



Trouble With The Law

Tatiana March

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are a product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places or occurrences, is purely coincidental.

To Courtney and Tiffany, my wonderful editors who helped to make this a better book.

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Chapter One

Justine Whitmore crouched down and tipped the contents of her satin evening bag over the gravel ground. Just to make sure, she ran her hands over the spilled clutter.

No luck.

In the darkness, her fingers closed over a credit card, a few coins, a lipstick—but no room key.

She peered at her gold watch, her face furrowed with concern. Half past two in the morning. Not the best time to go pounding on the door of a sedate country inn.

As she rose to her feet, her eyes fell on a wooden bench by the wall beneath a wisteria. The sweet scent of flowers filled the balmy air. In the sky, a golden August moon hung like a giant lantern, casting a glow over the house and the parking lot.

In her silver Mercury sedan, a half empty bottle of champagne stood wedged in a bucket of ice. Sandra had shoved it at her as compensation for not being able to drink the wedding toasts because she had to drive.

A slow smile replaced Justine's scowl of frustration.

She could sit outside, and while away the hours until someone woke.

* * * *

Justine shivered on the bench, sipping her third glass of champagne. The night air had turned cool, and she needed to pee. Above her, the dark windows stared down like a row of unseeing eyes.

Bouncing up to her feet, she surveyed the gables and turrets. A sturdy trellis with creepers covered the wall, and a thick drainpipe ran down from the gutter. And wasn't that her room right at the top, with the window she'd left ajar to combat the muggy August heat?

Swaying on her heels, Justine suppressed a champagne-fueled hiccup. She teetered in for a closer inspection. All she needed was to climb up, then step across and flop in over the

sill. Piece of cake for someone who at college had rock climbed to grade five point seven on the difficulty scale.

Kicking off her flimsy sandals, she slithered out of her dress and folded it over the bench. She'd splurged on a slinky Dior, a consolation prize for once again being a wedding guest instead of the bride. No way would she risk ripping a garment worth two thousand bucks. Unclipping her gold watch, she hid it under the dress, together with her car keys and satin evening bag.

Then she blew into her palms and attacked the trellis.

Piece of cake, just as she'd expected. She jerked the window wide and flopped inside with a thud. The ledge scraped her shins as she tumbled through. Wincing with pain, she scampered to her feet and inspected the damage. Drops of blood trickled from the cuts, and her silk stockings were torn, but at least her garter belt and lace panties remained intact. She adjusted her bra, and groped her way to the bedside lamp.

Her hand butted against a large object. As she fumbled along the lumpy contours, a scream pierced the darkness. Justine froze. She prepared to move again, but the bedside light snapped on, illuminating the room with a yellow glow.

"What in heaven's name?" A grouchy male voice muttered out the words of complaint, and a frail figure clad in striped flannel bolted up on the bed.

The screaming grew louder.

Confused, Justine retreated to the window. "I'm sorry," she said, and another hiccup escaped her chest. "I think I've got the wrong room."

"It's all right, Clara." The man in striped pajamas reached out to pat the mountain of flesh next to him. "The lady's got the wrong room."

The bedspread sailed to the floor, and an enormous woman wearing a long frilly nightgown clambered to her feet. "Hussy!" she cried. "Harlot!" She stepped forward to block the man's view.

Justine surveyed the scene, and although she knew that her reaction was like tossing gunpowder into flames, she couldn't help herself. She clutched her sides and burst into peals of laughter.

"Call the police," the woman said. "I'll restrain the harlot if she tries to flee."

The man flickered a glance between them, then shrugged his narrow shoulders and reached for the telephone on the nightstand.

Justine opened her mouth to protest, but when she caught the determined scowl on the woman's face, she slunk into the corner. She was too tired to argue. She'd curl up on the

floor and sleep until the police arrived to rescue her.

* * * *

Did the police always arrive so quickly in small towns? Justine wondered as a car crunched to a halt on the gravel drive. Footsteps clattered up the stairs, and a knock sounded at the door.

“Mrs. Harper?” A slight young man in a khaki uniform stepped into the room.

Puzzled, Justine stared at the officer. She’d listened to the man in the striped pajamas making the call, and she couldn’t recall him mentioning his name, only the room number.

“This tramp broke in and made advances toward my husband,” the woman said with an extravagant waddle of her double chin.

“I didn’t—” Justine began, but the young officer silenced her with an upheld hand.

“Hussy! Harlot!” the woman screeched.

“I’m a guest,” Justine explained wearily. “I got into the wrong room by mistake.”

“Let’s clear this up in the office downstairs.” The officer smoothed his mousy hair in a resigned gesture. “The landlord is already awake.”

“Fine,” Justine agreed.

“I’m coming with you,” the matron said firmly, and they trooped down the stairs.

Justine rushed to speak first. “I’m in room seven. Reserved by Sandra Clements. I’m here for her wedding.”

The lanky man behind the counter raked his fingers through his disheveled hair and bent down to inspect the guest ledger. “I have Mr. and Mrs. Simmons in room seven.”

“I know,” Justine said with a sigh, realizing the added complication. “I was booked into the motel on Route 54. Mr. and Mrs. Simmons have their little boy with them. When they heard the motel has a pool, they asked to switch. Although they had already picked up the key, they hadn’t settled in. I took their key and dumped my stuff in the room on my way to the reception. I planned to explain in the morning, but I lost the key. Rather than ring the doorbell and wake up everyone, I tried to get in through the window.”

Mrs. Harper threw the uniformed young man a withering look. “If you believe that the taxpayers aren’t getting the police service they’re paying for.”

“I guess we’d better clear this up at the station.” The officer reached out to take Justine’s arm.

She whirled to him. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“The taxpayers expect the law to be upheld,” Mrs. Harper declared.

“Are you arresting me?” Justine demanded as the young officer marched her down the

stairs.

“No.” He propelled her along. “I’m requesting that you come with me to the station so we can clear this up without interference from Mrs. Harper.”

“You can’t possibly think I’m a hooker.” She craned to look at him over her shoulder. “My clothes and my car are outside. I’ll show you my ID, and you can make a few phone calls.”

“Where?” He stopped on the porch and surveyed the front drive.

Justine flinched as she realized how it might look. If she took him to the bench where she had left her clothes, the baby-faced cop would see the empty bottle of champagne and might think she’d been drinking and driving.

She snapped her mouth shut, and flopped on the back seat of the patrol car with a mutinous expression on her face.

Chapter Two

Justine huddled in a plastic chair opposite the scuffed desk, hugging her arms around her body for warmth. She stared at the calendar on the wall. Someone had already turned the page to September, where a red circle marked the last Saturday of the month.

Her body tensed as she heard the door open and close behind her.

The young officer who'd hauled her in entered with light footsteps. He'd kept silent during the drive, but she had noticed his cautious glances. Once or twice he'd opened his mouth, clearly intending to speak, but had closed it again without saying a word. On their arrival at the low redbrick building bearing a sign for county administration and law enforcement, he'd ushered her down a corridor, and had left her waiting in an office with *Sheriff Taylor* stenciled over the glass door.

"Are you cold?" the officer asked as he circled the desk to face her.

Justine gave him a silent nod.

He strode out again, and returned clutching a shabby raincoat. He offered it to her, averting his gaze from her flimsy underwear and torn silk stockings. Justine glowered at him, her face twisted in disgust at the filthy garment. The man shrugged his shoulders, and tossed the raincoat on top of an open cardboard box crammed with manila folders.

"I want to make a phone call," Justine said, keeping her voice even.

"It's almost four in the morning."

"I know." She gestured at the clock on the wall.

"Who do you want to call? Husband? Boyfriend?"

"If I'm a hooker, I'd be calling my pimp."

The officer expelled a resigned sigh. "I can explain."

"You can save your explanations to my lawyer," Justine told him. "I want to exercise my right to a telephone call." Her eyes narrowed. "And believe me, Sheriff Taylor, once I've

spoken to my lawyer, the heat under your backside is going to get so scorching that you'll never sit comfortably again."

The young man rose. "I'm not Sheriff Taylor. I'm Deputy Mickelson."

Justine watched in silence as he stalked out to join another deputy engrossed in paperwork at an untidy desk. The pair huddled together, whispering, casting wary looks in her direction. Straining her ears, she could make out a few snippets of conversation.

The Sheriff will have your ass... Screwed up... The Harper woman... Didn't know what else to do.

A few minutes later, the older deputy marched into the office. His stomach strained over his belt, giving him a slovenly look. A worried frown lined his tired face. "Ma'am, I think we can clear up the situation real easy, if you just allow me to explain—"

"Lawyer," Justine snapped, as if talking to a dog. "Phone call." She clamped her mouth shut and fixed her attention on the wall calendar, refusing to engage in further conversation.

Eventually the deputy gave up and strode out. From the corner of her eye, she saw him pick a telephone, punch a button on the keypad, and speak a few hesitant words into the receiver.

Fifteen minutes later, Justine remained huddled in the plastic chair, shivering with cold, and she accepted that it might have been wiser to allow the deputies an opportunity to explain. She unfolded her legs, intending to get up, but an abrupt slam echoing down the corridor halted her. As she craned her neck to look through the glass door, she saw a broad shouldered man storming across the floor.

The newcomer burst into the office, instantly making the room appear smaller. "Miss Whitmore? I'm Sheriff Taylor."

He paused to close the door and pull the blind over the glass panel before propping one hip over the corner of the desk. His gaze raked her body, but not a single flicker in his expression indicated there was anything unusual in her attire.

Justine stared at Sheriff Taylor. Something heavy settled over her chest, and suddenly she found it difficult to breathe.

Dark stubble shadowed his jaw, and the black hair curled in an uncombed tangle around his face. Sleep softened the rugged features. The sensitive curve of his full mouth belied the angry glint in his eyes.

"Justine Whitmore, Academy House, Locust Street, Philadelphia?" He rattled out the information, raising a pair of questioning black eyebrows at her.

“Yes...Where— How did you find out who I am?”

Sheriff Taylor reached into the pocket of his khaki shirt and clattered a collection of items onto the desk. Her American Express card, her Elizabeth Arden lipstick, a few coins. He lazily picked up the lipstick, unclipped the cover, and twisted out the color. “Seems a match,” he said, holding up the lipstick, squinting at her.

Justine met his gaze, and suddenly the world faded away. The eyes holding hers were dark green, and amusement glittered beneath the anger. She licked her lips, aware that not a trace of lipstick remained. The corners of the man’s mouth twitched, and suddenly a surge of heat flared on Justine’s face with such intensity she knew she’d blushed scarlet.

“Definitely a match,” Sheriff Taylor said. He lowered his arm and replaced the cap over the lipstick, then set it on the desk with a little clunk.

“I...” Justine stared at the stranger, who by his mere presence had tied her up in knots. “Where did you get my things?”

He responded with an easy shrug. “I passed by Rob Thornton’s guesthouse on the way over and picked them up from the ground.”

Justine nodded, remembering how she’d tipped out the contents of her evening bag in search of the room key. Evidently, she’d forgotten to scoop everything up.

The sheriff contemplated her with idle curiosity. “What brings you so far from home? It’s a three hour drive to Philadelphia.”

“I’m here for a wedding,” Justine explained. “Sandra Clements.”

“Sandra Clements?” The sheriff frowned. “Nobody by that name in Eagle Mountain.”

“She’s from Elkhorn, but it’s such a big wedding there wasn’t enough room at the motel, so the guests have spilled over into the neighboring towns.”

“Elkhorn?” Sheriff Taylor said. “The daughter of Bob Clements? Marrying some city boy who’s made a bundle evicting old ladies so he can knock down the tenements and replace them with high-priced condos?”

“It’s called urban regeneration,” Justine informed him tartly. “And the *boy* happens to be my boss, Steven Chandler. And he is thirty-seven, which I presume is almost as old as you are.” Pursing her lips, she surveyed the muscular man in front of her. “You can cut the patronizing act. You must be what, forty, forty-five tops?”

“My age is none of your business.” The sheriff stood up and turned his back on her, but Justine saw the smile he was trying to hide. A thrill swept over her. Then she caught her train of thought, and gave her head an angry shake. What was wrong with her? He was just a man, and in the course of her job as the head of public relations for Chandler Developments,

she dealt with gorgeous hunks all the time. Male models who posed for advertising posters, sophisticated urbanites in tune with the latest trends. Men who dressed fashionably and invested time and money in personal grooming. Her eyes drifted over the sheriff's jeans and khaki shirt, until they homed in on the blunt fingernails reaching up to another uniform shirt that hung from a hook on the wall.

Aha! Sheriff Taylor was a nail-biter. Her lips curved into a satisfied smirk at finding a weakness in his intimidating strength.

"Did my men not offer you anything to wear?" the sheriff asked, turning to her.

Her skin tingled as his eyes lingered over her, and suddenly Justine became acutely aware of her state of undress. She pointed at the raincoat thrown over the box of files. "They did, but what they offered seemed to contain the DNA samples from hundreds of suspects."

He tossed the khaki shirt at her. "That's guaranteed clean."

She picked up the garment that landed in her lap and inspected it gingerly. "How do you know?"

"Because I washed and ironed it myself," Sheriff Taylor said as he walked back to the desk. "I always wear a clean shirt on Mondays."

"Today's Sunday."

"I know." He expelled a weary sigh. "My day off."

Justine felt another blush stinging her cheeks as she quickly slotted her arms into the sleeves. The shirt flapped loose around her, and she rose to her feet to fold the front across her chest. The hem hung halfway down her thighs. A strange heat filled her as she contemplated that the fabric hugging her body had only a few days ago stretched taut over the broad shoulders and muscular arms of Sheriff Taylor.

She looked up as she heard his quick intake of breath.

"Your legs," the sheriff said. "They're covered in scratches, and there's dried blood on your skin. Did my men use force to bring you in?"

Before she had time to reply, he closed the distance between them and dropped down on one knee in front of her. He ran his fingers over the scrapes on her shins, his touch so gentle he barely brushed her skin, but the contact hit her with the force of a knockout blow.

"No," she whispered. "I got the scratches when I climbed in through the window."

His halo of dark curls moved in a slow nod as he continued to check her legs for injuries. "You seem okay," he said finally and stood up again.

Justine swallowed. She was far from all right, and if the sheriff didn't realize the impact he had on her, he was a bigger fool than the two deputies outside.

“How much have you had to drink?” he asked.

She peered at him, a little sheepish. “I had three glasses of champagne.”

“Did the deputies give you a field sobriety test to see if you were fit to drive?”

Her head snapped up. “I do *not* drink and drive.”

“Then how did you get to the guesthouse?”

Justine expelled a sigh. Sandra could testify that she’d been sober when she left the party, but for some reason she couldn’t quite understand, it seemed terribly important to learn that Sheriff Taylor trusted her. “I brought a half empty bottle of champagne with me from the wedding reception. When I realized I’d lost the keys, I sat on the bench outside and drank it.” She flicked a glance at him. “That’s where my clothes are. On the bench. I took them off so I wouldn’t ruin my dress when I climbed up the trellis.”

“So, you transported an open container of alcohol in a vehicle and consumed alcohol in public? And then engaged in a recklessly dangerous activity?” He frowned at her. “You know you’ve broken several laws?”

Justine bit her lip, her eyes downcast. She expected Sheriff Taylor would slap her with a hefty fine, adding yet another disaster to her weekend, already hopelessly ruined. “I guess so,” she muttered.

He shook his head and gave her an easy smile, as if reading her thoughts. “What do you say we kill this mess without paperwork? Kurt and Leroy will apologize to you, and you can be gracious in your acceptance. Then I’ll drive you back to Rob Thornton’s guesthouse, and we’ll forget all about tonight. You won’t file a complaint, and I won’t book you for public intoxication.” His smile deepened, until lines fanned out from his dark green eyes.

Justine nodded. Most of his words made sense, but she had a premonition that forgetting the rugged Sheriff Taylor wouldn’t be as straightforward as he was suggesting.

She watched as he spent a few seconds rummaging in a desk drawer and patting the pockets of his jeans. Then he took her elbow. With old-fashioned courtesy, he helped her up and guided her out through the door. After a subdued exchange with the two deputies, they left the building. A black pick-up truck stood parked opposite the entrance. The sheriff clicked the locks open with a remote key and ushered her into the passenger seat.

During the drive to the guesthouse, he spoke quietly, almost as if talking to himself. “Leroy only became a sheriff’s deputy a year ago, and he’s still wet behind the ears. He panics easily. Mrs. Harper is a pain in the ass. Every year she books a week at Rob Thornton’s guesthouse, and every time she finds some reason to complain, so she can beat down the room rate.”

He glanced at her with a wry smile. “Last year it was kids making noise outside. The year before it was a water heater that malfunctioned. Leroy knew you’d gone into the wrong room by mistake, but he thought the best way of dealing with Mrs. Harper was to get you out of there. When you refused to let him explain, he didn’t know what to do. You alarmed him with your big-city manner and your talk about lawyers.”

Justine finished buttoning up the khaki shirt and lowered her hands into her lap. “I’m sorry,” she muttered, lacing her fingers together to steady them. “I guess you think I’m some kind of a queen bitch.”

The sheriff smiled again, this time without lifting his attention from the road. “No harm done. You had a right to be annoyed. From what I hear, Mrs. Harper called you all kinds of names.”

“Hussy. Harlot.” Justine let out a muffled chuckle. “A sinful tramp.”

Her pulse quickened as Sheriff Taylor shot her another amused glance. Then he resumed looking through the windshield, and they drove the rest of the way through the sleeping town in silence.

Chapter Three

The guesthouse greeted them with blackened windows, a single bulb casting a dull light over the porch. Justine tiptoed across the gravel drive in her bare feet. Her breath stalled as she imagined Sheriff Taylor picking her up and carrying her, but he offered to perform no such courtesy. He simply stood by the porch steps, patiently waiting for her. When she caught up with him, he bent to retrieve a key from under a clay pot with a miniature juniper growing in it.

“I told Rob to go back to bed,” he said as he opened the front door and waved her through. “He promised to leave a key to your room on the hall table.”

Justine advanced with caution in the darkness. When the ceiling lights snapped on, she lifted a hand to shield her eyes. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Sheriff Taylor picking up a key from a small table set flush against the wall.

“Thanks,” she said, holding out her hand. “I think I can manage from here.”

He gave her a long considering look. “I’d better see you upstairs, in case Mrs. Harper is waiting for you.” His fingers closed over the room key as he spoke.

Justine scaled the steps ahead of him, her heart pounding. Something had changed in those last few seconds in the hall, stirring up dark and dangerous undercurrents. She felt her mind slipping out of control, like she was a puppet, and she had no idea who was holding the strings.

“Here it is. Number seven. It’s a nice room, overlooks the front garden, although that doesn’t make any difference at this time of day. I mean this time of night.” Justine fell silent. God, she was babbling. She never babbled. Everyone knew anxiety made you talk too much, and long ago, she had trained herself to remain silent when her nerves stood on edge.

The sheriff unlocked the door and walked in. He didn’t say anything, didn’t even turn to look at her. Justine swallowed the panic rising in her throat, and stepped into the room

after him.

A faint glow shone in from the bulb above the porch. Sheriff Taylor reached out to the lamp on the desk. Justine heard a soft click of the switch, and then a muted light filled the room. She listened to the rustle as he drew the curtains, blocking out the world, shutting them inside a private cocoon.

A queen bed stood crammed into an alcove. The desk and the chair comprised the only other furniture in the small room. There wasn't even a nightstand, or a wardrobe, just a rack with a few hangers mounted on the wall by the entrance. A folding cot leaned against the wall in the corner, intended for the family who had booked the room.

The sheriff turned to her and gestured at the door. Justine took a step back and pushed at the panel, until it closed with a muffled click.

Tension gripped her, making her movements clumsy.

Why did he want her to shut the door? And why did she obey without a question? He had said nothing, done nothing to indicate any personal interest in her, but the air crackled with an attraction that couldn't be ignored. It felt as if by his mere presence Sheriff Taylor had set out to seduce her, the current between them so strong it would pull them together regardless of the circumstances.

Without thinking, Justine turned the knob to secure the lock. A shiver rippled along her skin at the implication of her actions.

"I need my shirt for Monday morning," Sheriff Taylor said, his voice low.

Justine stared at him. He took a step toward her. She matched it with a step of her own, and he followed with another step, his attention on her face. They come to a halt with their bodies almost touching.

"You'd better take your shirt then," she said, her arms down her sides. The force of attraction that drew her to the man standing before her filled her senses, leaving her trembling and defenseless.

He lifted one hand and undid the button at her collarbone, his fingers brushing her skin as they made their way to the next button, and the next.

Justine closed her eyes. The excitement tingling down her spine was more intense than anything she'd ever experienced. She knew that her behavior amounted to madness, but she couldn't stop herself, any more than she wanted to stop him.

This must be how it felt to sell your soul.

A thin ray of sanity pierced the sensual haze around her. "Are you married?" she asked in a whisper, blinking her eyes open.

“No,” he murmured, his fingers conquering another button and stroking the skin on her stomach. “And I’m forty-two.”

“I’ll be forty in a few weeks.”

“A good reason to celebrate.” He freed the last button and raised his hands to push the shirt over her shoulders. Sliding the sleeves down her arms he released the shirt and twisted it into a bundle with his strong fingers. “Right,” he said, holding her gaze with his. “I’ve taken my shirt.”

“Would you like to take anything else?” Justine forced the words past her tightened throat. Whatever the consequences, she knew she couldn’t simply let him go without finding out if the same madness afflicted him.

He brushed the back of his hand over the skin above her breasts, dragging one finger along the rim of the padded cups of her bra. “I don’t think I should take this. I wouldn’t have much use for it.”

Justine held her breath, and then she plunged into the torrent of lust that threatened to sweep her along. “You can take *me*,” she told him.

His finger stilled between her breasts. “I’m a stranger,” he said. “That brings risks. I could carry a disease. I could be the kind of man who gets turned on by violence. You don’t know anything about me.”

“No,” she told him. “And don’t want to know anything about you either, and I’m willing to take the risk. All I want is for someone to hold me tonight. Make me feel alive. Make me feel wanted and warm.”

His fingers resumed their motion, creeping to the edge of the padded cups and reaching inside, where they made tiny forays, inching closer and closer to her nipples with each sweep. “When did you last sleep with a man?”

Justine shrugged, and shuddered as the motion brought his blunt fingertips further down inside her bra. “Over a year ago.”

“A boyfriend?”

“Ex-boyfriend. We were both at a loose end, and it was his fortieth birthday. We got together to share old times.” She forced a smile. “Like you said, a birthday with a zero in it is a good reason to celebrate.”

“All right.” Sheriff Taylor nodded at her, his face unreadable. “I’ll help you celebrate yours. Let’s make it a birthday to remember.”

It felt as though someone had stolen the air from her lungs. Justine struggled for calm, but her legs buckled, and the room faded in her view. Sheriff Taylor untangled his hand from

her bra and gripped her elbow.

“Easy,” he murmured, steadying her. She stared at him helplessly, and in one graceful motion, he swooped down and gathered her into his arms, cradling her against his chest.

“Are you sure?” he said as he lowered her on the bed.

“Yes.” It came out on a sob, and Justine wound her arms around his neck, capturing him close, preventing him from pulling away.

“Easy,” he murmured again. He lifted his hands to break her grip. “I want to look at you.” He straightened, his eyes lingering over her, and once more she became intensely aware that nothing covered her nakedness except a pair of lace panties and a bra, and the shreds of torn silk stockings.

Justine drew a shaky breath, expecting that Sheriff Taylor would continue to tease her breasts with his drifting touch, but instead he stepped back and stood in the centre of the room. His eyes never left hers as he began to undress, moving with the economy of a man who possessed no vanity.

His fingers worked their way down the row of buttons on his shirt, and when the front fell open, with a quick twist of his shoulders he shrugged off the shirt, revealing a broad chest peppered with dark hairs that narrowed to a band over his ridged abdomen and disappeared into the waistband of his jeans. Without turning from her, he draped the shirt over the single chair in the room.

Justine rose to a sitting position on the bed. “Let me,” she murmured, lifting one arm to reach through the air, her fingertips pulsing with the need to touch his bare skin.

“No,” he told her. “I want to watch you watching me.”

His gaze locked with hers as he methodically unfastened the buckle on his belt. Rather than reach for the zip on his jeans, he slowly pulled the worn leather band out of the loops and folded the belt in his hands before stepping aside to set it down on the desk by the window.

Then he scraped out the chair and settled on it, lifting one foot over the opposite knee. Justine felt her mouth go dry. She hadn’t looked at his feet before, hadn’t realized that instead of shoes or sneakers he wore hiking boots. She listened to the sounds as he yanked the laces loose to remove the boots and the socks beneath.

Still looking at her, he stood up and raised his hands to his waist. “Sorry,” he said, and a quick smile quirked his lips. “Commando. I was in too much of a hurry to look for underwear when I got dressed.”

The metal zip rustled as his hands edged down. With a sweeping motion he shoved

the jeans down his powerful legs. His erection swung free, pointing at the ceiling. Justine couldn't help but stare. Her breath ran in swift gasps as she tore her attention back to his face.

She caught the flash of male pride in his eyes, and then he moved to the bed and crouched down beside her. "Happy birthday," he murmured, brushing a chaste kiss on her lips.

Justine laid the flat of her palm over his chest. She could feel the warmth of his skin, the slight moisture the steamy night had drawn on it, and the steady pounding of his heart. She swept her hand along the smooth muscles, following the downward taper of the dark line of hairs.

"Not yet," he murmured. Gently but firmly, he placed his hands against her shoulders and pushed, until she fell back to lie down on the bed. "I want to kiss every inch of your body. I don't care how long it takes, but I'm going to make you mine like no man has ever made you his. I'm going to find nerve endings on your body you didn't even know existed." A crooked smile played around his mouth. "And I'll do my best to have you begging before I finally slip inside you."

Justine closed her eyes. A soft moan rose from deep within her as she felt the heat of his mouth over her collarbone. Her back arched, exposing her throat. His kisses trailed along her neck. His breath brushed over her breast as he edged down her side, and she realized he'd meant it literally when he promised that he'd kiss her everywhere.

The drag of his lips in the sensitive dip of her waist sent her shivering. Her arms flew up from her sides, and she buried her fingers into his dark curls, attempting to guide him to her breasts.

"No," he told her, capturing her wrists and pressing her hands against the bedspread. "Not yet."

He roamed her body, found the tender spots inside her elbows and at the back of her knees. In between kisses, he smoothed his palms over her skin—the curve of her hips, the swell of her buttocks, the long line of her legs—and slowly removed the few scraps of clothing she wore.

"Please," she whispered as he worked his way up along the inside of her thigh. He raised his head to look at her, and then he laid one of his hands against her abdomen, heavy and warm. Slowly, he inched his touch over her belly, finally reaching the valley between her breasts and halting there.

Justine closed her eyes against the barrage of sensations. She rolled to her side in a desperate search, until his hand met her breast. She cried out as a wave of tension gripped

her, making her feel as if her body was a knot he'd suddenly yanked unbearably tight.

"Please," she murmured. When his thumbs brushed over her nipples, she jerked up on the bed, a rough moan rising at the back of her throat.

He hushed her, but she couldn't control her voice. A keening sound filled the dimly lit room. She felt the mattress dip as he climbed beside her, and then his mouth closed over hers, in a slow kiss that dulled her cries to a muffled whimper.

And just when she thought she could bear it no more, he leaned on his elbows and covered her body with his, sliding his legs between hers. "Are you sure?" he asked, his words low and husky.

"Yes," she told him, and shifted beneath him to welcome him.

"You'll have to wait a little longer." He adjusted his weight above her.

"No!" She reached her hands to his hips and tried to anchor him in place.

He planted a hurried kiss on her lips and twisted away from her. "Forty is grown-up. Safe sex." He swung his feet to the floor and took two long steps across the room to pluck his jeans from the floor. He smiled at her as he retrieved a small foil envelope from the hip pocket.

Justine stared at him. A sharp gust of reality tore through her passion, like an autumn breeze that strips a tree bare of its leaves. "You just happened to have that in your pocket?" She forced the question past her lips while her heart seemed to thud in slow motion inside her chest.

"In my desk drawer," Sheriff Taylor said calmly as he sat on the edge of the bed and sheathed himself.

"You thought...you expected..." Her brows drew together. She recalled how he had opened the desk drawer and fumbled in his pockets before they left his office.

He reached his hand up to her and traced her lips with his fingertips. "Every mile we drove through the night to get here, I was willing to barter my soul if I could have you." He shook his head at her wary expression. "Don't be angry," he told her, his tone soothing.

"I'm not sure I like what it says about the kind of woman you think I am."

"It has nothing to do with the kind of woman I think you are. It has to do with you sitting in front of me, dressed in nothing but a few scraps of silk and lace, and then wrapping yourself in my shirt as though you belonged in it."

Justine released a shaky breath. "I was cold. And your shirt was clean."

"So what is it to be?" His finger stopped tracing her lips and drifted down, resuming the teasing stroking around her breasts. "Do you want me to leave, or do you want me to

stay?”

She raised her gaze to his, felt herself falling into the dark green shadows of his eyes. “Stay,” she said, and something clenched inside her chest, a longing she tried to push aside but failed. “But I want you to stay until I go to sleep. Hold me, and keep me warm.”

He tipped her onto her back, murmuring the words against her lips as he kissed her. “I promise to stay and keep you warm until you go to sleep.”

Then his body descended over hers, hard and heavy. All hesitation left Justine in an aching rush of need. Her hands clutched his shoulders, her fingers digging into the muscular contours as he slowly inched inside her, stretching her, shaping her to fit around him.

“Tell me if it’s too much.” He raised his shoulders to look at her. “Tonight is for you. Tell me what you want. My pleasure comes second.”

“Slowly,” she breathed at him. “Just do what you’re doing. Slide in and out, slowly and gently.”

“Like this?” he withdrew, and then eased back inside her.

“Yes.” She rocked her hips around him, heard him catch his breath.

“Steady,” he murmured. “If you keep doing that, I’ll end up breaking my promise.”

She searched his amused expression. “Breaking your promise?”

“Slow and gentle.” He arched his dark brows at her. “Why do I feel like I’ve been set a challenge I won’t be able to meet?”

“I don’t know.” Justine offered him an innocent smile. Suddenly the strain of her encounter with screaming Mrs. Harper fell away, and laughter bubbled up inside her. She’d never had a one-night stand before. Her attitude to sex was actually quite puritan, and a wave of liberation swept over her, leaving her giddy. “Let’s see,” she murmured. She arched her back, clenching the muscles inside her until she gripped him tight.

“You must be like the sirens that lured the seamen of ancient Greece to their deaths,” he murmured, and thrust back into her with a quick jolt of his hips.

“Slowly,” Justine reminded him.

“Sorry,” he said with a rough edge to his voice. “I’m not very good at taking orders.” Then he slipped one arm beneath her waist to anchor her in place and wound his other arm around her shoulders. Bracing his weight over his forearms, he settled into a steady rhythm of advance and recoil that rocked her body on the bed and sent the frame pounding against the wall.

“Tell me if it’s too hard,” he said through gritted teeth, his face a mask of effort as he fought to maintain his control.

A sense of inevitability swelled inside Justine. She felt him deep in her center, stroking her, becoming part of her.

“Don’t stop,” she told him, her body coiling tighter and tighter, until she snapped. With a cry of relief, she arched up on the bed, falling into a dark chasm of pleasure at the same time as she lay safe and warm in the circle of his arms.

And then, Sheriff Taylor threw his head back, his eyes closed, his jaws clenched to contain a roar of triumph as he bowed and shuddered over her. His eyes drifted open and he lowered his weight on top of her, enveloping her, closing out the world around them.

“Sorry,” he breathed into her ear. “Let me rest a while. Then we’ll do slow and gentle.”

Justine pressed her face into the curve of his neck, frightened by the unfamiliar emotions that surged through her, making her fear the dawn when he would be gone, and she would wake up alone.

Chapter Four

The bright morning rays peeked in through the window. Justine stirred on the unfamiliar bed, feeling warm and languid and totally relaxed. Like a dream the night came back to her, the aching need and the passions that had soared, leaving her spent.

But not a dream.

Reality.

Her eyes blinked open. The covers fell to the floor as she flounced to sit up on the mattress. She surveyed the austere room bathed in the slanting morning light.

He was gone.

On the table lay a neat bundle of clothing, and over it a sheet of paper stood folded into a steeple. Justine swung her legs down from the bed and tiptoed over.

"I don't have anything else to give you. Happy birthday. Mark."

Mark.

She tasted the name on her lips, and a blush crept all the way to the roots of her hair as she recalled the things she'd done with a man she had only known as Sheriff Taylor.

How could she have been so wanton? With a rising panic, Justine raked her gaze around the room, checking her meager belongings, her mind dredging up scenarios for how he could embarrass her, should he wish to boast about the easy conquest.

He knew her name. He knew where she lived. He knew where she worked.

Justine shook her head, angry at the irrational thoughts. So what? She had slept with a stranger. A quarter of the girls in her office did it on any given Saturday night. Most of the world she moved in didn't burden itself with her antiquated moral standards.

Justine squared her shoulders. So, she had indulged in steamy sex with a handsome man for her birthday, and good luck to her.

She pulled on the jeans and white cotton shirt she'd worn for the drive from

Philadelphia. Her room shared a bathroom down the hall, but she decided not to bother with a shower. She brushed her teeth and rinsed her face and returned to her room. It only took a couple of minutes to pack her toiletries and the few items of clothing.

She left the folded shirt on the desk until last. Picking it up, she pressed her face into the fabric and filled her lungs with the scent. It didn't smell of her perfume. It carried the musky odor of a male, and when she lowered the shirt to examine it, she spotted a dark line on the collar, and wrinkles where the sleeves had been rolled up.

It wasn't the shirt she had worn. Sheriff Taylor had taken the clean shirt, and had left her the one he'd been wearing. As she made her way down the stairs, Justine couldn't help wondering if he had followed his usual practice of starting the week with a clean shirt, or if he wanted her to possess a lingering memory of him.

Downstairs, the tall man from last night stood behind the reception counter. Justine racked her brains for his name. "Good morning," she said, giving up the effort.

He nodded at her. "Breakfast will start in a minute."

"I don't usually eat breakfast." She gave the man a guarded glance, trying to pick up some signs to figure out if he knew that Sheriff Taylor had spent the night. "How much do I owe you?" she asked. "I agreed with Mr. and Mrs. Simmons that I would pay here, and they'll pay at the motel on Route 54."

"It's been taken care of." The man kept his eyes on the stack of postcards he was straightening by thumping the edges against the counter. "No charge."

Justine frowned. "I don't understand."

"I guess it's because of all the trouble you had last night."

"Trouble?" she repeated slowly.

"Mrs. Harper," the man explained, after a cautious glance around the empty hallway.

"Oh," Justine drawled out. "There's no need. It was my fault. I'm quite happy to pay."

"No," the landlord said as he crammed the stack of postcards into a slot on the plastic display rack. "I didn't mean it's on the house." He smiled at her. "Sheriff Taylor will take care of it. He left a note on the desk when he drove you back last night." The landlord regarded her with curiosity. "I guess he feels the Sheriff's Department should pick up the tab after the inconvenience they caused you."

"Inconvenience?" Justine echoed, heat creeping along her skin. Too embarrassed to risk taking the conversation any further, she retreated to the door and bolted out, leaving the insect screen swinging in her wake.

It wasn't until she realized she didn't have her car keys that Justine remembered she'd

left her belongings on the bench under the wisteria before setting off on the climb up to the open window. She dropped her overnight bag on the ground and raced over to the wall.

The bench wasn't visible from the front drive, so she assumed Sheriff Taylor hadn't noticed her belongings last night when he stopped to pick up the coins and lipstick and the credit card on the gravel ground.

Her watch and evening bag and sandals remained intact, but the morning dew had painted water swirls on the grey silk of her Dior dress. Justine expelled an annoyed sigh. Maybe dry cleaning would remove the stains. She turned the fabric over in her hands, shaking her head in defeat as she inspected the damage.

Two thousand bucks. She'd never owned a more precious garment.

Then she recalled the khaki shirt packed away in her case, and realized that now she did.

Chapter Five

Sheriff Mark Taylor sat in his office, trying to focus on the columns of figures in front of him. The rising fuel costs were killing him. In some cities, they were issuing police officers bicycles instead of cars. If the long distances in rural areas hadn't made it impractical he would have liked to do the same.

He rubbed his tired eyes and glanced at the clock on the wall. Only four in the afternoon, but he was ready to go home. Sleep had eluded him last night, just like it had the night before, and the night before that.

He'd lain awake every night since he fell victim to bad judgment and sampled the charms of the glamorous woman his deputies had hauled in. Hadn't his divorce taught him anything? He didn't want to think about Justine Whitmore. He didn't want to remember her face, or imagine her slender body writhing beneath his, and he certainly didn't want to call her.

His eyes strayed to the chair in the corner, and his pants instantly tightened. Goddamn the woman. Mark shuddered to think what she could do to him in person, if the mere sight of a chair she'd occupied reduced him to a nervous wreck.

The sharp ring of the telephone on his desk tore him back to reality. "Sheriff Taylor," he barked into the receiver.

"What's this I hear about you casting your tackle in illegal waters?" Gideon Steinberg from the State Attorney General's office boomed into his ear.

Mark knew his boss well enough to hear the amusement beneath the gruff voice, but he didn't get the joke. "My fishing permit is in order," he replied.

"Not fishing, you fool. Your dick. It seems you've been sticking your rod into some hooker when you ought to have been booking her for soliciting."

"What the...." Mark swallowed the curse and inhaled a sharp breath.

“I have a complaint here from a Mrs. Harper. She says your deputies picked up a woman for immoral conduct, and you released her after you enjoyed her services.”

“That’s not true,” Mark said, but his words came out on a growl and his chest tightened with worry. “She wasn’t a prostitute. It was a mix-up about rooms at Rob Thornton’s guesthouse.”

“Did you have sex with the woman or not?”

“I...” Mark stared at the empty chair in the corner. Even with the anxiety twisting in his gut, the image of Justine in her flimsy underwear sent his blood surging to all the wrong parts of his body.

“I take that as a yes,” Gideon Steinberg grunted. “I’m sorry, Mark. I have to order an official investigation into Mrs. Harper’s complaint. I can’t risk being seen as a weak leader who brushes corruption under the carpet. You’ll be hearing more soon through the appropriate channels. Good luck.”

The phone went dead with a click that sounded like a gun being cocked.

Mark tried to reach deep into his mind for a source of cold fury that he could direct at Justine, or at his own mistake of falling for her feminine charms. The only sensations he came up with were relief, and the slow wheel of excitement that began to turn inside him at the thought of seeing her again.

It was out of his hands now. The decision had been forced upon him. He had to get in touch with her if he wanted to protect her reputation and his career.

* * * *

Justine sat at her desk and watched the traffic crawl on the street below her office, trying to concentrate on the publicity shots in front of her. She couldn’t quite put her finger on what was wrong with the photographs. The apartment looked immaculate in the background, and she’d chosen the model herself. Now his casual elegance looked all wrong...too tame.

That was it. The model was too suave.

An image of the rugged Sheriff Taylor rose in her mind, and with an angry flick of her wrist, Justine slung her pen down over the advertisement. It grated that a whole week had gone by, and he hadn’t done anything to track her down. She hadn’t expected a dozen red roses exactly, but a phone call would have been polite. Or a little note, a few words of reassurance that he hadn’t forgotten her the moment he closed the front door of the guesthouse.

Perhaps he had.

Maybe he had forgotten her before he even reached the bottom of the stairs.

“What did you do? Abscond without paying or leave an unpaid parking fine?”

Justine snapped her attention from the window to Sandra Clements, who stood in the office doorway, her blonde hair tied into a messy ponytail. A plain white shirt spilled out from the waistband of her navy skirt. Not a scrap of make-up adorned Sandra’s innocent face, and once again, Justine wondered why her boss, who normally dated models and actresses, had fallen for his secretary who looked like a kindergarten teacher.

“Huh?” Justine frowned in confusion at the question.

“The law is after you,” Sandra explained. Her eyes widened with concern. “They didn’t stop you for speeding and discover that you were carrying an open container of alcohol in your car? The sheriff and the deputies can be real sticklers. If they slapped you with a fine, it would be my fault. I told you to take the bottle of champagne with you.”

“No.” Justine shook her head absently. “They didn’t fine me.”

“So you *did* have a brush with the law?” Sandra strolled into the room, inspecting Justine with a pair of curious blue eyes. “Why didn’t you tell me? What happened?”

“Nothing much.” Justine kept her focus on the advertisement in front of her, knowing that a blush covered her cheeks. “Just some confusion at the guest house. I thought it was all sorted out.”

Sandra shrugged. “It seems you’re wrong. Someone called you twice while you were in the meeting with the ad agency.” She glanced down at the note in her hand. “His name is Sheriff Taylor. He says it’s urgent.”

“Urgent?” Justine’s throat worked with difficulty as she swallowed. “Did he say what it’s about?”

“Only that he needs to talk to you as soon as possible. Here’s the number.” Sandra slipped a yellow post-it note with a scribbled string of digits in front of Justine. “Are you sure you’re not in any trouble?” Sandra leaned closer, her concern enveloping Justine, strong and warm, like a comfort blanket.

In a sudden flash of insight, Justine understood why the sharp and successful Steven Chandler had fallen in love with the small-town girl Sandra Clements. When Sandra spoke to you, she made you feel that your wellbeing was the most important thing in the world, and she would go to any lengths to protect you, standing by your side no matter what. She offered the kind of loyalty that could never be bought.

“If you need help, I can call my father,” Sandra said. “He is well connected in the local community. He might be able to pull a few strings.”

“Let me return the sheriff’s call first and see what it’s all about.” Justine picked up the post-it note with trembling fingers.

Sandra paused to look over her shoulder from the threshold on her way out, but despite the worry evident in her eyes, she didn’t ask further questions. As soon as Sandra was out of sight, Justine rushed to close the door. Then she returned to the desk and dialed, standing up as she punched in the numbers.

A nasal female voice answered with an official greeting. Justine flopped in the chair. It hadn’t crossed her mind that someone else might pick up. She asked for Sheriff Taylor, and when the woman told her he was unavailable, Justine left her name and number, asking the woman to tell him she’d called.

Then she sat and waited, the advertisement swirling in front of her eyes as she wondered what could be the reason why after a week of silence Sheriff Taylor wanted to talk to her urgently. Every time the phone rang, her heart leapt. Finally, after six o’clock, the deep voice she recalled came on the line.

“Can you talk?” he asked, without bothering to exchange small talk.

Justine flicked a quick glance at the closed door. “Yes.”

“We have a situation,” the sheriff said. “Mrs. Harper has made a complaint.”

“A complaint about me?” Justine blurted out. “That’s ridiculous. Can’t you just dismiss it?”

The telephone conveyed the rustle of a heavy sigh. “The complaint isn’t about you. It’s about me.”

“About you?” Justine frowned. “Why would she complain about you?”

“She’s claiming that I caught you soliciting and let you off after I...enjoyed a free sample of your offerings.”

“She *what*?”

“I know. It’s a load of bullshit, but there’s enough truth in it to make the situation difficult for both of us.” Sheriff Taylor paused, carried on in a low voice. “I’ll be asked if I had sex with you, and I’ll have to say yes. Then I’ll be asked if I had ever seen you before or since, and I’ll have to say no. It’s going to sound like Mrs. Harper could be right.”

“Oh my God.” Justine took a deep breath to suppress the surge of nausea that welled up inside her. “Will the information remain confidential?”

“I don’t expect so,” Sheriff Taylor admitted. “I’ll try to contain it, but there is always gossip when these things happen.”

“I’ve never even had a one-night stand before.” The receiver shook in Justine’s

unsteady hand. "If this thing leaks, people will get a completely wrong idea of who I am."

"I'm sorry to sound callous, but right at the moment, I'm more concerned about holding on to my job than I am about what people think of your moral standards."

"Holding on to your job?" Justine muttered.

"If they decide that I...took a bribe from you, I'll be history."

"But if you took a bribe, the implication is that I offered you one," Justine said slowly. "That I had done something to break the law and needed you to let me off the hook."

"That's it," Sheriff Taylor said bluntly. "It looks pretty bad for both of us."

Justine clenched her fingers tight around the receiver as the seconds ticked by.

"There might be a way to diffuse this," Sheriff Taylor said after a tense silence. "But I need your help."

"What?" Justine leaned over her desk, her voice rising with the desperate urge to grasp at any chance, however slim. "Tell me how."

"We'll do it again. We can turn the whole thing around by pretending it was love at first sight. We slept together that night, but it was the start of a committed relationship."

Justine's mind raced ahead as she tested the angles of what Sheriff Taylor was proposing. Her PR expertise quickly concluded he was right. If she pretended Sheriff Taylor was her new boyfriend, they would both come out with their reputations undamaged. After a few months, they could simply drift apart. All it required from her was a few weekends wasted in the depths of rural Pennsylvania, and a few nights that most unattached women with a healthy sex drive would give their designer wardrobes for.

"That sounds good," she agreed. "When do you want me to come up?" She reached for the digital organizer on her desk and tapped the keys. "My next two weekends are fully booked, but I could make it at the end of September."

"I don't think you realize how serious this is," Sheriff Taylor said. "Will you be at home tomorrow night if I drive down?"

Justine tapped another key and inspected the display. "Tomorrow's no good. I'm taking clients to dinner at Brasserie Perrier."

"Cancel it."

"I can't. It's part of my job. My boss, who is too busy to even take time off for a honeymoon, needs to attend a charity benefit at the Four Seasons. He can only come for the pre-dinner drinks. I'll have to represent the firm."

"If you had a boyfriend, would he be invited?"

"Yes, if he wanted to come and host the event with me. The clients will have their

spouses with them.”

“I’ll see you there then.”

Justine opened her mouth to protest, but the line made a tiny click and went dead.

Chapter Six

Mark pressed his foot on the brake and joined the snarl of cars exiting the expressway. Ahead of him, the Philadelphia skyline resembled a vertical pattern of prison bars that kept people locked inside the city.

Damn, he'd forgotten how much he hated the urban sprawl. Whatever had possessed him to get tangled up with a woman like Justine Whitmore? A wry smile twisted his lips as he recalled his first glimpse of her, huddled in the corner of his office, clad in nothing but a few scraps of silk. Her luscious mouth had twisted into a sulky pout when she spotted him, and her eyes had narrowed into angry slits as she watched him striding up across the floor.

His hormones had kicked in with a fury more fitting for a teenage stud than a jaded man of forty-two. Mark spun the wheel to avoid being hit by a battered white Toyota shoving in from the right. He expelled a tired sigh. What had caused him to take leave of his senses and dip his pen in that particular well of ink was obvious. Even now, his groin tightened at the memory of the attraction that had electrified the air in his office the instant he entered.

There was something fresh, something innocent about Justine Whitmore, despite her glossy glamour and haughty demeanor. Before he learned what she did for a living, he could almost have believed she was a warm and vibrant woman who by some trick of fate had ended up living in the city.

Then he found out that she worked in Public Relations, and adjusted his thinking. The woman could barely be classified as a human being. He wanted as little to do with her as possible. He'd be civil, he'd be polite, but he'd keep his distance, apart from the necessary physical part.

It was like a dirty job that had to be done.

He swung his truck into a lot, swearing under his breath when he saw the sign with prices. Almost ten bucks to park for a few hours! How in hell did people get by in the city?

He killed the engine and hopped out. Exhaust fumes filled his nostrils and horns blared down the street. As Mark stopped to pick up a ticket from the attendant in stained jeans and a psychedelic polyester shirt, he gave a fleeting thought to the appropriateness of his own clothes.

It didn't matter. With a dismissive shrug of his shoulders, he strode off to find the restaurant. He wasn't out to charm anyone. He just wanted to keep out of trouble, so he could get on with his life.

Liar.

He silenced the inner voice that whispered the truth at him, just like he ignored the tentacles of excitement that uncurled in his stomach at the thought of spending another night with Justine Whitmore.

* * * *

Justine adjusted her little black dress and threw a jacket over her arm. She was running a few minutes late, but it was the least of her worries. Her boss would be there to welcome the guests, and the restaurant on Walnut Street was only a couple of blocks from her condo at Academy House. She grabbed her evening bag and hurried out to the elevators.

All day her fingers had itched to dial the number to Sheriff Taylor's office. By late afternoon, she knew that if he really intended to make the three-hour drive to Philadelphia, he'd already be on the road. And if they were supposed to be madly in love, she could hardly call his office and ask for his cell phone number without appearing to be a scatterbrained idiot.

She would just have to brazen out the situation if he turned up in his khaki uniform, looking like a straggly lion amongst a flock of smartly shorn sheep.

Justine sighed as she raced in her high heels along the uneven pavement, avoiding the steam rising from the vents. She hadn't found a chance to explain to Steven and Sandra that they might have an extra guest. But the lack of opportunity to talk to her boss and his wife hardly mattered, as she wouldn't have known what to say anyway. After their conversation yesterday about her brush with the law, Sandra would smell a rat, and Steven would blow his famously short fuse about some country hick barging in to spoil the smooth running of an expensive PR event with clients.

"I'm sorry," she said as she breezed into the bar at Brasserie Perrier, where Sandra's scarlet evening gown created a splash of color amongst the guests mostly clad in black.

"Where is everyone?" Justine glanced around her. "They can't have sat down to dinner yet?"

"They've gone to the private dining room at the back," Sandra said.

“But it’s only twenty past.” Justine checked the time on her watch. “It was supposed to be cocktails at seven and the meal at seven thirty.”

“There’s some unscheduled entertainment,” Sandra explained in a dry voice.

“Entertainment?” Justine said. “Why do I suddenly feel worried?”

“Guilty conscience?” Sandra suggested. She drained the last of her fruit juice and set the empty glass on the counter with a clunk. “Follow me,” she said as she slid down from the barstool and steered the course toward the rear of the room.

Justine cast a longing glance at the rack of bottles behind the bar. “I think I might need a drink.”

“Truer words were never spoken,” Sandra said, and something in her voice told Justine that she had with her actions managed to upset the kindest person she knew.

She increased her speed until she caught up with Sandra. “I can explain.”

Sandra halted her progress and directed a level look at her. “Yes. I would very much like to hear your explanation.” The beginnings of a smile softened her stern expression. “But that can wait until Monday.”

Justine heard the flurry of voices as she stepped after Sandra into the long and narrow dining room. Half a dozen men sat at one end of the table, with women in cocktail dresses clustering behind them.

“Lower,” said one of the important clients.

“You’re lying,” said Sheriff Taylor.

“Damn it!” The client threw the nine of clubs on the table on top of the seven of spades. “How do you do it?”

“You glanced at the card when you said lower. When you tell the truth, you don’t do that.” Sheriff Taylor smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

“Lower,” said the building inspector, whose goodwill was crucial to Chandler Developments.

“You are trying to lure me into thinking that you’re lying, but you’re not.”

“Son of a bitch.” The building inspector flipped over the five of diamonds.

“When you lie, you fidget with the card,” Sheriff Taylor explained. “I made you aware of the habit, so this time you fidgeted on purpose. It looked false.”

“Justine!” Steven lifted a hand in greeting, making no comment about her late arrival. “Mark is teaching us how to spot when someone’s bluffing.”

Sheriff Taylor turned to look at her over his shoulder, then rose to his feet and strode up to her past the crowd of staring women. He wore a crisp white shirt with the top two

buttons undone, and pleated black trousers cut to perfection. "I didn't want to be in your way while you were getting ready, so I came straight to the restaurant." He bent to brush a kiss on her lips.

"That was very considerate of you," Justine stammered. Her stomach lurched when he placed his hand over the small of her back and held it there, heavy and warm.

"Mark told us he didn't know until yesterday that he could make it," Sandra said, watching Justine's every move. "I guess you forgot to mention it today."

"I knew he was coming, but I didn't think he'd get away early enough to join us for dinner." Justine nearly choked on the words. "It's a three hour drive."

"All in the name of love," said one of the older wives, reaching to take her husband's hand. "Do you remember when we were young?"

Justine was grateful for the chorus of comments that burst out, because it covered up the voice of Sandra whispering, "You're lying."

"I'll explain when I see you on Monday," Justine muttered and pinned a smile on her face as she turned to face the clients.

"I'm afraid we'll have to go now," Steven said, taking Sandra's elbow. "But I'll leave you in good hands." He grinned at Mark, and then cast a hurried glance at Justine to include her in his comment before he addressed the guests again. "Thank you for your support of Chandler Developments. Eat, drink, and be merry." He saluted the crowd and made his exit with Sandra in tow.

* * * *

Justine swallowed the last sip of Baileys in her glass and sneaked a glance at her watch. Almost eleven. The party had been a roaring success, with Mark amusing the clients with anecdotes about law enforcement in a small town where everybody knew each other. Thank heavens the table had been laid out without chairs at the ends for the host and the hostess, so she didn't have to spend the entire evening facing him. Everyone sat along the long sides, and although Sheriff Taylor sat across from her, he was three chairs over to the left, out of her direct line of vision.

She'd worried that he'd flounder with the sophisticated crowd and embarrass Chandler Developments, but instead he proved to be the kind of man around whom the laughter always rang the loudest and the conversation sparked the brightest.

"I'm sorry, I didn't quite catch that," Justine said to the quiet accountant from the City Hall on her right. She strained her ears to hear what the building inspector's wife had said to Mark, who appeared to be choking into his brandy glass.

“I asked if you follow the Flyers at all,” the accountant said.

Justine sent him a professional smile. “No, hockey isn’t my thing. We sponsor the Eagles.”

“I prefer hockey,” the accountant said. “I get hay fever in the summer.”

“Un-huh,” Justine said. Her eyes narrowed as the woman on Mark’s other side clutched his arm, shaking with laughter. This really was getting to be too much. Didn’t Sheriff Taylor realize that the husbands were present? Justine craned her neck and raised her voice. “Can we share the joke?” she called out.

“Honey, you *are* the joke,” cried the flamboyant woman in her forties who was the electrical contractor’s escort. Justine frowned as she tried to recall the woman’s name.

“Sharon asked how we met,” Mark said, his eyes glittering under the beam from the ceiling lights.

Justine stiffened. Panic lurched in her stomach. Everyone had been drinking wine throughout the meal, and brandy and liqueurs afterwards. She had no idea how well Mark tolerated alcohol. Did drink loosen his tongue and cloud his judgment, the way it did with most people?

“And how did you tell Sharon that we met?” Justine forced out the question.

Sheriff Taylor sent her a mocking smile across the table, and she realized that he knew exactly what was going through her mind.

“I told her that I arrested you.” He raised his voice to carry past the people between them. The rest of the guests interrupted their conversations and turned to watch him.

“What did you arrest her for?” asked the building inspector. “Speeding?”

“Soliciting,” Mark said calmly. “She barged into someone’s hotel room in the middle of the night, wearing not very much at all, and the gentleman’s wife made a complaint.” He swept a look around the table to include everyone. “Of course, I knew it was a mix-up with the reservations, but when I saw Justine, I simply couldn’t let her go. I arrested her and told her I’d hold onto her until she agreed to go out with me.”

Laughter rippled around the table, and Justine heaved out a sigh, exhaling the air trapped in her lungs. Grudgingly she gave a mental round of applause to Sheriff Taylor. By getting his version out first, he’d neutralized any rumors that might start circulating about the incident at the guesthouse.

When the party broke up, Justine bristled with unease. She ought to have been relieved that Mark had charmed everyone, including her boss, but instead it rankled that he fit so easily into her world.

“I hope you didn’t mind my gate-crashing your event,” Mark said as they walked back toward Academy House. “It made sense to be seen together in public.” He reached for her hand and laced his fingers into hers. Justine tried to tug her hand free, but his hold tightened, and he slanted an amused glance at her. She told herself that for just a couple of blocks it didn’t matter.

“I didn’t expect you to be so comfortable with strangers,” she said, carefully keeping her voice neutral.

“I’m an elected county official. That makes me a politician as much as a law enforcement officer.”

“I didn’t see you as someone interested in clothes.”

“I’m not.” He steered her around a cluster of people arguing in the middle of the sidewalk. The night breeze had cooled the muggy August heat, and the city felt vibrant, with music pulsing through the open windows of the bars and restaurants, and horns beeping from a line of cars jostling at the traffic lights.

“You could have fooled me.” She turned to run her assessing eye over his clothing. The soft black leather jacket draped beautifully against his muscular frame, and the white shirt emphasized his tanned skin and dark hair.

“Someone else chose these for me. She works as a buyer for a fashion chain.”

Justine’s brows snapped together as she recognized the sharp jolt of jealousy. What was it about Mark Taylor? In one short evening he’d put her through a whole gamut of emotions.

“Who?” she asked, and hated herself for the display of weakness.

He smiled down at her. “My sister-in-law.” A knowing look filled his eyes as he raised her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss on the back of her wrist.

“Don’t,” she said weakly. “This is a crisis situation, not a date.”

“We might just as well enjoy it,” he said with a lazy shrug of his shoulders.

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Justine felt her skin tingle as his fingers curled tight around hers, as though he suspected she might try to bolt before they reached their destination.

Chapter Seven

The normally spacious elevator felt crowded with Sheriff Taylor standing beside her. He released her hand and appeared engrossed in the safety notice on the wall. Justine tried to block out the thoughts that bombarded her, but it didn't work. Nervous anticipation made every nerve in her body throb.

She closed her eyes and recalled the night they had spent together in the tiny guesthouse room. She had behaved with total abandon, offering herself to the man who was now nonchalantly studying the sign for the maximum number of occupants. She had begged him, urged him on, voiced her needs with impatient demands, and then screamed out her fulfillment. There was no way she could do the same now. Not when she was in her own apartment, back in her orderly life. For God's sake, she was the kind of woman who drank cocoa before going to bed and telephoned her mother every week. She was not the kind of woman who had sex with strangers, but since of her job required her to put on a sophisticated front, most people didn't realize the truth about her old-fashioned values.

Justine blinked her eyes open as the elevator came to a halt and the doors slid open. She caught Sheriff Taylor watching her, an amused tilt in one corner of his full mouth. A sudden flare of irritation surged through her as she realized that her apprehension must be posted like a news bulletin over her worried face.

Easy for him to laugh. A man who slept around was seen as a stud, admired by his peers for the show of virility. A woman who did the same earned nothing but gossip and disapproval.

"I don't have a spare bedroom, but the sofa pulls out to a bed," she informed him. Her nervousness sharpened into anger as she struggled with the lock on the front door, her trembling hands unable to cope with the simple task.

When Sheriff Taylor didn't reply, she threw him a quick glance over her shoulder. A

frown marred his rugged features, making him look hard and implacable. She finally conquered the lock and shoved the door open. He said nothing as he placed his hand on the small of her back to propel her through, almost making her stumble as he urged her to move faster than her feet were prepared for.

Justine came to a halt in the middle of the small hall that opened up to the living room. She tried to draw a calming breath. Her hand fisted around the keys until the sharp edges cut into her palm.

Sheriff Taylor pushed the front door to a soundless close and turned to face her. He inspected her for a few seconds, his features void of expression. Then he reached out and pried the keys from her hand. Without looking, he dropped them on the narrow table lined up against the wall, his movements slow and deliberate.

“I didn’t come here to sleep on a sofa,” he said softly. “I came here to make love to you again. We have no choice about that. Don’t make the situation any more difficult than it needs to be.” A frown skimmed over his features. “You seemed to enjoy it the last time, so what’s the problem now?”

Justine kicked off her shoes, trying to find courage in the physical action. “Surely, there’s no need to actually have sex, as long as people believe that we are lovers,” she said, her voice brittle. She crouched down to line up her black high heels on the rack next to a red pair, dragging out the task in order to avoid rising up to face him. She couldn’t quite understand why she suddenly felt so frightened of repeating their intimacy, but the truth was that her heart hammered so hard it hurt in her chest, and she simply didn’t want to look at him.

She was reaching out to adjust the shoes on the rack one more time when she heard a movement behind her.

Rough hands slotted beneath her arms and yanked her to stand up. “If you are trying to play games with me, I’m warning you, I have no patience for female ploys.”

Her head fell back as Mark gave her body an angry shake. She reluctantly raised her eyes to his, and froze as she saw the fury blazing in them.

“I’m not playing games,” she told him in a strangled whisper. “Why are you so angry?”

He stared at her, his fingers digging into the flesh on the side of her breasts as he gripped her tight. “All evening I’ve been on my best behavior to make this easy for you, and now you come up with some crap about not wanting to sleep with me again.” His face drew into a scowl. “Well, let me tell you this—there’s no point in locking the stable door once the

horse has already bolted. You can't convince me that you're a bashful maiden protecting her virtue. I've had you trashing under me, taking everything I could give and begging for more."

Justine tried to squirm free, which only served to strengthen the way his big hands curled around her ribcage. "It's different now," she muttered. "That night was a folly. A slice out of time. Not the real me."

His angry expression softened. "I know this is a difficult situation, but you promised on the phone you'd help." A muscle jerked on the side of his jaw. "I don't think you really understand what's at stake here. My job. My livelihood." His eyes searched hers. "If there is an investigation, lying isn't an option. I need to make love to you again, at least twice. Three is the lowest number that will allow me to state several times if the question comes up during a hearing."

"Twice?" Justine murmured. "If you are staying the weekend, perhaps we could wait until tomorrow?"

"There's no time for that," he said gruffly. "I have other plans for tomorrow." He stared down at her, then muttered an oath and lowered his head. Hauling her body against his, he crushed his mouth over hers.

Justine let out a squeal of surprise, cut short by his rough kiss. For a few seconds, an explosion of rage kept her back rigid. She curled her hands over his shoulders, intending to push him away as his words rang through her mind. *I have other plans for tomorrow.* He wasn't even going to pretend the weekend was a romantic interlude. It was a quick tumble in her bed, and then he'd be off to do whatever he really wanted to do with his weekend.

She told herself she ought to push him away, but her body betrayed her. Instead of pushing him away, her hands on his shoulders clutched him closer, and her mouth yielded under his, responding to the hot roaming of his lips that burned on her skin. When his tongue invaded her mouth and began to probe deep inside, a whimper of pleasure rose in her throat.

She felt his hands reach down and tug at the hem of her little black dress, bunching the garment around her waist. When he cupped his fingers between her legs, she adjusted her bare feet on the hardwood floor, taking half a step apart to offer him better access. His thumb traced back and forth through the thin silk of her panties, sending tendrils of excitement curling through her stomach.

"I didn't want to use your own body against you, to seduce you into something you might regret later," Sheriff Taylor said as he lifted his mouth from hers. "I wanted you to be clear of what would happen between us tonight before I touched you at all." His voice carried a smug tone of satisfaction. "But I knew it wouldn't be difficult for me to turn that no into a

yes.”

Justine didn't reply. A fire ignited inside her, burning away every thought of caution as it raged through her. She fisted her hands over the edges of his shirt and yanked the fabric apart. The buttons made tiny clinks as they scattered on the floor. For a second she felt Mark go tense. Then a soft chuckle vibrated in his chest beneath her hands.

“So that's how it is going to be now?” he said, his voice a husky growl. “No holds barred.”

She ignored his comment, instead running her hands along his muscular shoulders to push back the shirt. Bending her head, she found one tight brown nipple and took it between her teeth, increasing the pressure until she heard him groan and felt his body shudder. He shoved his hands roughly into her hair and held her tight, almost preventing her from sinking down to her knees.

“Jesus,” he rasped as she set to work with his belt buckle.

When she had the black pants undone and pooled around his ankles, Justine leaned back on her heels to look up into his face. He was staring down at her, his eyes dark, his face taut as he fought to remain in control of his actions.

“You don't have to do this,” he murmured. “If making love to me really scares you as much as it seems to, I'll leave and take my chances with the investigation.”

“Are you telling me that you want me to stop?” Justine asked, using the tone of a patient teacher with an inept pupil.

“Christ, no.”

She arched her brows. “Say please.”

Sheriff Taylor flinched beneath her hands as he finally understood she'd set out to show him that she could entrap him just as easily as he could dominate her. The movement of his body made the powerful erection in front of her face jolt, and she sensed the desperate effort he made to reel in his need for a release.

Justine peered up at him, her eyes narrowed as hot anger continued to surge through her. “Say please,” she repeated harshly. Then she lifted her hand and lightly touched one fingertip to the end of his quivering shaft.

His sharp intake of breath turned into a growl. “Please,” he choked out through gritted teeth.

Justine sent him a triumphant smile, and then she leaned forward and ran her tongue along his pulsing erection. Sheriff Taylor groaned. Justine stopped, but only to glance up at him. He leaned back against the hall table, his eyes closed. Perspiration beaded on his brow,

and his breath came in labored gasps.

With a fierce sense of victory, Justine closed her mouth around the tip of his shaft and proceeded to show the arrogant Sheriff Taylor that in the battle between the sexes, men didn't stand a chance.

* * * *

Mark fought to control his ragged breath. If it wasn't for the edge of the hall table that he clung to, he would have collapsed on the floor. Never in his life had he experienced anything even remotely comparable to the shattering release that had just exploded through every cell in his body.

Justine returned from the bathroom where she had disappeared after she nearly killed him with her clever mouth. And damn if she hadn't stopped to comb her hair and adjust her little black dress, emerging as cool as a chilled bottle of champagne. As if she hadn't just devoured his cock and brought him the kind of incredible pleasure that would enslave a lesser man for the rest of his days.

He'd gone into a lot of trouble to put her at ease over dinner, knowing that the brazen night of loving a week ago had been out of character for her. He had never expected to see again, and when fate intervened in the guise of Mrs. Harper, he'd been prepared to soothe her, cajole her, do whatever it took to get her to comply with the need for them to have sex a few more times. He was willing to do just about anything, except lure her with empty promises, or pretend that their relationship was anything beyond temporary and dictated by necessity.

He knew what kind of women worked in public relations for big city firms, and he'd sworn to steer clear of the type. The vain, neurotic, back stabbing, free spending, unfaithful, image-conscious type. He was not a man to make the same mistake twice.

"That was an interesting way to show that you're angry with me," he said as she padded past him in her bare feet, apparently without any intention to stop and talk to him.

"I don't like arrogance in a man."

"What have I done to make you think I'm arrogant?" He bent down to tug his pants back up, so he could move fast if it became necessary to chase after her.

Justine gave a bitter laugh, and it dawned on Mark that her nerves were closer to the edge than he'd appreciated.

"What have you done?" she blurted at him. "Apart from crashing my party, flirting with all the women, and then taking it for granted that you can seduce me against my will?"

"And which of that makes me arrogant?"

“All of it!”

He shrugged his shoulders, feeling confused, both by her words, and by the solid feeling of satisfaction they stirred up inside him. “As far as I’m concerned, I showed good manners at your dinner party, and as to being able to seduce you, since when does accepting the truth make a man arrogant?”

“You were supposed to be a country hick who needed me to look after him in the big city,” she muttered. “Instead you charm everyone, seduce me, and have your own plans for the weekend.”

Mark stopped searching for any remaining buttons on his shirtfront. “Is that what this is all about?” he said in astonishment. “That I wasn’t planning to spend the weekend with you?”

He watched as Justine’s mouth puckered into a stubborn pout. Her shoulders shifted in an uncertain shrug and the fight seemed to ebb out of her. She contemplated him in stony silence.

“When I called, you seemed too busy to squeeze me in for a quick tumble between the sheets, let alone a whole day.” He stepped closer, and without thinking, he touched the back of his fingers to her cheek in a soothing gesture. “You’re welcome to join me tomorrow.”

She peered at him through her lashes, and the eager look made his chest tighten.

“What are you planning to do?” she asked.

He raised his other hand and cupped her face between his palms, fascinated by the curiosity that had replaced the fury in her eyes.

“I’m taking my niece and nephew to Valley Forge to see Washington’s Headquarters.”

“They live in the city?”

He smiled down at her and stepped closer, until their bodies almost touched. His thumbs moved in an unconscious gesture to gently rub over her lower lip. “You ask too many questions,” he said. Then he bent down and kissed her, the pressure of his lips soft and tempting. He could feel her hesitate, and then she leaned into him and responded to the kiss.

“I’d like to take you to bed now,” he whispered.

“Why?” she whispered back.

“Because now that you’ve got rid of your anger, you’ll be ready to make love to me rather than use sex as a weapon.”

“Is that what I was doing?”

He smiled against her lips. “Yes,” he told her. “And a lethally effective one too.

Damn near killed me.”

“I’ll have to remember that,” she breathed, her mouth brushing his.

Mark groaned in defeat, realizing that he might end up hanging around longer than was strictly necessary, simply out of the hope of repeating the experience he’d just been through. The thought made him harden, and he bent to scoop her in his arms. “Which way is the bedroom?”

She raised one elegant arm. “Over there.”

“Truce?” he said as he lowered Justine against his chest so that she could reach down to the doorknob and open the bedroom door.

“Truce,” she replied, and when her arms came around his neck and she planted a soft kiss on his lips, he found her gesture of surrender almost unbearably sweet.

Then they were by the bed, and he settled her on the quilted cover.

Vulnerability in a woman broke his defenses like nothing else. He nudged her over to her stomach and reached for the zipper at the back of her little black dress. Inch by inch, he pulled it open, bending to kiss the exposed skin between her shoulder blades. Her soft moans of pleasure eased his troubled mood.

Justine wasn’t to blame for his current predicament. She was a victim of circumstances, just as much as he was. Honesty forced him to admit that dealing with the situation had to be easier on a man than it was on a woman.

Unsure of exactly what filled him with such tenderness, Mark set out to give Justine pleasure that she would remember long after he was gone. She lay languid before him, allowing him to undress her. Shifting her shoulders, she helped him slide down the dress, and then she raised her hips so he could ease off the garment and the panties beneath.

He quickly discarded his own clothes and climbed on the bed beside her. She pressed her face into the covers, and he brushed her curtain of shiny hair aside to kiss her neck. Slowly, dreamily, he claimed her body with lingering touches and roaming lips. The curve of her shoulders, each side in turn. The arch of her back. Traveling down one vertebra at a time, until he reached the swell of her buttocks. Down her legs and back up again. The dip of her waist, the side of a breast peeking from beneath her body.

All the while, she trembled under his touch. Her murmured pleas for more filled him with a sense of ownership. When he could take no more, when the blood pounded through his cock so hard it bordered on pain, Mark paused to get ready and stretched out over her.

“Do you want me?” he whispered into her ear.

“Like this?” she asked, twisting her head to look at him.

“Yes.” He nuzzled the curve of her jaw. “I’ll keep it slow.”

She gave him a wordless nod.

He reached down, urged her legs apart, and slipped his arm beneath her to tilt her hips to give him better access. He ground his teeth to keep from ramming into her, the way instinct demanded. Instead, he eased into her, taking forever. When he finally filled her, he stopped and waited until she began to rock her hips to meet him take him deeper still.

With excruciating patience, he withdrew and slipped back inside. He lost all sense of time as he continued the slow thrust and drag, bringing her to a shuddering peak, making her shatter beneath him, and then waiting for her to calm down, so he could start all over again.

Giving, not taking, and the selfless act seemed to forge the most complete possession he had ever experienced.

* * * *

When Justine woke in the morning, she found herself spooned against Mark, his arm around her waist, anchoring her close. She barely dared to breathe. What madness had overcome her yesterday? A hot flush crept over her skin as she recalled how she had allowed the blistering anger to turn her into a sexual aggressor. Then she closed her eyes and thought how Mark had carried her to bed and made love to her with a tenderness that still tugged at her heart.

Sheriff Taylor was a dangerous man, but that was something she’d known from the instant she first saw him storming across the floor into his office.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked, without any apparent transition between sleep and wakefulness.

Almost against her will, Justine snuggled closer. “Yes.”

“Do you want to come with me today?”

“I don’t know.” Hesitation muffled her voice. How would he introduce her to his brother’s children, who would no doubt mention her when they got home? Friend? Girlfriend? Or would he keep it deliberately vague?

“How old are your niece and nephew?” she asked.

“Seven and ten.”

“Do you have any children?”

His arm tensed around her. “No.”

“Have you ever been married?”

“Yes.” He shifted along the bed. “Have you?” he asked. She could hear the strain in his voice, and knew that although he might be curious about her, his main reason for asking

the question had been to turn the conversation away from him.

“No,” she said.

“How come?”

“I almost got married when I was in my early thirties.” She paused for a moment, puzzled by the impulse that had her pouring out her relationship history to a stranger. “The man was my boss. He was divorced with three children, and he made it clear he didn’t want any more. I decided it was too much of a sacrifice.” She couldn’t stop the wistful little sound that rose in her chest. “Seems foolish now, since I’ve ended up childless anyway.”

“It must have seemed the right decision at the time. You couldn’t know then that you wouldn’t meet someone else.”

Justine was glad she had her back to Mark, so he couldn’t see the sheen of tears in her eyes. “That’s right,” she said. “And the guy turned out to be a bastard anyway.”

“Why? What did he do?”

“He fired me when I broke off the engagement.” She blinked back the tears, angry that despite the years the memory still had the power to hurt. “Six months later, he married a twenty-two-year-old and promptly got her pregnant.”

“Maybe he realized he’d made a mistake in letting you go, and didn’t want to repeat it,” Mark said lightly.

Justine expelled a long sigh. “Or maybe he never loved me the way he loved her.”

“Maybe.” Mark held her tight in his warm embrace. “This seems a very long way of answering my question.”

“Which was?”

“Do you want to come along today when I take my niece and nephew to Valley Forge?”

Justine held her breath. “No,” she said in the end. “I don’t think it’s a good idea. And I have work to do. I need to go and man the Chandler Developments stall at the charity bike ride in Fairmount Park.”

He didn’t press her. They took turns to shower and then had breakfast. Mark kept up the idle conversation, attempting to fill in the long silences. When he was gone, with assurances that he would be in touch as soon as he knew if he had the time to drive down the following weekend, Justine couldn’t relax. She spent the rest of the day regretting that she hadn’t gone with him.

So what, if it made no sense to risk becoming too fond of him, and having to suffer the agonies of a broken heart when he disappeared? Surely, a broken heart was better than a

frozen heart.

Chapter Eight

The following week, Justine had to use all her ingenuity at work to keep Sandra's probing questions at bay. Steven was much blunter in his approach, telling her that Mark had been a great success and should be invited to all upcoming company events.

Justine balanced the fine line between telling lies and keeping up the pretense that she and Mark were in a committed relationship.

On Thursday morning, he telephoned to tell her that there had been a breakout at the county jail, and he had to work until the three escaped prisoners were caught. Justine moped around her apartment all evening. It made her feel a little better when she heard the details of the prison break on Fox news.

At least it was true, rather than an excuse he'd made to avoid seeing her. Then it occurred to her that the convicts could be dangerous. She spent the weekend showing prospective buyers around the latest project of Chandler Developments, using every spare moment to rush in front of the television screen. She was almost as worried about Mark as she was about the fact that his welfare appeared to mean so much to her.

She tried to call him on Monday, and realized that he'd never given her his home number. Irritation stirred up inside her. How was she supposed to pull off the pretence that they were lovers, if he paid so little attention to details? She ended up leaving a message with the woman with the nasal voice, who seemed to have no idea who Justine was when she gave her name. So much for being the sheriff's latest ladylove, if his staff had never even heard of her.

The week limped by. Tension made Justine impatient, causing Sandra to give her long concerned looks. On Friday night, Justine took home three proposals for a leisure village Steven was planning, although the project was in such early stages that her involvement wasn't required. She would only be needed once Steven had decided which parcel of land to

bid on, and then she would do her best to rally support for the project amongst the local population.

When she got home, a message light blinked on her telephone. She pressed the keys and listened to Mark's tired voice.

"Sorry I haven't been in touch. It's been hectic, but we're done now. I'm too tired to drive, but I'm catching a ride down with a Fox reporter. I should be with you around seven. I hope that's okay with you."

When the phone clicked at the end of the message, Justine checked her watch. Half past six. She had no food in the apartment, she wanted a bath, and the kitchen was full of dirty dishes. With a sigh, she decided the kitchen was the biggest priority. She was still up to her elbows in soapsuds when the entry phone buzzed.

"Hi, it's Mark," said the exhausted voice.

"Come up," she told him. "I got your message."

She unlocked the front door and returned to the kitchen, her mood somber as she realized that tonight would fill his required quota of three times of making love to her. After that, she would be unlikely to see him again.

Unless...she managed to get through the weekend without sleeping with him. Her brows in a calculating frown, Justine finished rinsing the dishes. By the time the front door slammed and heavy footsteps thudded through the hall, her vague idea had grown into a solid plan.

She turned to say hello to Sheriff Taylor, leaning her back against the countertop as she waited for him to appear. When he did, his battle-scarred appearance made her forget her intention to act cool and distant.

"What is this?" she cried out, rushing up to him. "Why is your face covered in cuts and bruises?" Her hand rose to hover in front of his battered face, but she didn't dare to touch his skin, in case it would cause him pain.

"It's not what you think." He sank down in the kitchen chair too small for his big frame. "I haven't been in a fight. I've been running at full speed through the forest. There wasn't enough time take care, so the branches clipped my face."

She inspected the cut above his left eye. "Have you been attended to? In high summer cuts can easily get infected with the heat."

"There was no time." He lowered his head and rubbed his eyes with his hands, then winced when his fingers met the wound. "I had to see you this weekend. Time's running out if there is going to be a disciplinary hearing. I was too tired to drive, and the guy who offered

me a ride couldn't wait."

"You should have called me, and I could have driven up."

Mark lifted his face, looking surprised. "You would have?" His brows knitted into a frown. "When I told you two weeks ago that we needed to spend time together, you could barely find me a slot in your busy schedule."

"I told you I was busy for the next two weekends. That was work. This is the third weekend, and I'm free."

Mark shrugged his broad shoulders, appearing too tired to have the energy to become annoyed because of the miscommunication. "I guess it will do me good to get away from Eagle Mountain for a couple of days anyway," he muttered, rubbing his eyes again. "Is it all right if I have a bath? I'm bruised all over."

"Of course," she told him. Leaving him, she hurried into the bathroom and ran him a bath, filling the tub with bubbles. When she returned to the kitchen, she found him asleep, his head pillowed on the table over his crossed forearms. She hesitated about waking him up. Slumber rendered him appealingly vulnerable. The crescents of thick dark lashes made shadows against the bronzed skin. A longing choked Justine's chest as she stood watching him. She knew that she didn't want to let him go, but she also knew that she couldn't deny him if he tried to make love to her, so the plan to force him to return one more time wouldn't work.

It would be bittersweet, knowing that if she had the strength to resist him, he would have to come back to her.

Mark blinked his eyes open with the curious instant awakening that she recalled from their previous night together. "I've ran you a bath," she told him softly. "There are clean towels on the shelf, and shampoo and soap on the ledge by the tub."

He murmured his thanks and rose his feet. At the door he turned. "Would you mind coming in and watching over me? I'm so tired I might go to sleep. I don't want to drown in the tub."

She nodded, a lump forming in her throat at his battered look, and at the prospect that she might offer him some comfort. She followed him into the bathroom. When he began to undress with clumsy gestures, she stepped in and lifted her hands to unbutton his khaki shirt. As soon as she took over, he dropped his arms down his sides and stood still, allowing her to take charge.

She pushed the shirt open, her eyes widening at the bruises that mottled his chest. "It's a thick forest, and the tracker dogs run at speed," he told her gruffly. "I'm not in good

enough shape for the job.”

Not pausing to comment, she knelt down and unlaced his boots, then guided him to sit on the edge of the bathtub, which allowed her to remove the dusty boots and socks. He stood up again, and she undid his belt and rolled down his pants. She sensed his gaze lingering on her, and felt the stirring in his groin that didn’t quite grow to a full erection.

“I sure as hell am not capable right now, but I guess this reminds me of that other time when you pulled down my pants and had your way with me.” Amusement lingered in his voice, but it didn’t mask the exhaustion.

She glanced up at him, and saw that he wasn’t smiling. An intent look filled his eyes. For a long moment, they contemplated each other. Justine felt as if she was falling under a spell. It was strangely erotic, undressing a man who offered neither help nor resistance.

“Next time we do this, I want you to get in the bath with me,” he murmured. Then he turned around, and with a long relieved sigh, he lowered himself into the hot water.

Next time.

Her heart fluttered, but she told herself it was nothing but a phrase, an idle expression about what a man would like to do with a woman in a bath filled with fragrant bubbles.

“Duck under to make your hair wet,” she ordered.

He turned to give her a long look, and then slid down and dipped his shoulders beneath the surface. When he sat up again, water cascaded off his skin. She poured a dollop a shampoo into her hands and washed his hair, massaging the scalp with strong fingers, gratified to hear his murmurs of pleasure.

“Duck again to rinse,” she said, and he obeyed without question.

“Do you want conditioner?” she asked.

“What does it do?”

“Makes it easier to comb. And it smells nice.” She uncapped the bottle and held it in front of his face.

He inhaled a long breath. “Smells like a girl,” he said, turning to grin at her. “None of that for me.”

She smiled at him, and went on to soap every inch of his skin, carefully skirting around the darkening bruises. She hesitated around his half-hearted erection.

“It’s all right,” he said. “Just give it a wash. I’m too tired.”

She did as he told her, more embarrassed now than she’d been when she had taken him into her mouth in her burst of anger. Blood heated her cheeks, and the color deepened when she noticed the amusement Mark wasn’t even trying to hide.

“You are a strange contradiction.” His eyes followed her movements as she turned on the shower attachment to give him a final rinse with clean water. “Normally so proper and cool, but like a scorching flame when you lose control.”

She didn’t reply, just went about the business of methodically rinsing the last traces of shampoo and bubble bath from his dripping curls “You are done,” she said finally and turned off the taps. “Stand up.”

When he did, she shook out a big white towel and began to rub him dry, patting gently over his injuries.

“I could get used to this,” he said hoarsely when she was finished and wrapped a fresh towel around his waist.

She looked up at him, her throat closing up with the need to say something in return, to make him understand how she felt, but she knew that she mustn’t. The heartbreak of parting would be easier to deal with if pride remained intact.

“You can have the bed and I’ll sleep on the sofa,” she said, and felt a sharp sting of disappointment when he didn’t contradict her.

“You need to help me get there. I’m not sure that I’m steady on my feet.”

She gave him a surprised glance, since the bath seemed to have revived him, but didn’t protest when he draped his arm over her shoulders and leaned on her as he first stepped out of the path, and then made his way into the bedroom.

“If you don’t mind sitting down for a while, I’ll change the sheets for you,” she said.

“Have you slept with someone else on these sheets?”

Taken aback, she frowned at him. “Of course not.”

“Then there’s no need to change them.” He unraveled the towel from around his waist and dropped it to the floor. With a long satisfied sigh, he stretched out on the bed, on top of the covers. “I need to cool down,” he explained to her.

“Do you want me to get you anything? A drink? A cup of coffee?”

He turned and met her eyes with his level stare. “Only you,” he said. “I want you to lie down next to me.”

Her breath caught at the solemn tone of his words. “You’ll be more comfortable without me bumping against your bruises,” she said hesitantly.

“I don’t care.” He held one arm out to her. “It’s been a hell of a week.” His mouth quirked. “When a man is as beat as I am, he realizes how much comfort there is in a pair of slender arms to hold him.”

Justine swallowed, and then she stretched out next to him, leaving a careful distance

between their bodies in order not to cause him discomfort, but he reached for her and in one swift move, he hauled her up against his side, clutching her tight.

“I may be crazy,” he told her, his words muffled against her hair, “but when I heard that the men we were hunting were armed, the thought that flashed through my mind was that if I died, I’d never get to see you again.”

Almost as soon as he had finished the sentence, he fell asleep, but his arms remained wrapped around her, holding her close.

Chapter Nine

When Mark woke up, a sense of disorientation filled his mind for a moment before he realized where he was. He was lying face down on a bed that was too soft. His mouth felt parched, and a dull ache throbbed all over his body. He glanced at his wrist and realized he wasn't wearing his watch.

"Justine," he shouted, and waited for a reply.

An instant later, she rushed into the room. "Are you all right?" Concern furrowed her brow.

"I need a drink."

"A drink?" she blurted back at him. "As in alcohol?"

"No," he growled into the pillow. "As in water."

"Oh." She gave a nervous chuckle. "That's better. I'll get one for you." She began a slow retreat to the doorway.

"What time is it?" he asked gruffly.

"It's almost seven o'clock on Saturday night. You've slept round the clock."

"I feel like shit," he said. "I shouldn't have come."

"It's all right," she told him, her voice carefully neutral. "I don't have anything better to do. I don't mind looking after you."

He buried his head in the pillow once she was gone. How stupid could a grown man get? Despite everything he'd told himself, he was doing it again. He'd told himself to take it lightly, not think of her, and all it had achieved was that he'd thought of her anyway, and had probably got a naughty schoolboy's pleasure out of doing something he considered forbidden.

Women like her with their big city ways and high maintenance lifestyle were bad news. He knew he could hold his own in sophisticated circles, but he didn't want that kind of

life. He hated the city. But now he wanted her, and that was a problem.

He cursed himself for being stupid enough to make the same mistake twice. He could already imagine the pitying looks people in Eagle Mountain would give him when they found out.

“Justine,” he roared, blotting out his fear with anger.

“Yes?” she appeared on the doorstep, carrying a jug of water and an empty glass.

“I’m thirsty,” he said.

“I know.” Her lips twitched as she tried not to smile. “That’s why I’ve brought you water.”

She poured, and handed the full glass to him. He drained the contents and handed back the empty.

“Are you hungry?” she asked as she refilled the glass and offered it to him again.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Are you a good cook?”

“Yes, but I have very little in the kitchen. If you tell me what you want, I’ll run down to the deli. There’s one on the block.”

“I want a steak, medium rare, and garlic mashed potatoes.”

“Anything else?”

“Yes,” he said. “I know I’m acting like a jerk, and I want you to promise that you won’t hold it against me.”

She smiled at him. “It’s all right. All men are cranky patients. Do you want anything else?”

He shook his head, barely stopping himself from telling her that he wanted her.

“Fine. I’ll go and get some groceries. I won’t be long.”

Mark waited while Justine was gone, his nerves taut as he battled with himself. When she returned, she looked in on him, and then went into the kitchen to prepare the food. He breathed in the smells that wafted through, and realized he was ravenous. The sleep had restored him enough to be up on his feet, but when Justine brought the meal to him on a tray and propped him up with pillows, he didn’t protest. Staying the invalid would help him keep his distance. He ate in sullen silence, and then drifted off to sleep again, knowing that the battle was already lost.

He’d ask her up to the county fair, and that meant he’d have to tell her about Elise.

* * * *

Justine lounged on the sofa and watched Sunday morning dawn over the city rooftops. A slow smile rose on her lips as she thought of Mark sleeping next door. Men were such

babies when ill or injured, and it amused her that despite his intimidating physical strength, Sheriff Taylor was no different.

A sound from the doorstep caught her attention. She turned to look and saw Mark watching her, a resigned expression on his face. He wore nothing but a towel wrapped around his waist. "Good morning," he said, and crossed the room to her. "I need to leave at ten to catch my ride back to Eagle Mountain, but before I go, I'd like to ask you one more favor."

She smiled and nodded at him.

"Could you come up next weekend? There's a county fair, and the sheriff's department and the fire department take a big part in the festivities. If you're supposed to be my girlfriend, you need to be there."

"Of course," she said, managing to appear calm while the sting of disappointment over his explanation chased away the elation that had risen inside her when she first heard his invitation.

"You need to know something, to understand why some people may appear hostile to you."

"Hostile to me?" she asked, startled.

"I used to be married."

"So you said."

"My ex-wife came from the city. We met through my sister-in-law."

"The one who works as a buyer for a fashion chain."

"That's the one." He sat down on the sofa, forcing Justine to curl her legs out of the way. "When we got married, Elise gave up her job and moved to Eagle Mountain. After a while, she got bored and wanted to return to work. We agreed that she'd get an apartment in the city and come home for weekends, until a child came along. Then she would give up work. We kept trying, but she didn't get pregnant. One day I drove down in the middle of the week to surprise Elise on her birthday. I discovered she wasn't living alone."

"What?" Justine rasped, fury at this unknown woman slicing through her.

"I found she was sharing her apartment with a man, had been living a double life for some time. It seems I was the last to know," he added dryly.

"What happened?" Justine asked hesitantly. "Did you find them together?"

Mark shook his head. "No. They weren't at home when I turned up, but it was obvious that a man lived there. I found documents with his name, and ran the details through the police computer. He was actually using the place as his official residence. Had been for six months."

“Oh my God.” Justine stared at Mark’s stony face. “What did you do?”

“I confronted Elise. She admitted everything, told me she would never adjust to living in the middle of nowhere.” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper. “I discovered that she had got pregnant, but she’d had an abortion. She hadn’t even told me.” He turned to Justine, the pain burning bright in his eyes. “She never offered to bear the child and let me have it, bring it up alone. She just killed it, like she was purging her body of some disease.”

“I’m sorry,” Justine murmured. “No wonder you feel bitter.”

“Everyone in my home town knows.” He gave her a sideways glance. “And the reason they may be hostile to you is because of what Elise did for her job.”

“What?” Justine asked, unease churning inside her.

“She worked in public relations.”

Chapter Ten

Justine sat in the small stand overlooking the football field and surveyed the scattered crowd. Everyone seemed to be having a good time. She had inspected the biggest pumpkin, patted a piglet, and tasted ten different kinds of angel cakes. Mark had spent most of his time rushing around, taking care of the arrangements, and she'd been left to make her own way.

She felt the assessing glances of Eagle Mountain residents following her every step. A certain reserve cooled their greetings, and many of the women treated her with open hostility. She regretted not taking Friday off from work to have some private time with Mark before she was exposed to everyone's judgment. Instead, she had driven up in the morning and gone straight to the fairground.

A loud cheer went up as the mayor stood up in the middle of the field and announced the start of the final event, the annual tug-of-war between the sheriff's department and the fire department. The tiny brass band burst into a fanfare, and two teams jogged in from opposite ends of the field. The fire department wore black T-shirts with orange flames across the chest, and the sheriff's team sported on their T-shirts a picture of handcuffs on a grey background. Girls in cheerleading outfits marched in from the back, a long hemp rope resting over their shoulders like a gigantic snake.

Next, all the participants were weighed to ensure each team met the rule of a total combined weight of no more than 2000 lbs. The men struck muscular poses when their weight was announced, the women feigned horror when they stepped off the scales.

"The fire department, 1960 pounds," the mayor announced. "The sheriff's department, 1890 pounds."

"We can have one more," shouted one of the women from the sheriff's team. Justine recognized the nasal voice who had answered the telephone. "Is there anyone below 110 lbs?" She called out several names, and women in the stand responded with laughter and

denials.

“Come along,” the mayor chanted. “Any wife or girlfriend less than 110 lbs?”

“I’m 108 pounds,” Justine called out. “But I haven’t been a girlfriend very long. Is there a time limit to qualify?”

“True love knows no limits,” the mayor announced and waved her down. A few cries of support and a smattering of applause accompanied Justine as she scaled down from the stand, but she could hear the hesitation in the crowd’s reaction. Then she was on the ground, and after her weight had been verified, she crossed the field over to Mark, who watched her approach, an unreadable expression on his face. Justine held her breath, wondering if she had made a mistake.

“Honey, for a city girl, you’re wearing sensible clothes, but why don’t you put this on to protect your white blouse.” The woman with the nasal voice passed her a grey T-shirt with a picture of handcuffs on the front, and Justine slipped it on. Her jeans and sneakers were old, and she had left her gold wristwatch at home, instead relying on the clock in the dashboard when she drove up.

Still Mark hadn’t said anything to her. The young deputy Justine remembered from the Mrs. Harper incident arranged them by size, with Justine at the front, the nasal-voiced woman behind her, Mark with two other burly men at the back, and the young deputy in the middle. They grouped on their side of the white chalk line and curled their hands around the rope. The cheerleaders did a little dance, and finally the mayor blew into his whistle.

The rope bucked in her hands like the tail of an angry alligator as the tugging began. Justine dug her heels into the parched grass and leaned back. The rough texture of the hemp burned her hands, but she held on and pulled with all her might. The team behind her tottered back a step and she moved with them, digging her heels in again and feeling every muscle in her body strain. Then the other team grunted and yanked in unison and she flung forward a step. Behind her, the men yelled and fought back.

On and on it went, gaining a foot, losing a foot. The skin on her hands stung and her legs began to shake, but Justine clung on to the rope like a leech and joined in with the shouting. Then the other team suddenly lost ground and lurched forward, all the way over the white line, and let go of the rope. Justine toppled backwards into a heap of flailing arms and kicking legs. Before she had a chance to find her bearings, someone grabbed her arms and pulled her up and dusted her muddy backside with a few efficient slaps.

“Are you all right? Mark asked, pulling her against his chest and grinning down at her.

“Did we win?” She beamed up at him, oblivious to the people around.

“We sure did.” He bent to plant a resounding kiss on her lips. For a second she gripped his shoulders. Then he turned to shout his congratulations to the rest of the team, one arm still wrapped around Justine to anchor her to his side.

“You did well,” said the nasal-voiced woman. “You look as if the wind would blow you away, but you clung on like a burr.”

“I have strong arms. I was on the rowing team in college.” Justine smiled at the woman. Then the young deputy came over to praise her, and a moment later she had to join in the chorus of yelling, since the fire department tried to heckle them, claiming they had broken any number of rules. Throughout it all, she remained clutched to Mark’s side, his arm possessively around her shoulders.

It was almost an hour later when they finally took their leave and climbed into Mark’s black pick-up truck, muddy and tired. Justine leaned back against the headrest. “That was fun,” she said, her voice hoarse from all the shouting.

He turned to look at her. “You call getting your nails broken and our clothes muddy fun?”

She blinked at him in surprise. “Didn’t you have a good time?”

“I did,” Mark said with emphasis. “Elise, my ex-wife, hated that kind of thing. The only time she came, she wore high heels and an expensive dress. She didn’t go close to the piglets because they smelled, and she didn’t taste any of the cakes because they’re too fattening.”

“Oh.” Justine drew a long breath as she added another clue to the hostility she had sensed around her. “I hope people realize I’m not her.”

Mark shook his head at her, laughter dancing in his eyes. “After the tug-of-war, they certainly will.”

They drove a few minutes in silence, and then turned into a narrow drive that sloped up through a cluster of trees. When the house came into view, Justine gasped. Rugged logs that reminded her so much of Sheriff Taylor formed the walls of a two-storey cabin with enormous windows looking out to the forest. On the other side of the house, the ground fell down in a steep incline, and she caught the blue glint of water at the bottom.

“The river is so wide here it almost feels like being on a lake,” Mark said. “I have a rowboat and a pair of kayaks.”

“How long have you lived here?” Justine asked, breathing in the smell of the forest and listening to the wind that rustled in the leaves.

“Three years. After my divorce, I wanted something to keep me busy. It took me almost two years to build this place.”

“You built it yourself?” she asked in disbelief.

“Not alone.” Mark set off along the path toward the house and gestured at her to follow. “I had a retired builder who helped me. He did all the skilled carpentry, and I brought in professionals for the plumbing and electrics.”

As they entered the house, Justine saw that a wide porch ran the length of the house, overlooking the river. “This is lovely.” She rushed up to the tall windows to admire the view.

“Isolated. In the winter you can get snowed in.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder. Her heart ached as she imagined him living alone in this wonderful house, his dreams of a family shattered. Then a blush crept along her skin as she imagined being stranded there with him, a storm raging outside, forcing them to seek warmth in each other.

“I guess it was my fault,” Mark said quietly. “A city girl could never adjust to the quiet life.”

Justine shook her head slowly. “I guess they could not.” She watched his face, saw the clouding in his eyes. “But then I wouldn’t really know,” she continued. “I grew up in the country, on a farm with pigs and chickens.”

“You did?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded at him. “I only moved into the city to be with my fiancé. He was a property developer who bought some land from my father. After we got engaged, I started working for him. That’s how I got into public relations. I majored in art at college. I wanted to be a painter. The idea was that once I had children, I’d stay at home and focus on the children and my painting.” She looked up at him and put on a bright smile. “Of course, the fact that my fiancé didn’t want any children put an end to that, and when I remained single, I had to earn my living, so there was no time left for painting.”

“What sort of things do you paint?”

Justine turned to the window. “Landscapes,” she said in a low voice. “I did portraits too, but mostly I loved forest landscapes.”

* * * *

They took a shower together, washing off the mud and letting the hot water ease the abrasions on their hands and forearms. A new awareness grew within Mark as he began to see Justine, not as a hard and ambitious woman capable of deceit, but as a possible companion, with her own flawed past and unfulfilled hopes.

He bent his head to her breast under the cascading jets and slowly teased the nipple into a peak. Justine buried her fingers in his soaked curls and clung to him, her soft moans muted by the rushing water.

When she arched into him, her shoulders braced against the glass wall of the shower stall, he released her breast and kissed her neck, and then he roamed up to her lips for a slow drugging exploration of her mouth.

Her hands rose to twine around his neck. Not stopping to ask, Mark reached down and pulled her knee to rest against his hip, opening her for his penetration. The eager response of how she leaned up on tiptoe to receive him sent his heart soaring.

He brushed aside the fleeting thought of birth control. The chances were low, and if the unexpected did happen, Justine wouldn't kill his baby. The knowledge settled inside him like a solid wall that formed a defense against past betrayals.

Impatient, unable to control the need that roared through him, Mark thrust into her. The shower beat on his back as he bent over Justine, his mouth on hers, his shaft buried inside her to the hilt. He pounded in and out of her in a fierce rhythm, the water drenching them both, but nothing could dampen the fire of passion that burned within him, demanding that he declare his ownership of her in a way that didn't require words.

Justine clung to him and wrapped her legs around his waist. Her shoulders slammed up and down against the glass wall with a force that rattled the door of the shower stall. She tipped her head back, her eyes closed. He could no longer reach her lips, but he kissed her neck, drinking droplets from her skin.

When he felt her tighten around him, he sank inside her in one final powerful thrust. He roared out his release, the hoarse sound echoing between the glass walls. Justine shuddered in his arms. A keening sound burst from her lips and mingled with the fading echo of his.

He gathered her close, his head buried in the crook of her shoulder, and held her tight until she untangled her legs from around him and lowered her feet back to the tiled floor. Even then he clung to her, unwilling to let her go.

"The water is going cold," she told him finally.

He raised his head to look at her. Her lips were red and swollen, her eyes dark with passion. Suddenly, it seemed important that he find out this very instant if her feelings for him matched the strength of his. "What would you do if I had just made you pregnant?" he muttered out the question, part of him wanting her not to hear and fail to give him a response, in case it was the wrong one

“I guess I’d have a baby in nine months.” Her lips moved as she hesitated about saying something more, but instead she simply reached up and cupped her palm against his cheek.

Mark swallowed. It felt as if the outlook for life ahead of him had suddenly opened wide, expanding from the narrow view he’d been looking through, into a sunny landscape of family picnics and children playing on his lawn. A tremor ran over him as he accepted his willingness to trust a woman again.

He released his arms from around Justine and traced his fingertips over her features, lingering on each one. She stared up at him, her eyes full of questions. Mark decided the answers would have to wait. He wanted the threat of the disciplinary hearing out of the way before he talked to Justine about the future, and how he wanted her to be part of his.

Suddenly his own vulnerability overwhelmed him. Too much had passed between them, and Mark pushed his emotions aside with practical thoughts. “Do you want to go back into town?” he asked. “There’s a barn dance.”

“We ought to go,” Justine said, brushing droplets of water from his skin after he turned off the flow. “I don’t want people to think that I’m keeping you away from them.”

“They’ll understand,” he told her. “It’s up to you. Whatever you want.”

“In that case, we’ll stay in. I don’t want to share you with anyone tonight.”

Those simple words filled him with peace. After they had toweled each other dry, Mark led Justine into his bedroom, where a large window overlooked the terrace above the river. He stacked up the pillows so they could lean on them, and settled on the bed, where he pulled her to sit between his legs, her back resting against his chest.

Justine huddled closer to Mark, the heat from his body flowing into hers. She clung to the sense of belonging that had grown as the day went by. Accepted by his friends during the tug-of-war. Sharing his passion in the shower. The only thing missing was the promise of a future. With a wistful sigh, she snuggled more comfortably against him.

“We should talk,” Mark said. “About what happens at the hearing.”

“No.” She didn’t turn to look at him. “Not now. Not today. I don’t want to...think about anything unpleasant. We can talk by phone next week.”

“All right.” He bent to press a kiss on her shoulder. “What do you want to do?”

“This,” she said, and twisted in his arms until their lips met. She needed to give herself fully, without holding anything back, but now it would be tenderness guiding her abandon, unlike before, when anger had propelled her to forget her reserve.

She flicked her tongue into his mouth and drew a shuddering reaction from him. Fully aware of her actions, Justine set out to seduce Sheriff Taylor. Pulling aside the towel around his hips, she rose to straddle him.

“Are you sure?” he asked. “I don’t want to make you sore.”

She didn’t reply, but pressed her fingertips across his lips to silence him. No words were spoken as she rose to her knees and guided him inside her. She began a slow sensuous dance over him. With a harsh sound of passion, he buried his head against her breasts and closed his mouth over a crested peak.

Afterward he held her close, his arms tight around her, his heartbeat a steady drum that lulled her into sleepiness

Justine closed her eyes to hold back tears. Instead of a farewell, she wished tonight could have been the start of something more than a relationship designed to protect his job and her reputation.

Chapter Eleven

“Steven needs to talk to you.” Sandra stood in the doorway of Justine’s office, looking troubled.

“Oh? What is it about?” Justine dropped the estimates for the gala dinner she’d been reviewing.

Sandra had stopped asking questions about Mark, because Justine always evaded them. Now, after last weekend, she would have liked to talk about him, to find out what Sandra knew about him, but she didn’t quite know how to approach the topic without having to tell yet another lie.

“Steven will give you the details,” Sandra said, her voice evasive. “He is in his office.”

“Tell him I’ll be there in a second.”

Sandra nodded and retreated. Justine stacked the papers on her desk and rose. A knot of fear tightened in her gut. She knew she was a hard worker and a reliable employee, but she had no formal training in public relations. She had got her first job because she was engaged to the boss and her second job on the strength of her first job. Chandler Developments was expanding. Perhaps Steven had decided the time had come to employ someone with proper qualifications for the job.

Justine strolled over to his big corner office, trying to relax. Her latest projects had gone well, the press coverage had been favorable, and she had managed to prevent a demonstration at a redevelopment site in South Philadelphia by inviting the protestors to participate in a public question and answer panel. Her only failing since her trip to the county fair last weekend had been her lack of concentration as she held her breath for Mark to call.

He hadn’t.

On Sunday morning, he had taken her for a long hike in the woods. They had lunched

in the only diner in town, with a constant flow of interruptions from people who wanted to congratulate them over the tug-of-war victory. Most of them had gallantly credited her with making the tiny difference that had defeated the fire department.

Mark's goodbye when she got in her car had been subdued, void of any mention of the future. He hadn't even said he'd call her, or that there would be a next time for them to get together. Every implication had been that the task was done, and they could get on with their lives. It seemed such a contradiction to the night at his house, when she had felt that something had taken root and started to grow between them.

Justine sighed as she gave a quick rap on Steven's door and entered. It must have all been in her imagination. Wishful thinking, something that every unattached woman in search of a man occasionally succumbed to.

"Sandra said you wanted to see me." Justine came to a halt inside the door.

Steven cleared his throat and pointed to the chair in front of his chrome and glass desk. Behind them, the early afternoon sun gilded the Philadelphia skyline. "It really is two different things, but it's all connected."

"Yes." Justine gave him a nod, her voice calm and professional despite the fear that pulsed through her.

"I hope you know that I've been pleased with your work."

"Thank you." She crossed her legs and adjusted her skirt, recalling the freedom of jeans and sneakers during the tug-of-war and missing it.

"I don't really want to let you go, but—"

A knock at the door interrupted him, but Justine had heard enough to make her heart sink. Before Steven had a chance to call out a reply, the door inched open and Sandra poked her head through. "I'd like to be part of this, Steven," she said, looking earnestly at her husband.

He nodded at her, and Sandra crossed the floor to perch on the edge of his desk. She reached out to take Steven's hand and held it between both of hers. "I'm going to have a baby," she said, turning to look at Justine.

"Congratulations," Justine said, ashamed that her fear over her own future dulled her enthusiasm for the good news. "But what does that have to do with you firing me?"

"We are not firing you," Sandra said.

"Well, not exactly," Steven added.

"Hush," Sandra said. "Let me do this." She contemplated Justine, her expression full of hope. "We're moving to Eagle Mountain. Steven has found a wonderful farmhouse with a

barn that can be converted into offices.”

“Eagle Mountain,” Justine stammered. “Why?” She switched her focus to Steven. “It’s too far to commute. Are you selling the business?”

“I want to be closer to my family when the baby comes,” Sandra said. “But not in Elkhorn. Not right on the doorstep. Eagle Mountain is bigger, and it has a good elementary school.”

“I’m not getting out of the business.” Steven reached his arm around Sandra’s waist and pulled her into his lap. “I’m refocusing,” he said from behind her blond ponytail. “It’s getting too hard to find good sites in the city, and I’m fed up with all the politics that go with urban regeneration.” He grinned at Justine. “Do you remember those land parcels for the holiday villages?”

She nodded, her heart leaping up from her stomach and lodging in her throat. “I’m going to bid on all three of them. From now on, I’ll be evicting badgers and squirrels instead of old ladies.”

“What about public relations?” Justine said. “Why are you firing me?”

“I’m not firing you,” Steven said. “I’m just accepting the fact that you’d never move away from the city.”

“Why don’t you go home early and think about it?” Sandra piped up from the circle of Steven’s arms. “You can leave the room now so that I can kiss my husband to thank him to giving me everything I want.” She didn’t wait for Justine to close the door, but bent down to nuzzle Steven’s neck with shameless adoration.

Eagle Mountain. Justine stood outside the door, her heart beating hard enough to break out of her chest. What would Mark think? Would he give her the cold shoulder, imagining that she was stalking him? Perhaps, if she kept a careful distance, never even stopping to talk when she bumped into him in town, he would gradually accept that she was only anxious to hold on to her job, just like he had been eager to protect his.

She needed to tell him.

Back in her office, Justine stared at the telephone on her desk, gathering courage, composing a nonchalant way of explaining the situation. When the phone burst into a ring, she almost rocketed out of her seat.

“I just wanted to let you know that we are in the clear,” Mark said after a brief greeting. “Mrs. Harper has withdrawn her complaint.”

“That’s a relief,” Justine blurted out.

“I’d like to come down next weekend,” he said. “There are some things I’d like to talk

to you about.”

She didn’t reply, and the silence rose like a barrier between them. “I have something to tell you too,” Justine said at long last.

“Fire away.” Mark’s voice tightened, as though he expected some kind of a betrayal.

“I only just heard ten minutes ago.” Justine took a deep breath. “Steven is moving the office to Eagle Mountain. I’m going to be living in your neighborhood.”

“You are moving here?” There was absolutely no emotion in his voice, no anger, no disbelief.

“Yes,” she said. “Does that bother you?”

“And you’ll be able to keep your job, have your own life?”

She frowned into the phone. “Of course I’ll have my own life.”

“You’ll need a four wheel drive.”

“Mark, I just found out ten minutes ago,” Justine said in exasperation at his lack of reaction. “I expect I’ll need a lot of things, starting from somewhere to live.”

“No,” he said bluntly.

“What?” Justine slumped in the seat. She had expected that he might find things awkward, but trying to order her to turn down the move was simply too much. “Since when do you think you have the right to boss me around?”

“Since now,” he told her firmly. “I need to widen the clearing in front of the house to make room for a second car, and the kitchen is a little basic. When you come up next, I’ll get someone to quote for a refit.”

“What are you talking about?” she asked as her heart threatened to leap into her mouth and cut off her air.

“I’m talking about the good news that you are moving up here. I can now withdraw my application to join the Philadelphia Police Department. I would have hated it in the city.” A noise broke out behind him. “Sorry,” he said hastily. “Got to go. Call me when you know what time you’ll come up on Friday night. Everybody I know wants to invite us to dinner.”

The line clicked dead. Justine sat clutching the receiver to her chest. Every muscle in her body went numb while the meaning of Mark’s words slowly penetrated her mind. Then she stirred back to life. She dialed Rob Thornton’s guesthouse in Eagle Mountain and got the address.

Her next call was to a florist. “A dozen red roses,” Justine said. “A simple card which says ‘Thank you.’ No other message. The name is Mrs. Harper. H-A-R-P-E-R.”

She dropped the phone in the cradle and sat still in the chair as happiness settled over

her, like a burst of spring sunshine that thaws the frozen ground after a long dark winter.

About the Author

Tatiana March learned to read at four, and no other pastime has matched the thrill of being transported to other worlds. She took up fiction writing six years ago while taking a break from her job as a senior director in a large international corporation.

Tatiana lives in the UK near the river Thames. She loves to travel and has lived in several European countries, as well as spending time in the US. One of her favorite destinations is Arizona, the setting of her historical romance *Circle Star*.

When Tatiana is not reading or writing, she enjoys hiking, camping, and watching old movies on the TV. She is hopeless at housework and can barely cook enough to keep from starvation. She used to like clothes, and fuss about her hair, but the older she gets the more she has realized that looks matter less than a kind heart.

Circle Star was her first full-length novel accepted for publication. She is working on several other manuscripts, both historical romance and contemporary romantic suspense.

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Project Seduction

Project Manager: Georgina Coleman, VP at Pacific Bank, 28 years old. Brilliant and determined, but lacking in social skills.

Project background: Transfer from London to San Diego allows Georgina to shed her dowdy image and get a life.

Project objective: Seduce a man and lose her virginity.

Timeline: Seven weeks, starting from the completion of Project Flowchart.

Target: Georgina's downstairs neighbor, a surly cop named Rick Matisse.

Complication: Rick's 12-year-old daughter Angelina, who thinks Georgina would be the perfect girlfriend to keep Dad on his toes.

Distraction: Money laundering investigation which requires Georgina to mingle with a bunch of Colombian thugs who believe that every woman should be owned by a man.

Project evaluation: A project can go wrong despite successful completion, if Project Manager fails to plan for how to deal with the Target after project closure.

Circle Star

After thirteen years in the East, Susanna Talbot stands to inherit the Arizona ranch she grew up on, but only provided she marry Connor McGregor, the young drifter who once forged a bond with her father. Susanna will do whatever it takes to claim her right to land—even seek a union with a man who believes she ruined his life.

But first she must find him.

Connor McGregor rode into the desert without a backward glance thirteen years ago, believing Susanna had banished him from Circle Star. Now a man of twenty-eight, he has no interest in coming to her aid. Will he bury his bitterness, or leave Susanna on the mercy of the

ruthless neighbor Burt Hartman, who covets the ranch and will stop at nothing—including rape and murder.

Handcuffs and Lace

Resplendence Publishing's Erotic Romance Line of Law Enforcement Themed Stories

***What the Cuff?* By Celia Kyle**

God really should have reconsidered making werewolves. That, or Lyssa needed to get better taste in men and stay away from those with wandering eyes—and other things. Drunk as a wolf, she stumbles to her best friend's house to sleep off her whiskey induced haze and wakes to...*cuffs*?

Caleb sees his chance and takes it. His buddies on the force ribbed him but good for buying silver plated cuffs. But with a werewolf in his bed, the woman he's yearned for since they were teens, he wasn't taking any chances. Lyssa was his. She just didn't know it yet.

***Ticket Me More* by Tia Fanning**

Hailed by the bridal flower world as an artistic genius, Meli works long nights making bouquets for women lucky enough to find love, while she herself lives a life of solitude. She yearns to share her heart and body with someone other than Bob, her *Battery Operated Boyfriend*, but acute shyness keeps her from engaging the "living" world.

However, Meli's quiet and predictable existence takes an unexpected turn when she is pulled over and ticketed by the most gorgeous cop she has ever encountered—Officer Michael Johnson. Though he doesn't seem to notice her as anything more than a traffic violation, Meli makes plans to overcome her timid nature and seize the police officer's attention...using any speed necessary.

***Handcuffs and Lies* by Bronwyn Green**

Sometimes promises to friends are the hardest to keep. Undercover police officer, Michael Tanner, promised his dying partner that he'd take care of the man's little sister. Trouble is, after her brother's death, Doctor Tori Spinelli wants nothing to do with Michael—or any other cop for that matter.

Tori has always fought against overprotective men and deception. Forced into protective custody with Michael, she's now faced with both in the same package. Despite their differences, Tori falls in love with him, but how can she trust a man who lies for a living?

***Search Me Baby, One More Time* by Melinda Barron**

Wren Thornberry's life isn't going according to plan. She let her father talk her out of marrying Bryan Stockard, the man she loves, and moved halfway around the world. Now she's back home in Texas, babysitting her grandmother while grandma and her boy-toy work through their list of sexual exploits, making themselves the talk of the town.

But what Wren doesn't know is that things in her hometown are about to heat up even more, and it will have nothing to do with her grandmother. It seems that Bryan Stockard is still around, he wants to get back into Wren's life—by any means necessary, and now he has just the tools to do it: A police uniform, handcuffs, and the authority to make Wren *assume the position*.

***Cuff Me Lacy* by Demi Alex**

Three months is way too long to wait for some simple, low-down, straight forward sex. It's not like Officer Chrissie Hansen is asking for prince charming to offer her the love of a lifetime. All she wants is a good orgasm that she doesn't have to work for alone.

At least with "The Bull" she knows what to expect. But when Patrick MacKlick returns to her life and tempts her with new options, she discovers that lace can imprison a heart better than handcuffs can.

***Going Commando* by Catherine Chernow**

Bounty hunter Shyra Lawrence listens to her favorite radio station one morning where the DJ's are discussing "going commando" —*a.k.a* wearing no undies. Captivated by their conversation, she decides to shed her panties in favor of the freedom that wearing no underwear brings.

Enthusiastic, Shyra sends an email to her best friend, Donna, detailing the delights of panty-freedom, but unbeknownst to Shyra, she's hit the send key...to the wrong email addy!

When Derek Grayson opens his emails that morning, he discovers that his #1 employee and top bounty hunter has sent him an erotic, enticing message about going commando. Derek has always been polite, professional, and so damned attracted to Shyra that it's almost painful. Working day in and day out with voluptuous woman has sent Derek's hormones into overdrive on more than one occasion.

Now, Shyra's shed her panties and Derek's got all he can do to contain his lust when she announces that she's... GOING COMMANDO.

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