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*Kate Watterson*

# BLINDSIDED

SEXUAL STUDIES

# **BLINDSIDED**

## *Sexual Studies 2*

**Kate Watterson**

**EROTIC ROMANCE**



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**A SIREN PUBLISHING BOOK**

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**BLINDSIDED**

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# **DEDICATION**

For Ashley and Chelsea. A doctor and a federal agent? No wonder you two couldn't share a room growing up.

# **BLINDSIDED**

## *Sexual Studies 2*

**KATE WATTERSON**

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### **Chapter One**

The first fat, fluffy white flakes that drifted downward looked so unthreatening. True, the radio had insisted dismally all afternoon that a big storm was intent on wandering into Canada via the upper Midwest, but they were so often wrong it seemed worth taking the chance to make a few more miles.

Every mile, every yard, every inch, and she felt just a little safer.

However, Kerin Burke had to admit that maybe taking this winding little county highway might have been a great mistake. Yes, it was infinitely more relaxing than battling freeway traffic, and the nail-biting antics of other drivers. Also much more private—and more unlikely a route. With the bristling pine forest around her she got the occasional glimpse of a snow-coated pristine northern lake so it was also much prettier—but still a mistake. She had actually started to relax a little and enjoy herself until the snow began in earnest, whipping sideways under a wind that came out of nowhere, swirling tall columns of white across the narrow road in bursts so thick that sometimes for long heart-stopping moments she couldn't see a thing.

A mere two hours after the first lovely little white flake landed on her windshield, conditions rapidly moved from dangerous to appalling.

Slowing to a crawl at ten miles per hour helped a little. Crouched over the wheel, eyes straining, with one hand Kerin groped for her map. Muttering out loud, she said crossly, “What was the name of that damned town and how far can it be?”

The crinkle of paper told her she’d found what she wanted and she took a second to pull it up in front of her. Tomahawk, she saw before quickly lowering the map. With a big enough black dot to hopefully have a motel.

*If* she could even get there. The road seemed to disappear right in front of her, only the solid image of the hovering trees defining where she needed to go. Already she hit drifts that frighteningly affected her control of the car and the wind echoed above the sound of the rock station she’d found, howling eerily through the treetops.

But disaster came from neither the elements, nor the ever darkening vastness of the forest.

The red light that flashed on the dash was her first inkling the car had died. It had stalled several times already since she’d left Indianapolis but always started again easily and she’d not even entertained the notion of stopping yet to have someone look at it.

Without power steering she slid gently to a rocking stop, helped by a three-foot drift. Snow pelted the windshield and her wipers seemed to just move it around, not actually clear it away. Her lights blazed in vague illumination behind that white wall, the skies having grown so dark it was hard to believe it was only late afternoon. Kerin’s hands shook as she groped for the keys in the ignition.

The engine flared to life and then abruptly went silent.

*This*, she thought frantically, *cannot be happening*. No one, especially someone who had experienced such an awful past few months, could have such bad luck. Car trouble on a remote road during a full-blown snowstorm? God must truly hate her.

If there was a God. She’d always thought so, but lately she was beginning to wonder.

She tried again. This time there was no answering spark, no

comforting noise. This time the key merely clicked silently.

“Damn.” Her oath was choked with dismay and a sort of numbing fear. She hadn’t passed a car in many miles and no one in their right mind would be out and about anyway. Maybe a snowplow would come along...but then again, the road crews would have their hands full just keeping the main highways clear in weather like this. Even in Indiana the secondary roads got fairly treacherous during winter storms.

Some of them became impassable.

She left the lights on, as it seemed the logical thing to do. Waiting an agonizing five minutes, she tried to start the car again. No luck.

*Expensive piece of shit*, she thought cynically, fighting not to panic. Minutes passed by. She tried turning the key once more. That useless, useless key.

Already, alarmingly fast, she was beginning to get cold. Gazing blankly out the window she saw nothing but white lashing, retreating, dancing in waves against the glass. She waited, shivering, the full irony of the situation weighing as heavy as the deep, deep silence of the frozen woods surrounding her.

And waited. It was hard to just sit there but she had no idea what else to do.

She fled Indianapolis because she’d become convinced it might be the only way to save her life.

Now, she might very well die anyway.

At least this death would be peaceful, she reminded herself and leaned her head back against the seat, closing her eyes. Her coat was lightweight wool, the one she wore to the office, a dress coat unsuited for bitter temperatures. Even with her hands deep in the pockets, her fingers were cool and aching. Before long she would be able to see her breath, even inside the car.

Eventually she *could* see her breath as the conditions worsened. Not a promising sign.

The knock came without warning, close, just inches from her left



ear, and she jumped violently. Eyes flying open, Kerin twisted and stared out her driver's side window. A face, obscured by the flying snow, peered inside.

"Are you okay?" The shout was muffled by the wind.

A face. Another human being. Someone who had to have transportation to get there.

*Rescue.* It registered only dimly. It took a second before she summoned up enough composure to fumble for the button on the side of the door. Her window lowered so slowly that she knew her battery must be going dead. A blast of cold air and snow hit her right in the face and she gasped. "I'm fine, but my car is stalled."

The figure outside her window straightened. A tall man, she decided. She could hear the smooth idle of an engine even through the sighing wind. The words were nearly snatched away but she thought he said, "You'd better get out and come with me."

Get into the car of a perfect stranger?

No way.

Kerin shook her head, and inhaled another blast of snow. There was a small pile already on the seat next to her just from the brief time her window had been open. She called out, "Thanks, but no. Can you do me a favor and call a tow truck? Maybe let them know I'm here?"

For a second he disappeared, swallowed by a column of white that seemed to envelope his tall figure. He shouted into the wind, "Lady, no one ... here ... for days. I bet ... close the roads ... snow emergency."

"I ..."

The man bent suddenly and thrust his head inside the car through the open window. She flinched back but not before she got the impression of dark hair coated with white flakes, dark eyes, and a grim mouth. He said clearly, "I am willing to give you a ride but if we wait about one more minute, neither of us is going anywhere. Now, come on or forget it. It's a free country and if you want to freeze to death, hey, I can't really stop you."

\* \* \* \*

Jesse McCutcheon eased the truck into gear and felt the tires spin uselessly for a few seconds before the four-wheel drive kicked in and they lurched forward into the blinding wall of snow.

It was most certainly the worst storm in at least three years, one of those deadly entities that swept in and started to dump snow so fast that you couldn't get anywhere, do anything, and the whole notion of the power of nature came slamming into focus.

The woman sitting next to him shivered. He could hear her shallow breathing, and actually feel the tremors as she shook uncontrollably. He said, "If you want to turn up the heat, that's fine with me. I'd do it for you but if I take my eyes off what used to be this road, I'm pretty sure we'll end up somewhere in Otter Lake. It's that top button. Push it over to the red."

"Thanks." It was a mutter.

Seconds later the fan went up with a gush of warm air that fanned his face. The snow clinging to his hair began to melt, running down his neck under the collar of his coat. There wasn't much doubt that the young woman sitting next to him had been apprehensive about getting into the car with him, and since he wasn't used to being considered a possible ax murderer or serial rapist, he wasn't just sure what to say. He settled for a conversational question. "How long had you been there?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe an hour or more." Her voice was soft, the accent subtle and almost southern.

"If it wasn't for your lights, I would have driven right by."

"Thank heavens then you weren't about five minutes later, Mr....?"

"McCutcheon," he supplied readily.

"McCutcheon." It was almost a prim response. "At any rate, my battery was going dead. I couldn't even roll up my window all the

way. I hope the snow won't completely ruin the interior of my car."

"I'm sure any damage suffered would be preferable to slowly turning into a block of ice," he spoke dryly, trying to sound nonchalant as he strained to see the turn-off for Loon Road. If he missed it—and in this nasty soup it was just possible—they would be in some trouble. Using his intuition, he was sure it was just ahead but the white-out conditions and his reduced speed made everything different to judge.

No answer.

No thanks either, for his timely rescue.

Jesse chanced one swift glance over. The woman huddled in her long coat, collar up, her small form radiating tension in palatable waves. Not much was visible except for the top of her head. He jerked his gaze back to the road, or whatever he could see of it. "I need you to help me out, if you would."

That roused her a little and she stirred. "How?"

"We're looking for a blue spruce. Your side of the road. Right on the corner of an intersection. There's a sign, but we won't see it, not in this crap. The tree is big, and much taller than the pines around it."

The girl leaned forward, peering out the windshield. "I'll try but I can't see anything. Should it be getting dark so early?"

He couldn't see anything either, but he hardly wanted to say so. He murmured, "It's the storm. Speaking of which, what were you doing on the road anyway? They've been broadcasting dire predictions for most of the morning."

She didn't answer his question. Instead, she asked coolly, "If you knew that, what are *you* doing on this road, Mr. McCutcheon?"

"I was hoping they would be wrong." It was a truthful answer.

She laughed, a light sound, almost startling with the howling wind and slashing snow. "So was I."

"Yeah, so we're both stupid," he said half-under his breath. He was beginning to sweat despite the dropping temperatures outside, whether it was the blasting heater or the fact that the road he traveled

many of times looked like something out of a fantastic fairy tale, he wasn't sure. Deep drifts sent the truck spinning sideways almost every few feet and though he'd managed so far to plow through each one of them, his hope that the trend would continue was starting to dwindle.

*Damn it, where is the road?*

"There!" The woman pointed suddenly out her window. "A big tree. I'm pretty sure a spruce...it's hard to tell."

Timing wise, he had no idea if they had gone the right distance. However, it did look like there might be a gap, which *could* be a road. Twisting the wheel, he managed part of the turn before they lurched to a halt, the truck nose to nose with some snow-laden pines.

Backing up got interesting.

He could go a few feet, turn the wheel, and move forward, making some progress each time. The only good news was that he was sure now it *was* Loon Road, and that was reassuring. His companion said nothing during the whole neck-jerking business, just sitting with her coat held around her like a protective blanket.

It was a mile to his cabin. One blasted mile. Walking the distance in what was probably at least knee-deep snow didn't hold much appeal. Wrenching the wheel around with all his strength, he gunned the engine and finally managed a fishtail entrance to the narrow road that led to his lane.

Finally, he got a little lucky. On this road, the wind wasn't depositing great heaps of sticky white powder in his path. Actually, as the trees thickened even more and the wind blasted straight north, he could see a little better. His mailbox coming into view was a fabulous sight.

The lane on his property was long, deliberately long, deliberately private, and curved downward and then up a steep hill. Ninety-nine percent of the year he loved it that way, with the cabin tucked back where no one could see it except from the lake, the winding drive bordered by tall, straight white pines and the occasional graceful birch. This particular night, however, it was like trying to make his

way through a soggy marsh blindfolded.

The truck stalled out somewhere at the bottom. A formidable drift had formed already, blocking the slope upward, the wind direction and barrier of the trees making a perfect dumping ground for nature's abundant generosity. He usually had trouble with drifting in that spot, but rarely so fast and so much.

All this time, since spotting the spruce, his companion hadn't said as much as a word. He couldn't tell if she was scared, or merely standoffish. Somewhat wearily, he pulled out the keys and dropped them in his pocket. "We'll have to make a go of it on foot now."

It was almost fully dark now. The woman turned, and her face was a pale gleam. "On foot? To where?"

"My house," he replied evenly and pointed at the windshield. "Right over that hill."

"Your...house?" It was an unhappy question. He caught the sideways flash of her eyes in an oval of a face. "How far is the closest town?"

"About twenty miles too far away. Look, lady, you saw that road."

"Yes, but..." Her voice trailed off on a breath.

Females being conditioned from birth to be wary of unknown males, he really couldn't blame her for being less than enthusiastic about the idea. On the other hand, the way he looked at it, he'd stopped and done something decent for another human being. If she didn't like it, well, hell, that was her problem. Tersely, he said, "Follow me."

Then he shoved open his door.

\* \* \* \*

Wallowing knee deep in snow, having it fill her eyes, her mouth, her shoes, Kerin was both miserable and unhappily out of her depth. It was all she could do to make any progress forward and Mr. McCutcheon, with his long legs and purposeful stride, was

considerably ahead of her after just a minute or two.

He turned around just as she blundered into something buried in the snow and fell flat on her face. Literally on her face. With her hands in her pockets, she didn't even have time to break her fall. Sitting up and spitting snow out of her mouth, she heard a small curse before someone jerked to her feet. He put his mouth near her ear and said, "Come on."

He half-helped, half-dragged her up the steep slope of what must have been a driveway, but was pretty much indistinguishable from the rest of the landscape except for the gap in the trees. The conifers crowded thickly around, giving a ghostly echo to the roaring gale of blowing snow. Progress was easier with his help she had to admit, though it felt very odd to be clinging to the hand of a man she didn't even know, blinking against the stinging onslaught of moisture and wind.

The cabin was visible once they reached the crest of the hill. The last few feet were easier and she gladly scampered down a pathway that was protected by what looked like a garage. She got a glimpse of a square dark structure in front of them, possibly two-storied, though it was hard to tell in the wild dervish of the storm, before her rescuer let her go and pulled something from his pocket. Keys, she realized as he pushed past her and fumbled for a minute in the growing darkness. The door swung open and magical warmth seemed to reach out and touch her.

"After you."

It took her a second before she realized he was waiting for her to precede him inside. Hastily she complied, stepping into a small dark foyer. He followed and when the door shut behind him, the resulting quiet compared to the wildness outside was almost unsettling.

Even more unsettling was the knowledge she might not be freezing to death in her car, but she definitely was in an extremely isolated place with a complete stranger.

The lights flared to life, replacing the darkness with a warm

golden glow. She saw they stood in a small hallway with plain paneled walls and a polished wooden floor. Shaking out of his coat, Mr. McCutcheon said evenly, "I would appreciate it if you would take off your shoes and your coat. We're both pretty much covered in snow but the less we drag in the less I have to clean up."

In the light, Kerin could finally see her would-be-savior.

He was tall, but she'd been able to figure that out already. A bit over six feet at least, maybe even taller. Dark hair to his collar, right now plastered to his head and neck with melting snow. He turned and opened a door to what turned out to be a closet, and took out a hanger for his coat. She observed wide shoulders under a tan-colored flannel shirt as she stared at his back, and jeans that fit well over lean hips and long legs but were undeniably wet from mid-thigh downward. He turned back around and held out his hand.

His face was *arresting*. All the same features that every man had, eyes, nose, mouth, but there was a vitality in his dark eyes, also in the subtle curve of his well-shaped mouth, and the elegant line of jaw and chin.

Mr. McCutcheon, Kerin realized, was a good-looking man.

Very good looking.

His dark brows lifted a fraction. "Uhm, warts?"

Her coat dripped. Kerin could hear the faint splatter on the hardwood floor. "Warts?" she repeated stupidly.

"I was wondering if I had suddenly sprouted some." He smiled, his hand still outstretched, as if he expected her to give him something. His teeth were white and even. Of course.

He wondered if ... Oh God. Because she was standing there just staring at him. Blood rushed to her cheeks and she instantly struggled out of her sodden coat and handed it to him. She stammered, "I'm sorry. I'm not usually so rude, but this has been a tough day and I guess...I'm not really myself."

He calmly hung up her coat and closed the closet door. "No problem. I'll show you to the phone and you can at least call the

towing company and let them know where your car is when they can get to it.”

“Thank you.” Kerin bent and removed her shoes, wriggling her half-frozen toes. Her socks were soaked as well and she took them off for good measure, draping them over her shoes by the closet door. Mr. McCutcheon had left the little entryway and turned on more lights and with some curiosity, she followed.

The room she entered was, well, in a word, impressive. The whole house opened in front of her. To her left stretched a galley kitchen separated from the rest of the giant room by a long bar flanked by stools. It was very modern in contrast to the rest of the space, with polished marble counters and tall cabinets done in flat pine with round polished bronze handles. The refrigerator, stove, and microwave were shiny and clean, the counter immaculate except for the keys he’d carelessly tossed down. The rest of the living space was huge; soaring vaulted ceilings, enormous stone fireplace with sofa and chairs scattered around, and a set of stairs leading up to a loft above, complete with railing overlooking the open area. On her right, a spectacular wall of windows displayed the fury of the snowstorm, white piles beginning to show against the glass. With all the wood and stone, the space felt warm and appealing, especially after the hellish outside conditions.

*Surely a deranged killer wouldn’t keep such a neat house, would he?*

The place was gorgeous and elicited only one response. She said it almost involuntarily. “Wow.”

“Thanks.” Her host nonchalantly pointed to where a phone hung on the wall just to the right of the kitchen. “Phone book is in the drawer beneath. Since I don’t think you’re from around here, I want to tell you that Tomahawk is closer, but Rhinelander is bigger. More tow companies. You might try both.”

Her own clothes were fairly wet, and her hair clung to her face and neck in cold, clammy clumps. Rather self-consciously, Kerin



smoothed it back as best as possible. The phone book was a sliver compared to the Indianapolis directory, but she did find three towing companies. While she made her calls, Mr. McCutcheon disappeared up the stairs to what was presumably a bedroom. Just as she was hanging up the phone, he came back down, his tousled hair much drier, and another shirt and set of jeans replacing his wet ones. “Any luck?”

Carefully cradling the receiver, she admitted, “Well, sort of. There’s a snow emergency, which I think is what you tried to tell me back on the road. I guess the police will ticket you if you’re out right now. They said as soon as they could get out there, they would tow it to a garage and look at it.”

“Kind of what I thought they’d say.”

“The snow isn’t supposed to stop for at least twenty-four hours.”

“Is that so?” His face wore nothing but a neutral expression. Arms crossed over his broad chest, he leaned casually against the kitchen counter. His hair must be naturally wavy for it had begun to curl as it dried dark against the strong column of his neck. His mouth was a firm, even line.

“And,” she added with gloom, “the wind is supposed to stay like this for even longer than that.”

He said nothing. Probably, Kerin thought morosely, wondering how he’d ended up with an unwanted houseguest when they were likely to be snowed-in for several days. If she was uncomfortable and uneasy about being trapped with a total stranger, how must he feel about having some unknown female in his house for what looked like a long time? Taking deep breath, she said swiftly, “Mr. McCutcheon, I haven’t thanked you yet for stopping to help me. I really have no desire to impose on you but there doesn’t seem to be much—”

“Jesse.” The interruption was smooth.

Kerin blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

His fine dark eyes looked amused. “My first name is Jesse. Mr. McCutcheon is a little formal.”

Disconcerted, Kerin mumbled, "All right then, Jesse."

Dark brows lifted a fraction. "And you are?"

Had she not even told him her name? She paused a moment before she said quietly, "Kerin. Kerin Smith."

It was better for the both of them if he didn't know her real name.

Wasn't it?

She had no idea.

Jesse McCutcheon didn't even blink at her unoriginal deception. He just scanned her up and down with a quick look. "I'll see if I can come up with something dry for you to put on."

Staying with some unknown man, wearing his clothes...the situation was crazy, almost as crazy as the situation she was running from. Kerin quickly shook her head. "Don't go to any more trouble, I'm fine."

A violent gust shrieked past the house, rattling the kitchen window and sighing uncannily like a wounded animal. Her host asked politely, "You really want to spend the rest of the evening in soaking wet clothes?"

"Well, no."

"I'll see what I can do."

"Okay." Her reply sounded a little ungracious, even to herself. She modified it by adding, "You've already done too much."

He tilted his head slightly and looked at her with a disconcerting, intelligent gaze. "Would you drive past a stranded motorist, and leave them there in the middle of a storm?"

Even though the house was warm, Kerin felt cold from the sodden fabric sticking to her legs and upper body. He was right about her needing to change clothes. She shook her head.

"Of course not."

There was an undercurrent of amused exasperation in his voice. "So then, relax a little, Kerin Smith. I wasn't out prowling for my next victim, I was just driving home. And I didn't stop because I wanted to lure you to your doom. I just did what you would have done

yourself. I'm a nice guy, I promise."

At that moment, the entire house went pitch dark.

## Chapter Two

Mother Nature, Jesse couldn't help but think cynically, had very good timing. Good timing, that is, if the situation were some sort of romantic farce being played on stage in Broadway or the West End of London. In that case, when the hero reassures his innocent leading lady that he has no evil designs on her virtue just as the lights go out, the audience would laugh.

Kerin Smith didn't seem to find the sudden plunge into darkness amusing. He clearly heard a sudden intake of breath as it happened, almost like a little moan. Another fierce volley of wind swallowed the sound.

It was funny, even after the room vanished from sight and he was left blinking and blind, he could still see her eyes, wide and very blue, looking at him with a sober regard that might be disconcerting if it wasn't so apparent that the woman was afraid.

And not just of him. Of him, certainly, but not *just* of him. When he'd knocked on the window of her car, he'd seen then her face was already pale and still and she'd started as if the very devil might be asking entrance instead of being glad that someone had stopped to help her.

He said calmly, reassuringly, "I have a generator. This particular corner of Wisconsin doesn't have the full attention of the electric company. If the power doesn't come on in the next minute or so, I'll go out into the garage and start it."

She made some exclamation in the dark that he didn't quite catch but he almost felt her dismay cross the room in palatable waves. He wasn't exactly thrilled either at having the furnace blower not

operable or the well useless, which is exactly why he had gone through the expense and trouble to have a generator installed. Reading by candlelight was fine by him, but having no heat and not being able to flush a toilet because the pump didn't work—that was a different matter. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light coming through the windows, he moved into the kitchen and opened the cabinet where he kept the flashlight. From the fury of the blast outside, he was surprised the whole building wasn't shaking. It seemed doubtful that the electric company could even send someone out to fix the problem. Smaller storms than this one had left him without power for hours. He flashed the light on and the beam bounced across the shining wood floor before fastening on the door by the stairs that led to the garage. "This will just take a second or two."

Ms. Smith, if that was even her last name, had a gift for silence. She just stood there, a slender shadow, undoubtedly miserable and cold in her damp clothes.

With a shrug, he made for the door to the garage.

He peered into the building, wincing at the cold, shining the light at his feet as he thought about his guest. She was a bit bedraggled, but he had noticed that her skin was very smooth and unblemished under the smeared mascara and wet wisps of dark blond hair clinging to her cheeks and graceful neck. Delicate eyebrows framed those very blue eyes and her mouth was pink and softly formed. Her figure too, was athletically slim and shapely, the wet material of her blouse clinging to the curves of her breasts and her tan slacks tight over perfectly rounded hips. Probably around thirty, if he had to guess her age. She was pretty despite being almost blown to pieces by one of Northern Wisconsin's more inspired fast moving fronts, so he guessed she'd be a knockout under normal circumstances.

It had been a while since he'd met a woman he was attracted to so quickly.

And that was a hell of a thing to be thinking, he told himself in disgust, when it was obvious he was going to be stuck with this

distrustful young woman for the next twenty-fours at the least.

To Jesse's relief, the generator started sweetly and easily. He heard the furnace kick on immediately, so at least they wouldn't freeze to death. When he went back inside, the great room—the room that had sold him on the place—was illuminated once again by soft track lighting that ran along one of the huge beams below the pitch of the ceiling.

Kerin Smith hadn't moved. Not one inch, as far as he could tell. She still stood rigid by the edge of the kitchen, her leather purse clutched in one hand, her face pale and wet.

Actually, she looked uncomfortably a little like someone in shock. Every few seconds a ripple of shivers shook her entire body.

Just from the lights going off?

He asked slowly, "Ms. Smith, are you all right?"

\* \* \* \*

She had to get a grip on herself. There was no doubt about it. It had all been bad enough; her unplanned abrupt flight from Indy, the roundabout and unfamiliar route, the onslaught of the horrendous weather, and then having to place her trust in some strange man...but when the room had suddenly gone black, it had shaken her to the very core.

She wasn't doing a good job at all of hiding her distress from Jesse McCutcheon.

The real trouble was, of course, that though her everyday life had been slowly disintegrating for the past weeks, the worst damage was how much her faith in human beings had been compromised. Had the same scenario happened two months ago—what seemed to be a nice man stopping to help her, offering shelter and warmth and no apparent threat—she would have been grateful, and probably trusting.

But, my God, suddenly being alone with him in the dark...

Her throat worked, unexpected tears coming to her eyes. The

lights were on now, the room was warm and very nice, and he stared at her with dark eyes full of undisguised confusion and alarm.

She did feel odd, off-balance, almost weak. Taking a deep breath, she tried a wobbly smile. "I'm fine. Maybe a little confused at how one minute I could be driving down a pretty country road and the next be stranded in some stranger's home, but I'm okay. Could I use the restroom, please?"

Jesse McCutcheon didn't smile back. He frowned, drawing his ebony brows together. "You're white as a sheet. You don't have some medical condition I should be aware of, do you? Diabetes or something like that?"

"No." A half-hysterical laugh escaped her lips. "I promise you, there's nothing like that wrong with me."

He didn't look much like he believed her and she wasn't sure she blamed him. God alone knew what she looked like. However, he did turn and point to the stairs. "Bathroom's upstairs off the bedroom."

She could feel him watch her as she walked across the room and climbed the wide and open wooden stairs. *No doubt wondering just what kind of a weird stray he's picked up*, Kerin thought with a welcome twist of wry humor.

His bedroom wasn't quite as pristine as the rest of the house. It was a big room, taking up the whole loft area, and had two large triangle shaped windows on either side of the chimney. A rich patterned oriental rug in dark greens and red covered the hardwood floor and the bed was huge with an ornately carved wooden headboard that looked antique. It was as lovely as the rest of the house, with the same sort of rustic elegance, masculine yet appealing and comfortable.

Two steps through the door Kerin stopped, arrested by the intimacy of being in such a private space. The covers on the unmade bed were tossed back as if he'd just climbed out and his damp clothes from their flight through the snow lay on the floor.

She could suddenly picture her handsome host lying on the bed,

and that quick little fantasy was both unexpected and unwelcome.

The bathroom was to her left, a gleaming white affair with a tiled shower and pedestal sink. The large framed mirror didn't exactly show a promising picture, and she stared back at her smudged face and disheveled hair with some dismay as she ran hot water into the sink. There were washcloths and towels in a cupboard by the shower and she dried her hair and removed her streaked make-up, saying a little prayer of thanks those long and unexpected hours at work made it sensible to always carry a comb and some cosmetics in her purse. Repairing the damage actually made her feel a little better, more in control of the bizarre situation. She combed her hair back into a semblance of her usual casual straight-to-her-shoulders style, applied new mascara and lip gloss, and lightly dusted her face with some sheer powder. Her clothes might still be damp, but at least she looked a little more normal. With one last glance in the mirror, she squared her shoulders and opened the door.

Sometime during her stint in the bathroom, Jesse McCutcheon must have come upstairs for a blue shirt lay neatly folded on the now made bed, and there was a pair of soft woolen socks as well.

Gallant, thoughtful, *and* good-looking, she thought as she went back into the bathroom and slipped out of her sodden blouse. Maybe God didn't hate her as much as she thought.

Still, as nice as it was for him to stop and help her, offer her shelter, and even share his clothes so she would be more comfortable, the size of the shirt was a reminder that Jesse McCutcheon was a much larger human being, undeniably male, and she was a virtual prisoner due to the storm.

She didn't know a thing about him. Any sensible woman would be nervous in her position.

However, she had pretty good faith in her own judgment of people and he didn't send off any bad vibes, or at least he hadn't yet in the approximate hour since she'd met him.

Rolling up the sleeves of the well-worn denim shirt and putting



the giant socks on her admittedly cold feet, she squared her shoulders and went back downstairs. Her slacks might be still quite wet around the knees and ankles, but she was much warmer. Mr. McCutcheon moved around the kitchen. He'd switched on a radio somewhere. She could hear the low sound of classical music muffled by the rattling of the storm along the eaves and windows. He glanced up when she approached the long counter, and she chose a stool, carefully sliding upward onto the seat.

"Thank you." She indicated the shirt with a swift motion of one hand.

"You're welcome." He made no secret of inspecting her appearance. "Better? You actually have a little color now." The lamplight shone off his wavy dark hair and high cheekbones.

It was lightly, almost delicately, put. Kerin ducked her head in an attempt to disguise how embarrassed she felt at her near breakdown. She murmured, "Yes, very much so."

"Please feel free to use the phone."

"I already did." She glanced up.

The corner of his mouth lifted and his gaze was direct and quizzical. "Surely you need to tell someone where you are, Ms. Smith."

Actually, that was only good thing about this unusual situation. That *no one* in the world except the man standing right in front of her knew where she was. Very coolly, she responded, "No, not really."

"No husband, parents, friends, that would worry about you, given they might hear about the storm?"

"I..." Kerin opened her mouth, and then shut it, not sure what to say. She had no one to call that was for sure. No one she *dared* call. But then again, it wasn't at all smart to tell him, however nice he might seem. She said lamely, "I might do that in a few minutes."

"Okay." He smiled. It was a very charming, half-crooked curve of his mouth that echoed the awkwardness of the moment. "Whenever you like. In the meantime, would you like a glass of wine or anything

else?”

A glass of wine. God, yes. Stuck in the middle of a maelstrom of snow and shrieking wind and the man could offer her soft music and wine. She managed to say with fair courtesy, “Yes, very much. Actually, after today, wine would be heaven.”

Jesse McCutcheon laughed, his face lightening in a disturbingly attractive way. “My thoughts exactly. Red or white?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

He was having red, it turned out. A deep, dark burgundy that she would never have drunk so early in the evening ordinarily by itself, but it was so smooth and excellent that from the first sip she was won over. It was served in the proper glass as well, the rounded bowl trapping the scent yet letting the liquid breathe and grow during its exposure to oxygen, showing that the man was also at least a little cultured.

Cultured. Considerate. Good-looking. The list grew. Add prosperous. The wine was expensive, no doubt about it. And the cabin was a careful blend of modern convenience and rural charm that spoke of a sizeable investment. Taking another appreciative sip, she murmured, “It’s lovely.”

“I hope so. Otherwise I’ll be stuck with a case of it to pour down the sink. Actually, now that I think of it, that’s a good start to our forced acquaintance, Ms. Smith. We already have something in common. We both like this wine.”

“True enough.” She couldn’t help it, a little laugh welled inside her. How long had it been since she laughed? That was a frightening thought. She said quickly, “Let’s not forget we both have a low, almost fatalistic opinion of the accuracy of weather forecasters.”

His back against the opposite counter, McCutcheon swirled the liquid in his glass very slowly. “That makes two things. A good start. What else might there be? Do you like opera?”

Kerin shook her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Three.” He grinned and took a sip of his wine. “Sports?”

“Well, I do follow the Colts during football season.”

“Ah, so I take it you’re from Indiana. What do you do back in Indiana, Ms. Smith?”

“Kerin,” she said automatically, thinking fast. She’d already lied about her last name, and she hardly wanted to give him personal information. Unfortunately, fabrications had never been her strong suit.

He said pleasantly, “All right. What do you do for living, Kerin?”

Her gaze dropped uncomfortably. The shirt that had replaced his wet one was flannel also, this one a dark red. It was unbuttoned enough that she could see a V of tanned chest, undoubtedly nicely muscled if the width of his shoulders was any indication. She jerked her gaze back up to his face. “I work in a doctor’s office.”

“I see.” His brows went up a fraction. “That explains a few things. What kind of medicine do you practice?”

Her fingers tightened involuntarily on the delicate stem of her glass. “I never said I was a physician.”

His dark eyes were steady on hers. Intelligent, insightful, and questioning. He said mildly, “No, you didn’t. Quite the opposite. But your car is kind of a giveaway. In my experience the only person who works in a doctor’s office and drives a Mercedes is the doctor. Besides, despite the fact this situation makes you pretty nervous, you still carry yourself like someone who is used to being an authority figure.”

*Okay. Add smart to the list now.* Kerin admitted haltingly, “I’m an internist who works with a group of doctors.” That was vague enough.

“And that’s a secret?”

Now he was crossing from uncomfortable to downright inquisitive. “I don’t know you.” The words came out more forcefully than she intended.

He seemed to pause, the glass of wine halfway to his mouth. After a second, he took a little sip. “Please remember, I don’t know you either.”

The worst thing was he was aching, agonizingly correct. He *didn't* know her. Yet he'd stopped and picked her up, welcoming her into his home. Instantly ashamed of herself, Kerin said, "I know you don't. I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted, Doctor." He set aside his glass and moved down the length of the kitchen. He disappeared into the hallway where they'd come in and she heard the closet door open. When he came out, he was wearing a thick dark coat and pulling on a pair of gloves. "You might want to listen for the weather report on the radio. If they predict anything but gloom and doom, let me know."

"You're going out there?" Kerin couldn't conceal her disbelief. Perched on her stool, she stared at him. "Why?"

"Just for wood. I want to build a fire. I'm a little uneasy about how long the power might be out and how much fuel I have for the generator. I'd say once we go to bed, we should probably turn it off at least for a few hours."

*Once we go to bed...*

He seemed to realize just how the casually spoken phrase sounded because for the first time the tables were turned and he didn't look quite so confident and self-possessed. Instead he said abruptly, "I'll be back in a few minutes. Help yourself to more wine."

She could hear for a brief moment the roar of the storm and feel an eddy of icy cold rush into the room before the door closed behind him.

\* \* \* \*

The big dead hemlock he'd planned on taking down in the spring had fallen across the path to the woodshed. It had not gone down gracefully, and the huge trunk had shattered and bits lay everywhere, already being swallowed by the drifting powder. Collar up against the wind, Jesse tried to blink the blowing snow out of his eyes and clamber around the mess as best he could.

*Smooth*, he told himself wryly as he slid across a log at least thirty inches in diameter. That last little moment inside had been quite smooth. Of course, he hadn't meant anything even remotely suggestive when he'd mentioned them going to bed. He had every intention of sleeping on the couch and keeping the fire going so they wouldn't freeze to death overnight with the generator off.

But damn if the lovely doctor's eyes hadn't widened in a betraying fashion, letting him know just exactly where her mind had shot when he'd said the words. He'd been unaccountably embarrassed for something not at all his fault and the feeling was irritating. He was a grown man and certainly had held his share of conversations ripe with sexual innuendo. That was not what had happened.

Perhaps what threw him was the fact that he'd never before been around a woman so patently uncomfortable in his company. He simply couldn't shake the feeling that Kerin Smith, *Dr. Kerin Smith*, was frightened and somehow vulnerable.

The question of the hour, he mused as he began to pull logs from the top of the neatly stacked row under the shed roof, was why? Some concern in an unusual situation was understandable, but for a very attractive and self-possessed young woman, she seemed a bit too much on edge.

It took him a good thirty minutes to carry what he thought enough wood to the back door. By then his fingers were numb in spite of his gloves, and his hair and clothes coated again with snow. The temperature was dropping still and his cheeks stung as he opened the door and stepped back inside. Shedding his coat and gloves, he shook the moisture from his hair.

She had moved from the stool to the leather couch by the fireplace and quietly sat there, the soft lamplight touching the smooth sheen of her honey-colored hair. He'd brought two logs in, and without comment, he carried them to the large hearth and deposited them both into the grate. The basket of dry kindling he kept on hand proved useful, and the welcoming spark of fire helped a little as he held out

his frozen fingers to the flame.

“Here.” The soft voice right behind his shoulder almost startled him. Still crouched by the hearth, he glanced up to see that Kerin held out a towel.

Her smile was sweet, a little apologetic, and to his surprise, seemed genuine. She said, “I know how you feel about snow all over your floor so I thought I’d better get you this.”

“Thanks.” Accepting the olive branch, he stood and dried his hair and face, then used the damp cloth to wipe the snow from his jeans and mop up what had dripped and melted on the floor. During this time, he was aware Kerin returned to her seat on the leather couch, sitting gracefully with her legs folded underneath, one slim hand holding her half-empty glass of wine.

The fire licked up and the wood began to hiss and crackle. Satisfied it was going to start, Jesse went back to the kitchen, tossed the soiled towel into the small laundry room next to the built-in pantry, and then retrieved his own wine. Eyeing the level in the bottle he’d left sitting on the counter, he guessed that perhaps it was being on her second glass that had made his reluctant guest relax a little bit.

If so, he’d be willing to pour as much expensive booze down her lovely throat as it took for her to not look right through him with those blue eyes. He took the bottle with him back into the living room and sat down on the hearth, making a pretense of needing to poke at the growing flames.

To his surprise, it was Kerin who spoke first. “I’ve been sitting here wondering what kind of occupation would allow someone to live in such a remote place.”

As an offer to exchange personal information, it was a little ambiguous. Jesse replied in the spirit it was offered. “Who says I live here?”

The soft lamplight he favored cast a golden glow over her perfect skin and the pale oval of her face. After a moment, she said, “It’s a little upscale for just a vacation home.”

“Thank you.”

She flinched at the short reply, her gaze dropping to her wine glass. “Look, Mr. McCutcheon ... I mean Jesse, I realize I offended you earlier—”

“Not offended exactly,” he interrupted. “I’m more puzzled than anything. But hey, if you don’t want to talk about yourself, that’s all right.”

“It isn’t...” She stopped and bit her lip, her teeth sinking into the soft flesh. In his oversized shirt, she looked very young, like a pretty child. The wine glass in her hand trembled. When she continued, it was with an aching dignity. “Please understand I have a very good reason, something that has nothing to do with you, for not bubbling over with details.”

Bubbling over with details. Since he was pretty sure she’d even lied about her name, that statement was almost ludicrous. However, the pain shadowing her eyes was not. It was real, and it was uncomfortable. Taking a quick drink from his glass, he swallowed and said in a cool tone, “I guess I don’t have the same problem. Anyway, I don’t mind telling you I live in Chicago and own a construction company. This place is my oasis of sanity in a pretty busy life.” He smiled with as much detachment as possible. “Oh yes, I’m not married, just in case you were wondering.”

He was definitely wondering about *her*.

“Divorced?”

He still thought she had a lot of gall to ask any questions at all, but answered readily, “Nope. Never met the right girl, I guess, if that is cliché enough for you.”

“I’m not married either.” Her lashes were long, and as she stared downward at the glass in her hand, they left dark shadows on her cheekbones. “Never had the time.”

But she had time to run off to northern Wisconsin and lose herself in a storm. Reaching for the wine bottle and pouring himself another glass, he ventured, “As a physician, I am sure you are very busy. You

can't be long out of medical school. More wine?"

"Uhm ..."

Looking down doubtfully at her glass, she nodded.

"Yes, I guess so."

It was fully dark outside now, giving the onslaught of the storm a distant feel. Jesse got to his feet and refilled her glass. "It's almost dinnertime. Are you hungry?"

She gazed up at him uncertainly. "Maybe a little."

He laughed. "Well, then I feel compelled to tell you something else about myself. Very personal, and very relevant."

"What?"

"I am one hell of a terrible cook, so brace yourself."



## Chapter Three

Kerin sliced onions with a deft hand, transferring them to the frying pan via a cutting board. The rising sweet scent mingled with garlic and browning meat, filling the kitchen with delicious aromas. She picked up an opener and went to work on a can of tomato sauce.

All the while, the man across the counter watched her with steady dark eyes, sitting as she had earlier on one of the stools, one long-fingered hand toying idly with his glass. The radio played softly, repeatedly interrupting a violin concerto or flute solo to announce the long lists of counties under the snow emergency and give ever rising figures on the amount of accumulation and increasing wind gusts.

“Right now,” Jesse McCutcheon observed dryly, his elbows comfortably on the counter, “I’d be burning something. I admit back in Chicago I rarely even attempt to cook but either eat out, or pick up something on the way home.”

“I love to cook,” Kerin admitted truthfully, stirring the sauce into the mixture. “I find it relaxing. I don’t have time to do much else that is creative.”

“I know what you mean. Though, between big jobs, I come here to relax and fish. That’s why I bought this place. In the summer, I can usually manage almost a month here.”

“A whole month? That sounds marvelous.” She glanced behind him to where the fire burned brightly in the lovely fireplace, the reddish light giving the gleaming wood floor and comfortable furniture a warm glow. “This is a lovely retreat. Time to myself is also a luxury I don’t have.”

She was intruding on *his* time that was for certain.

“Take it from me, you have to make it for yourself,” he told her with an ironic lift of one dark brow. “I could work twenty-four hours a day if I wanted to, but I refuse to burn out before I’m forty.”

“That’s probably good advice.” Kerin reached for her third glass of wine, knowing it was a little dangerous to mix stress, fatigue, and alcohol, but not concerned enough to keep from taking another sip. In retrospect, now that she had relaxed a little, she realized that she couldn’t be safer than where she was right at this moment. The roads were impassable. Her cell phone and beeper didn’t work. She was entirely isolated from the world except for the very intriguing, attractive Mr. McCutcheon.

He smiled, showing the gleam of his white, even teeth. “If you notice, I don’t even have a television, Dr. Smith. If you want to unwind, the place to do it is a North woods cabin where there is nothing to do but eat, sleep, fish a little, and enjoy the quiet.”

Kerin smiled back. “A man without a television? You must be a new species. And I’ll keep the advice in mind if you will please call me Kerin.”

For someone who didn’t cook much, he had a nicely outfitted kitchen. Rummaging around to find a pan for the pasta, she found the cupboards as neat and tidy as the rest of the place, which gave her another bit of insight into his personality. He liked order, she decided, lifting out a suitable pot. Control was something she understood pretty well, since she was a bit of a freak about it herself. Maybe that’s why her current situation had her so rattled.

He helped her find the spaghetti noodles, sorting through a well-stocked pantry loaded with canned goods, probably against just such an emergency. While the pasta cooked and the sauce simmered, he got out plates and silverware and opened a second bottle of wine. Instead of sitting at the counter, he suggested they sit by the fire, and when the sauce and pasta were done, they both took their plates and sat on the floor, using the low coffee table as an impromptu casual place to eat.

Legs folded under her, Kerin sat down, the delicious smell of the food mingling with the comforting scent of the fire. He sat across, the dancing light reflecting off the planes and hollows of his face, highlighting the clean cut symmetry of his features. How on earth he'd never married, Kerin wasn't sure. Whether it was the wine or her current state of relative safety after so many weeks of fear, she was sure he was one of the most attractive men she had ever met. What's more, he also seemed polite and intelligent, which was a combination that simply didn't happen often in nature in her opinion.

If the circumstances were different, she would definitely consider Jesse McCutcheon in a romantic way. No woman with a breath in her body wouldn't.

Why the hell she was thinking about that was a mystery, because her life was in chaos, but it was a relief to actually feel some emotion besides apprehension and dread.

"That was wonderful," he remarked as he took a last bite, his plate clean. His tone was sincere and his smile a slow, rueful curve of his mouth. "As if you can't tell, I liked it. If I hadn't happened on your car, I would be eating chili out of a can or something from the freezer. Would you like more wine, Kerin?"

She only known him...what, a few hours? The sound of her name, said in his deep voice, made a small quiver of excitement clench in her stomach. The way he said it seemed intimate and warm, like they been friends a long time. "I shouldn't," she said truthfully.

"Well, you certainly aren't driving anywhere," he said dryly. "I would guess no one in Northern Wisconsin is on the roads tonight. So what's the harm?"

That sentiment sounded logical, but it probably wasn't. She didn't object when he filled her glass again. In fact, all of it; the raging blizzard outside, the cozy dinner by the fire, the comforting food, the delicious wine, all of it evoked a long missed feeling of well-being.

The company of a gorgeous man like one sitting across from her didn't hurt either. She hadn't even been on a date in over a year. The

last time she'd had sex...well, that had to be close to two years ago, before she and Michael had split and broken their engagement.

Good God, was she actually sitting there thinking about *that* with a perfect stranger?

"Would you listen to that wind?" Jesse leaned back, his lean body relaxed in the leaping firelight. The shadows did nice things to the chiseled planes of his features. His dark hair was tousled, but it suited the outdoorsy image of flannel shirt and old jeans. "I bet there are going to be eight foot drifts by the front door. It's going to be fun shoveling out of all this when the storm is over."

As if to emphasize his words, a particularly keening howl whistled past the house, the brush of the snow flung against the windows loud in the darkness. To conserve energy, he'd turned out the lights and shut off anything that would draw from the emergency generator, leaving on only the essentials.

Maybe that was it. A romantic fire and lots of good wine, Kerin pondered, curled up comfortably on the floor with her back resting against one of the chairs. She knew she was tired—she had to be tired after the long drive and all the strain she'd been under—but somehow felt content to simply sit there and talk.

What had started as one of the worst days of her life had turned out to be rather nice.

\* \* \* \*

The storm was a bitch, and there wasn't much doubt it was going to be days before they could get out. Jesse wondered if the pretty doctor realized just how much time they were destined to spend together.

Thank God he hadn't stopped to help an overweight redneck who didn't believe in personal hygiene or a little old lady with a heart condition and a religious objection to the consumption of alcohol in her presence. He came up to the cabin to get away from people, and if

he had to get stuck in the middle of a blizzard with another human being, he was damned glad it was a beautiful, intelligent young woman. Yes, she'd been uptight as hell at first, but that seemed to have passed. Since there was nothing to do but talk, she'd hesitantly given him a few more details about her life as she relaxed. The wine probably didn't hurt either, he thought wryly.

The clock on the mantle chimed, and she glanced up. Her eyes were fringed with long lashes that sent shadows across her smooth cheeks. "Is it really that late?"

It was, and he'd been up early, splitting wood in case the storm became the reality the weathercaster predicted. "Yes. Let me make sure you have extra blankets. It's usually pretty comfortable upstairs but the way the temperature is dropping, you never know."

"I don't think it's fair for me to kick you out of your bed." She shook her head, honey blonde hair brushing her shoulders. Her features were delicate, almost fragile, and her mouth soft.

His smile was crooked. "With only one bedroom, I don't see how else to arrange things. Needless to say, I didn't buy this place with the intention of having a lot of guests. It's no problem. I can sleep on the couch and keep the fire going." He got to his feet. "I think I have an extra toothbrush in the cabinet and I find you something to sleep in."

She stood also, her slender body dwarfed by his flannel shirt, concealing those enticing curves, which was a damned pity because he'd liked what he'd seen before. "I feel like such an imposition."

"You aren't," he said, and surprisingly meant it. It had been a while since he'd had a nice home-cooked meal with an articulate, interesting woman. Usually, women either dated him for his looks, or his bank account, and neither scenario turned him on. Sure, he was glad he was attractive enough that he got noticed, but he really just wasn't out to get laid as often as possible.

Someday, he wanted more. Sex was great, of course, but casual sex felt all wrong. He didn't do that often—in fact, almost never—and the few times he had, he'd regretted it. During the several serious

relationships in his thirty-three years, he had learned that affection made all the difference in the level of pleasure when you made love.

So why was he thinking that way right now about the lovely but mysterious Dr. Kerin Smith? They didn't even know each other.

She went up the stairs first, slender in the flickering inadequate light. He followed, intent on getting her the blankets, finding the extra toothbrush he had in a drawer somewhere, and getting the hell back downstairs as fast as possible.

There were built-in cabinets in the pine walls, one of the features he'd been impressed with when he looked at the house, and he took out a couple blankets for himself and an extra, in case she needed it. Rummaging through his dresser, he found her a tee-shirt that said University of Wisconsin across the front, the badger logo faded from years of washing. It was his favorite; the one he wore the most often in the summer, and why he wanted her to wear that particular shirt was some sort of irrational male fantasy.

He liked the idea of his shirt next to her bare skin.

What an idiot.

Kerin accepted the shirt with a soft murmur of gratitude. When he produced the toothbrush, she smiled at him warmly, the simple curve of her lips taking his breath away. Pale and disheveled, she'd even been pretty. When she smiled, she was positively gorgeous. He'd always been a sucker for a great smile.

"I can live without a lot of things," she told him. "A toothbrush isn't one of them."

"Toothpaste in the drawer," he said, still mesmerized, hoping she didn't notice his stare. "If you need anything else, help yourself. I'll be right down on the couch."

She stood, looking back at him with a hint of uncertainty in her lovely eyes. "I feel terribly guilty about this. Are you sure?"

"Positive." His reply was firm. "If you'll let me brush my teeth first, the upstairs is all yours and I'll get out of your hair."

Jesse made fast work of the before bed essentials, glad he made it

a point to keep everything neat and clean, considering his unexpected company. When he came out of the bathroom, he saw she'd changed already with a small twist in the pit of his stomach. The UWM shirt had been a good choice. It came to about mid-thigh, showing off her long slender legs, and the worn material molded nicely to the curves of her breasts. The swing of blonde hair over her shoulders contrasted with the dark blue material, and she looked like some delectable young college coed. She sat on the bed, obviously waiting for the bathroom.

Jesus, he was actually getting a hard-on, he realized, and it happened so damned fast his cock was already halfway to a full erection. He flushed slightly, hoping she didn't notice the telltale bulge in his jeans. "Good night," he said abruptly, turning for the stairs.

"Wait." The word was soft. She added on a breath, "Please."

He really needed to get out of his bedroom. The very tempting Dr. Smith perched on the edge of his bed was a little too much apparently for him to ignore. At least his unruly body. His mind recognized damned well he didn't know much about her.

Reluctantly, he turned around. "Yes?"

Her gaze shimmered and her mouth trembled, just a small quiver. "I don't have the slightest clue as how to say this."

"Say what?" he asked, trying to seem nonchalant.

She brushed a stray lock of shining hair from her cheek and took a deep breath. "Would you like to stay? I mean, up here? With me?"

Jesse registered the offer with a sense of the unreal. Was she serious? Apparently she *was* serious, for her cheeks held high color, but her chin was lifted and she met his gaze directly. She added almost inaudibly, "Together."

When he didn't speak at once, the spots of embarrassment deepened, and she stammered, "I don't do this sort of thing, I swear it, but—"

"Yes."

She stopped talking. “Yes?”

“Yes,” he repeated, almost tersely. “Yes, I want to stay up here with you. And I don’t do this sort of thing either, for the record.” He grinned, a wry twist of his mouth. “If you are at all observant, Dr. Smith, you might see my thoughts aren’t exactly as pure as the white stuff outside either.”

At full mast now thanks to her invitation, his erection was obvious, and she finally realized it, her blue eyes widening slightly as she stared at his crotch. “I do see that.”

“It’s damned embarrassing.” His laugh was rueful as he moved toward the bed. “Just seconds ago I hoped you wouldn’t notice it and think I was some sort of pervert. You were a nervous wreck when I first picked you up.”

“I’ve been a wreck for quite some time and it has nothing to do with you.”

Later, he would have to pursue that cryptic remark, but right now he wanted nothing more than to touch her. Jesse reached down and took her hand, gently pulling her off the side of the bed and to her feet. He slid his arms around her slim waist and she leaned in willingly as he lowered his head.

Her mouth was silky and warm. She tasted like rich wine, and opened for his tongue, kissing him back with shy, but arousing, enthusiasm. He’d guessed already from just the few hours in her company that she wasn’t a novice when it came to sex, but not particularly experienced either. She’d been aware of him as a man, but not comfortable about the attraction.

Apparently she grew more comfortable all the time, he thought, kissing her deeply as he felt her fingers fumble with the buttons on his shirt. He helped her strip it off, breaking the kiss just long enough to shrug his arms out of the sleeves, before he pulled her close again for another open-mouthed kiss.

She felt wonderful, so soft and female against his bare chest. His cock actually throbbed, the beat of blood matching the rhythm of his



heart. Moving his mouth to her ear, he kissed the delicate hollow beneath, and murmured, "Let's take this off."

She didn't resist when he tugged the tee-shirt off over her head, lifting her arms in cooperation. Jesse couldn't help but take in a ragged breath. Her body was pretty much how he had imagined: slender, her breasts not large but beautifully formed, and just the right size for her delicate frame. They were tipped with rosy pointed nipples he couldn't wait to taste.

"It's warm in the bed," he suggested in a husky voice.

Her fingers slid down his torso and fumbled with the fastening at the top of his jeans. "Take these off and we'll get warm then."

"Gladly. You, too, though." He ran his finger along the elastic of her bikini underwear, feeling her smooth warm skin, noting that though the woman currently lowering his zipper dressed conservatively, she wore very slinky black lacy panties.

What a turn on.

Jesse slid them down, his hands lingering on her bare ass. It was firm and nicely shaped. In turn, she shoved his briefs and jeans down his hips. Slender fingers brushed his erection.

His laugh was a short expulsion of breath and Jesse could feel his heart pound. He stepped out of his pants, watching her slip into the bed. Those same blue eyes that had been so wide and dark with fear earlier held an entirely different light, but he sensed what was happening at this moment was just as much fueled by whatever sent her running.

Because she *was* running from something. He didn't have to be a genius to figure that out.

That meant he was probably really taking advantage of her and the situation even though she'd made the suggestion. They both had quite a bit of wine too, before, with, and after dinner.

Really, he shouldn't fuck her.

But damn it, he wanted to in the worst way. Even on such short acquaintance, he'd discovered she was exactly his type. Smart, driven,

hard-working, and he'd always had a thing for blondes. That body too, was exactly right, trim and toned and feminine in every single way.

Yeah, as much as he might second guess this decision down the line, right now he was pretty sure he couldn't stop if he wanted to anyway. His rock hard dick was definitely in charge at the moment.

Jesse climbed in next to her and slipped his arms around her for another kiss, this one so hot it would melt steel girders. Her hands ran over his back and up again as they pressed into each other, and he could feel wonderful pressure of her stomach on his stiff cock. His balls actually ached and the warm soft sensation of her naked body against him was enough alone to make him explode like some horny adolescent.

"God, you feel good," he murmured, tangling his fingers in her hair. "I hoped you couldn't tell I was fantasizing about this when we were sitting downstairs, but I must have sent the vibe anyway."

Kerin gazed at him, her hands on his shoulders, her soft mouth slightly parted. "The important thing to me is that you wouldn't have done anything about it if I hadn't asked you."

With a light laugh, he nuzzled her neck and kissed his way lower. "How do you know?"

"I just do somehow. I think I'm a pretty good judge of character. Oh ...yes..."

There was no way to suppress his purely male inner grin as her voice trailed off breathlessly when he took a nipple into his mouth. He lightly suckled at first, and discovered quickly that she not only liked that, she loved it. Her body arched convulsively and the low moan that came from her throat was the sexiest thing he'd heard in a long time.

Fine with him. He thought breasts were God's gift to the human male, and if she liked having her perfect tits touched, kissed and sucked, well hell, he was just the right man for the job.

He liked putting his mouth other places, too, and after a few

minutes of breast play that had her panting and shifting impatiently under his mouth and hands, he moved south.

Even with the blast of the wind outside actually rattling the windows, he could hear her shift in breathing. Jesse inhaled her female fragrance as he nuzzled her pubic hair, his hands suggestively putting pressure on her inner thighs. Kerin parted for him with willingness, and he began to lick her pussy in long slow strokes, tonguing her clitoris, then sweeping downward, tantalizing the delicate nerve-endings.

The lady in his bed really, really liked it.

She came quickly, her whole body quivering as she climaxed. Legs wide open, knees bent, she gave an incoherent scream of enjoyment and arched into the teasing pressure of his mouth. He kept her on that peak for as long as possible, until she tugged at his hair and said weakly, "Oh God, stop, Jesse, please. I can't take it anymore."

"Sure." He adjusted upward between her legs and gave her a smile, glad she'd just had an obviously satisfying wild orgasm in case he didn't last. "But if you don't mind..."

With his hand, he guided his cock to her pussy and began to enter her.

Tightness, wet exquisite heat...oh yeah. He was glad he'd made her come first.

"Don't worry," she gasped, her face flushed and her hands on his shoulders. "I don't mind at all."

\* \* \* \*

It was something she never did. It wasn't her. In her life, she'd never had a one night stand. She'd never even dreamt of sleeping with a stranger.

However, she didn't regret it at the moment. Not with the long solid feel of his cock sliding into her, not with the muscled strength of

his shoulders hot and hard under her clutching fingers.

The storm outside wasn't the only one she was experiencing.

Usually she wasn't vocal during sex, but as she felt the full length of his erection sheath itself to the hilt, Kerin moaned.

Loudly.

Shit, she'd have to be mortified later, because it felt so damned good and she really couldn't help it.

Braced on his arms above her, Jesse had an intense expression on his face, his dark eyes shielded by partially lowered thick lashes. He slid backwards and thrust inside her again, and she felt his wide chest heave against her breasts. "Oh man..."

Her thoughts exactly. Well, not thoughts. Were thoughts possible when your body was on fire?

No, she discovered in the next minutes, they weren't.

Either her good-looking rescuer had some special skill, or Michael, who was her first and only other sexual partner, hadn't done something right. This wasn't anything like the unmemorable sex she remembered. This was different. Wild, exciting, unrestrained, and probably the most reckless thing she'd done in her life, but fantastic just the same.

She slid her fingers into his thick dark hair and dragged his face to hers for a kiss. He obliged with flattering enthusiasm, and the spike of his tongue into her mouth mimicked the same pumping motion of his lower body as he drove into her pussy over and over.

She was going climax again, which amazed her. She'd never had a vaginal orgasm in her life, but as he continued the erotic motion of his lower body, plunging into her time and again, she felt an overwhelming pleasure and began to reach for that peak.

"I can't wait," Jesse said, almost simultaneously with her first shudder. "God, I'm coming."

Kerin clutched at him wildly, probably leaving scratches on his arms. He went still and taut, his tall body racked with convulsive tremors and she could feel the liquid surge of his release as they

trembled together. Her pussy milked his cock and he gave it all to her there was little doubt, for they remained that way until they both were spent, limp, and out of breath.

With Michael, in the aftermath, there was always a certain awkwardness, but somehow it didn't feel that way. Jesse held her, his warm breath fanning her temple, and Kerin reveled in the intimacy of their joined bodies.

Why on earth would it be more comfortable with a complete stranger? A man she'd known less than a day?

Jesse laughed finally and eased free, looking delicious and utterly masculine with dark hair falling over his brow and a wickedly satisfied smile. He fell to his back, put an arm around her, and tugged her body next to him. "I have one word. Wow."

It was suddenly as if all the events of the day rushed in and piled on top of her. Tired did not even begin to describe the contented lethargy of her body. "Yeah," she murmured, liking the solid feel of his much larger body next to hers. His skin held a faint clean scent of sweat. "Good word choice."

"I'm glad you liked it." He looked at her from under the fringe of his lashes. "I thought it was incredible."

"I'm glad you care if I liked it," she said without thinking. "And yes, it was incredible."

"Of course, I would care."

"Not necessarily," she muttered against his sweat-sheened chest.

"Is Smith your real last name?"

Well, she supposed she owed him that much. "No. Burke."

"Care to tell me why you lied?"

"No," she replied and drifted into a contented sleep.

## Chapter Four

Thea Benedict fingered her glass, the rhythm of the music throbbing like a giant, macabre heartbeat. Perched on the stool, she sipped the now tepid beverage in her hand and waited.

Waited.

Too much smoke, too many people, too much money for a single glass of chardonnay she had nursed for over an hour.

Once again she scanned the room.

*Damn, there he is.*

Medium height, with a shock of dark brown hair with just a hint of silver at the temples and that signature hawk-like nose...

Those eyes, too. So cool, so assessing as his gaze swept over the room.

Donovan.

*Bingo.* His gaze swept past her, like a cold touch. She didn't think he smiled. That wasn't precisely what you would call the expression on his face. But one corner of his mouth lifted and he shouldered his way through the crowd toward the man sitting at the bar.

Yeah, they had set up a meeting and it wasn't something that could apparently be discussed in the office.

It was hot, but she felt chilled all of a sudden. She watched the seemingly casual greeting, making sure she sat back in the farthest corner of the bar and kept her head down, though she doubted with her exaggerated makeup and skimpy clothing either of them would spot her. She was just one of many young women who populated these types of hot spots and besides, they had serious business to discuss.

Murder.

Seeing them meet like this wasn't proof, but it was sure as hell a good start. She smiled at the bartender and ordered another pricey glass of wine.

\* \* \* \*

Jesse crouched down and set two more logs on the glowing embers, suppressing a shiver. It was pretty cold in the cabin and the less than hospitable conditions outside weren't helping a bit. Part of the problem, of course, was he had fallen into a very satisfying deep sleep and warmth had not been an issue with a beautiful naked woman curled comfortably next to him. Normally he wasn't much for cuddling after sex, but he'd had no problem drifting off with his pretty guest's firm delectable ass pressed against his groin as they lay together; his front to her graceful back. They'd slept that way, with her in his arms, and when he woke up and registered her warm, soft body against him and remembered what happened, he'd been amazed it wasn't just some bizarre—but incredible—dream.

She smelled damned good, like flowers and heated woman. Her scent was still on his skin and he knew it would be on his sheets.

It made his cock stiffen if he thought about it, and the really, really good news was with the wind still shrieking outside like a runaway train, there really wasn't much to do except go upstairs and crawl right back into bed once he built up the fire.

Once the blaze was crackling nicely, he did just that.

Kerin was still sound asleep, her silky hair spread over the pillow, and the depth of her fatigue was evident in the way she didn't even stir as he eased back in next to her under the blankets. He fitted his body to hers and tried to keep his attention off his undeniably wayward dick. In the light of day, without wine and whatever drove her down the obscure county road in the first place, he hoped she didn't regret sleeping with him.

He didn't regret a thing. As far as he was concerned, they could stay in bed until the snow melted in the spring. She'd been both passionate and responsive as hell, and it was such a turn-on to make love to a woman who obviously really enjoyed it. His last serious girlfriend had been pretty lukewarm over the sexual part of their relationship and it was part of the reason he held off proposing. In every other way they'd been really compatible, but he always had the sense he was being given a gift when they went to bed together. Not all women were created equal in the sexuality department and he understood that, but sex was a part of any serious intimate relationship. Though an emotional and intellectual connection was just as important as good sex, still, it *was* important.

Dr. Burke had that part nailed down just fine.

His hand rested on her bare stomach and very slowly he inched it upward until he cupped one of her beautiful breasts. It fit perfectly in his palm, firm and resilient, and he tested the weight of it lightly, cradling the tantalizing flesh with his fingers. Her nipple hardened as his thumb brushed it, and for the first time, she stirred a little and sighed in her sleep.

Damn, he was really hard. Cock-throbbing, balls-aching hard. Jesse had no idea if she would even be receptive to the idea of making love again, but from her response the night before, he was going to take a gamble and try to convince her.

Very lightly, he nuzzled her neck, brushing her hair aside to expose the vulnerable column to his mouth. Kerin's eyelashes fluttered a little.

He squeezed her breast just a little and kissed her shoulder. "Good morning."

"Hmm..."

"It's ten degrees outside." He kept his voice low, licking a path across her collarbone. "But in this bed, it's hotter than hell in my opinion. I turned the generator back on but it will take a while for the house to warm back up. We'd be better off to just stay here."



Her eyes opened fully then, and he felt her tense for a moment, as she were confused over where she was, but to his relief, she relaxed almost immediately. “Oh.”

Not quite certain what that one word meant, he continued to lightly cup her breast and hold her close. His erection pressed against her hip, and there was no way she could miss it. “I’ve been up for a little while,” he said with a hint of dry humor. “In more ways than one, obviously.”

“I can feel that.” She rolled to her back and looked at him, all sleepy-eyed and gorgeously tousled. When she smiled, he felt his heart begin to beat faster. “I haven’t slept like that in months. Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me.” He grinned, sliding his hand to the other breast and teasing the nipple. “Anything I’ve done has been entirely my pleasure.”

“Not yours exclusively. If you’ll give me a minute, I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be right here.” Jesse rolled to his back and put his arms behind his head as he watched her slide from the bed. She gave a small shiver as her feet touched the chilly floor, and she practically ran to the bathroom. The sight of her nude body made his stiff penis pulse even more, and he couldn’t help but feel a wry twinge of humor at the tent he made in the blankets. Males did have some advantages when it came to the human reproductive process, but there was one huge negative. If you were aroused, it wasn’t really a state secret.

The toilet flushed and he could hear water running, and when Kerin emerged and dashed back to the bed, she carried a whiff of minty toothpaste and her shining hair was smooth and untangled. She slipped back in beside him and he gave a small exclamation as her hand slid across his bare chest. “Hey, that’s damned cold.”

“Is it?” She looked innocent but amusement glinted in her eyes. “Feel free to warm me up.”

“That will be no problem.” He shifted to roll on top of her and

kissed her urgently, wanting to take his time but finding it difficult. He hadn't lied, he'd been awake for quite a while, and his cock was just as awake and incredibly eager for a repeat of last night's performance. She didn't seem opposed either, for her arms slipped around his neck and her nipples were tight points against the heated skin of his chest.

It might be bitter cold outside, but he was burning up. "Correct me if I'm wrong," he murmured against her lips, "but last night was damned good and I have feeling things are only going to get better."

"You aren't wrong." Kerin looked at him through half-lowered lashes. "But I do have a question. I know it's like locking the barn door after the cow has wandered off, but do you have any condoms?"

Why he was startled by the notion was a mystery, other than he was so engrossed in his own need. Protection was something he was usually obsessive over. Jesse blinked, and then regretfully shook his head. "No. I come here alone and I am not some adolescent who cares them in his wallet. But don't worry. I'm perfectly healthy."

"Your assurances are appreciated, but I am a doctor and last night was unforgivably reckless. We're both smarter than that, I would think."

"Thinking doesn't have much to do with this." He rubbed his cock between her legs, not penetrating but just nudging her clit. She already felt wet and slick and a slight sweat broke out over his skin. "But you're right. I'm usually a lot smarter than that. I'm going to assume you keep pretty good track of your sexual partners too, Doctor."

"I've only had one." She rubbed the bottom of her foot on the back of his calf in a lazy, suggestive movement. "And let's not even think about him right at this moment. After we broke up I got tested, just in case. I'm fine."

"So there's no reason to stop." He moved his mouth seductively to the point where her pulse beat wildly at the base of her throat.

"That depends how you look it." Her voice had a throaty quality

that really, really made him need to be inside her.

He just let the comment slide by, because he wasn't interested in stopping. He wasn't even sure he could, not with the silkiness of her inner thighs against his hips, her body open and willing, and his cock touching the entrance to paradise.

To make sure she was ready, he smoothed his hand down over the taut plane of the stomach and touched her. A satisfying wetness coated his fingers as he probed the softness of her pussy, and she gave a small sigh as he slid one finger completely inside her vagina.

The lady definitely was ready.

"Uhm...Jesse, that feels very nice, but I know first hand you can do better."

There was just the smallest hint of a southern accent in her voice and he liked the way she said his name. "You want something a bit more substantial?" he teased back, looking into her eyes.

"As soon as possible." Her breath fanned his shoulder and she rubbed her nipples seductively against his chest.

"We have all day, you know." Sliding his finger free, he adjusted his position. The tip of his cock tested her vaginal opening.

"That sounds marvelous." A small gasp escaped her lips. Her eyes closed and she spread her legs open wider as he began to push firmly inside. "And that *feels* marvelous."

"You're telling me." Jesse briefly shut his eyes as her body closed around his cock. The beautiful doctor was pleasurably tight, but her lubricated passage took his whole length to his balls in a perfect, exquisite fit.

It felt every bit as good as the night before, so his hope he might last a bit longer was probably doomed, he thought hazily as he began to thrust in and out in long, sure strokes. Hopefully Kerin would be as quick to climax, as she had been the first time.

"Oh...oh...oh." She grasped his biceps and lifted her pelvis into the rhythm of his movements, maximizing the depth of each thrust of his cock, and a flush invaded her cheeks as she moaned.

The soft sounds of her enjoyment were just so damned sexy. But then again, everything about her was sexy from her shining blonde hair to her dainty bare feet. He found it hard to believe she'd only had one lover in her life, for surely men were hitting on her on a daily basis.

If they knew how hot she was in bed, they'd be mobbing her.

The telltale tightening around his cock told him the friction of their intercourse was having the desired effect. If he were a judge, he'd guess the way her fingers dug in as she clutched his arms meant she was getting close to orgasm.

Good timing. So was he. His testicles felt ready to burst.

"Harder?" His breath whistled out of his lungs so forcefully with each breath he could barely ask a one word question.

"Yes." Frantic hands let go of his arms and gripped his ass, as if she could move him deeper into her hungry body. "Harder. Faster. Oh please."

He obeyed, increasing his speed, flexing his lower body as he drove in more forcefully and gave her what she obviously needed.

She cried out as she came, her slender body going tense as she gasped and trembled beneath him. The rapturous wash of acute release hit him as the rush of sperm exploded from his body and poured into her. He shut his eyes and held there above her on arms that shook with the enormity of the physical pleasure.

It took a while, but gradually he became aware again of the howling wind at the window, and the coolness of the air on his heated skin. Lifting his lashes, he peered down at Kerin's face. Still breathing erratically, she stared back.

He was pretty sure she felt exactly like he did. Speechless.

Finally he did manage a weak laugh. "I was right, I guess."

"How so?" Tendrils of blonde hair spilled over the pillowslip, framing her oval face. Against his chest, her breasts felt firm and full. Small hands still cupped his buttocks.

"How the hell it's possible I don't know, but that was even

better.”

A small languid smile touched her mouth. “Apparently not all orgasms are created equal. Before you, I didn’t know.”

*Before you.* It sounded very intimate for two people who were still virtual strangers in most ways. “Since we’re both by our own admission indulging in behavior that isn’t normal for us, I’d say the physical chemistry is pretty powerful.” Jesse eased his softening cock from her slick warm vagina and propped himself on one elbow beside her. Very gently, he touched her cheek. “I’m not going to ask questions, but I admit I’m curious as to why you lied about your name. Who wouldn’t be?”

The woman next to him said nothing, but she looked away briefly before meeting his eyes again. “I have a very good reason, Jesse, and maybe I’ll tell you later. Right now, I feel like the weather is a gift. It’s...protecting me. The rules are all suspended because we’re isolated here together. It explains last night, I think, though I have to admit I’m the first one to be shocked I decided to sleep with a stranger. This time yesterday we hadn’t even met.”

“I don’t normally cart home pretty doctors and take them to bed either,” he pointed out slowly, registering her use of the words “protecting” and “isolated”. “I’m obviously attracted to you—really, really attracted—but I don’t assume things about people, so you don’t have to worry. You’re afraid. I knew it yesterday. You’re running, too, which has to be unusual for someone in your position and profession.”

“Very insightful, Mr. McCutcheon.” There was a careful lack of inflection in her voice.

“Hey, I just promised I wouldn’t pry.”

“Good, because I’d love to forget about my problems until I have to face them again. It might be a bit impractical, but you know, I’ve spent entirely too much of my life lately looking over my shoulder.” She shifted, stretching a little, and the sheet drifted down over those very tempting breasts. “I don’t know if you can understand this, but I

just want to be free to do something I want. To be a little reckless. To not have to listen for my beeper, my cell, or my phone at home.”

He understood, none better. That was why he bought the cabin in the first place. Softly he asked, “I take it I am part of your current reckless escape?”

“A very good part.” She reached out a hand and touched his chest, and then let her fingers drift south. “Like you said, we have all day.”

He might be wildly curious about what was going on, but he wasn’t going to turn down fantastic sex, especially if she really meant the term “all day”. His still half-rigid cock reacted to the glide of her fingertips over the sensitive crest.

“All day,” he repeated and sucked in a quick breath.

\* \* \* \*

It was like something you would read in a romance novel, Kerin decided in the hazy aftermath of another mind-blowing orgasm, her whole body still tingling. A very, very sexy erotic romance novel in which the handsome hero simply can not get enough of the heroine and keeps her in his bed while he has his wicked way with her over and over.

And she loves every minute of it.

Jesse’s breath fanned her cheek as he exhaled raggedly. “Jesus,” he muttered. “I’m not eighteen anymore but I sure as hell feel like it. I’m not keeping count or anything, but...well...Jesus.”

He had a very hard, very sexy ass, and Kerin lightly rubbed her palms over the bare skin, her legs spread open wide as he rested between them. His cock still felt large and long inside her even after his climax. She murmured, “Being eighteen is overrated if you ask me. Besides, you are doing just fine and though I’m not exactly keeping count either, I agree wholeheartedly with your assessment of the situation.”

He lifted his head a little and smiled, his dark eyes holding both

smoldering heat and amusement. "I'm inspired, I think, by one very hot lady."

It was odd, but she had never ever thought of herself as being particularly sensual in nature. Maybe the perception had been fueled by her general ambivalence toward sex; maybe it had been part of her lackluster relationship with Michael in the first place.

Maybe she hadn't met anyone yet like Jesse McCutcheon.

She gave a small breathless laugh. "Take my word on it. I am not like this normally. I'm pretty sure my fiancée found me a bit boring in bed."

"Then he was an idiot." Jesse lowered his mouth and kissed her lightly, and then slid his cock free and held out his hand. "Come on. Let's go take a shower and make something to eat. It's hard to tell because of the storm, but I'd guess it's past noon. I don't know about you, but I have to keep my strength up."

She laughed at his theatrical leer, but he was right. Her body felt pleasantly damp and a little sticky from repeated intercourse and she did register hunger along with a delicious physical contentment.

Plus the idea of showering with her handsome host was a pretty appealing one.

Thirty minutes later, dressed in another one of his oversized shirts and socks, she scrambled eggs as he flipped bacon. He claimed it was the one thing he could actually cook without ruining it. They ate by the fire again in companionable silence, and she couldn't help but be amazed as he polished off a fourth piece of toast.

"I'm a growing boy," he said with his heart-stopping grin as he rose to take their plates. "Besides, I am pretty sure I worked off quite a few calories this morning."

"What a fabulous idea for a diet." Kerin felt her lips twitch.

"You hardly need a diet. You are little on the slender side, not that I am objecting to anything about your body, don't get me wrong."

She had lost weight lately. The loss of appetite was directly related to stress and anxiety and she was well-aware she wasn't eating

properly but couldn't help it. "I'm not usually quite this thin," she admitted.

"You look terrific." He had a carefully neutral expression on his face as he rinsed their plates and put them in the dishwasher. "I'm obviously a fan of every sexy inch of you."

He was true to his word and not prying, though had the tables been turned, she knew she would be wildly curious if he was the one being so secretive.

Maybe she'd tell him everything.

Later.

Right now she just didn't want to think about it.

The fire cracked in a comforting soft sound and the howling wind outside made the room even cozier. Kerin stared at the leaping flames and carefully kept her mind as blank as possible. Jesse came back with another piece of wood, expertly stacked it on the blaze and sank down next to her. He clasped muscular arms around his knees and asked, "So what happened with the fiancé? I know you don't want to talk about whatever else is going on, and that's fine. But tell me about him."

She glanced over. "Michael? Not much to tell, I realize now. We were pre-med students together and then got into med school at the same time, both of us accepted to Indiana University. He wanted cardiology from the beginning, and I thought about several different specialties, but we both knew we just were driven to become physicians. Obviously, some couples manage to balance that lifestyle, but neither of us proved to be very good at it. I know doctors married to doctors, but it isn't easy to make it. We tried living together and were more ships passing in the night than anything. When we applied for residencies, we went our separate ways."

"I can see the time issue would be a problem."

"It was for us. I'm just glad we didn't actually get married and then have to go through a divorce. It's a little old-fashioned maybe, but I want to know when and if I ever get married it is a forever deal."



“I’m the same way.” Jesse’s face reflected approval and the corner of his mouth—that mouth so capable of giving spectacular pleasure—lifted a little. “One time only for me.”

“When you meet the right girl.” She meant it to come out teasingly but somehow it didn’t sound that way.

*Oh no...this is the worst timing ever.*

“Yeah,” he said, staring at her, the small smile fading from his face.

No way. There was no way either of them, at less than a days acquaintance, could even be thinking anything of the sort.

Love at first sight. She didn’t buy into it. Animal lust, yes. There wasn’t much question, considering the night before and this morning’s sex-a-thon.

Of course, she hadn’t exactly bought into the animal lust thing before the gorgeous Mr. McCutcheon picked her up in a blizzard either.

It was crazy. Not just what she had already done, but what she was thinking.

Clearing her throat, she switched the subject. “What are they saying about the storm now?”

“At least another day of blowing like this and then everyone can start to try and dig out. Where we are, the road will be last priority, believe me.”

Another few days then, at least.

Thank God.

## Chapter Five

The computer screen flashed and he typed in the code, frowning as the account came up. Still no activity.

*Well, fuck.*

Nathan Henderson sat back in his chair, feeling frustration rise. As far as he could tell—and he'd hacked into everything possible—Dr. Burke hadn't used her bank card, any credit cards, or her cell phone for at least four days. The tracking device attached to her car had lost the signal somewhere north of the Wisconsin state line, probably due some pretty bad weather they were having up there.

In short, he had no idea where the lady might be.

The trouble with dealing with someone like her was she was smart. It irked him to think so far she'd managed to circumvent his every effort to pin something down but somehow she had. Was she now running scared?

Yes, she was. Motivation was the question.

He liked to think he was more cerebral than having to resort to underhanded tactics like the past few weeks, but given the situation he hadn't had a choice. He was operating outside the lines, trying to keep things as low profile as possible.

For some very good reasons.

There wasn't much doubt she'd have to come back eventually. No one with a full lucrative practice who spent all that time going through medical school would let it go easily.

There was no choice but to wait until she resurfaced and see what happened next.

\* \* \* \*

It was bone-freezing cold, the wind chill in below zero double digits, and probably dangerous to be outside for long but at least the blizzard conditions had abated. Finally.

The drift outside was so high Jesse couldn't wedge the front door open, the amount of snow impassable from sheer volume. He'd kept the back clear by going for wood every few hours and had a semi-decent path to the lean-to where he stored the firewood he replenished each spring, but that was the wrong direction.

Jesse waded through waist deep drifts, avoiding the even deeper ones, and finally made it to the top of the drive. His truck at the bottom was only about half-visible and the notion of clearing the winding track back to the road was daunting. He had a snowmobile for just such emergencies and that was going to be the only option for right now if they had to go somewhere. It would probably take him a few more days to get enough snow out from behind the vehicle to be able to back it up, which was fine because by then they might have gotten to the side roads. Kerin's car, too, needed to be towed and repaired before it was a big deal to go anywhere. Luckily for him, the company was on the usual winter lull and between large jobs, so he'd planned on staying for a few weeks anyway.

The more time he got to spend with Kerin the better, in his opinion. She didn't seem to have cabin fever either for someone used to a hectic life. They spent a good deal of time talking—and in bed—and it was proving to be the best vacation of his life.

Trudging back, he stamped into the garage through the back door, shedding his snow-covered coat, boots, and gloves, and went back inside, grateful for the warmth. Kerin was in her usual spot by the fireplace, drinking coffee from a thick mug, the expression on her face hard to interpret. She didn't look like a professional woman who was over thirty in one of his oversized shirts, the sleeves rolled up around her slender wrists.

He went and poured himself a cup, curling his hands around the warm porcelain. "It's still pretty rough out there. I'm going to guess even though they say they're getting started on the roads, from the amount of snow and the extent of the drifting the county road crews have their work cut out for them."

Relief showed in the softening of her mouth. "We have a few more days?"

What an interesting way of putting it. *We?*

"At least. I'll get started this afternoon on trying to clear the driveway, but it's so cold I'm not interested in frostbite or killing myself."

"I'm not interested in you doing either of those two things either, so we're on the same page." Her smile was a little wan and she turned and stared at the fire. "If you aren't tired of me being here, I'm more than happy to stay."

Tired of her? Yeah, right. He was so the opposite he was a little off balance. He went in and stood by the mantle, still cradling his cup. "I planned on staying for at least two more weeks. You're welcome to keep me company for as long as you like."

It was amazing, but after the past few days in her company, he meant it.

She shook her head, her soft hair moving against her shoulders. "Not that long. I have to go back. This whole trip was spur of the moment and I have responsibilities. All I told my office staff was to cancel my appointments until they heard from me. They're probably wondering what is going on. Besides, you wanted solitude, didn't you?"

The luminous look in her eyes didn't escape him and tears were not what he expected. One droplet gathered on her lashes and spilled over to slide in a glistening trail down her cheek.

"Solitude is way overrated I've decided since I dragged you here." He set aside his cup and moved toward where she sat curled in the leather chair. He picked her up and settled back down so she rested on

his lap. A muffled laugh of protest escaped, but her head fell into a natural spot on his shoulder and nestled there.

"I'm not a little girl." She belied the protest by curling into him more, one hand grasping the open neck of his shirt, her fingers warm against his skin.

"Amen. And may I say I'm damned glad." Jesse let his mouth graze her hair. Then he asked simply, "Can I help?"

"No." A small sob came, and then another, and she began to cry, quivering against him, her face pressed into his shirt. It came and went quickly, which didn't surprise him because whatever was happening, he'd already discovered she was both intelligent and normally self-confident.

Eventually she lifted her damp face and swiped at her damp cheeks with one rolled up sleeve. She whispered, "Sorry."

"Don't be. We all need a meltdown now and again."

"Artemis is missing."

Since he had no idea who Artemis might be, he struggled to come up with an appropriate response and finally decided not to say anything and just let her talk.

She gave something between a watery hiccup and a sigh. "He's just a stray, but I started feeding him and I could see where they might think he was my cat. Well, maybe he *is* my cat. Or was anyway."

The hollow tone of her voice made Jesse hold her just a little tighter, as if the clasp of his arms could protect her. "They?"

"Whoever is...after me."

That didn't sound promising. He remembered all too well how she'd acted when they first got to the cabin. "Stray cats, well, they stray, Kerin."

"His food bowl was smashed to pieces. I leave it on the back deck."

Shit, that did sound malicious. "Maybe you'd better start from the beginning." Jesse added, "If you want, that is. No pressure."

"The trouble is, I have no idea why this is all happening."

Still holding her in the cradle of his arms, he felt an unexpected surge of protectiveness at the vulnerability in her tone. “What *has* happened? Tell me.”

The fire crackled into the resulting silence. Then she cleared her throat. “It started a month ago with a burned out light bulb. Something so simple. I went to change the bulb and noticed there was this...thing. Some kind of electronic device stuck up under the fixture. Obviously I’d changed the bulb before and though it was very small, I noticed there was something strange where it shouldn’t be.”

“What kind of thing?” Jesse frowned.

“A bug. When I called the police they told me it was the kind of thing that monitored any sound in the room. I couldn’t believe it. I’m actually not home all that much to begin with, and even so, I can’t imagine why anyone would bother. It isn’t like I lead an interesting life particularly. I mean...why?”

Since to him she was damned interesting, he suppressed the urge to argue the point, too concerned over the revelation. “Someone is spying on you?”

“I’ve been followed, also. Unless I am imagining it and I don’t think so. It’s escalating, too.” She shivered against him. “It sounds paranoid, but it’s true.”

“All right, I believe you.” He believed that, at the least, *she* really believed it, remembering how frightened she’d been when he first picked her up. He prodded gently, “Define followed.”

A small sigh escaped, brushing his throat. “This is going to sound really circumstantial, I’m afraid. But when you’re living it, it isn’t.”

“Try me.”

“On at least three different occasions I’ve seen a dark car, sedan of some type, behind me in traffic. I don’t mean for a few blocks, I mean from almost the time I leave the house to my destination. The first time it happened I really didn’t think much about it because you know how it is, every once in a while someone just happens to be going to the same place. In my case, it was the hospital, so since

plenty of people go there, I dismissed it. But later the same day I noticed the car again, this time when I went to the office.”

“You’re sure it was the same car?”

“I was sure enough it bothered me. It has happened a couple of other times also, and I’ve even changed my route and it was still there.”

“Okay. I can see with the listening device in the mix, you might have grounds to be suspicious of something like that.”

“There’s more. A couple of days before I left I know there was someone *inside* my house while I was gone during the day, which absolutely freaked me out. Whoever it is can get in. I have a security system but it doesn’t matter.”

His fingers lightly sifted through her hair and he had to tamp down the urge to swear out loud. “That would freak me out, too. How could you tell?”

“When you live alone, you leave things in certain places. I’m pretty “A” personality. The door to the basement was ajar. If you don’t pull on it just a certain way, it cracks back open when the furnace comes on. I make sure to close it well because it’s a habit, and I hadn’t been down there in a week. My computer, too, should have been asleep but the screen was up. I don’t see how anyone could login without my password, but it made me think someone had tried.”

A cracked door and a possible computer malfunction weren’t much to go on, it was true. “My computer has frozen up before and needed a shut down.”

She quivered a little against him. “I know, but it also just *felt* like someone had been in there. It sounds stupid, but it was almost as if the minute I walked in, I knew.”

For whatever reason, he found that the most compelling piece of evidence. He’d always believed human beings had perceptive instincts they didn’t use often enough.

He now understood why she’d been so jumpy. “What made you run? The missing cat?”

“No.” Her head shook where it rested against his shoulder. “Like you, I know they stray, even though the smashed bowl made me cry...”

And she didn’t cry easily, despite what had just happened. That he’d already sensed about her.

“I called the police. Again. I have a feeling they think I’m a nut. They asked a few questions about old boyfriends, that sort of thing, but basically told me since nothing had been stolen and no direct threat was made, there wasn’t much they could do. For several nights I couldn’t sleep, even with a can of pepper spray right next to me. I don’t even think I dozed off. I guess at that point, I was so strung out I just decided to leave so I could think about all of it, try to figure out *why*.” Her smile was a wan tremble of her lips. “I just headed north.”

Wisconsin—this part of it anyway—was always a good place to go and feel you were away from the rest of the world in Jesse’s opinion.

He relished the soft warm feel of her body against him, the fragrance of her hair drifting to him. “You’re safe here.”

“Yes,” she agreed in a quiet voice, “but I can’t stay forever.”

\* \* \* \*

Why did the timing have to be so ironic, Kerin wondered. At any other point in her life she had a feeling she would be elated to have met what she was beginning to suspect was a really incredible man. In terms of time, he should be a stranger, but it didn’t feel that way. Yes, they were still exploring each other lives, digging out little facts as they talked, but—the fabulous physical part of it aside—she felt like she *knew* him somehow.

Now she’d just cried all over him, told him what was going on in her life, and he merely held her and looked thoughtful rather than treat her like the police had, which was with a mental lifted brow and a shrug. She didn’t precisely blame local law enforcement because they



were overworked enough as things were with crimes that had already been committed, but she'd certainly felt let down.

Jesse absently tangled his fingers in her hair, a frown bringing his dark brows together. "It would be interesting to find out why someone would go to all that trouble. Are you involved in a lawsuit of any kind?"

"No, thank God."

"No problem patients or disgruntled colleagues who might want to find anything to discredit you, even if it's done illegally?"

"None I can come up with, and believe me, I've given it a great deal of thought."

"It's puzzling."

It was the same conclusion she'd come to herself. "I agree. As far as I know, I get up, go to work, come home and sleep. Who am I bothering? If I had the slightest idea why I was being harassed, I swear I'd feel better."

"Yeah, the whole unknown enemy thing is a bit hard to handle for anyone."

He had no idea. It had gotten to the point she was so nervous and jumpy if she saw anyone that looked like they might remotely be following her, she nearly panicked. Those two endless nights she'd lain in bed and flinched at every single sound after finding the basement door ajar and the computer screen up. But, if she was being followed, going to a hotel seemed pointless, and maybe even less safe.

"I undress in the dark in my closet because I'm so paranoid about other devices, and I admit I've asked one of my male colleagues—who happens to be six foot six inches tall, to walk me out to my car once the office is closed. I told Glen something vague about a persistent boyfriend and he's been very sweet about it." Jesse felt very solid and male and comforting, and though it wasn't at all her usual style, Kerin could stay curled in his lap forever.

"I doubt sweetness is what makes him so cooperative," Jesse said

dryly. "In case you haven't noticed, Dr. Burke, you're gorgeous."

"Glen is happily married, but thank you. I just hate being so...so...vulnerable. Why should I have to be afraid to walk to my car? Why should I have to be afraid to sleep in my own bed? I'm frustrated and ticked off besides scared."

"Can't say I blame you."

The fire crackled and hissed as resin bubbled from one of the blazing logs, the homey sound and the feel of Jesse's flannel shirt under her cheek a bit surreal. His heart beat in a strong, reassuring rhythm. She said, "I dislike being helpless."

He laughed, his chest lifting with the soft sound. "That I already know about you."

She really didn't want to think about going home, going back to the insecurity and fear. Kerin lifted her head and attempted a smile. "Is that so, Mr. McCutcheon? What else do you know?"

"Plenty." A sexy grin curved his mouth, his easy acceptance of the change in subject a sign of the considerate side of him she found as compelling as his dark eyes and those Hollywood chiseled features.

"Go for it." She shifted just a little, settling her ass more against his groin.

"Okay. Well, for one thing, you're impatient. You like to fix things and set them in neat little piles labeled "done"."

It was pretty insightful. She raised her brows.

"You have a few hang ups. Like giving yourself a break now and then. When something stresses you out, you work harder."

"Is that so?"

"Quiet, woman. I'm playing Freud here." Jesse's hands went to her waist, adjusting her position a little more against his crotch. "I think your perfectionist side gives you grief and makes you probably hard to live with now and then. On the other hand, it makes you a damn good doctor. I'm going to guess you graduated at the top of your class. I can't see it any other way."

She had, and he was damn good. Was she transparent, or was it

just a lucky guess? “Hmm. Maybe. This psychoanalysis is fascinating. Don’t stop now.”

“You grew up in a small town.”

It was true. She was from a small farm town east of Indianapolis. Her grandparents still lived there. Kerin blinked. “How the hell would you know that?”

He shrugged and his gaze dropped to her mouth. “Call it intuition. I have a thing for the wholesome girl next door type. My instincts scream you qualify.”

The husky tone of his voice did all kinds of interesting things to her body. Looking into his dark eyes it was easy to forget the fear, her flight, the storm...everything.

“Maybe,” she confirmed, leaning just a fraction closer. “Let me know when it’s my turn.”

“Go ahead at any time.”

She gave it a shot. “You work too hard, also. It’s a flaw and why you bought this place. The anal thing isn’t just my provenance, for this is the single neatest bachelor place I’ve ever seen. You’re understated by choice. You drive a truck, not a flashy sports car even though you could afford one. You’re practical, almost to a fault. Money is a necessary evil, not a goal.”

A twitch lifted his lips. “Okay. Some of that might be right.”

“You like what you do. You’re content, but not necessarily happy.”

Something flickered in his dark eyes. He said nothing. Their mouths were only an inch apart and she could feel the bulge in his jeans where she sat nestled against him.

Kerin went on, feeling a little as if she was walking over a cliff. “You’d like a family someday. That you’d make time for.”

There was no comment on her accuracy because at that moment he closed the gap between them and took her mouth in a very hot, long kiss. Her arms slipped around his neck and she responded with almost desperate abandon, turning into the embrace, obliterating the

problems waiting for her back in Indiana.

His hand slid up her thigh and since her wardrobe was pretty much limited to his oversized shirts and woolen socks, there was nothing between his questing touch and bare skin. Skillful fingertips brushed her pubic hair and then parted her labia. She made a small sound into his mouth as he penetrated her vaginal opening with a long, invading finger and began to slowly pump it in and out as they kissed.

It felt very, very good, but whenever he touched her it was fantastic. Maybe it was because she felt so comfortable with him she lost her inhibitions, or maybe it was their situation, but it just *was*.

Fate?

Karma.

Whatever. All she knew was she was wet and ready at the touch of his hand. Actually, his gorgeous smile alone did that to her. In her wildest dreams she hadn't expected to ever react to anyone with such intensity.

Kerin spread her thighs wider and dragged her mouth away. She kissed a path along the clean line of his jaw to his ear. She whispered, "Fuck me."

The reaction to the crude suggestion was unmistakable. He jerked a little in surprise, and then gave a low laugh. "Is that an order?"

"Does it need to be?" She lightly bit his earlobe.

"Hell no."

He stood in one swift motion, still holding her, and moved the few feet to just before the fireplace. There was a patterned rug there, done in shades of dark red, ochre and navy blue and Jesse laid her down and jerked the shirt she wore up above her waist. "Spread your legs."

After all, she'd asked for it. On her back, she did as instructed, watching through half-closed eyes as he unfastened his jeans and shoved them down his hips. The length of his erection jutted upward, long and already beaded with semen at the tip. He knelt between her open thighs, pushed them apart a little more, and leaned over her as

she felt the probing pressure of his cock.

Then he entered her in one long forceful glide that wrung a gasp from her lips.

“Like this?” Jesse withdrew almost all the way, and then plunged back in, his surging length impaling her body, braced over her with his arms on either side of her shoulders. His face held a flush of sexual arousal.

“Yes.” She arched into the motion of his lower body, accepting the possession.

He leaned closer and kissed her, but not the usual seductive kisses she was coming to know pretty well, but instead a passionate, crushing kiss that matched the intemperate wildness of the way he was taking her.

A part of her she didn’t even know existed loved it. She’d never talked dirty, never played at sex.

Rapturous pleasure, the bright cackle of the fire, the cool rug at her back...

“Touch yourself,” Jesse said in a thick voice. “Make it happen.”

It was going to happen anyway, but she did as he said, sliding her hand between them to find her clitoris, slowly massaging as he continued to thrust into her throbbing pussy.

The explosion was fast, it was impetuous, and she cried out as it happened, the shuddering joy of her orgasm making her body quake. Jesse went very still, his eyes closed as he groaned and she could feel the answering pulse of his ejaculation as he climaxed.

It took a little while before he stirred, his lashes—too unfairly dark and long to belong to a male—lifting and one brow going upward. “Is that what you had in mind?” he asked, still braced over her.

Every muscle in her body was so lax she could barely move. Kerin smiled with languid teasing contentment. “We might have to practice it more but it was a good start. I’m learning a lot about sex—about myself—from you, Mr. McCutcheon.”

She *wasn't* teasing, despite the tone of her voice. The nasty storm had been a gift from Mother Nature and Jesse was a tutor extraordinaire when it came to exploring a part of life she'd pretty much neglected until this trip and their forced seclusion together.

"I'm learning, too." He kissed her softly, with lingering pressure.

"You? I think you have a pretty good handle on how it all works." She could feel his cock, still big inside her.

A muffled laugh stirred her hair. "I try to give it my best shot each time, no pun intended. Are you sure you don't want to stay here for the next ten days? Think of how much more *studying* we could do."

"I'm sure I do want to stay." She reached up and touched his face. "But it isn't practical. Whatever is happening, I still have obligations to my partners and my patients. Leaving was a knee-jerk reaction caused by lack of sleep and too much tension. The idea someone could come into my house just plain scared the hell out of me. I snapped."

It was hard to read his expression, but his easy, compelling smile faded. An irrational part of her wanted for him to keep trying to persuade her, but she was telling the truth, she just couldn't walk away from everything for that long without making arrangements, and she hadn't.

Finally, Jesse shrugged. "Just know you could if you wanted to."

Oh, she was tempted. So much it was disturbing.

## Chapter Six

The truck balked a little after sitting for nearly a week in subzero temps, but it finally turned over and Jesse put his arm over the back of the seat and the tires spun a few times before they took and he rocked backwards down the lane. It was so closely lined by trees it was always a bit tricky in deep snow, but he managed to get to the end and stopped there. The road had finally been plowed, but the big pile of snow at the entrance to his driveway had been a huge pain in his ass to shovel out.

Damn if he didn't have a love/hate relationship with winter, he thought in amusement as he clambered out and started to walk back to the cabin. When it was like this, beautifully quiet and serene, the trees laden with snow, the air crisp and so clean your lungs hurt to inhale it...well, it was magical. However, wielding a snow shovel for over an hour took some of the gloss off of scenery even this lovely.

Kerin's car had been towed into Tomahawk and the garage there had ordered a new part for it. The part was being overnighted and they promised it would be done tomorrow. With the driveway cleared, he should be able to take her into town no problem.

Only it was the last thing he wanted to do for more than one reason.

Yes, he had a feeling he was going to be restless once she left. Never had he settled so fast and easily into a relationship with anyone and though she hadn't said it out loud in his presence, he sensed she felt the same way. They clicked, and it wasn't just sexual, though that part was beyond good, in his opinion.

When he thought about it—and he certainly had been—she was

just what he wanted. Independent, intelligent, sexy, and feminine. His parents would love her, he knew it.

To think about a woman in terms of how she might fit into your life on a permanent basis wasn't something he'd done often. To do so after only knowing her for a week was unheard of, but then again, he'd always believed if he met the right person, he would realize it right away.

Was he falling in love with her?

The answer was maybe he was already past that point.

Since he was sure he didn't want her walking out of his life, he was also sure he wasn't going to let her walk back into a potentially dangerous situation all alone.

Taking more time off work wasn't a problem. Maybe with an unprejudiced outside eye, he could help her figure out what was going on.

If she'd let him.

The front door to the cabin wasn't going to be passable anytime soon, so he skirted around the back and let himself in. His hands were freezing and he took off his heavy gloves and set them on a towel spread on the floor in the little entryway off the kitchen. His boots went next and he wiggled ice cold toes as he took off his coat and hat. Raking his fingers through his hair so it wasn't sticking straight up, he walked through the kitchen and into the main room. Kerin had a book on her lap, open, but wasn't reading, instead she stared out the big window toward the frozen lake. In profile, her delicate features looked a little melancholy.

"We can get out," he said. "I left the truck at the end of the drive in case it starts to drift again tonight. They aren't predicting too much wind, but you never know."

She turned and for a minute her eyes were blank and then she seemed shake herself a little. "That's good news."

"Speak for yourself. Now I'll have to eat my own cooking again." He tried for a light tone but fell a little flat. "Unless, of course, you



want to make a trade.”

Her smooth brow furrowed. “A trade?”

“You give me cooking lessons and I’ll continue your enlightenment in other areas to the utmost of my ability.”

She stared at him uncertainly. Blonde hair fell like silk across her shoulders and her slender legs were curled under her. “I wish I could stay, but—”

“But you can’t, I know. Feel free to say no, but I wondered if maybe I could go back with you. I have another week of vacation planned anyway, and could take more time if I wanted.”

*Please, don’t say no. Please, please, please...*

As the chant echoed in his brain, he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt, he was definitely in love with her. Head over heels, a goner, the proverbial dead duck of all of the clichés, and more. He found he even held his breath as he waited for her answer.

A small, tremulous smile curved her mouth. “I’ve been sitting here thinking about how to ask you just that. It’s too much...I’ve imposed on you already, and God knows what’s happening in my life, but—”

Relief washed over him, so strong it was a bit frightening. “I’ve been sitting around trying to think of how I can get you to stay. In that light, I don’t think imposition is the right word. Besides, I’m picturing you walking alone back into whatever is going on and it bothers the hell out of me. I’d feel better if I was there for a while. Maybe together we can make some sense of it all.”

A hand lifted to push her hair back from her cheek and he noticed it shook a little. “You’re trying for some knight in shining armor award, aren’t you? Fine, you have my vote already. You don’t have to do this.”

“Problem is, babe, I *want* to do it.”

\* \* \* \*

Did he have the slightest idea what he did to her?

It could be all the stress, the romantic trapped-in-the-snowbound-cabin scenario, the fact he was gorgeous, smart, and considerate, not mention a fantastic lover, but Kerin felt as if she was seriously out of her depth.

Maybe it was the sexy, lumberjack look with his tousled dark hair and rugged clothes still damp with snow. Damn it, she even thought his nose being a bit red from the cold outside was attractive.

If Jesse went back to Indiana with her it made the idea of it at least palatable. She wouldn't have to leave him, and she knew she'd feel a lot safer. He just seemed so capable, and she worked in an environment where there were plenty of confident men. The medical profession oozed them out the seams, so it wasn't that quality alone that drew her.

No, it was something else. It was just *him*.

And now he wanted to come back with her. Another week in his arms sounded like heaven.

Except she could be headed back to hell.

"It isn't a fair trade," she said, the flux of her feelings making her throat tight. "A beautiful secluded cabin for a house in the suburbs and all day by yourself while I work? As soon as I get within range of a tower I going to have them start rescheduling the appointments we had to cancel, not to mention the patients I am sure have called in the meantime. Usually my schedule is full a month or more out, so I'll have some long days ahead of me."

Jesse raised his brows. "I'm a big boy. I can entertain myself."

"It seems like too much to ask. You came up here for solitude."

"You didn't ask, I offered. Besides, I plan on it being worth my while." His mouth twitched into a devastatingly attractive smile. "As far as solitude goes, if you left and I stayed here like I planned, I have a feeling I'd be a little lonely. I never have been before, but I think things have changed."

She thought things had changed, too. It was all too fast, and

warning bells should be going off all over the place, but all she felt was relieved and a kind of inner euphoria she wouldn't think was possible with the turmoil and fear she'd faced in the past two months. "If you're sure, then yes, consider yourself invited."

\* \* \* \*

No wonder he thought she might be a keeper. The woman could make the most amazing things of out the simple ingredients he bought for his usual bland standbys. She'd taken bacon, onions, potatoes, milk and cheese along with a can of chicken broth and made a fantastic soup. To go with it, Kerin had used refrigerated biscuits and added garlic and butter in some way that the smell of them baking had him hovering in the kitchen, until she'd shooed him out.

A beautiful doctor who could cook and was more than enthusiastic in bed?

Yep, seventh heaven wrapped up in one delicious package.

Jesse finished his second bowl of soup, polished off another biscuit, and then sighed in contentment. "You could open a restaurant on that one."

She just looked amused, sitting across from him by the fireplace. "You really are a hopeless bachelor. It's potato soup, Jesse."

"It's out of this world potato soup," he corrected, leaning over to take her empty bowl. "I'll do the dishes and then we'll talk, okay?"

The contentment vanished from her expression, but she nodded. He went over and took care of cleaning up the kitchen, opened a bottle of wine, and took it and two glasses back into the main room. He poured her a glass first and handed it over. "Here. We're just going to relax and discuss the situation."

Dark blue eyes gave him a straightforward look as she accepted the glass. "Care to clarify?"

He knew exactly what she was asking. Jesse settled back into his chair. "We'll talk about us later. I want to talk about everything that's

happened with you in the past two months. Well, make that three or four.”

*Us.*

It had a nice sound. He liked saying it.

“I think I’ve told you everything I know. The truth is, I don’t know *anything*. Yet my house was wired so someone could spy on me. Someone has illegally entered it and I’m convinced I’m being followed. Otherwise, unless you count the smashed food bowl on the back deck and Artemis being gone, I guess there isn’t much.”

“You see, I think you’re wrong.” He took a sip from his glass and let the pause hang. “*Something* is important. To someone else, apparently it’s a threat. It seems to me they’re trying to gather information.”

Her lips parted and she obviously thought it over, a haunted look on her face. “Maybe. I suppose you could be right. But it isn’t helpful if I have no idea what it might be.”

“That’s why we should brainstorm a little about it. Talk to me. Tell me anything unusual that has happened, even if you didn’t think much of it at the time. Maybe it’s something with a patient, like I suggested earlier.”

“I see a lot of them. Besides, it’s all confidential. What you tell your doctor stays in the exam room.”

“Someone may not trust that.”

“They should. I didn’t invest eleven years of my life in getting my medical license to lose it because of the something like a confidentiality violation.”

The forcefulness of her statement made him a believer, but if someone out there was paranoid or had something life-shattering to lose, well, it could be the source of the vague threat.

Kerin went on, the flickering firelight playing over her pale shining hair. “And think about it, what do you tell your internist that the world can’t know? My job is usually to try and steer patients toward the best specialist possible if the problem isn’t an obvious one

from the initial tests.”

“Lots of people want to keep the fact they’re sick to themselves.”

“Maybe, but they don’t usually break into their doctor’s home. Besides, I can’t think of anyone who stands out. I’m literally at a loss.”

So was he. But he was also determined. Jesse narrowed his eyes a little, listening as the furnace kicked on. It was still damn cold outside. “What about anything else. An unfriendly neighbor, a friend who is acting oddly, a disgruntled colleague? It’s got to be there, Kerin.”

She looked bewildered and shook her head. “I’m telling you, I’ve thought a lot about this. I’ve done nothing *but* think about this and I can’t come up with a single thing.”

“What about the people you talk to regularly, the ones you e-mail, who you meet when you go out for dinner?”

“My family and friends are as innocuous as I am as far as I’m aware. My parents are retired and live in Florida, my brother is an accountant in Virginia, and most of my friends are people I work with. To tell you the truth, we don’t have time to go out much. Everyone works long hours. Socializing isn’t a big part of our schedule. The ones who have families are even less inclined. Like I told you, I mostly go to work and to unwind, I have a quiet evening at home.”

Jesse pondered the fire over the rim of his glass. “I think what bothers me the most is the nature of the harassment. It isn’t everyone who knows how to circumvent an alarm system or plant a listening device.”

“I know.”

“The missing cat and the broken bowl are more the work of a thug, but the rest of it is pretty sophisticated.”

The woman across from him said nothing, just held her glass of wine in her slender fingers.

Kerin was a smart lady and he had the feeling she was as uneasy

as he was over that aspect of the whole thing.

He was only half-joking when he asked, “You didn’t inconveniently witness a mob hit or dig a bullet out of someone in the dead of night under duress, did you?”

She laughed, but the small burst of sound had no mirth in it. “See, you do watch television apparently. No, I’m happy to say, I haven’t. About the closest I can come to that is seeing someone back into a parked car in a restaurant parking lot. Not exactly a high crime.”

“No, I can’t see bugging your house over that one.”

“Me either.” She sounded very subdued and when she looked at him, her lips trembled a little. “I’ll feel so much safer with you there. Thank you.”

He’d feel so much better being there because he really couldn’t imagine sitting around worrying himself half to death over what might happen. “I’m no detective but maybe I’ll notice something. Consider me your bodyguard for the next week or two then.”

“That sounds very nice.”

Jesse gave her his best leer. “Your body has become one of my favorite things.”

The attempt at levity was a little lame, but it worked. She laughed and it sounded genuine. “Yours isn’t bad either, since we’re on the subject. You’ll have to come into the office. The nurses give me a hard time about my lackluster love life. One look at you and they’ll all turn green. If they discovered you are also that quintessential nice guy we all look for, you’d need to come armed with a club.”

The double compliment was nice, not that he cared what her nurses thought of his looks, but because *she* thought he was attractive and more than that had enjoyed their being together. He knew it was true, but hearing her say it was an affirmation that if he was falling so quickly—and so hard—for his beautiful houseguest, maybe the feeling was mutual.

“This is our last night here,” he said in a level tone. “Maybe we should take our wine upstairs.”

“If we get in bed, I doubt we’ll sit there drinking wine.”

“My very plan.” He set his glass aside and got to his feet.

*Screw the wine.*

He almost said it out loud. Back in Chicago he could sit around drinking wine all by himself when he had to return. Though he’d never minded the alone part before, it really didn’t seem all that appealing with Kerin as an alternative.

This night signaled the end of their unexpected entrapment. It also hopefully was the beginning of even more.

Making this last evening something she would never forget seemed like a good idea.

## Chapter Seven

Progress at last. Thea padded across the floor into the bathroom, shut the door, and flipped open her cell phone.

Yeah, that *was* a good picture.

God bless technology.

The meeting had been little more than a brush of one man against the other but she'd caught it their brief exchange.

The damning juxtaposition would be hard to deny, as long as she could get the photo sent and erase it quickly. Having it saved on her cell was like putting a hand grenade in your pocket and having your twitchy finger around the ring.

Hopefully Rob's new e-mail address hadn't been traced yet.

If it had, she might be screwed.

No. Correction. The more she knew about Nathan Henderson, the more she was convinced she'd be screwed in a very deadly way.

She went over and flushed the toilet, then slipped her phone back into her purse. At least she'd gotten a chance to check the results of this night's work and it hadn't been for nothing that she'd put up with another night in some only marginal chain restaurant, waiting for something that might or might not happen.

But then again, in the name of love, people did unusual things.

This was third clandestine meeting she'd recorded. Not firm proof but maybe it was time to try Henderson's computer.

That would take some nerve, because she was going to have to disable the system to get in. She had a code, but if she used it, they could trace her.

Damn it.



\* \* \* \*

The house looked as ordinary as always. Brick façade, two story, with a landscaped yard now covered with a light dusting of snow and empty driveway. Kerin pushed a button on the visor of her car and the garage door began to slowly go up. She pulled in and Jesse parked his truck on the other side but not in the garage itself.

It would be obvious she had a visitor and maybe it was just as well. She felt nervous over the situation, but then again, better at the same time.

*Is there real danger?*

As she got out of the car, Jesse walked up and the width of his shoulders and his height were reassuring, but then again, she just wasn't sure what was going on and the whole hidden enemy part of the equation was daunting.

She was back to it. To the trepidation and fear.

But at least she wasn't alone.

"If you'll disarm the alarm, I'll go in first." He said the words in a calm, unaffected tone. "Just in case."

The temptation to let him just take over was there, no doubt about it. On the other hand, she didn't want anything to happen to him because of her, and besides, she'd been independent a long time and making decisions was a strong part of her job and her life. Kerin shook her head. "I'll go in first. I've been gone over a week. If whoever it was that left the device wanted in, they've had plenty of time. I'm more likely to notice if something is off."

"Ah, the take charge doctor is back, I see." He grinned.

The man was just too good-looking with all that dark tousled hair and that boyish, compelling smile. She reluctantly smiled back. "You getting hurt on my behalf isn't part of the plan. And let's not forget nothing has really happened in particular in a physical way. It's all so vague."

“Not so vague if someone has broken into your house. Just let me go in first, Kerin. Bow to my male ego, if nothing else.”

The garage was heated but it was cold just standing there with the door open, so she finally nodded and went to the door. One button closed the door in a low grind of the mechanism and she punched in the code and heard the latch click.

Jesse stepped past her and she followed, aware of how tense every muscle in her body was at the moment she entered the darkened interior. Had she been doing this alone...well, she wasn't sure she could.

All was quiet, dark due to the gloomy January sky, and on first glance, seemed undisturbed. She quickly moved to flick on the light on the table in the hall.

“Nice place.” Jesse looked around with obvious interest, taking in the hardwood floors and vaulted ceilings. “I expected something like this.”

“Like what?” Kerin felt a measure of relief to see there was no menacing sign of anything amiss in the great room or entryway. She moved around and began to switch on more lamps.

“Elegant yet understated. Warm and comfortable but not lived in.”

“I live here.” There was a slight defensive edge to her tone.

“Do you?” He looked amused as he prowled into the room and looked around. “You already said you spend most of your time at the office or the hospital.”

“I'm a doctor. It's a lifestyle choice.”

He stopped and turned, a glimmer in his dark eyes. “Is that a warning?”

Maybe it was. With everything so upside down, how could she tell? She set down her bag and walked into the kitchen, unwilling to deal with thoughts of the future when the present was so tenuous and unsettled. If someone had told her before this all started that she'd be petrified, on the run, and would eventually invite back to her house a man she'd known only a week for an undetermined amount of time,

she'd have referred them directly to a psychiatrist.

The marble counters gleamed, clean and shining, and the faint musty disused smell was the only indication she'd decamped without notice. "We're going to have to order out tonight," she said, avoiding the question.

"Fine." Jesse followed her, folding his arms across his chest and leaning a hip against a cabinet. "Whatever you want."

He wasn't just talking about dinner and she knew it. "Everything in the fridge is likely to be spoiled. I just...left."

"We'll deal with it."

That once again there was a double meaning to his words made her hesitate. Finally, she nodded. "I think so, too."

"That's a start. Shall I really look around?"

"Help yourself." The shrug she gave was feigned nonchalance. If she wasn't shaken before, having Jesse McCutcheon in her home did the trick.

It was all too easy to imagine him there all the time.

While he prowled around the house, she sorted through over a week's worth of mail, checked her messages, most of which were from her mother who she'd already called on her way home from Wisconsin, and went to the French doors leading onto the back deck. The new bowl was there, untouched this time, but the water was frozen and there was still the same amount of food as when she'd left.

She hadn't particularly wanted a cat, but she'd become accustomed to the morning feeding ritual, and last summer when she did grab a few minutes to sit out on the back deck, he'd been a nice companion.

How come she'd never realized she was a little lonely? It seemed impossible, since she was around people all day long, but it was true. Her life lacked something. Artemis had at least shared in a small way her private side, the personal space separate from her busy professional one.

Maybe Jesse was right and the cat wandered off in the same way

he wandered in. If the bowl hadn't been destroyed, she would be more hopeful. It felt like a message.

"Looks all quiet." Jesse came up behind her and touched her shoulder, then feathered his fingers down her arm. Through the material of her sweater the gesture felt reassuring. "If someone's been in here, I can't tell it."

"Thanks for looking." She stood there, staring out at the tufts of brown grass peeking through the light covering of snow.

"What do you say we order a pizza or get some Chinese and watch a movie? Just relax. We had a pretty long drive and tomorrow you said you want to be at the office by seven o'clock."

Finally she turned, and was pretty sure her smile was on the wan side. "Sounds good to me."

\* \* \* \*

Jesse pushed the button on the remote and the television went silent. Next to him Kerin was half-asleep, one arm curled around his waist, her silky hair spilled over his chest. She said, "Hmm..."

He loved it when her voice took on that throaty tone. He skimmed his fingertips down her spine, the bare skin like satin. "You're tired. Go to sleep."

"I like you in my bed."

The words were said very low, and he knew why. Even though she'd made him check every inch of the room, he knew she didn't trust no one was listening in. Making love tonight didn't seem to be an option, besides, he knew she was exhausted.

He bent and put his mouth to her ear. "I like being here."

"I think we're both crazy."

It wasn't as if he could argue the point. "In a good way, right?"

Her lashes drifted down a little more. He predicted she'd be out in seconds.

When her breathing was soft and regular, Jesse eased away from

her enticing warmth, cursed his unruly erection, and pulled on his jeans. He grabbed a sweatshirt, tugged it over his head, and picked up the case holding his laptop.

He went quietly downstairs, the house silent as a ghost around him. Other than slamming his shin into an ottoman in the living room, he managed to navigate the unfamiliar surroundings pretty well, flicking the light on in the kitchen and settling into the breakfast nook. She had wireless internet service and he took advantage of it, powering up his computer.

The next hour was spent building a file that included the names of her colleagues and whatever information he could find on them. It might be futile to look to a group of doctors as likely suspects in the type of activity Kerin had described, but then again she spent most of her time involved in some kind of contact with them and it seemed like a good place to start. Then he did a swift run through of his e-mails, sent a detailed message to his secretary about his change in location and the possibility of needing some extra time away, and then he logged off.

A glance at the glowing numbers on the sleek stove showed it was past midnight, but he thought he'd take a chance. He took out his cell phone and flipped it open, scanned the directory and hit call.

It took four rings, but the voice that answered sounded alert enough. "Hey, Jess. You still freezing your ass off up in tundra country?"

"Like Chicago is much better," he countered.

"True enough. We got eight inches of snow coming our way tomorrow."

"As long as it doesn't hit Indianapolis, I won't see it. It's practically balmy here at twenty-five degrees."

"What the hell are you doing in Indy?"

He could picture Lucas Young in his usual baggy jeans with his boxers hanging out, a rumpled tee-shirt with a few scattered stains on it here and there in all probability, a thin straggle of a beard across his

chin. The girls in the office tended to hang all over him when he was called in, and Jesse found it funny, wondering if he was really showing his age by shaking his head over the dirty rock band boy look. But, whatever his less than professional appearance might suggest, the kid—he was only about twenty—was a genius. If it had wires and circuits, he could fix it.

Jesse grinned. “I guess you could say I met a girl. I’m at her place.”

“Shacking up, eh? You work pretty fast. You’ve only been gone what...two weeks? By the way, that fancy phone system you put in is a fucking pain in the butt. It went down again last week. Took me three hours to find the problem.”

Since it would have taken anyone else probably a lot longer, Jesse merely said, “Thanks. Look, Lucas, I have a couple of questions. I thought maybe you could help me out.”

“Sure.”

“How hard is it to switch off a home alarm system and then manage to switch it back on without the owner ever knowing it?”

“What brand?”

“That I don’t know.”

“We talking about the chick’s house where you’re staying?”

“Yes.”

“Go check. It’ll be on the box.”

That made sense. Jesse went over to the front door and looked. Sure enough it was there and he supplied it.

“That’s a pretty top grade system. I’d say on a scale of one to ten, it’s about an eight to make one of those go down. She have a break in?”

“Sort of. What about her computer? How hard is it to access her files without her password?”

“Give me a break. If you know what you’re doing, it’s so easy it’s funny.”

“How well do you have to know what you’re doing?”

“Depends a little on the computer and the program, but I’d say you have to be pretty good at it.”

In other words, the impression he’d gotten when listening to Kerin’s story was fairly accurate. If her suspicions were correct, the person or persons responsible for making her so nervous weren’t just someone right off the street in all likelihood.

Shit. It bothered him. A lot.

“Thanks, Lucas.”

“Sure, man. Hey, tell me about Miss Indianapolis. She hot?”

That was a question he could answer easily enough. “Hopefully you’ll get to judge for yourself sometime.”

“Uh-oh. Sounds serious.” A low whistle sounded.

Yes, it did, he mused after he ended the call. It *felt* serious, too.

If they could only figure out what the hell was going on maybe he could think a little more about how this relationship would proceed. At the moment though, he was just damned glad he was there.

In the morning he was going to tail her himself to work to see there were any other interested parties. Then he was going to do a little research on just how a person could detect monitoring devices, and maybe even he’d talk to the police. It was all he could think of to do other than be there if something happened.

For the first time in his life he wished he were a private detective.

\* \* \* \*

The fallout at lunch was predictable.

Still, Kerin had to smile.

“Whoa, look at what walked into the waiting room and asked for you.” Sylvia, the office manager, quirked a brow.

*Jesse.*

She glanced up from the chart in her hand. Through the open window used for checking in patients, she could see him there, dressed in the usual flannel shirt and worn jeans. He’d settled into one

of the chairs in the waiting room and was leafing through a magazine, a slight frown on his good looking face. Kerin murmured, “Not bad, huh?”

“Are you kidding me? Where did you find him? Hollywood?” Sylvia’s eyes held a speculative gleam. She inclined her head just a little in his direction. “If that’s why you suddenly needed some time off, I can’t say I blame you.”

The staff had been great about not mentioning her abrupt disappearance with little to no notice, and Kerin was grateful to not have to explain. With studied neutrality, she said, “Not the reason, but a nice result. I’m going to step out for lunch. I’ll be back at one.”

“You have fun.” Sylvia accepted the chart from her hand.

There was something about receiving a heart-stopping smile as she walked out that made even the hectic morning fade. Jesse got to his feet in an athletic movement and set the magazine back in the rack, quirking a brow. “We still on?”

“I’ve got about forty-five minutes.”

“We can do that. Let’s go.”

His truck was parked fairly close to the entrance and Kerin directed him to a sandwich shop just a block or so away. It was crowded, but not so much they couldn’t take their order to one of the small tables.

She picked up her grilled chicken sandwich and took a small bite, just waiting.

Jesse shook his dark head. “If you were followed this morning, I couldn’t tell. Then again, it was snowing just enough to make it difficult to see and I had to pay attention to make sure I didn’t plow into anyone either. The streets were pretty damn slick.”

It had been nasty out, a mixture of snow and sleet coating the streets. No particular accumulation expected, but just the kind of Midwestern soup that caused accidents. Kerin swallowed and then took a sip of iced tea. “That’s a relief, actually.”

He’d ordered some sort of sub piled with cold cuts and cheese,



dripping with just about everything imaginable in the way of condiments, but then again, with his lean build, he could afford the calorie hit. His dark eyes were grave as he picked it up, but he didn't eat. "Yeah, maybe, but there was a car like the one you described sitting in the parking lot when you got to work. With a guy sitting in it. It strikes me it's kind of cold to sit out in your car. I cruised around behind him and took down the license number. It can't hurt."

"No, I suppose not."

Jesse somehow managed to take a bite of the conglomeration in his hands without the entire thing falling apart, which had to be some kind of special skill honed by years of experience. Kerin stifled a laugh and ate her own sandwich, realizing this was the first time she'd left the office to go out at noon since she came to the conclusion something was going on. She'd never subscribed to the old it's-good-to-have-a-man-around theory, but at the moment, she was a believer. He just looked comforting and competent and absurdly normal, eating his huge sandwich with usual male appreciation in about half the time it took her to get through part of hers.

When they finished lunch, he took her back to work and they parted on a very nice, but brief kiss once he saw her all the way inside.

"I'll be back to follow you home," he told her.

They stood just inside her office but the door was still open. Kerin wanted to argue, but didn't. Dealing with the situation all by herself had made her finally snap and impulsively leave the state. She nodded. "I'll call before I see my last patient. That way if I get behind you won't have to wait."

His mouth lifted in a teasing smile. "I'll be lurking in the parking lot like a bad James Bond on the lookout for suspicious characters."

"It sounds so stupid, doesn't it?" Kerin made a small helpless gesture with her hand. "This could all be my imagination."

It wasn't, she was convinced of it still, but from anyone else's point of view...

“The listening device was not your imagination.”

Good point. Jesse McCutcheon, secret agent, was infinitely better than jumping at shadows all alone.

“I’ll call,” she said.

## Chapter Eight

Jesse hunched his shoulders and finished pumping the gas, the drift of an icy breeze brushing his cheek. At least the sleet had stopped, but it was still blustery and he was grateful for his winter jacket, the collar turned up to ward off the insidious cold. There was no choice but to stand in a puddle of dirty water and the steel gray sky overhead didn't offer much of a promise of better weather.

He turned and set the pump back in the slot, waiting for his receipt to print.

"If you so much as turn your head, it could be one of the last things you do."

At first he wasn't sure he heard right, and yes, he started to turn his head.

"Don't."

Something in the quality of the warning stopped him. A coldness. Which was appropriate to the moment because a gust of wind whipped against his face, slapping him with considerable force. He stood stock still, his hand outstretched to take the piece of paper as it rolled from the slot of the gas pump, aware someone stood just on the other side of the pump just to his right.

Out of the corner of his eye he could make out a leather jacket, collar up like his, and a baseball hat. "Can I take my receipt?" he asked as conversationally as possible.

"Go ahead and then unlock the passenger door. I'm coming for a ride with you. We need to have a little talk."

Now that sounded like an exceedingly bad idea. "Why in the hell would I agree to that?"

“An exchange of information. I’m armed by the way, just in case you’re interested.”

Jesse took the piece of paper and slipped it into the pocket of his jacket, thinking furiously. This was hardly a random mugging.

“Move it. There could be someone tailing you by now.”

He did. The keys were in his pocket and he took them out and unlocked the passenger door as instructed. As he walked around the truck, he considered sprinting off across the parking lot to the convenience store, but discarded the idea. There was no reason on this earth he could think of for anyone to approach him unless it had something to do with whatever was going on in Kerin’s life and he was damned curious.

The oblique threat didn’t make him very happy, but then again, he didn’t believe it. People with guns only forced other people into cars in the movies or thriller novels. It didn’t happen in real life, he told himself as he slid into the driver’s seat and started the vehicle. The man clambered in, slammed the door and said tersely, “Head north. Take 465. I’ll tell you what exit to use.”

Jesse risked one swift assessing glance but the profile of his unwanted passenger didn’t tell him much between the shield of the collar and a winter cap pulled low. He pulled out onto the slushy street and did what he was told, reaching over to switch off the CD player.

For whatever reason, he wondered if he hadn’t seen this guy before. Even without a clear view of his face, he seemed familiar.

His gaze fastened on the road, he asked, “Okay, I’m listening.”

“When we get there.” The man reached over and switched the radio back on.

It took twenty minutes, and quite a lot of lane switching that brought his joking James Bond comment to mind. Only this time he really didn’t think it was all that funny because the tension in his companion was a palpable thing and he wasn’t feeling all that relaxed himself. He followed the terse instructions and finally pulled into the

parking lot of a chain restaurant. With the lunch rush over, it was fairly empty inside. The hostess led them to a booth in corner, requested by Jesse's mysterious friend, and they sat down. A television suspended in the corner showed a golf tournament being played in a climate in an entirely different latitude, with brilliant blue skies and green grass.

The man across the table pulled off his hat and looked at him. "You a Fed?"

Statement, not a question. Jesse stared, nonplussed, realizing with a bit of shock just why he thought he might know him. No, he'd never seen him before but the shape of his nose, the clean line of the jaw—a little more square but familiar—the pure blue color of his eyes, yes, those he knew. Even the hair, not worn in a smooth honey curve past his shoulders but tousled and cut short, was the right shade. He was a good-looking guy, just as his sister was a beautiful woman.

Kerin had told him her brother's name, hadn't she?

"No, I'm anything but a Fed" Jesse said with slow emphasis. "But I can guess who you are. Rob, right?"

One nod, curt and business-like. For an accountant, Rob Burke looked both muscular and tough. He hadn't removed his leather jacket but underneath it his shoulders looked wide and his mouth was set. "The last time I talked to her she didn't say anything about a live-in boyfriend."

"I'm new." Jesse leaned back and smiled blandly as a waitress came up. He'd just eaten lunch, so all he ordered was an iced tea. Kerin's brother asked for a light beer. "I'm staying because she's a little on the edge over a few recent events."

Her brother rubbed his jaw. "No matter how smooth they think they are, it doesn't surprise me she'd notice. Too smart for her own good sometimes."

"Notice what? And while you explain that, mind telling me who the ominous 'they' might be."

"I need to talk to her. Can you take a message?"

The evasion wasn't exactly promising. Jesse cocked a brow. "I'm not sure," he said with deliberate cool criticism in his tone. "Look, she thinks people have broken into her house, put listening devices in her bedroom, tampered with her alarm system and computer. I believe it's all true. Now more than ever. Mind telling me why?"

"Yeah, I do mind."

The beer and tea arrived before Jesse could retort and he waited, feeling both irritated and concerned. They measured each other across the bland expansive of the table, eye to eye, a sort of male to male assessment that went on for a few minutes as Jesse stayed stubbornly silent and Robert Burke didn't say a word either.

Finally, Jesse commented, "You said you wanted to exchange information. Fine, you want me to take a message, I will. You're her brother. But you'd better give me a good reason why. She's flipped out already, wondering why anyone wants to spy on her. If you're in trouble, and it seems to me that might just be what's going on, I'm not dragging her into more without something of an explanation. It's not happening."

Burke picked up his glass but didn't drink, just holding it. Over the rim his gaze was direct. "My trust level is pretty low right now."

"If you're talking about me, it seems like you were the one to initiate this meeting. Why is an accountant following me around anyway, and if you want to talk to Kerin, why not walk into her office or call her house or cell phone?"

"I'm still wondering where you fit into this."

"That makes two of us. I met your sister when she was stranded on a road in the middle of nowhere in northern Wisconsin. Why a normally intelligent woman would put herself in that kind of situation puzzled me at the time, but now I think I'm beginning to see the light." Jesse took a sip of tea he didn't even want. "If the cloak and dagger approach at the gas station is any indication, you're actually the one in trouble."

"That's where she went? Why the hell go to northern Wisconsin?"

The man was a master at not answering direct questions. Jesse felt both irritated and confused. “I don’t know. Because it’s far from here and all the stuff going on was starting to scare the shit of her? Look, I—”

“I need money. They knew I’d need it eventually.”

Well, fuck, that certainly didn’t sound good. And Kerin, his sister the doctor, probably had money.

Rob Burke spread his hands a little. They shook. Not much, but just enough to belie the expressionless set of his face. “When I got into town, I couldn’t believe she was gone, but on the other hand, getting a hold of her was going to be a problem anyway. I think they don’t know what to make of you anymore than I did. I decided to take a chance. If Kerin trusts you enough to let you stay over, well, she’s always had pretty good judgment.”

“They?” He’d asked before and was really getting tired of the song and dance of the constant non-answer.

“I’m not exactly an accountant.”

“No kidding.” Jesse smiled and shook his head at the waitress as she sidled up to ask if they wanted to order more than just drinks. After she departed, he remarked sardonically, “That doesn’t really surprise me, I guess. No has ever used the term “Fed” in my presence. I thought it was some television euphemism invented by underpaid script writers.”

“Quantico is in Virginia.”

*My brother is an accountant who lives in Virginia...*

“So I understand. Never been there.” Jesse contrived to look bland when inside he was wondering just exactly how a simple businessman who liked to contract projects to construct buildings found himself having such a nonsensical conversation. Stranded sexy doctors in blizzards and runaway FBI agents?

No, not his usual ordinary life.

“I work there,” Rob Burke said heavily as he ran a finger down the condensation on the side of his glass. “But it doesn’t look like I

can go back.”

\* \* \* \*

Kerin finished up the report and set aside the patient file. Her coat hung on a brass hook set into the back of the door and she retrieved it. Slipping it on, she hesitated a moment and hit the lights, closing the door to her office. The waiting room sat empty and most of the nurses were gone, the receptionist just shutting down her computer.

“Good night, Dr. Burke.”

She smiled automatically. “Good night. Drive safely. It’s supposed to be slick.”

Keys in pocket. Cell phone on. Purse in hand. Kerin went out into the hall to find Jesse was already there, leaning against the wall. It wasn’t really what they’d agreed on and she looked at him in some surprise.

“I thought you were going to follow me home.”

“Change in plans.” There was a tight look around his mouth. He caught her arm. “There are several exits from the building as far as I can tell. How do we take the stairs to the north one?”

“Jesse—”

“We’re going to talk, don’t worry, but not here and now. Show me.”

Usually she didn’t sanction being dragged off without an explanation, but her life wasn’t exactly following the normal plan lately and there was something grim in those gorgeous dark eyes that made her not offer a protest. The stairs were discreetly tucked into a corner and she motioned the direction they should go, letting him guide her there. He opened the door but instead of his usual polite behavior, he stepped in first, looking around.

At that moment, she felt a frisson of foreboding that chilled her more than any arctic clipper slamming down from the Canadian border. “What’s happened?”



"I have every intention of explaining, believe me. But first let's leave this building as carefully as possible."

That had an ominous sound to it.

Well, if she didn't trust him, she would never have accepted his offer to come back with her in the first place, not to mention the uncharacteristic way she'd fallen into bed with him that first night.

He was special, she'd known it from that first moment she stood in the foyer of his cabin and he'd smiled at her. Maybe she'd even known it when he stopped and rapped on the window of her car to offer aid to a perfect stranger.

Without argument she took his proffered hand and followed.

One story down, a sidle through the now deserted secondary hallway because most people used the main lobby and doors and almost all of the offices were closed, and they stepped out into the cold, gloomy evening. Their breath moved in gusty puffs. It was full dark at a little past six and the parking lot had emptied to only a few cars here and there.

"Come on." Jesse tugged her toward a black SUV she didn't recognize, his fingers tightening on hers. "Walk quickly."

Like she had a choice. His legs were a good deal longer and he seemed in a very big hurry. "Whose car is that?"

"I rented it this afternoon." He pressed a button. "Hop in."

He'd rented a car. When he had his truck? That made no sense, but his urgency was enough to make her yank the door open and climb in without more questions. He started it, turned on the lights, and they pulled away in a sedate manner that was entirely different from the way he'd urged her from the building.

"Bend down," he suggested. "So no one can see you, just in case they're watching."

"Fine." She hunched in the seat, incredulous she was really doing such a thing. "But I hope you're going to start talking soon because I admit I'm more than just a little curious, not to mention just a touch apprehensive."

The sarcasm in her tone made him smile, his mouth curving in that very sexy way he had, but he stared at the road and didn't look over. "Someone wants to talk to you. The rental vehicle is insurance they don't recognize the truck and follow me. The focus is on you, but they've probably figured out I'm part of the equation by now. Your brother seems to have some pretty convincing reasons to lay low."

"My brother?" Kerin straightened as they pulled out onto the street. "As in Rob...my brother?"

"I thought you said you only had the one."

She was getting the feeling that was just as well. "I do. Sorry, just surprised. Come on, Jesse, what the hell is this all about? Have I mentioned you're scaring me?"

"Being scared seems part of the current equation. If you don't mind, for clarity's sake, I'm going to let him explain."

Since she had no idea what to say to that, Kerin sat silent. Jesse drove with the same competence he used when rescuing stranded motorists and finding driveways in blizzard conditions. His profile was set and sharp against the glistening street lights.

Rob? She wasn't sure whether she was surprised or not this had something to do with him. Accounting had always seemed a bit tame for his choice of profession and she hadn't been able to get a hold of him for several months. She'd thought they were playing voice mail tag, but...maybe not.

Oh shit, at least two months since she'd talked to her brother. About when all this started.

If she'd been able to think of something to say, she would have. As it was, she sat there in a sort of numb silence until they arrived at one of the local downtown hotels. Lots of lights, valet parking, people walking in and out...

She slid out obediently and watched Jesse hand over his keys and a tip. As he set his hand at her waist and guided her into the hotel lobby, he murmured, "This is a pretty public venue. I have to give it to him. Rob seems as intelligent as you are. We're on the ninth floor."

As a compliment, it was well done, or at least it seemed that way. She felt a bit shaky and thinking straight was a problem.

To make matters worse, he said in an offhand voice, “He has a false identity and if they haven’t traced it yet, we should be safe enough.”

Good God, what was going on?

## Chapter Nine

He dipped the card into the slot in the door, saw the green flash, and opened it. The room looked deserted at first glance, but Jesse realized with a start that Rob Burke must have been strategically placed so that when the door opened, he would be behind it.

“It’s us,” he said unnecessarily.

“All right.” Rob moved a little and Jesse could swear he slipped something back under his arm. He wore dark jeans, a gray shirt, and over it the usual leather jacket, even in the warmth of the hotel room. It was as if he wanted to be ready to leave at any minute. “A guy can’t be too careful. Hi, Keri.”

Kerin stepped past him into the room, her face pale and taut. “Was that a gun?”

Jesse followed her and closed the door, after giving one last glance at the hallway. It was deserted and generic, with blue patterned carpet and recessed lighting. It seemed benign, but he had an unreal sense of danger anyway, which probably stemmed from spending the afternoon renting cars and hotel rooms to help a man who was an admitted fugitive.

To think he just wanted to spend a few weeks reading and relaxing at the cabin. How he’d ended up in Indiana and the middle of this mess spoke a lot for the allure of one pretty doctor who had stumbled into his life.

Rob gestured at the bed. “Sit down. I realize I need to explain.”

Kerin wore a long black wool coat that contrasted nicely with her shining hair but at the moment emphasized her pallor. She slipped it off and sat down, her fingers tightly twined together. Under her red

sweater her slender shoulders were tense. “Yes, you do. I’ve been trying to get a hold of you but you won’t return my calls. Mom and Dad are worried, too.”

The room was as generic as the hallway, with just the king-sized bed, a long dresser that held the television and a small desk with a chair in the corner. The sheers were drawn but the drapes open and the lights of downtown Indianapolis glowed against the sheer fabric. Rob leaned one shoulder against the wall as if he was too restless to sit, and leveled his gaze on his sister. “I know. I got the messages. I just couldn’t return them.”

Jesse moved to take the chair by the desk. He was a spectator in this, not really a player. Or maybe he was one, but not part of the main cast. The story he’d heard in the restaurant earlier had been damned interesting. He was curious to see if Kerin bought it. Because of her, he’d helped Burke out, but he didn’t know the guy. She did.

Accessory after the fact came to mind, but he felt he didn’t have much choice. What was he going to do, turn in her brother?

No, he couldn’t. That said quite a lot about the state of his involvement with the very beautiful and passionate Dr. Burke.

Even now he wanted to put his arms around her and protect her.

“Why?” she asked flatly. “Why are we here? What’s happening? Jesse said he wanted *you* to explain. I’m sitting here in some hotel room wondering just what that means. It’s obvious you’re in trouble, Rob. Is that why someone is watching *me*?”

“I’d guess.” Her brother’s tone was bitter. “They’ve done everything possible to make sure my options are limited and figured I’d come to you. I had to. Fucking bastards.”

“Who are you talking about? Please, Rob.” Her voice shook. “Tell me.”

Burke ran his hand briefly over his face. His blue eyes looked dark and troubled. “I’ve already told McCutcheon this, but he wanted you to hear it from me, so here goes. Look, I haven’t been quite straight because I didn’t want Mom and Dad to worry, but I work—

worked maybe would be a better way to put it—for the government. I am a licensed CPA, but as you know, my degree is in actuarial science. Someone like me comes in very handy when they want to track laundered money. We spend a lot of time looking at the business practices of suspected organized crime fronts.”

Kerin sat very still. “All right, go on. I don’t know why you wouldn’t tell us that, but I’m listening.”

“I didn’t tell you because I’m sometimes undercover as an agent. It’s actually the least glamorous job in the world, believe me, but for obvious reasons the less people that know, the better.” His smile was a brief humorless flash. “A mild-mannered accountant by day, a mole by night. There you go. Except nothing is simple when it comes to the type of situations I’ve found myself in now and again, and this last one went really bad. I’m taking the heat for it and not enjoying it one bit.”

Kerin’s knuckles were white. “How bad?”

“I witnessed a murder. I wish to hell I hadn’t, but I did.”

Jesse had felt the same flicker of revulsion that crossed Kerin’s face when he’d heard the same thing. Rob went on, now sounding unemotional. “It was a fellow agent named Donovan who killed the guy. By coincidence, the man he killed was an important source in our investigation. At the time, I had no idea why the whole thing went down like it did. I just thought it was a moment gone wrong. In retrospect, it seems clear why the victim panicked and went for a weapon. He must have known something Donovan wasn’t interested in having me or anyone else find out about. It wasn’t until later I realized it was premeditated. I’ve replayed the scene a hundred times in my head. It was definitely intentional. Donovan had me set up the meeting, so the victim had no idea he would be there. The minute the two of them came face to face, all hell broke loose, but Donovan had the advantage because he was ready for it, of course.”

The room was quiet. Kerin seemed frozen in place. Jesse imagined he’d held the same pose back at the restaurant as he heard

the story for the first time. Finally, she cleared her throat. “If you reported this, why are you the one in trouble?”

“Yeah, good question, isn’t it? My direct supervisor might be able to answer it. I’ve had two months to try and figure out what’s going on and come to a conclusion I don’t like at all.”

“I’m afraid to ask, but what’s that?”

“My boss, Nathan Henderson, is part of this. Hand and glove. They’ve set me up. I was starting to get uneasy almost right after I filed that report. It didn’t seem to go anywhere and I thought I’d have Internal Affairs on me the next day to discuss the situation. Instead I waited a week without a request for an interview. I was still undercover, so I didn’t get alarmed at once. I was in Florida at the time, still working the case, and Donovan was supposedly back at the office. Only he wasn’t. That was my first real clue I had trouble on my hands. I walked away from one very nasty car accident I shouldn’t have even survived, discovered my cover was blown by an anonymous tip, and ducked into hiding.

“Naturally, the first thing I did was contact Henderson and told him what happened. That’s when he told me Donovan’s story differed a lot from mine and since neither one of us waited around for local law enforcement, there was no official statement of any kind. Donovan is too smart to not dispose of the weapon, and in his version of the story, *I* shot the informant.”

A shaky hand lifted to brush a strand of blonde hair from her face. Kerin said, “You?”

“I can’t prove I didn’t.” Rob shifted, his body language unmistakably angry. “I can’t prove shit, Keri. I was an eyewitness, but the man who was shot was a scumbag, a snitch with ties to some of the most questionable people you can imagine. Nathan suppressed the report supposedly to keep both Donovan and I from a big Internal Affairs investigation over a guy who would have probably ended up in and out of prison for the rest of his life. If he hadn’t lied about Donovan’s whereabouts, I might even have let it all go.”

Jesse wasn't sure how he felt about that statement. A life was a life, and murder was just plain wrong, but he could at least see the point. "How did you know he was lying?"

"I saw Donovan. It was just dumb luck. My car accident could have been just that, an accident, but it didn't feel that way and he made the mistake of driving past after it happened. There were police officers and ambulances everywhere but I'd managed to crawl out the back window. I'm positive he didn't expect me to be one of the people standing around what used to be my rental car."

"He tried to kill you." Kerin looked both pale and shocked. "Can't you tell...someone? The police—"

Rob's mouth lifted with a cynical smile that had nothing to do with amusement as he interrupted. "The police usually aren't called upon to protect federal agents from one another. Besides, I don't have a shred of proof except my word on what happened during a killing in which I left the scene just as much as Donovan did. The police wouldn't be ecstatic over that little point, Keri. In the meantime I think Henderson and Donovan are doing some serious damage control by trying to corner me and eliminate the only person who can confirm the shooting wasn't just self-defense."

"No." Kerin shook her head in patent denial, her silky hair moving across her shoulders. "This kind of thing doesn't really happen."

Jesse spoke up. "I think it just might. What about the listening device, sweetheart? Does *that* sort of thing happen? The methods being used to keep tabs on you aren't legal at all. Breaking and entering, tampering with your computer, bugging your house. That isn't regulation stuff, but it is professional. Your role in this is incidental. It takes following the rules to make sure of a conviction in court. Rules aren't being used. It makes me believe your brother's story more than anything. They don't want to arrest him, they're after him."

The vulnerable look in her eyes shook him. It was unguarded, it was stark, and it said she knew this kind of thing happened. It just



didn't happen to people she knew and loved.

*Well, fuck.*

Jesse moved from the chair. It wasn't conscious, it was the kind of action that happened as your brain sends signals to your muscles and a person reacts. Just like that.

He settled next to her on the bed and murmured, "If I didn't believe him, we wouldn't be here."

It was a possessive statement and he had a feeling normally she would object, but instead she rested against him with acquiescent quiet, her slender body rigid within his circling arm.

Rob looked at them in somber contemplation. "I've had the past eight weeks to think about it. Moving from motel to motel, eating in the most obscure dives I can find, trying to figure out a way to fix this. At this point, I'm afraid to talk to anyone because I'm not sure who to trust. I'm out of money because they've got the resources to track any ATM withdrawals. They are probably tracking yours, too."

"Mine?" Kerin straightened her already stiff spine. "Why mine?"

"Where else would I end up? I'm not going to drag Mom and Dad into this, and they don't have it to help me anyway. Believe me, Donovan and Henderson will have checked out their finances."

Kerin made a helpless little gesture. "I'll be happy to give you money if that's what you need, but—"

"I'll do it." Jesse wasn't exactly sure what prompted him to say it. "If they're keeping tabs on Kerin's accounts a large withdrawal will clue them in. I can do it through my business. Have the money transferred to an account in a different country if you want. We do that all the time if we contract a project overseas."

\* \* \* \*

At some later time she was going to have to assess the emotional extent of her reaction to Jesse's more than generous—ridiculously so—offer. Had they really become so deeply involved with each other

so quickly? Here was her brother offering up information on how he was accused of criminal activity of some kind and Jesse jumping in with both feet on his side.

Well, *her* side.

His arm felt solid and comforting around her waist, the heat from his body warming her not just from the contact but from the protective gesture.

“You don’t have to get involved with this.” Even as she spoke she betrayed the sentiment by leaning into him even more. It was involuntary, but telling. All her life she’d been fine standing on her own two feet but there was something about Jesse McCutcheon that brought out a streak of dependency she didn’t even know she possessed.

Did she like it?

She wasn’t sure. It was more accurate to say it surprised her beyond belief.

“I’m already involved,” Jesse said in dry observation. “If I wasn’t I’d still be in Northern Wisconsin minding my own damn business.” He looked at Rob. “How do you want to handle this?”

Her older brother shook his head. There were lines in his face she didn’t remember incised by his mouth. “I’m not going anywhere, and besides, my passport might be no good at this point. I’m going to bet that’s the first thing Henderson did. It depends on whether or not he really is intent on hanging me out to dry or if Donovan acted on his own back in Florida. Either way, I’m going to guess Nathan either knew what he was going to do, or is just protecting Donovan after the fact. They’ve got to be in bed together over whatever started all of this.”

She still had a hard time wrapping her mind around the conspiracy aspect of what Rob was saying. “How can they do that?”

“He has the authority of the federal government, Keri. If what I suspect is true, he’s abusing it as they do their best to track me down.” Her brother ran a weary hand over his face. “This is seriously fucked

up. If I hadn't reported—"

"Then you would be as bad as Donovan." She might feel like she was in the middle of a suspense novel, but she worked hard to *save* lives. "Can't you write the report again and send it to someone higher? Your side of the story, in writing, getting them both investigated?"

"All of that requires letting people know where I am and stepping up the heat. Not a bright choice at this time. They really aren't playing around if what Jesse here tells me is true about them following you. Who knows, maybe it isn't even just the two of them. Maybe there are a few more people involved. Once again, I am not sure who to trust. It sounds like if I push it, I could get myself a murder indictment. Henderson isn't a small fish."

She silently agreed with reluctance, recalling her fears and uneasiness of the past two months. Kerin compressed her mouth and stared at her brother. "So what do we do?"

"I need to figure out what they're covering up. I have a decent start on it. It's a friend with some ties in the right places who is looking into a few things for me, trying to help. I have a hunch or two, but I don't want to put anyone else in danger. I saw Donovan kill. I know he rigged my car. That means keeping everyone I care about out of his path is a damn good idea."

This was all wrong. There should always be recourse. Didn't they live in a democratic country where due process was the law and it was illegal to try and kill people? Kerin felt more than a little stunned and disillusioned.

Her brother shoved himself away from the wall. "For now, I'm going to go back to my motel." He glanced around the room. "It isn't half as nice as this, by the way, but I have a feeling I'd be a little in the way."

"Will you be safe?" She didn't want him to go, to walk out of the room in case she never saw him again. God, her parents would be horrified if they knew what was going on.

"I've done okay for the past two months." His smile was just a ghost of the easy grin she remembered from when they were growing up. "I've got one of those anonymous cell phones. I gave Jesse the number. Buy one yourself and then call me. I'm hoping to get some information soon so I can decide what to do next."

Jesse, was it? There was nothing like a situation like this to make men brothers in a very fast way. "I'll call tomorrow," she said with effort. "Rob, be careful. Please."

"I will." He gave the man sitting next to her a look and his mouth tightened. "Thanks."

"No problem." Jesse sounded as if he aided and abetted possible criminals every day of the week.

Rob slipped out, the door clicked, and they were alone.

Jesse's arm around her was the only thing that felt real. Silence stretched out and then she gave a shaky laugh. "Shall we take a vote? What's weirder? Thinking someone is watching me, jumping in my car and leaving my practice in the middle of a busy week and driving into a blinding snowstorm? Or is it hooking up with a complete stranger? Or—third choice here—finding out someone apparently wants to kill my brother? I can't decide. The options are a bit too varied."

"I'm going to concede I can't answer that one." His mouth grazed her temple.

As a reassuring gesture, he couldn't have done better.

Kerin said in a nearly inaudible voice, "Digesting this is going to take a bit of time. Do you realize that means there really is someone watching my house? Not my imagination, but the truth."

"That's why we're here." Jesse gave a light squeeze. "I paid cash. There should be no trail. Tell you what, let's order room service, including a nice bottle of wine, lock the door, and relax a little. We have some of our answers, Kerin. It's a start. Rob says he's got an inside source trying to help him, too, so maybe a break will come there."

“Jesse—”

He kissed her. His lips molded to hers, the duel of their tongues in delicate play, her body fitted so perfectly into his arms. Without her even realizing it, in moments he had her backwards on the bed, the satisfying weight of his body over hers, his elbows braced at her side. Jesse nibbled at her lower lip. “So room service it is?”

“Whatever you want.” She meant it, too. Not even talking about food.

“Hmm. Sounds damned promising. You sure?”

Once again, they were talking oblique angles and inferences. She touched his face. “I’m getting there.”

His smile crinkled the corner of his eyes. “Shall we take off our clothes and convince each other some more?”

“What about room service?”

“Later,” he promised, his dark eyes intent. “Right now we have a *room* with a large bed, no one besides Rob knows where we are, and I promise you there are no cameras or microphones.”

Her house did make her tense, there was no denying it. Just the idea someone had been in there made her both angry and apprehensive.

“That sounds promising,” she acquiesced, rubbing her hands over his shoulders and trailing them downward. His shirt was tucked into the waistband of his jeans and she tugged it free. Her fingers brushed his flat stomach and she felt the muscles contract in reaction.

There was no question he had one of those boy model bodies, all hardness and definition and even more attractive because he was not a boy in any way, but a mature man.

Instinct made her want to fix Rob’s problems. That was her job, to fix other people’s problems. Only she wasn’t trained for this particular scenario. Medical school didn’t include classes and instruction on how to deal with a situation like this one, which when she thought about it, seemed so unbelievable.

But Jesse was there, strong and solid. Losing herself in the

moment held a certain appeal.

Kerin fumbled with the fastening on his jeans, popping the button loose and finding the zipper to his fly. She lowered it as their mouths met in another hungry kiss, the hectic day fading away and even maybe the incredible story she'd just heard was banished if even for just a few minutes.

His presence had that much power.

She inched her hand under the band of his briefs and stroked his erection. Hot and hard, it lengthened against her palm.

"Uhm..." she murmured against his mouth, cupping his testicles.

"Oh yeah." He gave a small, sexy grunt, his muscles tensing.

The world was out of control, surreal, but this was immediate and the scent of his cologne, subtle and spicy, sparked memories of what they'd shared at the cabin.

She needed it. Needed him.

It was inspiration to slide her hand free and lightly shove at his shoulders. He lifted his head and she saw the heavy light of arousal in his eyes. "What?"

"On your back," she ordered.

He got the message. A small grin lifted his mouth. "Okay."

"Now, McCutcheon."

"Yes, ma'am."

He rolled over, all lounging male, his jeans parted to show the rampant length of his stiff cock.

Though she'd never been one to enjoy much the idea of giving oral sex, somehow Jesse looked...delicious. Long and hard, the tip of his erection glistened with semen. His eyes were narrowed as he regarded her, his body not precisely relaxed but reclined against the bed in a careless sprawl that invited her to do with him whatever she wanted.

Kerin shimmied downward, her hands touching him, stroking the velvet length of his erect shaft. She shoved his shirt up, exposing his taut belly so that when she bent her head, her hair spilled across his

skin.

He groaned as she took the tip of his erection in her mouth.

Michael had never shown the same level of appreciation, but then again, she'd only done it infrequently. The intimacy wasn't at all the same. This just felt so right.

"Jesus." Jesse stiffened as she swirled the tip of her tongue around the head of his penis and lightly toyed with the slit. He tasted salty and male and surprisingly fantastic. He rasped out, "Remind me to practically kidnap you from your office every day."

There were two things she didn't want to examine in that statement. Why he'd had to do it in the first place and the phrase "every day".

Every day. Was it possible? Not without a significant change in both their lives and this mess with Rob came first...and oh hell, she didn't want to think about it...

*Not now.*

She wasn't good at this. Or she'd never thought so. With Jesse things did seem to be different. She took his small telling shudder as praise when she sucked him as deep into her throat as she could, and the way his fingers suddenly spiked into her hair sent a thrill into the pit of her stomach.

"That's enough." He said it with ragged authority. "Stop."

Was it enough? She wasn't sure. She'd never even contemplated letting a man ejaculate in her mouth, but for him...well, maybe.

"No." He might have been a mind reader. "Some other time." He deftly switched their positions so suddenly she was the one flat on her back. He slid down her pants and her underwear at the same time, jerking them off her hips and down her thighs with impatience. "My turn, Doctor."

"You don't have to—"

"Get over it. I want to."

His hands were warm on her legs and he pushed them apart to dip his head. A hot seeking tongue delved deep and cut off any coherence

to her argument. Kerin arched her hips off the bed, a low cry echoing into the room.

It felt beyond good, well into fabulous, and the way he stimulated her clit caused a spasm to clench hard in the pit of her stomach. He tasted, teased and touched in just the right way and before long pre-orgasmic bliss made her lashes drift downward.

“In me,” she managed to mumble. “Jesse, please, inside me.”

“Sounds perfect.” He levered upward on his elbows, positioned himself, and thrust hard. Her body took him, his rigid length going deep as she wrapped her legs around him.

He’d already shown her simultaneous orgasm was not a myth, and she moved with him, encouraging, wanting, needing. He pushed deep, withdrew and then surged again and she egged him on, her hands fisted in the shirt he still wore. It was perfect, wild, and totally not her.

Well, it might be her *now*. Since she’d found herself on a lonely snow-blasted country road not long ago with a dark-haired stranger peering the window of her car.

They climaxed seconds apart. Hers began first, the contraction of her inner muscles setting him off. He groaned, his warm breath going out in a gust across her cheek and his cock pulsing as he ejaculated.

It was very, very nice, and gave a whole new meaning to the term “room service”.



## Chapter Ten

Thea held the phone clamped to her ear and listened to the ring. One, two...

*Answer.*

“Yes?”

God, Rob sounded so guarded and he needed to be, but still, it made her stomach hurt to hear it. Well, actually, she felt pretty nauseous anyway.

“Got it.”

For a split second, she wondered if they’d disconnected. Then Rob said with quiet lethal emphasis, “If you’re kidding, don’t do it to me.”

Like she was kidding. She was still sweating, shaking, sure she’d missed something. Because she couldn’t help it, she said in a wobbly voice, “No, I wouldn’t do that, I’m just...well...shit...oh...”

“Sweetheart?” His voice softened. She could picture him with that gorgeous blond hair attractively disheveled and his blue eyes narrowed in concern. “What hell are we talking about here? Are you hurt?”

“No.”

The person that was hurt was one Nathan Henderson. Could you get fired for killing your boss? Yes, she was pretty sure she could. “He’s dead.”

The moment of quiet seemed to last a lot longer that it probably really was. Rob said, “Can you define ‘he’?”

“Henderson walked in on me. It didn’t go well.”

What an understatement. Fourth time was not a charm apparently.

The convoluted trail she'd been trying to follow had taken an interesting turn though. If the files she'd been downloading to a jump drive proved as interesting as she thought they were, well, she'd just saved Rob's very nicely shaped ass. The way Henderson had come after her when he walked in, told her they probably were very interesting.

"What happened?"

What happened was she'd been almost done when he'd opened the door to the office. He hadn't flipped on the lights either, which meant he suspected she was there—or that someone was there anyway. She'd seen the glint of something metal in his hand, assumed it was a weapon, and ducked behind the desk. In the glow from the computer screen she'd seen only a dusky outline as he came around, but it was a big quiet place, they were alone, and she knew enough about the guy to realize he wouldn't want to kill her right there, but then again, if he did, no one would hear it.

The plaque was behind her on the wall. Big, heavy, made of carved wood in some modern interpretation. When she stood up her shoulder bumped it, she turned, grabbed it and jerked.

Then swung as he came around the desk after her.

A shudder rippled through her and she sat, shaking in her car. She'd parked in the lot of a grocery store and hopefully looked just like anyone else sitting in a car chatting on their cell before going in to grab a gallon of milk or something. "I can't talk about it right now, Rob. I just left a dead guy in a government office. It was self-defense but that doesn't help much. My knack for sparkling conversation is null and void at the moment. The bottom line is I found the files we need. I have them."

"I'm not going to pretend I'll miss Henderson much." His voice was grim. "You sure he's dead?"

"I didn't exactly send for the medical examiner but I'd say that's a big yes. It sounded awful." Thea lifted her hand, saw it tremble like a leaf in a high wind, and a semi-hysterical laugh escaped that had

nothing to do with real mirth. “If you kill someone who attacks you, that doesn’t that give you an express elevator ride straight to hell, does it? I’ve always heard otherwise.”

“Thea, honey—”

“Look, Rob, my minutes are ticking away here and I’m not in the mood to go somewhere and buy another card for this phone. For all I know there’s blood on me and the idea of it makes me sick. I’ll go through the files when I get home and let you know exactly what we have, okay?”

“I’ll call you in a few hours.”

If she had a chance to go home, take a long, hot shower and maybe have a whiskey sour or something, she might be able to stop shaking. “Yeah, give me three.”

She pushed the end button and still sat there a moment. The cars of the late night shoppers had the parking lot about a third full, the neon lights above glowing against the black winter sky. It was cold without the car on.

Henderson, she reminded herself firmly, was a criminal and he’d had a gun in his hand when he’d come into that room. If he and Donovan conspired to kill, her boss wasn’t someone who would be really missed all that much.

From what she’d seen earlier, he had also been involved in quite a lot of other shady activities.

Her fingerprints were all over the plaque, but then again, she’d taken it with her, wrapped in her coat. They’d know it was missing off the wall...someone would remember.

The choice now was whether to try and act normal and show up to work tomorrow as usual, or run like hell.

\* \* \* \*

At least she’d slept. Maybe Jesse could take credit for it, but it could have been a lot of things besides sexual satisfaction. The long

day Kerin had packed with patients as she tried to catch up, the impact of her brother coming out of the blue and his more than-a-little unusual story, or maybe it was just anonymity of where they were that allowed her to relax a little. They'd made love that first time, then ordered up a couple of steaks and some wine, watched part of a decently entertaining made-for-television movie, and then made love again, the second time slow and long, all soft touches and tender smiles and subtle nuances.

It was exactly his kind of evening—minus the secret agent-on-the-run drama.

Kerin lay on her side in the position he'd discovered she favored, her mouth parted just slightly, her fair hair tangled over her bare slim shoulders. Jesse ran his fingers down her arm in a slow, teasing caress. "It's six."

"Hmm." She blinked, the murmur a sleepy acknowledgement. "Is it really?"

"I'm afraid so."

"All right." She sat up and ran her fingers through her hair, looking sleepy and delicious. "I need to go home to shower and change."

Yes, delicious, he thought with an inner smile. Even with small smudges of mascara under her eyes, she was beautiful. He said, "I'll take care of check out."

"I'll pay you back." She frowned. "For the rental car, too. Jesse, you've done too much."

"Really?" He lifted his brows. "The way I see it, I just spent one very satisfying night with a gorgeous woman." He corrected himself. "A very satisfying several weeks, actually."

"Yes, well, we're even on that score too, so I'll still reimburse you."

The no-nonsense doctor, when it surfaced, was always pretty plain-speaking. "Let's argue about that some other time. Are you sure you should go into work?"

She slid out of bed and picked up her underwear, stepping into the panties as she shook her head. "I'm not sure of anything right now. Every time I think about Rob's story, I want to ask myself if I mistakenly auditioned for a part in some suspense movie. I wish I'd passed up the role, by the way."

"There's a reason they make movies like that." Jesse got up and reached for his own clothes. "I suspect it's because sometimes this kind of shit really happens. Read the newspaper this morning and I'll bet there's at least one article that will make you say to yourself, 'unbelievable'."

A tousled blonde head appeared as she pulled her red sweater on. Her blue eyes were dark with obvious worry. "You think this is all true?"

"Rob's story? I told you I did. Maybe I wouldn't if you hadn't had all those things happening and he'd just popped up and started rambling on about undercover and murders and dishonest colleagues, but quite frankly, it does explain why someone would bug your house, break in and search your computer, and all the other things that got you so rattled you left town."

Kerin said nothing but just finished dressing, her face averted. He did the same and a few minutes later they were on their way down to the parking garage. It was still dark, inordinately cold, and the crisp air made their breath steam as they got into the rented SUV.

As they pulled out into the street, she said in a quiet voice, "Do you think it's just all this? Is that what makes it different?"

He would ask her to be clearer about such a vague question, but why would he when he knew exactly what she meant? Different. That was the operative word about their relationship. He touched the brakes at a red light, bringing them to a stop, and it was a convenient time to glance over and try and gauge her expression. "I think all this has worked as an accelerant, but no, I don't think the reason things are moving so fast between us is just 'all this'."

He understood her reservations. At thirty-three, he wasn't sure

falling in love in less than two weeks was a very mature thing to do, but on the other hand, maybe it was supposed to be this way. Instant, electric, beyond logic.

“It feels selfish to worry about my love life when Rob is in trouble.” Kerin perfectly mirrored his thoughts.

At least she hadn’t just said sex life. It was something. Besides, he agreed with her. It *was* different.

The rest of the drive was made in silence. The quiet was fine with him since they both had plenty to think about and it was a little early in the morning for deep conversations. The street in her neighborhood looked deserted, only a few lights on here and there, and he pulled into the driveway and parked. It was not exactly bitter cold, but cold enough, and if someone was really watching the house, he felt sorry as hell for them in that regard. It would be an uncomfortable stake out to say the least.

He had to wonder what Donovan—if he was the one doing the surveillance—thought about another disappearance. At least Kerin wasn’t the target after all, but just a minor player in a game she’d never opted for in the first place.

Kerin used the pad outside the garage to let them in, and then disarmed the alarm before they entered the house. A few flips of the light switches showed comforting normality, nothing out of place, no sign of any disturbance or illegal entry.

She visibly relaxed. “I’m going to run up and shower.”

“I’ll make coffee,” Jesse offered, gesturing at the kitchen.

“Sounds fantastic.” She smiled and dropped her purse on the counter, turning to leave the room.

And stopped. Jesse waited and watched her square her shoulders and turn back around. Her blue eyes shimmered with unshed tears. “*You’re* fantastic, actually. Last night...when you offered to help Rob...I mean, you don’t even *know* him...”

“I’m trying pretty damned hard to impress you, so don’t be fooled.” He grinned, trying to lighten the mood. “If we were in the

third grade, I'd be the best one at kickball, just for you."

She gave a choked laugh. "I bet you would be."

"In my day, I was one hell of a kickball player if a pretty girl was watching."

Kerin stood there, looking at him. "Jesse..."

He waited but tensed a little. Whatever she was going to say, he wasn't sure either of them was ready for it.

She whispered finally, "The coffee is the pantry. I'd better get going."

He wasn't sure if he was relieved or not when she left the room and practically ran up the stairs.

\* \* \* \*

Patient, patient, patient. Consultation call. More appointments. No time for lunch. She made a brief call to Jesse's cell phone to let him know a sandwich at her desk was going to be the best she could do.

He'd promised to get one of the more anonymous cell phones so they could call Rob. Though work was a good way to distract her from worrying about it, her brother's plight was at the back of her mind all day.

It was after six when she finished up the last chart. When the door to her office opened, she looked up, expecting to see one of the other doctors, though most of them were gone.

Instead the man that entered was stocky and dark-haired, with a slightly hooked nose, square jaw, and he wore a padded black jacket and a baseball cap. Startled, Kerin set down her pen, the flicker of alarm instant.

She *knew*.

It was the look in his eyes. They were flat, unemotional, unfriendly. He shut the door behind him with a definite click. "Dr. Burke."

"I don't know where he is," she said with only a small tremor in

her voice, folding her hands with what she hoped looked like calm and setting them on her desk. "I'm going to guess he deliberately didn't tell me."

His smile was chilling. "You know who I am. That means he's talked to you."

"I'm going to guess your name is Donovan, and yes, I've spoken to my brother. But once again, I don't know where he is."

*Did anyone see him come in?*

Jesse would surely be waiting to follow her home. Maybe Donovan had even passed him...shit, why didn't they ask Rob for a description? The answer was, of course, because they both had been trying to process the information in the first place. Considering the inhospitable weather, their inexperience with this type of intrigue, and how unbelievable the circumstances, it wasn't much wonder she had failed to ask. Maybe Jesse had during the initial meeting with Rob, but it was so cold out, people bundled up against the weather. It was difficult to recognize anyone with a hat shading their features and a bulky coat on.

"He'll have given you something. A phone number. I need it."

She really didn't have the number. Jesse did. Kerin shook her head. "I don't have one."

"You do realize your brother is in a lot of trouble."

"I realize *you* are in a lot of trouble."

"He's sold you a pack of lies, Dr. Burke. I'm afraid sometimes things go wrong. I was there. If he can't reconcile what happened, he needs help. The department has programs for this."

She was acutely aware for the first time her office felt small. It had always seemed spacious before but now the space was overwhelmed with her unwanted visitor's presence. Kerin stood, though it didn't do much to make her feel better. Donovan was still quite a bit taller and dominated the room.

"His story differs."

"He's lying." His eyes glittered.



“I wasn’t there,” she said succinctly. “So guess who I believe.”

With studied casual intent, he reached into his jacket. “Doesn’t matter. Things are getting a little out of hand. I’ve been playing nice so far where you are concerned, mostly because I didn’t think you knew a fucking thing anyway. But I’m sorry, sweetheart, when you didn’t come home last night, I figured Rob must have popped up after all. The rental car was a dead giveaway.”

The moment he produced the very business-like looking gun, she knew her brother had been telling the entire truth. It wasn’t so much she doubted Rob before, but maybe some of more the fantastical aspects of his story. In her familiar office, with the diplomas she’d worked so hard for on the walls and the ordinary trappings of telephones, a cluttered desk, the day calendar that was full of scribbles...

She believed.

“We have no way of reaching him.” She feigned a calm she didn’t really feel. If Rob was comfortable facing weapons and desperate moments, she wasn’t. Yes, she dealt with a different type of desperation sometimes, but...not this.

The man *really* had a gun pointed at her.

“We can maybe ask your boyfriend. If he doesn’t know, he’ll find out.” Donovan released the safety with an audible click. “Where’d you dig him up anyway? I thought I pretty much had you figured out. I’ve been keeping tabs on you for a couple of months.”

“I know.” Kerin had never faced the barrel of a loaded pistol before.

It *wasn’t* one of her best experiences in life.

“McCutcheon—I ran his license plate—well, he doesn’t really matter.” The dismissal was terse.

Oh, how wrong he was. A flutter of panic filled her chest. If Jesse became concerned and entertained some chivalrous idea of checking on her, he might run into Donovan, who—according to Rob—hadn’t hesitated to kill someone before.

The world of her priorities shifted all at once.

“You can hardly escort me out of the building at gunpoint,” she pointed out, trying to ignore the light sweat that had broken out all over her body.

“Sure I can. Do you have any idea how fast I can pull my weapon and fire? Take my word for it, it’s damned quick. I’m accurate, too. Ask Rob when we see him. I have the gun and I’ll use it if I need to, and that’s enough. Now, McCutcheon is in the parking lot in the rental you got out of this morning. Tell him you’ll be another hour or so. I know where he’s parked and we’ll go out the other way.”

Jesse *had* dropped her off, mostly because she’d left her car the night before when he’d whisked her off for the meeting with Rob. Short of disappearing again, neither of them could think of a way to conceal her arrival at the office and it was obvious now neither of them were too good at the whole espionage angle.

She didn’t want to be good at it. What she wanted was to be able to go back to her routine existence and forget about any of this...

No, that wasn’t true. Without all this, she would not have met Jesse McCutcheon.

Kerin took her cell phone out of the pocket of her lab coat and flipped it open.

## Chapter Eleven

Jesse slowly pushed the button to shut off his phone, feeling his stomach tighten. Immediately he scrolled down and punched another key. Rob picked it up at once. “Yes?”

“Kerin just called me. Said she was running late, which could be possible, of course. She’s still playing catch up with her patients.”

Her brother sat silent for a minute. “But?”

“But she sounded funny. Strained, stilted, whatever you want to call it. Not normal.”

“You know her that well after such a short time?”

That one was easy. “Yes,” Jesse said simply.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” Rob said with a hint of grim humor in his voice. “My guess is Donovan is inside then. If I hadn’t worried something like this would happen, I wouldn’t have hung out in the building for the better part of the afternoon. I didn’t see Donovan come in, but there is only one of me.”

“You’re inside?”

“Yes.”

“I didn’t see him, or you, either,” Jesse admitted, aware a light sweat had touched his skin under his clothes even though it was cold in the car, “but I can only watch one of the four entrances at a time, too. I’m going up to her office.”

“No, I’ll go. I’ve been alternating waiting rooms all afternoon. Right now I’m in the second floor stairwell. I just left the cardiology practice only a few doors down from hers. I can be in there in two minutes, maybe less.”

Rob was there?

"I'm coming up, too." Jesse knew he couldn't watch the entrances on all sides of the building and he wasn't about to sit idly by while a killer like Donovan abducted the woman he loved.

Yes, loved.

"Henderson is dead."

The flat statement fell between them. In a raspy voice, Jesse said incredulously, "What?"

"I don't have time obviously to tell you the story but it's why I've been here most of the day. I got the call late last night. It was an accident...friend of mine found the information I've been looking for but things went wrong...Look, Jesse, I wondered if Donovan wouldn't be desperate now to flush me out."

Through Kerin.

Jesse simply hung up and got out of the car, slamming the door and hunching his shoulders against the insidious cold. He walked across the parking lot, trying his best to not break into a jog and to ignore the panic. For the first time in his life he wished he both owned and knew how to use a gun. The hallway was long silent, muddled by the traffic of the day. A few of the offices on the first floor still had their lights on as he proceeded to the elevators.

The piped-in Christmas music was incongruous to the moment. The doors opened and Jesse stepped out, warily looking around. A young nurse, in scrubs and a winter coat, was waiting. She smiled at him and entered the now empty elevator.

As he began to walk down the second floor corridor, he heard a loud, horrible crack.

A gunshot. It seemed to him time was suspended, like the echo of whatever terrible thing had just happened rolled on.

His heart stopped.

The doors to the elevator were still open and he heard the young woman gasp behind him as he sprinted forward.

Jesse wrenched the door to Internal Medicine Associates open with such force it hit him as it rebounded, making him stumble into

the waiting room. He called out frantically, "Kerin!"

Nothing.

Surely Rob, who had been so close, was already there, already in the office...his brain seemed fogged, and he wasn't sure which way to go. A woman whimpered in a sound of pure distress and that seemed to make his decision-making progress go on autopilot.

Jesse chose the door to the left, following the sound, silently spinning small incoherent prayers in his head. A middle-aged woman, presumably the receptionist, sat huddled in a small area that held copiers and fax machines, her face terrified and pale. Jesse said harshly, "Dr. Burke's office. Where is it?"

Apparently unable to articulate, she pointed a trembling finger toward the right. Dredging up a coherent thought, Jesse fumbled into his pocket and grabbed his cell, tossing it toward her. "Call 911."

Even as he turned back, someone stumbled out into the hallway.

Kerin. All he saw was blood. Brilliant scarlet on her white coat, her hands, a streak of crimson down one ashen cheek. She saw him, seemed to focus. On a sob, she whispered, "Oh, Jesse."

\* \* \* \*

She was used to hospitals, felt at home in them; the smell, the sights, the sounds, all familiar, but she wasn't used to *this*.

Kerin sat in a gray upholstered chair, a Styrofoam cup of coffee cradled in her hands. The waiting area was plain, with a few generic pictures on the wall. It was also quiet...very quiet, with nothing but a single wall clock above the double doorway into intensive care marking the passage of time.

Being on the other side of the equation was particularly unpleasant.

The whole evening had been unpleasant, in fact.

Except for Jesse, who even now sat next to her, his long legs extended, his face drawn in concern. "Just one more time," he urged

her.

She glanced at him, then at the police officer, and then at the man in the dark suit who had introduced himself as Agent Mazzetti. Wearily, she nodded, agreeing to repeat her story. “I was in my office. A man came in. He asked for my brother’s phone number. I told him I didn’t have it. Then he admitted he had been spying on me for a couple of months. He also took out a gun. Per his request I called Jesse—Mr. McCutcheon—to tell him I was running late. Maybe a minute or two later, I could hear Rob arguing with the receptionist. Unfortunately, so did Donovan.”

It seemed natural to fall silent, waiting for the tide of nausea to pass. Both the police officer and the FBI agent waited with courteous patience. Kerin felt like crying. It was odd, for she’d cried more in front of Jesse than any human being on this earth, including her mother. A hot droplet rolled down her cheek and landed on her wrist. She swallowed hard. “They shot each other. Just like that. Rob appeared in the doorway and Donovan was waiting for him and they both just fired. No one even said anything.”

Jesse looked at the man who had introduced himself as Ken Mazzetti. “There seems to be a lot of personal baggage involved with Donovan and Rob Burke and a man called Henderson.”

The dark-haired agent glanced at the young Indianapolis police officer. “If there is anything else, I’ll let your captain know.”

“Yes, sir.” The IPD officer got the hint easily enough and nodded, flipping shut his notebook and walking away.

“You know about Henderson?” Mazzetti said it evenly, but there was an edge to his voice.

“We know there was a cover up of some kind involved and Rob claimed he was getting the shit end of the deal,” Jesse said bluntly. “Since Donovan arrived in Kerin’s office and threatened to abduct her at gunpoint, I’d say maybe he was right.”

“Or maybe Donovan was just desperate to find Burke. When he did, he got shot for his efforts.” Agent Mazzetti sat across in the small

cluster of chairs, the arrangement designed to give anxious families some measure of privacy, and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. His dark eyes were direct. "It's my job to figure out which scenario is true."

"I'm sure you can prove Rob Burke didn't kill Henderson. He was here, not in Virginia. Besides, from what I understand, he now has evidence to substantiate his initial allegations are true. A friend of his was gathering information, and Henderson's death was self-defense."

Kerin slowly turned and looked at the man sitting next to her. Jesse's good-looking face was tight and set. She had no idea where he got all his information but was damned glad he was there. There was no way she was currently capable of fending off government agents.

"You already know Henderson is dead?" Mazzetti's black brows snapped together.

"Rob told me."

"That links him back to the crime. It hasn't even been released to the press yet."

Jesse shook his dark head. "It links him, Henderson, and Donovan together, which you already knew. It gives Donovan, too, a motive to get even rougher. Without Henderson's clout to block an investigation into the possibility he executed an informant, he was a vulnerable man. What happened this evening makes perfect sense if you buy Rob Burke's story."

After a moment, Mazzetti sat back. A small wry smile played across his mouth. "What is it you do again, Mr. McCutcheon?"

"I construct buildings."

"I think you missed your calling. You say Burke can substantiate his claims?"

Jesse nodded as if he really believed it was true. She prayed it was. At the moment, her brother by all accounts was at least resting comfortably, but he did have a bullet wound to the abdomen.

Donovan hadn't been nearly as lucky.

Mazzetti nodded and got up. For the first time all evening he

looked tired, rubbing the back of his neck. “I’m sure we’ll have more questions.”

Unfortunately, Kerin was sure he would, too. When he nodded and walked away, she slumped back in her chair. “Thanks.”

“For what?” Jesse removed the cup from her lax hand before the unappetizing beverage spilled on the floor. “As far as I can tell, I didn’t do anything but arrive in a very unhero-like way after it all happened. I didn’t know Rob was in the building, I didn’t know Donovan was there either, and—”

She leaned over, grabbed his shirtfront, and kissed him. It was spontaneous and even though it was very late, she was bone tired, and so worried over her brother she felt almost limp, she couldn’t help the kiss.

It was easier than explaining he was wonderful in about a million ways for even being there at all. If ever there was a time she wasn’t up to explaining her feelings, this was it.

Thankfully, it worked. Jesse murmured against her mouth. “I didn’t see that coming.”

He’d blindsided her more than once since their blizzard induced meeting on a cold Wisconsin road. She whispered back, “One surprise after another, that’s me.”

He laughed and leaned back, looking at her with those incredibly sexy dark eyes. “You have that right, sweetheart.”



## Epilogue

The high rise office building was right in downtown Chicago, part of an impressive landscape of gleaming glass, concrete, and busy streets. It was one of those rare, balmy spring days that sometimes come in early April, with the temperature in the sixties, almost no breeze, and a few trees beginning to show a hint of green.

It really had been a long winter Kerin mused as she stood in the busy lobby and scanned the board for the name of the company. There it was. Twelfth floor, J.M. Construction, Inc.

Rather an impressive address for a mere builder, she thought as she got in the sleek elevator. When she got out and looked for the correct suite, she found it right away. First set of glass doors on her left, the name of the company in gold lettering on an onyx plaque by the entrance.

The waiting area was plush carpeting, elegant leather chairs, and huge ferns, with discreet classical music in the background. Beyond it was a desk with a young dark-haired woman who glanced up and politely smiled as Kerin approached. The receptionist asked, "May I help you?"

"I don't have an appointment but I was told Mr. McCutcheon would be in today. Is it possible to see him?" In retrospect, maybe the idea of a surprise visit wasn't quite the brilliant romantic gesture Kerin had perceived it to be. It was just that his message he was back in the country had an impact she didn't expect, so she'd made an impulsive decision to drive up.

No, that wasn't being honest with herself. She'd been dying for him to get back from his latest project, and like some adolescent,

hadn't wanted to wait to see him. *Couldn't wait* to see him would be more accurate, or she wouldn't have rearranged her schedule and dropped everything to drive to Chicago unannounced.

"He's in a meeting." The receptionist eyed her with discreet curiosity. "I'm not sure how long it will be, but I can take your name and see if he can perhaps arrange some time after lunch. I'm afraid he has a rather busy day as Mr. McCutcheon just returned from South America."

Kerin decided to play what she hoped was a winning card. "Yes, I know. He called me from the Houston airport."

There was a slight readjustment to her status, which is what she'd hoped for. "I see. Was he expecting you, then?"

"No, I wanted to surprise him if possible. My name is Kerin Burke. I think I'll just go ahead and wait, and if he can fit in a few minutes to see me after lunch that would be fine."

"I'll let him know you're here, Ms. Burke."

Kerin didn't bother to correct the form of address. She had colleagues who did that and it irritated her no end. She chose a comfortable armchair and picked up the latest copy of *Architectural Digest*. She was lost in gorgeous Spanish Mission style homes in beautiful California valleys when she heard the sound of voices, one of them familiar, a light laugh sending a shiver down her spine.

A door to what must be a conference room to the left of the receptionist's desk opened and several men came out, all of them in business suits, one of them in particular drop-dead gorgeous with his glossy dark hair longer than she had last seen it and a fine tan from the Venezuela sun.

Jesse.

He was shaking hands with one of his associates when he caught sight of her sitting there, the magazine suspended in her hands. The smile that lit his face assuaged all doubts about her reckless decision to make the impromptu four hour drive up from Indianapolis. Kerin heard him say, "I'll get everything to you by next week. Can you

please excuse me, gentlemen?”

She really wasn't aware she'd stood up, but she must have, for when Jesse walked across the waiting area, and took the magazine from her hands, she was on her feet. “Hi,” she managed to say in a very breathless voice.

“Hi.” His smile was more than sexy. It made her stomach do a strange twist. “This is a very nice surprise.”

“I hoped it would be.”

He dropped the magazine on the table. “You read my mind. I didn't want to wait all week to see you either. I almost tried to rearrange my flights so I could end up in Indy instead.”

“We're on the same page, apparently then.” Kerin felt that flutter again in the pit of her stomach. There must be some medical term for it, but if there was, she didn't know it off the top of her head.

“How's Rob?” Jesse's dark eyes held concern.

“Recovered, at least almost completely. He still has to do some physical therapy, but he's doing well and back in Virginia. He has a rather interesting friend who came and stayed with us for a while. I take it Thea was somehow involved in the whole cover-up mess, but whatever evidence there was against Henderson and Donovan must have been convincing because there was just a perfunctory hearing and I've heard nothing else.”

“Sort of an internal problem that resolved itself?”

Kerin had a feeling he was right. Certainly as the investigation progressed, Rob seemed to become less and less anxious about it all.

Jesse's hands touched her waist, pulling her the fraction close enough so he could lower his head and whisper in her ear in a gesture as intimate as if he'd kissed her in front of their amused audience. “How about we go into my office? After we say hello, I can take you to lunch. And dinner. And in the morning, breakfast. We have a lot to talk about.”

“Talk?” She managed a small smothered laugh. He smelled fabulous, like light crisp cologne and a special scent that was his

alone.

“Some talking,” he clarified, with a slightly wicked grin as he looked into her eyes, “among others things. If you missed me half as much as I missed you.”

“I missed you twice as much,” she said in a shaky voice.

“It can’t be.” His hands still lingered at her waist, his voice soft. “I love you.”

*I love you.* He’d whispered it in her ear before he’d climbed in his truck and left for Illinois, but hearing it again months later when she’d had time to adjust to everything that had happened made her throat tighten.

“If you think for a moment *I* don’t love *you*, you haven’t been paying attention,” she countered, her voice hoarse.

He laughed, the sound light, familiar...perfect. “Is this a contest? If so, do you want to continue the debate in my office like I suggested?”

The impulse to drop everything and come to Chicago to see him had been even a better idea than the flight to Wisconsin that had brought them together in the first place and that was saying something.

Kerin leaned against him. “Absolutely.”

## THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Kate Watterson loves crafting suspense novels with a tantalizing dose of heat. She also writes historical erotic romance as Emma Wildes and futuristic as Annabel Wolfe. Please visit her at [www.katewatterson.com](http://www.katewatterson.com)



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