that lovely place could be her G-spot.

"Oh, Trey. Please do that again. That feels so good." He drew back and rammed forward. She groaned in startled pleasure. Her fingers clutched at the sheets. "Yes."

Another drive forward. "Yes!" His hips drew back and thrust. "Again."

Then he said something she'd never expected to hear from a man's lips. "You want me to fuck you harder?"

His low growling demand fired arousal so high, she trembled on the edge, unable to form an answer.

"You want this?" he asked, pumping now with short, thrusting digs into her center that rubbed repeatedly over her most sensitive areas.

She managed one plea. "Yes."

Trey's hips went into motion as he powered into Olivia, each long, deep, piercing lunge quickening until the motion became part of her. Over and over his body met hers, the motion stroking over her sweet spot so that she cried out again and again, and he must know how close to insanity she'd come. This was the loving she'd needed and wanted, that signaled his ferocious need to brand himself upon her. She pleaded, she begged, his guttural moans proving how close to the edge he was.

A second later she felt it. Down deep in her womb the pulsing built with long, slow pulls that drew Trey's cock deeper, that opened wide for his possession. She exploded, and a scream ripped from her. Trey pounded deep and held. Pleasure rocked her from the core as she trembled, and finally surged into a dazzling pinpoint of bliss so acute she whimpered and shook.

A growl ripped from Trey as he climaxed, squeezing her tight. She felt his cock jerking and throbbing inside her again and again, until he lay against her. The beauty of it rippled like a wave, robbing her of breath and senses until she floated on a dream so gentle it surely could not be real.

They sank together on the bed for a few seconds before he left her. When he returned to the bedroom a few moments later, he pulled her into his arms. Silence cloaked them. She propped up on her elbow and stared down at his face, marveling at the best lovemaking she'd ever experienced. Even in the low light, Trey MacGilvary was the most stunning man she'd beheld. They'd shagged like bunnies, and with his hair ruffled, his breath still coming a little fast, and his big body sprawled in glorious muscled surrender ... well, she couldn't hold back.

"That was bloody incredible," she said softly. Tears touched her eyes and threatened to escape. She couldn't keep the awe out of her voice even if she tried. "I've never ... I've never felt anything that wonderful in my entire life."

He opened his eyes, and where she expected to see a smile, she saw a frown. *Oh, bugger.* What was wrong now? She didn't have a good feeling about this.

"What's wrong, Trey?"

"Nothing is wrong." He threw his arms over his head, his biceps bulging with tempting muscle.

“I don’t believe you.”

He shifted into sitting position against the headboard. His eyes softened, his gaze taking on a cross between exasperation and desperation. “It was ... amazing for me, too, mouse. I just...”

“Just?”

“This is maybe getting too ... intense.”

Her stomach felt like she’d just taken a plunge straight from the thirty-second floor in an elevator. Her mind and body reacted as if she’d just seen a disturbing scene in a horror movie that she couldn’t quite believe. “Too intense?”

He cupped her face, brought her forward for a gentle kiss. “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way.”

English frostiness came out of nowhere, and she couldn’t put the brakes on it. “Too late, Trey. I already have. I realize sometimes the language barrier gets in the way between American speak and my brand of English, but would you please explain what you mean by *too* intense?”

He sighed and closed his eyes. He tilted his head back against the headboard. “I’m not sure who you are. I met this vulnerable, quiet librarian not that long ago, and now you’ve turned into a hot, sexy siren. It’s messing with my head—”

“Rubbish!” She slid off the coverlet and stood up as she saw red. “That’s a stonking big pile of rubbish.”

Surprise flickered over his face, as if she’d bashed him over the head. “Olivia, that isn’t it at all. It’s just that everything is coming at me hard. You’re wonderful, but all this change has me worried.”

She sputtered, swallowed in an anger that blindsided her. “I can’t believe you are bringing this up now. It’s very bad form.” Olivia trembled, unable to control the words tumbling from her lips as she stalked toward the door, naked and feeling like the biggest fool that ever walked. “Oh, just ... sod off.”

She slammed the door and marched to the guest room. Once inside she slammed that door, too, and locked it. Then she sank down on the bed, burying her face in the pillows. Her gut twisted, her heart broke, and while she couldn’t believe she’d lost control like that, at the moment she didn’t care.

Oh, Olivia. You’ve made a smashing fine mess now.

She stifled her sobs and became the stiff upper lip librarian. The tears rolled in hot rivulets down her face, and she felt like she’d been hollowed out. Thoroughly brassed off, she let the tears continue, and she knew that nothing would make her feel better now or in the near future. Silent grief ripped her into pieces.

Then she made a command decision. Tomorrow morning, when she’d discovered her footing, she would tell Trey exactly what she thought of their relationship in terms the big cop would understand.

Chapter Eighteen

Monday morning started better than expected for Olivia. And worse. She'd woken up at four thirty, a good hour earlier than she intended, yet she felt energized. She should feel depressed or at the very least knackered. Instead she'd found new energy and purpose. Perhaps she should get steamed more often. She'd showered and dressed, imagining that Trey would wake for all the noise she must be making. She didn't hear a sound from his room.

As she sipped coffee at the breakfast bar, she hadn't expected today to feel right. It was twitchy. Uncomfortable remembering what had happened between them last night. They'd made love in the most amazing way she could imagine, with passion, with fire, with true affection. Yet Trey worried she wasn't whom she claimed. That the librarian couldn't be the siren, apparently.

Bollocks. Men.

Trey walked into the kitchen, showered, dressed in uniform and looking sexier than any one man should. She ogled him despite her determination that she wouldn't.

Words popped out without remorse. "You are so hot."

Trey, who had just poured a cup of coffee, stopped dead and looked at her. Her compliment had the desired effect.

He grinned like a schoolboy. "Thank you, but where did that come from? After last night, I thought you hated my guts."

"Watching you stride through here in that uniform. You're ... I don't know. You have this amazing presence. It screams tough but compassionate. Rough and tumble but vulnerable."

"Vulnerable? God, I hope not."

"Okay. Vulnerable to little kids and puppies."

"And women. I have this thing for women." He winked. "I like them a lot."

An ache started in her midsection. She didn't wish to interpret him wrong. "You've dated a ton of women, haven't you?"

He took a healthy swallow of black coffee. "Depends on your definition of a ton, but yeah. Probably."

Embarrassment washed over her as well as confusion. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business."

"No problem." His smile disappeared as he took a sip of coffee and then leaned on the counter. "Look, I was ... I was an asshole last night."

"Yes, you were."

His mouth flopped open. Clearly he didn't expect that. "I'm trying to straighten things out in my head."

She had to make a statement, but forcing it past her lips didn't come easy. "Take all the time you need."

That, apparently, wasn't what he expected either. He came around the counter, his gaze intense and serious. He stood in front of her, so close she could smell leather, musk and all man. "I thought about our arrangement here and how to make it work. Last night we disagreed on something fundamental. I still need more time to think about changes."

I've never lived with a woman before and the sex was the hottest ... hell, the hottest I've ever had. I just need to think a few things over before things get even more complicated."

Still his voice held that hint of doubt, that uncertainty that saddened her on a whole level she didn't want to contemplate.

She slid off the breakfast barstool. Standing this close to him sent little explosions of need straight to her midsection, but she wrestled them into submission. "That's splendid, but our relationship from now on is purely professional. You're a cop. I'm a civilian needing your protection." She put her hands up in surrender. "I'm leaving in six months anyway. There isn't a future in letting this go farther."

She started to walk away, her throat tight and her eyes swimming with tears.

He clasped her forearm. "Wait."

When she turned to look at him, he towered over her, his nearness driving her mad. "We'll do this any way you want."

"Brilliant. Now if you'll please—"

"This thing with you working at night worries me," he said.

"Part of me screams to be independent." She decided to let it hang out, to say what she felt at the moment. "The other part of me is scared. But I'm tough. I can handle working at night as I did before."

"I'm not going to let anyone hurt you. I swear it."

"No one can make that promise, Trey. You can't protect me from every eventuality."

He swallowed hard, his eyes flashing and determination written on his face. "I can damn well try." Before she could make another reply, he said, "I'm on the desk job for a week. Rather than you driving home late at night, I could pick you up at closing time."

She chewed her lip, pondering.

"Believe me," he said, "this isn't about losing independence. It's keeping you safe while we figure out who wants to hurt us."

His gruff, deep voice, full of a huskiness that purred along her senses, made her tingle from head to toe. Trey smoothed his fingers over her jaw line and tipped her chin upward. "If you need me, you have my cell phone number." His gaze intensified, caressing her mouth. "Call me."

"I will." She meant it, too. It gave her a sense of security hearing these words from his mouth.

Her cell phone rang, and she grabbed her purse on the couch. It was Dean.

"I did it," Dean said. "I talked again to Cyn, and she finally agreed to let me work the evening shift."

"Wow, that's wonderful." She smiled at Trey. "Dean can switch places with me."

Trey returned her smile. "Excellent."

"Thanks so much, Dean. You're a peach."

He laughed. "That's what they tell me. So you're due in at nine a.m."

"How did you get her to change her mind?"

"I used my famous charm, what else?"

"You devil you."

"It'll cost ya lunch one day."

"Trey already packed my Barbie lunch pail today," she said with sarcasm dripping.

Dean snorted a laugh. "Oh, baby. Does he have a brother?"

She followed with a bark of her own laughter. "Um, yeah. But Mick is engaged and

Craig is as straight as an arrow.”

“Damn. All the good men are taken.”

“Nah, you just have to know where to look.”

“We’ll have that lunch someday soon and you can tell me where to find them.”

She almost said, *mine dropped in my lap*. Instead she said to Dean, “I’ll be at the library earlier than nine, though. Trey’s dropping me off and picking me up.”

“Oh, that’s excellent. I know I’ll feel better if you’re not here at night and Trey’s looking after you.”

Pleased that Dean had made it easier for them, they headed to the library. Once they reached the large Victorian building, Trey pulled into a parking space and left the engine idling. Outside the weather had turned colder, a winter wonderland of picture postcard perfection.

His gaze pinpointed her. “Be careful, okay? I’m not trying to scare you, but don’t go outside for any reason unless you absolutely have to.”

“No problem.” She took in the icy crystals forming on the sidewalk and looked down at her snow boots. “It’s only thirty degrees out today. Cold enough to keep me inside.” She hefted her Velcro top microfiber lunch bag. It wasn’t a Barbie lunch pail, but it would do. “Lunch is made, so I’ll be cozy.”

He nodded, but worry still lingered in his eyes. “Good. Remember what I said, call me if you feel any threat. If you have any doubts.”

Warmed by his protectiveness despite their *new* hands-off relationship, she reached for his forearm and squeezed. “I’ll be surrounded by people I know all day.”

A reluctant looking grin passed over his lips. “Yeah, I know. I’m not saying that you can’t take care of yourself and that you aren’t one of the smartest people I know. You have a lot of common sense. It’s just...” He reached out and brushed the back of his index finger along her jaw line in a teasing, soft touch.

Rather than say anything more, he leaned forward and pressed a quick, smacking kiss to her lips. He winked. “Get outta here. You’ll be late.”

Trey didn’t leave the parking lot until she entered the library and waved to him.

* * * *

Trey’s cell phone rang at three o’clock in the afternoon, and he grabbed it off his belt. Every muscle tensed. The clacking of computer keys, phones ringing, the smell of coffee, the jangle of other phones faded to the background.

Then he saw Arlene’s name on the phone and relaxed. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hello sweetie.” Her voice flowed like a gentle river over him. “How are you?”

Fucked. Screwed. “Good. And you?”

“Busy as usual. Things are a bit crazy around here. By the way, I have some good news. Well, I’ve got two things you should know.”

Good news sounded great about now. “Shoot.”

“First, I’ve applied for a new job.”

“New job?” This threw Trey, because his mother had worked for the city in the administration area for years. “A different position with the city?”

“Edie told me about an administrative job at the hospital. It pays far better and has better benefits than where I’m at now. I wouldn’t have known about it if it wasn’t for her.”

“Wow.” What could he say? “That’s great. I guess.”

“You guess?”

How did he say this? “Well ... Mom ... Edie was always great at changing jobs.”

“And?” An edge entered her voice.

Ah, *crap*. He shrugged, even though she obviously couldn’t see him. “She sometimes makes snap decisions that end up a disaster.”

“And you think that’s what I’m doing?” Mom’s voice held iron-willed certainty.

“That any woman who dares change her mind after working twenty years in one place is being flighty?”

Trey floundered like a man taking cautious steps over thin ice. “Well, no.”

“You’d better not, mister.” Her voice gentled. “Justice and I taught you better than that.”

A lump grew in his throat and for a second he felt like a teenaged boy again. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Trey, sweetheart, just because Edie’s life has been haphazard doesn’t mean my life is heading that way because I’m taking a suggestion from her.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Good.”

Trey looked around the busy office, the buzz of conversation from other cops, the ringing phones. “What’s the second thing you want to tell me?”

“Edie is moving in with me for a while.”

Trey froze. “What?”

“Edie expects to get news on her job at the hospital soon. Living in the inn, though, is expensive. We’ve talked and realized it would be an excellent set up for us both.”

“I didn’t know you guys were that close of friends already.”

“We’ve discovered we have a lot in common besides one of the best sons in the world.”

His mind went into chaos. What the hell? When did his two mothers—God that sounded weird—have that much in common? *They couldn’t*. Deep inside a panic started. One that resembled how he’d felt after making hotter than sin love with Olivia.

His mother was still talking. “She’ll pay me rent for a while and get on her feet. Once she does that, she’ll rent an apartment.”

Trey didn’t know how to react. “You never mentioned changing jobs.”

“I know. I decided I needed to try something without my family jumping in and giving advice.”

Baffled, Trey tried to take it in. “You think we give too much advice?”

“Sometimes, yes. All three of you boys are very opinionated sometimes.”

That stung a little. He’d always thought of himself as open-minded.

He didn’t know what to say at first, his mind wrapping around the idea. “Do Craig and Mick know about this?”

“My job, or my plans with Edie?”

“Both.”

“I haven’t been able to reach them yet.”

“I see.” He didn’t, but couldn’t find the right words yet.

“You sound confused or disappointed.”

Leave it up to mom. She never pulled punches on the important things. “Yeah, I

think I'm both."

"Look, I know you're at work. We'll talk about this later."

"All right."

After they signed off, he closed his eyes and sighed. *Fuck this, MacGilvary. You're just hosing things up right and left. You're mucking it up with all the women in your life.* Olivia would tell him to get it *sorted out*.

He wished he could crawl away somewhere and take the time to think. Time alone last night after making earth-shattering love with Olivia hadn't *sorted out* anything. When she'd basically told him where to get off last night and this morning, he'd realized he needed to either break off their relationship entirely, or try and understand her better. Part of him wanted to *stay* blinkered, another word Olivia would use—shit, even her vocabulary had started to invade him—the other wanted to open a new chapter in his life with Olivia in it.

His relationship with Olivia, even if he broke it off, would have to stay on a slow simmer while they discovered the culprit who seemed to be stalking him and Olivia. In the meantime, he would do everything in his power to see to her safety, regardless of what happened to their relationship.

Before he could manage another coherent thought on the process, his desk phone rang and he returned to work.

* * * *

Olivia wondered how much longer she could stand this artificial relationship that had sprung up between her and Trey. They'd settled into a routine. They passed another full day with sleeping in separate bedrooms, with life proceeding as if they'd never made love. Never kissed. Never had the shimmering heat between them. Yes, they were friends *without* benefits.

Their strange situation had one good effect. Cyn's blustering at the library during the day didn't bother Olivia nearly as much as it would have before ... well ... before she'd given Trey the what for. A new bravery had emerged inside her, one that included not worrying about the man who'd made yet another call to the Sheriff's Department threatening their lives.

After Trey picked her up at the library Wednesday and they returned to the condo and settled down at the table with spaghetti, Olivia decided to ask Trey more about Compton.

"Do you think this Hamilton Compton is the one threatening us?"

Trey twirled spaghetti around his fork. "Possibly. Though I'm not sure why he's waited this long to come after me."

She sipped her Chianti. The wine tasted almost bitter on her tongue. How did she say these words? "You killed his brother?"

"Yeah."

Trey chewed slowly, and when he glanced up, she witnessed the deep pain in his eyes. It wasn't what she expected. Trey's eyes had reflected many things to her since she'd met him. Deep concern, outrageous amusement, teasing, arousal and desire, and undeniable anger. When he'd told her about his father's death and his real mother's actions toward him, she'd seen the consternation in his expression. This ... this was something wholly different. Raw. Wounded. She almost winced.

“Do you mind if I ask what happened?” she asked.

Trey’s fork clanked on the milky white, utilitarian plate. “Compton took his wife and ten-month-old baby hostage one day at his home. It was outside of Gold Rush. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was bitter cold and snowing. That blizzard dumped several inches and snow drifts four feet high back in January.”

“I wasn’t in the United States yet, but I recall Dean telling me about it. Everything was closed for two days. Nothing could move.”

“Well, the bastard took her hostage. He told her to call 911. She did, and we came running of course. Which wasn’t easy because of the snow. We almost crashed the mobile command unit twice the streets were so bad. Anyway, we got there and Compton’s brother insisted he could talk his brother out of doing anything stupid. He tried, but Hamilton started calling his brother a dumb bastard and things went to hell. We made Hamilton stop. He came unglued and was escorted from the area. He said his brother wouldn’t be like this if it wasn’t for the war. That he’d lost his mind fighting in Iraq. We already knew Roland Compton had issues from post traumatic stress disorder. He’d been medically discharged because of his problems. Our negotiator tried everything, but no matter what we did, we couldn’t get Roland to back down.” Trey picked up his fork but didn’t continue eating. He stared at his plate. She wondered if he relived every moment in his head.

“When Cohen had that gun to my head, I was surprised at how much time slowed down. At what I could recall afterward. I thought I’d forget everything. Sometimes, after a car accident, people realize they can’t recall what happened from moment to moment. It’s not like that with the incident in the library. Sometimes it plays in my head when I don’t want it to.” She closed her eyes. “I remember too much.” When she opened her eyes, Olivia saw the recognition there that proved he understood what she meant.

He nodded. “It’s like that for me, too.”

Silence covered the room until her curiosity pressed in upon her. “What happened next?”

“I was in position at a nearby complex. Because Roland Compton had automatic weapons and was firing at random, we’d evacuated the immediate area. My spotter and I were on the roof of a nearby complex ready to take the shot.” Trey stopped eating and shoved aside his plate. “I got the order to shoot.”

Her throat tightened. “Was he the first person you had to shoot?”

Trey shook his head. “Remember the story about Mary Banovic being taken hostage in that mechanic’s shop?”

“Yes.” She knew what he’d say, what he’d done.

“I had to take the shot in that case, too. I didn’t want to, and I wish things could have been different. In both cases these men held a precious life in their hands, and they were determined to take that innocent life with them.”

“Trey, you’re not a killer.”

One side of his mouth turned upward. “Yeah, I am, Olivia. I am.”

She took a long, slow breath. “You took an oath to serve and protect. That was the only way you could protect.”

“Exactly. I don’t harbor any guilt over what I did.”

“And Hamilton Compton blames you for his brother’s death rather than understanding you had no choice?”

“At the hearing Hamilton said I should be charged with murder. He threatened to sue the county and me in particular, to make sure my badge was taken away.”

She rubbed the side of her temple. “Oh, God.”

“It didn’t fly.”

“Still ... I can’t imagine doing what you do. How do you cope with that enormous responsibility?”

“I’ve got a lot of help. The guys on SWAT are one big happy family. Mick and Craig and Dace are awesome. They understand, and I can talk to them. After this last shooting, I saw a counselor.” He leaned forward, his eyes dark and haunted. “I’m cool with it. And I don’t mean that in a callous way. Taking another man’s life is a horrible thing. But it was him or those innocent people. I would have felt far worse if I hadn’t done my duty and innocent lives were lost.”

“You don’t have to convince me, Trey.”

“Are you sure? There was one woman I dated a few months back...” He shrugged. “The minute she heard I was a sniper, she was horrified.”

Incredulous, she blinked. “Why?”

His mouth curved in a sardonic smile. “She said she didn’t date killers.”

“Trey, if she let the fact you’re a sniper keep her from knowing the great man you are—well, she was an idiot. You are a lifesaver, Trey. I know that from experience.”

The slow, genuine smile that touched his mouth made her stomach dip. She couldn’t control the heady sensation any more than she could control the wild feelings being near him caused.

Olivia stared into her wine glass, aware of the steady ache inside her for this wonderful man. “Does it ever hurt? I mean, the things you’ve seen ... the violence and the lack of understanding?”

Conviction replaced doubt in his eyes. “No. That’s probably the one reason why I can survive this job. Gold Rush isn’t the big city, and even though El Torro County is big, it’s very rural. Life here isn’t as violent as it would be in Denver or Colorado Springs. Plus, I’ve got a damn good support system, like I said. My brothers and Mom, they’re my lifeline. I’m enforcing law and keeping people as safe as I can. That gives me enormous satisfaction.”

Serenity glowed in those eyes for minute, and she admired his strength as she’d admired nothing in a long time. Trey’s strength and integrity satisfied and impressed her.

It didn’t matter if she’d decided to keep their relationship as friends only. Too late to backtrack. Her feelings for him confused her, twisting inside like a sailor’s knot that held fast. She didn’t know how to categorize them, or maybe she was too damned scared to try. Certainly, she’d fallen for him hard. And just as hard, she’d tumbled arse over elbows out of the fairy tale tower onto the bricks below where reality lived. Trey hadn’t sorted his priorities that way she wanted—too bad. She’d get over it.

In a few years.

Dinner continued on a lighter note, yet she couldn’t regret learning this new facet of Trey. A man had never revealed himself to her like this before, her relationships too shallow. *Hah. Wasn’t that ironic?* She fallen back onto somewhat superficial footing with Trey.

As they washed pots and pans and placed dishes in the dishwasher, the silence didn’t feel uncomfortable to her. Maybe they’d both settled at a place where they could forget

every embarrassing facet of what came before.

“You’re a fascinating woman,” Trey said out of the blue.

“Me?” Her voice squeaked a bit.

His gentle smile reassured. “You. I’ve never told a woman the things I’ve told you.”

“I was just thinking that same thing—a man’s never opened himself to me that way before.” She blushed, unsure why this confession caused violent self-consciousness.

“Does it scare you?” he asked.

“No, I told you I’m not afraid of you or the fact you’re a sniper. You would never hurt me.”

“Damn right. But what I meant was ... does it scare you to reveal so much of yourself to me?”

“It’s terrifying. You?”

He stripped off his rubber gloves. “I’m scared to death.”

She smoothed the drying towel over the dish rack. “Tell me why.”

“Because you’re everything and nothing I’ve come expect in a woman. I can’t get away with superficial talk, flirting lightly or keeping it simple. It’s damned impossible.”

“Why do you suppose that is?”

“Because you’re different. The other night, when you came on like a sex goddess and I couldn’t control myself, it was confusing.”

“This is old ground, Trey. You told me that Sunday night. This is Wednesday.”

He frowned, and conflict filled his eyes. How could she read the mixed emotions running across his features as anything but confusion and uncertainty? With her emotions careening from one point to the other, she couldn’t blame him for not knowing which end was up.

“What are we doing, Trey? We said we’d keep our relationship strictly friends, but we haven’t.”

He nodded, yet the amorous light didn’t leave his eyes. “I know. We pushed this over the edge.” He leaned closer, his breath warm and stimulating on her lips. “I’m tired, aren’t you? I’m going to call it a night.”

She smoothed her hand over his chest. “Bushed.”

“Let’s take this slow. Easy.”

Though she couldn’t say for certain, she felt him pulling back, pulling away to a safer distance. Not only physically, but mentally.

“I’m going to hit the sack,” he said.

After he retreated to his bedroom, a portion of her heart sank into her boots.

Chapter Nineteen

He watched MacGilvary's mother stride into the city administration building with MacGilvary's biological mother. Yeah, he knew all the players and this fact boosted him. Immense satisfaction flooded him, and he smiled. He'd never imagined, in his entire life, the pleasure to be had from seeing his own power in action. Having inside information on MacGilvary worked damn well. With what he had on Parker at the Sheriff's Department, the old bastard would cough up more vital information on Trey MacGilvary and family before the final event. The Final Event. His smile grew wider as he sat in the car, patience his middle name. Ah, yes. The Final Event would prove spectacular.

He licked his lips and then brought the small binoculars to his eyes. He hoped Arlene MacGilvary and Edie Phillips would hurry up. Skulking gave him satisfaction, yes, but the end result of hard work would bring release. As people came and went, he stayed on alert. Last thing he needed would be some ass wipe catching him on the prowl. Like a cougar he felt strong, supple and ready for the fight. He hadn't experienced this much certainty and power for a long time. Revenge and the need for it twisted tighter in his gut, and images of the damage he wanted to create for MacGilvary and his family flooded his head. He imagined taking MacGilvary's women hostage and frightening them so bad they'd pee in their panties. He even considered raping them, but that disgusted him. No. Didn't matter who or what the woman was, no matter how much he hated MacGilvary, he couldn't rape.

Killing would prove easier. He could do it painlessly. Or he could shred and tear bit by bit and make it more painful than any man or woman had endurance inside them. He'd learned that from his buddies back in the desert. He'd learned things a normal man shouldn't know about how to kill and maim. He itched to try it on an urban environment with people who feared. In the desert he'd killed without remorse and with the knowledge he offed the bad guys. People who didn't deserve to walk the earth.

With MacGilvary he could stalk his woman and his family and know that no matter how much they tried to protect themselves he'd always be one step ahead. MacGilvary's family might deserve to live, but they were collateral damage on the way to MacGilvary. Yes, yes. Much more delicious, and in the end, triumphant. An hour passed and finally the two women exited the building. He didn't use his binoculars because he didn't want them to see, for anyone to see and wonder what the hell he was doing watching people with binoculars. Secondary to that, he liked the stalking, the anticipation of an animal creeping in for the kill. The women climbed in one car, a puky lime green sedan that belonged to Edie. They drove away moments later, and he followed. He started to hum, a nondescript tune that elevated his spirits. He didn't know why. He smiled as he followed the unsuspecting women. On to the next and very final event.

* * * *

Perhaps returning to England would solve all my problems.

The ludicrous idea flitted into Olivia's head Wednesday afternoon the minute Cyn had called the front desk and asked for Olivia to come to her office. Office didn't

honestly describe the largest cubical in the back room—the branch library didn't have extra room for grandstanding supervisory librarians with fat heads. Yet Cyn guarded it like Queen Elizabeth the First. *Bloody difficult act to follow, really.*

Active imagination in force, Olivia envisioned Cynthia Horvath wearing a jewel encrusted tiara. As she came into Cynthia's office, the woman closed her laptop with a click and glared at Olivia as if she might be something nasty at the bottom of the woman's boot.

Olivia tried a smile, even though she knew it would look as plastic as a clown mask. "Hello, Cynthia. What can I do for you?" *Jump in the lake? Get sacked?*

"This is Wednesday," Cyn said.

A cryptic statement if there ever was one. "Yes." Olivia waited, keeping sarcasm out of her tone, but then slipping. "And tomorrow is Thursday."

Cyn's eyes hardened, turning as gray as the snow clouds that threatened outside all morning and promised to bring a new storm. Cyn's lips tightened into a thin line of disapproval. "Do try to remain civil. Close the door please."

Olivia barely stifled a snort of laughter as Cynthia tried to sound upper crust or vaguely British. "Of course." Olivia closed the door to the cubicle area. "I am all ears."

"Honestly, I don't think this is going to work." Cyn's eyes stayed cold as ice.

Olivia straightened her spine, ready for more cryptic doom. It always took this woman a while to arrive at the point. "What isn't going to work?"

"I've talked with the main branch library and they are taking my advice."

"About?"

"Your performance here as a librarian."

Here it comes. Ever since the incident with Cohen, this woman had strained herself to look for an excuse to ream Olivia. *Now it sounds as if she's ready to give me the sack.*

Olivia's jaw clenched. What did this woman want? Tired of the innuendo, Olivia nevertheless refrained from making a huge inflammatory statement. Instead, she settled in the chair in front of her supervisor's desk and stared at Cyn. Cyn's nose twitched and her mouth turned tighter and thinner. *If this woman didn't like you, you could do nothing to please her short of die. Even then, she wouldn't care for how or when you died and would somehow see it as an inconvenience to her.*

Cyn opened her mouth, but the phone rang. Sighing, she reached for the phone.

"What?" Cyn said after her initial hello. "What?" The second what emerged more stringent and filled with patent disbelief. "Well, it must be a prank. No. No evacuation. Don't call the police."

Cyn hung up the phone and pinned on a cynical smile, no pun intended.

Increasing concern raced through Olivia. "Evacuation? What's happening?"

Cyn's mouth pursed slightly before she clasped her large hands on the desk in front of her. "Rena said there was a threatening phone call."

Olivia wanted to rage at Cyn's coolness and lack of concern. "What type of threat?"

"A bomb threat."

Olivia stood. "Oh, my God. Did she call the police?"

"As you heard, I asked her not to."

"We must call the police and evacuate. What if it isn't a prank?"

Cyn shrugged, as cool as the proverbial cucumber. "They aren't serious. It's your stalker that's pulling this practical joke. Please sit down."

Even though instinct urged otherwise, Olivia complied.

Cynthia cleared her throat. “Now, back to what I started to say. I want to switch you back to evenings. I talked with Maxine at the main branch, and she agrees we never should have switched you to days.”

Olivia liked Maxine Tidwell, the head librarian, but the older woman sometimes let people lead her around by the nose, especially someone like Cynthia who used cunning and pure bombastic tactics to obtain what she wanted. What sort of rubbish had Cynthia told Maxine?

Olivia wanted to scream, reach over the desk and bitch slap this woman. “You agreed to my shift change after Dean said he’d do the evening hours.”

The older woman sighed, her expression exasperated and condescending. “Dean is a very good worker. But we need him here during the day. When I told Maxine more about your ... situation ... she agreed we shouldn’t have changed your schedule.”

If Olivia could have throttled the woman she would have. Olivia made a command decision, whether it meant she lost her job or not. “We can talk about this later. We have to evacuate and call the police.”

Olivia stalked out of Cynthia’s cubicle and into the main area. Her breathing came faster, her nerves jumping to the edge at the same time determination led her to the front desk. Rena stood at the front desk looking decidedly nervous as she caught sight of Olivia heading her way. The library remained quiet, with one elderly woman sitting at a desk reading a huge book.

Then the front door opened and in walked ten grade-school aged children and an adult.

She stalked toward Rena at the front desk, and kept her voice low when she reached her. “You got a bomb threat? Did you call the police?”

Rena, sweet-faced, red-headed, and sometimes as bright as a lowered dimmer switch, shook her head. “Cyn said not to.”

“I know, but—” Olivia changed gears. “Did you use the bomb threat form?”

“The what?”

Olivia touched her temple and sighed in exasperation. “Oh, bugger.” She reached into one file drawer and pulled out the single sheet of paper. “This. Didn’t anyone tell you about this form? When a person makes a bomb threat, you ask them these questions.”

Rena’s lower protruding lower lip resembled a five year old being reprimanded by a cruel taskmaster. *I wish Dean were here. He would have called the police.*

The phone rang and Rena grabbed it. She frowned and then put the call on hold as she said to Olivia, “It’s for you.”

Olivia grabbed the phone and punched the button. “Olivia Scott speaking.”

“Hello, darling.”

The low, modulated voice mocked seduction. It failed miserably and went right into creepy stalker. All the hair prickled on her arms. “Who is this?”

“The mad bomber.” The voice almost whispered the words.

She placed hand over the receiver, and whispered to Rena. “It’s the bomber again. Call 911 on the other line. Now.”

Rena frowned and headed back toward Cynthia’s cubicle in the back. Olivia returned to the call. She reached for the bomb threat form. Words blurred before her eyes, but she took a deep breath and refocused.

"What can I help you with?" she asked.

"There's a bomb, but the idiot I talked to before isn't taking me seriously. That's a really bad, bad idea."

She scribbled the man's words down. "When will the bomb explode?"

He chuckled, the sound rich and soft, as seductive as a man attempting to lure a lover. "Soon."

"Where is it located?"

"You think I'd tell you that?"

Frustrated, she followed the questions on the form, hoping he might slip up. "What does it look like?"

"Small, but big enough to do the job."

"Why did you place the bomb?"

"To hurt the ones Trey MacGilvary loves."

Her breath caught, her heartbeat now pounding in her ears so loudly she wondered if she'd heard him correctly. "What?"

"To hurt the ones Trey MacGilvary loves."

Stunned, she felt the horror creep into her bloodstream like an intravenous solution of ice water. She glanced around the room and saw the schoolchildren gathering at the front counter and the old woman watching the proceedings. Olivia did the only thing she could.

She put the caller on hold without saying a word and looked at the teacher, whose face held curiosity. *I wonder if she heard me.*

Olivia kept a straight face and didn't smile. "Ma'am, you have to leave the building. There's been a bomb threat." She glanced at the old woman. "You, too ma'am. Leave now."

"Oh my, God." The teacher's face went from pleasant and expectant, to death white horrified. "Is it terrorists?"

"I don't know, ma'am. Please, if you could exit and get far away from the building."

The woman pivoted, ushering the chattering kids from the building, anxiety sending her voice higher in pitch. The old lady had already left.

Olivia saw the phone line no longer blinked. "Blast it."

Then she saw something that made her blood run thick and sluggish, her mind wrapping around the danger as every sense rebelled. Right after the teacher and children exited at a rush, in walked Arlene and Edie, heading toward Olivia with large smiles.

"No," she whispered.

Without bothering to fill out the rest of the form, she ran around the counter and rushed toward Arlene and Edie. Their expressions changed from delight to serious concern as she stopped in front of them.

Olivia grasped their arms and started pulling them both toward the exit. "You've got leave. There's a bomb threat."

"What?" Edie squeaked the question.

Olivia kept moving, anxiety nipping at her heels as she urged them back toward the door. "No time to explain. There's a bomb threat. I think it's from the man whose been stalking us. Call 911 and Trey and let them know what's happening."

Arlene kept her grip on Olivia's hand. "Come with us."

"No, I have to clear the rest of the library. There are still people in here."

“But—” Edie started.

“No time.” Olivia pushed them through the exit. “Go!”

Olivia scrambled to check the stacks, going from row to book row making certain no one remained in the small building. The place was empty except for her, Rena, and Cyn. Fine perspiration dotted her body, her heart pounded too quickly, her nerves on fire with a prickling sense of danger. Everything urged her retreat, to run as far away as she could. Where was Hannah? Olivia dashed for the cubicles and offices in the back.

A huge gasp seemed to suck the air out of the room, and fear had time to overwhelm her like a miasma ... a shocking, trembling cold sweat. Everything around Olivia slowed like some ridiculous cartoon movie scene even though she ran.

A rush of air exploded, and in a cacophony of crashing, eardrum-bursting sound, the earth shattered, buckled and everything went dark.

* * * *

Trey settled into routine after having lunch with two other deputies in the office. He returned to a desk and waited for Olivia to answer her cell phone. She’d promised to keep the phone on her person at all times. They might be keeping their distance in some ways, but he continued to monitor her safety.

When he got her voice mail, he left a message for her to call him, then hung up. Seconds later Trey’s cell phone rang at the same time his desk phone went off. He grabbed the desk phone, placing duty before a personal call.

“Trey,” Marc LaBlanc from dispatch said, “There’s been a bombing at the branch library.”

For a moment Trey didn’t think he heard Marc correctly. Trey didn’t register a damn thing but a dead, awful silence. “What did you say?”

Marc’s voice continued, and Trey realized he wasn’t focusing on Marc’s words anymore. Trey forced his brain into compliance. “A bombing.” Marc’s voice stayed calm but firm. “Where Olivia Scott works. I thought you’d want to know.”

Trey thought his breath would seize, and he’d never suck in another inch of air. “Jesus.” He cleared his throat, and when his voice came it sounded stressed and raspy. “Injuries? Damage?”

“Don’t know yet. About fifteen calls have come in on the explosion.”

“Thanks, Marc.”

Trey hung up, his brain running in circles as ramifications slammed into him like a freight train. He started to shake, perhaps from the deepest corner of his soul, in a place that never experienced crippling fear before. So much fear. *Olivia.*

If anything ... oh, God, please...

He sprang up from his desk and stalked toward the hallway, heading for Jefferson Harris’s office to tell him he was going to the library. Now.

Call her. She’s all right. She must be all right.

His cell phone rang as soon as he reached for it, and he saw his mother’s cell phone number pop up. “Mom?”

“Trey, oh darling, Edie and I have been trying to reach you. Something horrible has happened.” Arlene’s voice cracked, filled with tears. “We were heading into the library—”

“Are you hurt?”

“No—have, have you heard about the bombing?”

“Just now. I’m headed that way.”

“Oh, Trey. We barely made it to the parking lot when this horrible explosion went off.”

“Olivia—”

“She shoed us out before the explosion. She’s—oh, Trey, she’s still in there.”

Crushing weight landed on his shoulders as he quickened his pace and stopped in front of his supervisor’s office. “I’m on my way, Mom. I’ll talk to you when I get there.”

He could have quizzed her more, pleaded for information, but he heard the tears in her voice and it echoed the tight noose around his neck. Painful. Constricting disbelief.

“Hurry, son. Hurry.”

He arrived at his supervisor’s office, and when he relayed what had happened, Captain Harris didn’t hesitate to let him go. Trey took off down the hallway at a jog and out the side door to the parking lot, his breath rasping as if he’d run a marathon. He thought he’d experienced every horrible emotion possible. Every sickening, obliterating pain. As he ran for his squad car, he knew he’d been wrong. So very wrong. Even the dull ache in his ankle barely registered.

As he drove he tried Olivia’s cell phone, hoping against hope she would answer. He let the phone ring, but her mailbox came up.

Heart clenching with dread, he said, “Olivia, call me back immediately. I heard about the bombing. I’m on my way. I’m coming, sweetheart.”

Chapter Twenty

Darkness.

A hollow ringing. Far away echoes of sound, a mishmash of noises that made no sense.

Olivia stirred, her body aching, numerous stings flooding her perception. She gasped, her heartbeat galloping in her chest as confusion attacked from all sides. *Where am I? What's happening?* She didn't move, and took in the eerie silence. What—?

Then it hit.

Explosion.

Olivia's eyes snapped open, a gasp tearing from her throat. She moved, arms and legs stirring in alarm. What greeted her eyes shouldn't have surprised her. After all, the bloody place had blown up. Her right leg was wedged under a fallen table. Her right arm pinned between a small bookcase and a large one. Lights flickered, sputtered, and died. Light still spilled from the windows in the high, stained glass windows. Images, flashes of memory intruded, inconsequential garbage that intruded for no reason. Tasteless cereal she'd eaten for breakfast that could have passed for cardboard. Something dripped on her forehead, and with her left hand she reached up to keep it from pouring down the side of her nose. Her hand came away smeared with red. What? Blood?

Headache.

A low, throbbing, slightly stinging headache in her left temple. Either she'd gone mental or the blood belonged to her. Her right leg started to ache, and so did her right elbow.

She heard whimpering, and like a sledgehammer the memories rushed back. Cyn and Rena could be trapped—hurt even—and here she lay around daydreaming about light streaming through stained glass windows. Then she realized one of the stained glass windows had shattered. Amazing that all of them hadn't disintegrated. Sirens and distant voices filtered through the almost eerie silence. She pulled and her wedged arm and leg came free from the mess. She shifted into a sitting position, her body throbbing from aches and pains in her joints. Bruised but not broken. Grateful, she shifted into action and stood slowly. Dizziness caused her to grab book shelving that leaned sideways into the wall.

Devastation didn't quite describe the area. Bookshelves on the east side of the room toppled here and there like dominos. Tables lay willy-nilly around the room. Papers, books, bits of wall and insulation from the ceiling spilled like cotton balls on the floor. The west side of the library beyond the main counter suffered damage, but far less than this half of the room.

"Cyn? Rena?" She raised her voice and headed for the arched doorway that led to the cubicles.

That's when she saw the arch had partially crumbled. The entire wall on the east side had fallen until a huge hole gaped like a mouth.

She heard another moan and hurried forward. Olivia climbed over a fallen file cabinet. Cyn struggled into a sitting position, her eyes wide, lower lip trembling. Her desk and all the items around her had been blown sideways, papers littering the floor,

ceiling tiles hanging down. Cyn let out a horrific scream.

Startled, Olivia jerked. She rushed forward even as her body protested with a full ache. “Cyn, it’s okay.” She sank down next to the woman. “Are you hurt?”

Cyn was breathing hard, as if she’d run a marathon. “No. No.”

“Where’s Rena?”

Cyn shook her head. “I don’t—she was here—” She looked around. Her hands went to her face and her eyes went wide. She pointed. “There. Oh, God.”

Olivia followed Cyn’s finger and saw Rena lying by the twisted metal water fountain. Water dripped from the broken piping. Eyes closed, Rena moaned loudly. Olivia got to her feet and went to the younger woman. “Rena? Rena can you hear me? Are you all right?” No signs of cuts or bruises marred the young woman’s body so far as Olivia could see. She checked the pulse in the girl’s neck. Steady and strong, the pulse reassured Olivia. “Rena?”

The sound of the doors opening and several people entering the building echoed. “Hello!”

Olivia stood and headed for the mangled archway, her legs unsteady. Weakness suddenly washed over her, but she staggered toward possible rescue. “In here!”

“Back here!” She heard a male voice, then several.

The sight of several firefighters in full turnout gear caused relief to swamp Olivia. She sighed. “Thank God. Over here! There are two hurt women back here!”

A sheriff’s officer appeared at the double front doors, his voice urgent, but she couldn’t hear what he said. He had wide shoulders, and a lack of cowboy hat showed his dark hair.

Trey.

Amidst the fear that still thumped through her body, staggering relief overwhelmed her like a monster wave, weakening her legs. She smiled. Trey caught sight of her, and the strain on his face changed to utter relief. He almost pushed his way passed the firefighters. She climbed over the filing cabinet, and without a word, they rushed toward each other.

“Olivia.”

Trey gathered her into his arms, his initial hug fierce as she buried her head against his shoulder, her arms tight around his waist. She shook like a leaf in the wind, trembling so hard she didn’t know if she could stop.

Trey’s voice was hoarse. “Are you hurt?” He pulled back enough to cup her face. Pure distress flashed through his eyes as his gaze scanned her anxiously. “Christ, you’re bleeding.”

“I think I hit my head. But I’m fine.”

His frown turned thunderous as he ran his hands over her in a search for damage. His eyes went soft, and for a moment, she saw unguarded anguish. “You’re not all right. Come on. Let’s get you checked out.”

“But Rena and Cyn need help.”

“The firefighters and paramedics will take care of them. This building may not be stable. Let’s get you outside.” Efficient cop mode came to the fore. He lifted her in his arms. Her arms looped around his neck automatically—he carried her as if she weighed nothing and as if his ankle had not been injured.

“I can walk.” Her voice didn’t sound convincing.

“Take it easy. You’ve been through an explosion.”

When he stepped out of the building into the light, she squinted. Winter wrapped around her with icy teeth, and her trembling turned to shaking. Two paramedics rushed toward them and before she knew it, Trey placed her on a stretcher and a blanket went over her. All around her the commotion went on, with two fire engines, firefighters, ambulances and cops swarming the area like bees.

“Where are Arlene and Edie?” Olivia asked as alarm rushed through her veins.

“They’ve been taken somewhere safe. Craig and Mick are with them,” Trey said.

Satisfied the two ladies were in good hands, she relaxed a little. Not long after, stretchers bearing Cyn and Rena were wheeled out and loaded into ambulances. Cynthia’s whiny voice echoed around the area, and anger surged inside Olivia.

Paramedics worked on Olivia quickly. Blood pressure, pulse, poking and examining while asking her questions. While they worked on her, the tumult around them increased.

A plain suited cop appeared nearby and started twenty-questioning Trey.

Trey’s voice went terse. “She’s hurt. You can ask questions later.”

“Come on MacGilvary, you know the drill. She might know something.”

“It’s all right,” she said. “I can answer questions.”

“We need to get her to the hospital,” one of them said to Trey. “Just to make sure she doesn’t have a concussion or internal injuries.”

Trey, leaden-faced, still looking angry enough to chew bark, nodded. “Let’s go.” He pressed her shoulder, then leaned over to kiss her forehead next to a bandage. “I’ll follow in the squad car.”

The paramedics loaded her into the ambulance.

* * * *

“Trey, talk to us.” Edie’s voice reminded Trey that he sat in the subdued hospital restaurant. His fingers tightened on the tall paper cup of coffee. His stomach growled, but he couldn’t eat a damn thing.

Arlene reached over and placed one of her nicely manicured, small hands over his much larger fingers. “She’s going to be fine. A small rap on the head. She’s remarkably unscathed.”

“Damned lucky.” Trey couldn’t tame the terror in his chest. He couldn’t forget what had almost happened.

Trey’s muscles tightened across his shoulders until he thought they’d snap. He clutched at his coffee cup with both hands. Steam rose from the fragrant java, but he doubted the cafeteria coffee would prove worthy. A wild idea floated through his mind. What he wouldn’t give for a quiet morning in bed with Olivia, sharing a cup of decent coffee. Yeah, a simple pleasure of infinite worth. Holding her, feeling her rounded, beautiful body hot and aroused against his ... yeah. He craved that safety for her.

Edie touched his wrist, and his fingers unclenched long enough to grasp her hand. When he looked up, her expression held sincere tenderness and concern. No one would know she’d come close to being caught in an explosion. Her eyes reflected steadiness and control. He wondered if he looked as fucked up as he felt. Both his parents looked amazingly unaffected. He felt the love, the compassion flowing from Edie, and when he glanced at Arlene, he saw the same.

Since Trey had shadowed Olivia’s ambulance, every nerve on alert for more danger,

he'd become even more aware of how close he'd come to losing people he loved.

Yeah, he loved his biological mom. He'd struggled with it, knew he had a ways to go to understand her. To make sense of their tangled relationship. Still, he'd seen how she'd changed. And he trusted Arlene's insight. If she believed Edie had changed, he would, too.

More than anything, almost losing Olivia had thrown him into a chaotic place. Shaky. Greedy to be with her. Wanting her in his arms and safe.

He shifted in his chair. "I need to go back to Olivia."

"Rest a bit." Arlene released his arm. "Give yourself some ease. You've had a big scare."

He almost confessed that he'd been scared out of his mind. Was still scared shitless. Words wouldn't form, clogging in his throat at the very thought of voicing them.

Edie raised her coffee cup to her lips. After she swallowed, she said. "Mick and Celeste are looking after her."

"And there's an army of law enforcement around. No harm will come to her," Arlene said.

Trey's jaw muscle twitched with tension, his nerves jumpy as hell. *Damn it, MacGilvary, get a grip on the situation. You're no use to Olivia like this.* His gaze darted toward the two entrances to the cafeteria, his mind vigilant as he scanned the people at the other tables. White coated medical personnel. Nurses. Doctors. Lab technicians. Family and friends waiting patiently or not so patiently for good or bad news. He shoved his coffee aside. The damn stuff tasted like sludge anyway.

"It's all right to be afraid." Edie apparently didn't feel the same way about her coffee. She took a big gulp. "If I show you a person who never feels fear, then I'll show you a person who has no soul."

Had she felt fear all those years away from him? Had she regretted her actions the way he regretted his? The ones that burned through him like lava this very minute?

"You could have lost Olivia. Could have lost so many people," Edie said. "But you didn't."

He nodded. "Yeah, I know."

Arlene's frown increased. "Something else is bothering you. What is it?"

Trey shoved aside his fear and launched into anger. "The fact that we can't locate Hamilton Compton tells me he's the one who set the bomb."

A bomb, if placed correctly and built better, would have collapsed the entire library and killed everyone inside without a doubt.

The idea kept running around in his mind, stuck in a groove like a horrible record he couldn't shut off.

Sheriff's deputies had already gone into Hamilton's home and on his property searching for evidence of bomb making materials but had located no proof. His wife had cooperated, saying the man had started to act weird after his brother died in the SWAT operation. She said more than once that her husband said Trey ought to pay for what he'd done. Still, words were circumstantial and this wasn't new information that Hamilton hated Trey's guts. The phone company checked Hamilton's home phone number and cell number to see if calls had been made to the library or to Trey's home but had come up empty. Law enforcement moved as quickly as it could, but Trey wanted it to move faster. If he wasn't afraid for Olivia's safety he'd be out there right now chasing down evidence.

Instead he sat in this puny cafeteria with the scent of old grease and hamburger in his nostrils and bitter coffee on his tongue.

Come on, spit it out, man. What are you waiting for? “There’s something else I needed to say.” He turned his gaze on Arlene. “About getting the job at city administration ... I think it’s a great idea if it’s what you want.”

A big smile blossomed over Arlene’s face and then Edie’s.

“Arlene said you weren’t too pleased with her new job or with me moving in with her,” Edie said.

Trey swept one hand through his hair. “I wasn’t. At first. But I’m getting over it. This whole thing with you coming back into my life, then Mom accepting you and becoming good friends with you ... it just piled on quick for me. Too many changes at once.”

“I’m sorry,” Edie said.

He shook his head. “No. I’m sorry. I was too quick to judge.”

“I understand.” Edie’s smile remained. “I’ve given you lots of reasons to be suspicious in the past. Your mom is a great lady and a real friend. I haven’t met a more generous person in a long time.” Wistfulness came into her eyes as she gazed into the distance. “Since I decided to stand up and fly right, things have gone well for me. I’m keeping it up.”

Happiness worked around his worry and lowered a margin of his apprehension. “That’s good. Really good.”

Feeling like an idiot, he continued with, “I’m sorry I didn’t give you my full support from the start. It’s your life, your plans, and you know best what to do.”

Arlene’s lopsided grin said he wouldn’t escape entirely. “Darn right, mister. I thought I earned your trust long ago.”

Shamefaced he looked at his coffee cup and winced. “Yeah, you did. I wasn’t thinking right.”

Arlene patted his arm again. “You have other things ... or rather say, someone on your mind.”

He could have denied her insinuation, but did he want to? He managed a half smile and the word spilled out. “Yeah.”

Yeah, his feelings for Olivia overwhelmed him, but he couldn’t afford to analyze them right now with chaos tangling his emotions. Making decisions during times like these could make a man crazy, and he knew that.

“I need to get back to Olivia.”

He sounded gruff, rough, and uncompromising. He didn’t have the patience he needed to make more small talk right now.

Before they could leave, Craig walked toward them from across the cafeteria. When he reached the table, he said, “Hey. Everyone okay?”

Craig’s rock-solid, uncompromising expression held genuine concern.

Edie and Arlene echoed that they were fine.

Craig didn’t sit down. “Are you ladies ready? I’m taking you to Mick and Celeste’s.”

Arlene frowned. “What?”

“Mick and I were just talking about it. I’m working late tonight. After this attack on the library, we thought it would be better if you moved in with Mick and Celeste. They have enough room and there is safety in numbers.”

“What about you?” Arlene asked.

Craig grinned. “It’s going to get a bit crowded at Mick’s house. I’m moving in with him, too.”

“Shit.” The word left Trey’s mouth before he could stop it. “We really will be the Waltons.”

Arlene and Edie laughed, but Craig’s half-hearted smile and Trey’s poker face remained. Trey didn’t feel like laughing.

“It’s a good idea,” Trey said. “You should all stay with Mick. He has an excellent security system, and like we said before, there is safety in numbers.”

Although Arlene and Edie continued to express doubts, Craig and Trey managed to convince them they should move ahead with the move to Mick’s place. Trey headed for Olivia’s room on the fifth floor as soon as Arlene and Edie left with Craig.

He hadn’t taken more than ten steps down the hallway to the elevator when he heard a noise that sent an ice pick through his heart.

Fire alarm.

Medical personal hustled as evacuation started.

Shit. He headed for the stairwell. He had to get to Olivia.

* * * *

Olivia had heard the cliché of looking down the barrel of a gun, but never imagined doing it twice within a month. This was too much. Cohen’s rampage and now a bomb—yes, it was too bloody much.

Celeste and Mick had already headed downstairs, ready to leave for home and end a bizarre day. She yawned, her eyes drooping with exhaustion. This day couldn’t finish soon enough for her, either.

Where was Trey?

She thought back to his attentiveness when they’d reached the hospital. When they’d wheeled her into the ER, the nurses had to threaten him to keep him from intruding on the examining room. After they’d finished with him, he’d come into the room, along with Mick, Celeste, Craig, Arlene and Edie. A menagerie she couldn’t be happier to see. Still, she’d love some alone time with Trey.

She’d learned that Rena was still unconscious, a blow to her head causing a skull fracture. Cyn didn’t have a scratch on her, but so far hadn’t come in to see how her subordinate had fared.

I have to find another job or go back to England.

Going back to England would prove bittersweet. How did one keep a position when their boss made it a life’s mission fire them? Good question.

Suddenly a blaring alarm went off, and she jolted in surprise. It took her a second to identify the loud, annoying wail.

Fire alarm.

She slipped out of bed, eager to jump into her clothes. No way would she leave the room in this hospital gown. She grabbed her clothes in the small closet and hurried into the pullover top, black pants, and suit jacket. Her coat was somewhere in the rubble of the library. *Too bad. Better to freeze outside than roast in here.* She jammed her feet in her shoes.

Suddenly she noticed a man standing at the threshold of her doorway. Alarm jolted

through her immediately. This guy wasn't one of the cops assigned to her doorway.

Where are they? Shouldn't they have told me to evacuate?

This man's short stature, balding blond head, plain features, and Sheriff's Department uniform should have reassured her, but it didn't. Instinct made her reach for the call button and push it. The man's gaze darted to her grip on the button, and he smiled. Reassuring. Mild.

Over the wail of the alarm, he said, "I'm Deputy Grisholm."

His voice sounded calm, well modulated.

She nodded, muscles on alert. Something wasn't right. Why hadn't medical personal checked in on her and where were the other sheriff's deputies?

Her gaze went to where his nametag should be. Nothing there. A serious leather holster with weapon hung on his waist, though. She couldn't ignore evidence like that. He could do serious harm. His eyes shone like cold pewter. A glitter of ice, an intent that spelled evil.

Play thick, Olivia. Thick as a plank.

She recognized him from a photograph Craig and Trey had shown her.

Hamilton Compton.

She'd run as soon as they left the room.

He gestured. "Come on, let's get out of here." He took her arm and shoved her in front of him. Then he said something that confirmed her worst fears. "And in case you decide to run, I have a gun."

Chapter Twenty-One

As the man gripped Olivia's arm and started down the hallway, they plunged into the extensive crowd evacuating the building.

"I could scream," Olivia said above the headache-producing wail of the fire alarm.

His fingers bit into her upper arm. "You could. But then I'd have to shoot someone. You wouldn't want that on your conscience, would you?"

Right. Lovely. Playing mental obviously wouldn't help.

"Where are the other deputy sheriff's?" she asked, trying to keep her panic to a dull roar.

"There's a commotion downstairs. Apparently a guy in the emergency room started creating a scene and hospital security was having trouble handling him." He shook his head. "Fuckin' rental cops aren't worth shit."

Olivia almost snorted in disgust. "I thought you were a rental cop."

She didn't see his expression, but the cruel bite of his left hand around her upper arm stung. "You are a sassy piece of wench, aren't you?"

Tosser. She wanted to kick him in the stones.

A moment later a nurse darted toward them around the front counter for the floor.

"Oh, good. We were just about ready to get you."

"I've got her. We're taking the stairs." Compton kept going.

Olivia considered screaming for help among the crowd of people filing downstairs in an orderly fashion. But what if Hamilton started shooting people in retaliation? She couldn't take that chance. Olivia's heartbeat slammed like a drum in her chest, and her pulse thrummed in her temples. Her breath came short, an ache that wouldn't relent as Hamilton drug her toward the far stairwell.

He opened the stairwell door and nudged her ahead of him and through the door.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked, well aware it sounded like a line from a bad movie. Did she wish to know the answer?

"You'll see."

His pedantic, emotionless manner surprised her. This man wanted to harm Trey and those he cared for, yet Hamilton Compton's attitude spelled blasé. Perhaps he held cold, dark places in his soul he'd hidden for decades. If she were fortunate, she wouldn't discover the basement in his personality.

Talk to him. Make him see you as human.

"Mr. Compton, you don't want to hurt me."

Stairs under their feet clanked, the metal echoing. "Yeah, I do."

"I haven't done anything to you."

"Doesn't matter. You're collateral damage."

"Why do you hate Trey so much? He was doing his job. He didn't want to kill your brother. Your brother didn't give the cops any choice."

Hamilton stopped on one step, his eyes blazing with sudden fury.

Blast. She'd said the wrong thing. "I'm sorry. That was insensitive of me. You don't see things that way. How do you think it should have gone?"

He closed his eyes for what seemed an eternity but must have been a mere blink.

"The whole fucking system is corrupt. I was a deputy sheriff. I see how they operate. I know the political games and the way some people are promoted ahead of others unfairly."

"Is that what happened to you? You didn't get promoted?"

"No, I got promoted. After I'd done some nasty things. Some really bad shit."

"All right. If the Sheriff's Department is corrupt, did that have something to do with them killing your brother?"

He blinked again, this time rapidly as if he had something in his eye. "Yeah. It did."

"Tell me how."

Keep him talking.

Humanity flickered through this eyes, cold metal softening an increment. Good.

"Your boyfriend got promoted over me, and I've been with the Sheriff's Department longer than him." He jabbed at his chest with his thumb. "I'm still a fucking sergeant, and he's about ready to be promoted to lieutenant."

While she hadn't paid much attention to the rank thing, she'd heard people refer to Trey as Sergeant MacGilvary, but his brother Craig was also a Sergeant, Mick was a Lieutenant, and their good friend Dace a Lieutenant on his way to Captain.

"I see." She didn't, but if she kept him talking, maybe she would. "Tell me more."

"The MacGilvary brothers are as corrupt as they come. They influenced the powers that be to keep me off the SWAT team."

"I'm sorry you weren't selected."

He snorted. "Right. You're about as sorry as hell. Come on, you're trying to distract me." Once more his fingers tightened, and she gasped at the pain. "This isn't a game, Miss Scott. You can't manipulate me. You can't talk me out of this. Resign yourself."

Icy, permanent, and determined, his words cut through her like a dagger.

A door near them opened, and a woman with tangled red hair and a frantic look in her eyes bumped into them. Only Hamilton's grip kept Olivia from taking a header down the stairs. The other woman gasped, tripped, and fell headlong down the next level of stairs, screaming as she went.

Olivia jerked on the man's grip as the redhead landed in a crumpled heap. "Let me go! I've got to help her."

"Nope." He jerked her through the next doorway.

"What?" She gasped the question, digging her feet in as she fought his punishing fingers. "There's a fire! What—"

"Bullshit. There isn't a fire. I pulled the fire alarm and threw a cigarette into a trashcan to start some smoke. Nothing major. We're going across this floor to the back staircase and down to the parking garage. We'll take my car."

She stumbled along, lost for an answer, for a way to escape from this predicament. Florescent tubes in the ceiling made her head ache, glaring along the cream walls like blinding sun. With a clarity as white as the lights, she knew her fate depended on what she did right this minute. She stopped, pulling against his hold until he lost his grip.

Shaking, scared out of her wits, she said, "You might as well kill me right here. I'm not going anywhere with you."

She hadn't expected his smile, so when it came the chilling effect cut into her like a bone saw. "I don't have to kill you right here or right now."

His fist came out and caught her across the side of the head, and her world dissolved

into sparkling stars and midnight black.

* * * *

Olivia's head pounded again. At least the fire alarm no longer shrieked.

Her body ached from end to end, and she heard things around her that didn't form into a coherent package. Sirens in the distance. Knocking like old pipes that didn't work well, a roaring noise. On the other hand, she felt so sick she didn't care. She lay on a somewhat soft surface. She groaned, and the sound echoed. Struggling to open her eyes, she wondered what could be happening.

"Don't move," a deep voice said, and then she recalled what and where and how with sickening clarity.

Hamilton Compton held her prisoner. Why hadn't he just killed her?

She obeyed him, but opened her eyes. Thankfully the room wasn't bright. A solid ache thumped behind her jaw. Anger pumped in her blood, but she remembered not to rile him. Compton stood over her, hands on hips and with a firm, once more unemotional façade.

She realized that she lay on an examining room table in a small room. Marginal light leaked around the blinds over one small window. The room smelled faintly antiseptic.

She squinted at her watch. Around thirty minutes had passed since he'd snatched her. "What's happening?"

"You made me lose my temper, and that's not a good thing." He leaned over, placed his hands on either side of her, and leaned down in her face. "Don't try and make things all better. Don't try to talk to me as if you understand. You're not even from this country. You couldn't possibly understand a damned thing."

She would have nodded, but her head throbbed too much. "What happens next?"

He went to the single window and peered between the blinds. He turned back quickly. "Your boyfriend and his SWAT team are probably searching for you right now."

God, I hope so.

"What do you plan to do?" she asked.

"We can't go out the back way. The parking lot is surrounded by cops. Firefighters are going floor to floor. It'll take some time. As soon as that calms down, we'll see what happens."

"If the place is swarming with police, how will we escape?"

He unsnapped his gun holster, retrieved his weapon and cocked it. "Who said anything about we?"

* * * *

Trey radioed Commander Jefferson Harris and kept him apprised. "One more floor to go."

Back and forth radio communication told Trey that none of the other officers searching the hospital had located Olivia. His heart clenched as sweat beaded his brow. Where was she?

As soon as he'd entered her room and found her gone, he'd hoped to find her outside. He'd been ordered out of the building while firefighters made sure all was safe. Trey had no proof, though, that she hadn't evacuated. He raced outside, but a sweep of

the parking lots proved she hadn't evacuated.

Fear had hit him full force.

Hamilton Compton might have her.

He didn't know how or when, but the suspicion wouldn't leave him.

Now that the hospital had emptied and firefighters swarmed the area to determine a possible cause for the alarm, Trey had a feeling they'd come up empty handed. His commander had allowed him and two other deputies to reenter the building to search for Olivia. Law enforcement outside would make sure no cars exited the scene. The entire time this slow operation went forward, Trey gritted his teeth, barely able to maintain. He wanted to be insubordinate, his insides roiling like a volcano ready to spew lava. If Compton had Olivia, God only knew what the asshole would do to her—had already done to her.

I'm coming, baby. Hang in there.

Trey continued down the next hallway, caution in every step, gun drawn.

Trey found nothing until he reached the second floor and saw an arm dangling over one of the landings on the way up. Alarm raced through him until he realized the blood red long nails didn't belong to Olivia. His heart started again, but he rushed up the remaining stairs to check the woman's status. A quick check of the woman showed a weak pulse. He radioed for paramedics, but didn't move her. He couldn't see any outward sign of injury but if the woman had fallen down steps, serious injuries could be well hidden. He was chomping at the bit to locate Olivia, but couldn't live with himself if he left the woman alone in this cold, dim stairwell. Fortunately, paramedics responded quickly. He hurried up the remainder of the steps and onto the second floor. Florescent lights flickered down the long hallway. A phone rang somewhere, an annoying sound that went on and on. Other than the phone, the insistent quiet lent an eerie air to the hospital. He brushed off the comparison to an overwrought horror film where a mad slasher lurked in every corner ready to slice and dice.

Yeah. What an image.

He didn't need shit like this cluttering his head, causing weird anxiety as he searched for Olivia. In fact, he'd never experienced random ridiculous thoughts like this on the job before. He knew where it was coming from—Mick had warned him that when your woman was in danger all good intentions at obeying command was in jeopardy. But he knew better than to screw up. Otherwise, it was too easy to make things worse. Sweat beaded on his forehead.

He checked each doorway, each room and found nothing.

Damn it, Olivia, where are you?

He didn't panic, though he was damn tempted. Every second lost meant Olivia could be hurt or worse. The thought pushed him to hurry.

Voices halted Trey.

What the hell?

Two voices belonging to a man and a woman echoed from somewhere behind a closed door in this very hallway.

* * * *

Compton's weapon looked big and damned threatening as he pointed it at her.

Please. Please. Help me. Oh, God.

Olivia didn't know if praying would help, but right now she knew the only person she could rely on was herself. She hoped Trey would find her, but this was a large building. There was no guarantee.

Her heart thumped loud in her ears, her body trembled with reaction. She didn't want to go out this way. Not in a million years.

"MacGilvary has to be sweating about now," Compton said, an icy smile creeping over his face.

"Well, you're wrong. We broke up before all this started. So you've kidnapped the wrong person to get revenge on Trey."

Compton glared. "What?"

She swallowed, her mouth desert dry. "Trey and I aren't together. If you kill me it'll mean nothing to him."

Triumph struck as she saw doubt flash through his eyes. "Yeah, right."

"I'm not lying." She added contempt to her voice. "He's a stupid sod, really. I don't have use for muscle bound, thick-headed cops."

"Like me?"

"I prefer intellectual men. Men who are interested in art and culture." She softened her voice. "Look, just leave me out of this and go extract whatever revenge you think is necessary on MacGilvary. I just want out of this country and back home where every bloke doesn't have a gun."

He snorted a laugh. "What are you? One of those stupid, tree-hugging bitches who thinks we ought to ban guns?"

Play it up. Stall for time.

"I don't give a damn what you Americans do with your guns. I just don't want them around me."

Confusion flickered through those cold eyes, but then he masked it. "Too late. You're knee deep in it." A new emotion, perhaps defiance, spread into his eyes. Derision replaced insolence. "Why didn't you die in the explosion?"

"Lucky, I guess."

"The explosion wasn't big enough. I fucked up the bomb."

The fact that he spoke with such scorn surprised her. Maybe his external arrogance masked a serious lack of ego. She stayed silent, uncertain what to say next. *Come on, Olivia. Think of something. Anything to keep him talking.*

Before she could beg for her life or think of anything that might sway Compton, the door burst open with a tremendous bang. She gasped and bolted into an upright position.

Compton whirled, weapon leveled on the door. Trey stood there, weapon squarely on Compton.

She cried out a warning to Trey as two gunshots filled the room.

Her eyes snapped shut, horror clogging her throat. She might have screamed. She didn't know.

"Oh, God," she gasped.

"Olivia?" Trey's raspy question made her open her eyes, grateful but fearful about what she'd see.

As she opened her eyes, Trey rushed toward her. Propelled by staggering relief, she slipped off the exam table and rushed into his arms. Everything happened in a jumble, a tangle of emotions bouncing inside her as his powerful arm circled her and brought

Olivia to his chest. She buried her head against his shoulder, and he spoke into the radio on his shoulder, but she didn't hear what he said.

She pulled back enough to catch the relief and fear still in his eyes, more stark and startling than she could imagine.

"Jesus, Olivia. When I realized you were missing..."

She saw uncertainty, perhaps desperation in his eyes ... she didn't know.

Seconds after that, and without preamble, his mouth found hers. Grateful and surprised she trembled under his kiss.

When he pulled back, she dared look at the body not far from the door. By the wide surprise in Compton's unblinking eyes, she knew the man had died instantly. "I thought he would ... I didn't think I'd make it, and then when you came in and he shot—"

"I know." He brushed hair away from her shoulder. "I know. Did he hurt you?"

"Yes. But I'm all right now." She gave him a weak smile, and then the tears poured from her eyes.

He heaved a sigh, this one broken, and Olivia saw the tears in Trey's eyes before he kissed her forehead and said, "Let's get out of here."

And he led her away from death.

* * * *

"Now isn't this a mighty fine show?" Olivia tried an American accent as she walked into the living room of Trey's mother Adele's home one evening.

Congregated on the couch and in chairs around the roaring fireplace, Adele, Mick, Celeste, Dace, Mary, Edie, Craig, Kelso and wife Irene stared at her and Trey with expectancy. Also in the room, Maddie sat in her wheelchair, a huge grin on her face.

With Trey next to Olivia, and the cheerful teasing and greetings that followed, she didn't mind that her American accent sucked.

"That was awful, wasn't it?" Olivia asked as Trey helped her take off her coat. A chorus of "not bad," "good try," and other hardy affirmations made her laugh. "Thanks everyone, but you are all bloody lying."

Laughter filled the room, and Olivia couldn't remember the last time she'd felt this good. This secure. As they settled on two extra chairs brought into the room, she knew that security came from the good friends she'd found in this small American community. Before long the conversation in the room was loud and boisterous, teasing and good-natured, and she loved it. Wine flowed, and after a few minutes, Mick said he had a speech to make.

Mick stood and held up his glass of white wine. "I have a toast to make and an announcement. The first announcement is that Celeste and I have finally set a date for our wedding." A round of cheers and applause went up. Celeste held up her hand to answer some of the questions being fired their way. "It's going to be in May of next year."

A few groans followed. Celeste held up her hand. "Now, now, it takes quite a bit of time to put together a big wedding. This one will have all the trimmings, including a big reception. That takes planning."

A week had passed since Trey had shot the second Compton brother, and with the inquiries and red tape and everything else involved in the investigation into Compton, the MacGilvary clan had found little to celebrate. This was good news indeed.

Celeste continued. "My good friend Leigh Strong, who works as a wedding planner,

is going to help me.”

Mick cocked a wiseacre look toward Craig. “You remember her, don’t you?”

Craig grunted, throwing his brother a ‘shut it’ look. “Yeah.”

Olivia smiled. *Wonder what that is all about? There’s a story there.*

Mick cleared his throat and grinned. “Second, congratulations to Olivia on her recent promotion.”

Another solid round of cheers and clapping followed while Olivia blushed and laughed. “It’s only temporary until Cynthia recovers from her ... mental situation.”

Mary snorted softly. “I’d be surprised if she returns. Didn’t you say the doctors think it’s a complete breakdown?”

“Possibly,” Olivia said. “But I’m not sure I’ll be returning to the library.”

The joviality subsided at her statement.

Edie, who sat to Olivia’s left, took her hand. “Oh, my dear, you’re not going back to England are you?”

Olivia’s gaze traveled to Trey, her heart twisting inside as she thought of returning to England early. As the week had progressed and Olivia had spent time in her own apartment thinking, she’d decided she should leave the U.S. She didn’t think she could take another minute of being with Trey knowing that their relationship couldn’t go any farther. After the hospital incident, Trey had treated her with kid gloves. She’d stayed in the hospital another night, then insisted on going home. Since then Trey had been extremely busy, and she’d needed time to think and recuperate. She’d spent a lot of time with Maddie. He saw her every day, kissed her gently like she might break. Yet he’d stayed more detached. More standoffish in a way she didn’t understand. He didn’t try to make love to her, and his detachment kept her from trying to make love to him.

More than anything, she’d tried to pretend that her heart wasn’t breaking into a million pieces. After all, Trey cared for her, but he didn’t love her, and she’d realized that she’d fallen for him.

Olivia realized they were all staring at her unexpectedly. “Yes. I’m going back to England as soon as it can be arranged.”

A chorus of “no’s” went up, along with exclamations of dissent. She glanced at Trey and saw pure surprise and another turbulent emotion she couldn’t define shining from his eyes.

Trey reached for her other hand and said, “Can I talk to you in private, Olivia?”

Aware of curious looks all around her, she wondered what Trey had up his sleeve. As he led her away, conversation returned to the living room.

“Where are we going?” she asked as she sat her glass down on the kitchen counter.

He gently tugged her by the hand through the sliding glass windows and into the back yard.

The night was cold but not freezing, and for that she was grateful. “Are you trying to freeze my bum off, sir?”

Out of sight of prying observation, his arms went around her and he cupped her butt. “No way. It’s a delicious, wonderful bum.”

She wriggled and grinned as the sensation sent her heart into overdrive. “Thank you, but it is cold out here.”

“Good. Then you won’t have much of a chance to say no before we have to go inside or suffer hypothermia.”

“Say no?”

There was no humor in his eyes. “You can’t leave.”

“What? Why?” A small spark of hope glittered in her heart.

“You can’t leave.”

“You already said that. Why can’t I leave the U.S.?”

“People here will miss you.”

Tears sprang into her eyes. “People?”

She slid from his arms with a tug and turned her back on him, staring into the darkness.

God, why can’t he just express his emotions? Tell me what he really feels.

Maybe he doesn’t feel what you want him to, Olivia.

His hands cupped her shoulders, brought her back against his hard body. His arms circled her waist as he tucked her close. “I’m mucking this up, aren’t I?”

“Trey MacGilvary, I have no idea what you’re going on about.”

He nuzzled her ear, and heat shot through her. “You can’t leave because if you do...”

“Yes?” Her own breathless question sounded alien in her ears, as if someone else said it. “Why does it matter to you? You knew I was only going to be here a year.”

“But you’ve only been here six months.”

“So? There’s nothing here for me now.”

His hot breath puffed in her ear as he kissed her earlobe, and she tingled all the way to her toes. “Don’t leave.”

Frustrated, she pried out of his arms and turned to face him. She hugged herself, the cold more mental than physical. “I can’t stay, Trey.”

He put his hands up, all teasing leaving his eyes and replaced with desperation.

“God, Olivia. When I ... when that building blew up and I thought you were in it ... I was so damned scared I’d lost you. Then when Compton took you, and I knew what he could do, it scared the shit out of me. And just now, when you said you were leaving, it made me realize something else.”

Heart in her throat, she managed to whisper, “What?”

He took her hands in his and then got down on one knee. Her heart about leapt into her throat. This couldn’t be ... he wasn’t...

Despite the darkness, a full moon illuminated the area, and she could see his half smile clearly. “That I’ve been a total idiot. I’ve tried to guard myself against getting hurt. Against love. All week I’ve tried to tell myself that I needed time, that I wouldn’t push you for anything. But I love you, Olivia, more than anything on earth. Since you’ve known me you’ve had a world of trouble. And still you haven’t run away screaming.” His grin turned wider. “When I almost lost you ... God, I can’t begin to describe the fear I felt. You’ve changed me, little mouse. You’ve shown me a new world. Will you marry me?”

Tears filled her eyes and poured over. She laughed and tugged him up and into her embrace. “Yes. Yes. I love you, too.”

Several deep, hot kisses later, they broke away and yet stayed in each other’s arms.

“I mean it, Olivia. I’ve learned so much about myself since I met you.”

She sighed. “I’ve learned a lot, too. Maybe fate brought me to America to find you, and I’m so glad I did. There isn’t anywhere I’d rather be than with you.”

He brushed his fingers through her hair, his touch erotic and yet tender. “Whatever

happens next in my life, I'm going to embrace every second of it."

* *

Trey watched his beautiful English mouse and wanted to swing her into his arms and make soul singing, explosive love to her. But that would have to wait until later. "I would have bought you a ring, but I want you to pick it out."

She smiled. "That's very thoughtful."

"Only the best for you, little mouse." He frowned. "Sorry. You didn't like that name before."

Olivia's smile broadened as she tightened her arms around his shoulders. "I love it. There was a time when I thought I'd never hear it again."

"There was a time I thought I'd never get to say it to you again."

Quiet contemplation came over them, if only for a moment, reminding them that in the next few weeks they would face challenges. But Trey knew they could handle it, no matter what came.

Her beautiful smile, silvered in the moonlight, kept the cold at bay. "I plan on learning something new from this day forward. Like how to speak with a decent American accent. I'm really keen on it."

He laughed. "Why?"

"For fun. For the hell of it. I'm going to have more fun more often. What about you?"

"Damn straight," he said. "Let's go inside and make the announcement we're engaged."

Ah, God, he liked the sound of that.

"Wait." She pulled him closer. "Let's seal that with one more kiss, shall we?"

And with the worst English accent he'd ever attempted, he said, "Too right, mouse. Too right."

The End

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