

Charla's Shadow

By Robin Smith

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DEDICATION

This book could not have been written without the help of many people, including, but certainly not limited to, my sisters-slash-editors, Maren and Laura; my father, who provided me with the tour through his opal-mining and jewelry-making equipment that was the inspiration for much of this book; and my long-suffering veterinarian, who answered a lot of truly bizarre questions at some really odd hours.

This book is for Gus and for Cerberus, who came together in my mind to make my hero. There are still a lot of good dogs in the world, but there are two less than there were.

Chapter One

Charla Savelle was sitting at her worktable midway through a Wednesday morning when her life changed. She didn't know it yet. She continued to work, her hands rising and falling as steady as a matched pair of metronomes as they went about their appointed tasks with an efficiency that was almost a separation of self. The left worked the sponge that kept the motor cool and the blades wet, while the right hand had the unenviable task of directing the machinery itself. She conducted their pace with her own measured breath, pulling air in deep, slow drags through the thick cotton mask and exhaling with a little cough to shake the dust free.

The back room where she made her living was brightly lit, but what she saw came through a diffused haze of grit on goggles; she did not need her eyes for her work anyway. She didn't need her ears either--the grinder was loud and shrill as a mutant wasp in a murderous rage--she wore earplugs to soften external sounds, and ran her mind through a mental tape deck of classical piano to cover up any audible residue. All she needed was her hands, and her hands were happy, her hands whistled while they worked. Her hands knew their job and Charla was a woman at peace with the world.

It was time for a Diet Coke break.

Charla switched off the grinder and stretched expansively, savoring the pull of muscle and rush of blood for as long as possible, then hopped off her high chair and uncorked her ears. She started to remove the stone for close examination before turning, and then realized she could still hear a faint grinding sound.

She put the pebble in her hands down carefully in the jade bowl provided for half-worked materials and turned around, holding her breath.

The door to the hallway was closed, but she could still hear something. A rasping, almost. Something abrasive anyway, but not consistent; the sound came and went irregularly, never very loud.

Charla pulled her mask down and pushed her goggles up, looking hugely around the workroom as though baring her face could somehow help her locate and identify the source of the sound. It didn't, of course, and neither did her worktable transform itself into a bank of security monitors, although she gave it a hopeful glance. She wanted

to entertain the notion of mice in the walls, but the sound, although soft, was too heavy and the way that it came and went left Charla with the impression of an intelligence impossible to imagine coming from rodents.

There it was again--a slow drag, faintly coarse but muffled, this time with the creak of floorboards. Was it in the house? She couldn't tell.

Charla stood motionless, feeling her heart hammering at her ribs, actually clutching a little at her throat just like a bad actress in a B-movie. After a minute or an hour of frozen listening, she picked up a chunk of heavy lapis rough to use as a weapon and edged toward the door.

Her slippered feet made no sound as she moved out into the hallway, raising her rock to the level of her shoulder as her eyes jumped frantically from shadow to shadow in search of the sound. Her house was so dark in the mornings...she'd never noticed before....

But the house seemed empty, and when the faint shifting came again, she turned into it and found herself looking down the hall at the front door. The sheer curtains that covered the long windows that flanked it fluttered in the warm breeze spun out by the heat register, but she could see through them pretty well and she saw only her own empty porch, and five miles of wooded nothing beyond. Had she imagined it? She couldn't have!

Scrrape. A soft thud. A low moan.

The highway was out there somewhere, unseen past the fields and the forest. Could some accident have happened, some injured person crawling all this way only to collapse on Charla's doorstep? It didn't seem likely, but the only alternative Charla could think of was a ghost, and that was hardly a more plausible explanation. She edged a little closer to the door, acutely conscious for the first time of how isolated she was out here, how starkly alone.

She paused at the door, gripping her rock tightly, and pressed her ear against the smooth, cold wood. She couldn't hear anything now but her own heartbeat. She looked at the curtains--she could lean six inches to one side and look out, see for sure--but she didn't move. She didn't want to reveal herself to anyone on the other side. If she did this, she wanted to have the element of surprise.

Thud.

Charla's hand clenched on the doorknob and she took one last breath to steel herself against confrontation. Then she wrenched the door open, raising her rock and sucking in a scream even though it didn't seem to be required.

She looked down, and almost screamed anyway.

There was something dark, something HUGE, spread out virtually all over her porch, and it had a head, and that head lifted and looked up at her. She could see only one eye beneath the bush of black fur that covered it, and its gaze was thoughtful and calmly inquiring.

Then it stood up, and Charla's crude choice of weapon dropped from her frozen hand. The creature's head came right to the level of her breasts. Each wide front paw seemed easily the size of her own feet, with at least an inch of additional length in the form of claws. She thought it was a bear. Even after the long, plumed tail raised and wagged, she thought it was a bear.

They looked at each other for what seemed an eternity as Charla tried to grapple with the reality of this animal. Eventually, it decided to continue introductions in the comfort of a heated home; it nudged her gently aside and went on in.

Charla spun, staring, and watched the beast pad heavily across the foyer and into the parlor. It moved utterly without uncertainty, as if it had lived here for years.

It hadn't growled at her, she realized, and thought that must be a good sign. Its eyes had been bright and clear, its wide jaws free of foam. That was about the limit of her knowledge of animal ailments, however. So it didn't look rabid, so what? It could still eat her up and hardly even have to chew.

But it was cold, and the creature wasn't coming back out of the parlor. Charla closed the front door and went after it.

It was lying on the couch--the whole couch--and it didn't look up when she entered, although it did wag its tail once. It looked exhausted. It also looked filthy, all matted and mud-streaked fur, with hanging drops of baked-hard mud dangling from its underbelly, tail, and all four armpits.

It was a dog, she realized. It had to be a dog. A big dog, but just a dog.

"Um...come here, boy," Charla said timidly.

The dog thumped its tail twice and did not move.

She inched toward the couch, holding out one hand and trying very hard not to think of it as "snack-size" when measured against the dog's massive wedge of a head. "Come on, boy," she said again, louder this time.

The dog shut its eyes and feigned sleep.

She reached him, still holding her hand outstretched, but the dog did not raise its head or look at her. After a second or two, she eased her fingers right up to its nose.

It grumbled, pushed out a huge expanse of black and pink tongue, and slimed her whole hand.

Charla jumped back with a cry of child-like disgust, wiping herself exuberantly dry on her shirtfront, an act that served only to cover her drool-slick hand with rock dust.

The dog didn't move.

A few more seconds went by. Charla snuck a little closer, reached out, and tentatively patted the top of its head.

Its fur was gritty to the touch, but underneath the debris of dirt and pine needles, it had an undercoat as soft and thick as down. She had to work to get her fingers through it, and once she had, she thought the skin felt hot. She wondered if it were sick after all.

At last, it occurred to her that the dog hadn't hatched out of an egg on her front porch. Someone was missing him--maybe even walking around in her sprawling backyard, just as lost and dirty as the dog.

Charla left the animal sleeping on her couch and got her coat from the closet. She stepped into her boots and went outside. The dog's trail was obvious, its massive tracks as stark in the stale snow as cigarette burns in linen. Charla started walking.

Evidently, the dog had circled around from the back of the house before ascending to the porch, and it had done a lot of zig-zagging from tree to shrub to fencepost on its way from the stables and tack sheds, unused now for at least four years, but still smelling of manure and hay. It seemed to her from the impression of the tracks that the dog had spent a little time in the stable, perhaps sleeping in the close corner on the low stack of ancient, unraveled burlap before it thought itself rested enough to move on. The tracks that walked up to the stables were considerably less steady than those that went to the house.

Charla followed the trail of slushy paw prints, her legs quickly tiring as she slogged through the crust of heavy snow and the tangled mat of dead and frozen grass beneath. She never paid much attention to the fields, but she hadn't realized how overgrown they'd become, to still catch at her legs like this in the dead of winter. Likewise, the blackberry bushes at the back borders had overrun the fence itself to an appalling degree. When spring rolled around, she had to get someone out here to take care of it.

The dog had evidently struggled through the thorns, but Charla had to find an easier crossing, and then come back, her eyes sweeping over the ground until she found the dog's tracks again. The forest was sparse here, mostly maples and oak, but the snow was much thinner, and the going was easier. She walked comfortably, breathing into her cupped hands to keep them warm, in what seemed to her to be an arrow-straight line through the trees, stopping when she came to the banks of Murder Creek.

The creek (ridiculous to call it that, considering the size of it) was just as pretty as a postcard as it cut through the forest. Its beauty and frozen stillness was somehow enhanced by the water that poured down the center--white foam spitting and gurgling to itself as it passed the shards of thinning ice that reached from each bank. The water seemed to move with deceptive slowness and grace, but when Charla scraped her boot across the snow, she uncovered the true creek, with ribbons of rapids unspooling silently just below the thin veneer of treacherous ice.

Charla shaded her eyes against the blinding glint of sun on ice, and easily picked out the muddy patches that marked the dog's trek over the water. If she squinted, she could even see dark dots she believed were the dog's paw prints on the far bank. It had come over the ice as far as it could, swam the twenty feet or so in the middle where the current kept the creek from freezing, and the current must have been harsh, because its tracks came up almost fifty feet down from where they'd gone in. No wonder the dog was so tired.

In all this time, the only sounds had been the crunch of her own boots. No one had come across the water but the dog, and no one was on the far side calling him back. Charla stood for a few minutes beside the mostly-frozen water, and then

headed back to the house.

The dog was still on her couch, now on its side with its head shoved almost completely beneath the cushion. It wagged its tail when she walked by, but only twice, and the effort seemed to exhaust it further. Its side heaved with shaky breaths, and finally the dog began to relax again, sinking into the cushions as though rooting itself and gradually sprawling until it had comfortably overhung both armrests.

It looked so tired. She knew she'd really ought to be doing something about it, but she hated to disturb it. Still...maybe she should get in touch with the appropriate authorities now and just tell them not to come for a few hours.

Of course, this led to the question of just who the appropriate authorities were. Charla got the phone book from the kitchen and sat there, staring at it as she tried to think of who to call. Under Animal Shelters, she found the nearest branch of the Humane Society, in Salem, and dialed. They were closed, but invited her to call back the next day during proper business hours. There was a shelter in the opposite direction, about forty miles over and south, advertising itself as no-kill and open seven days a week, so she dialed.

A harried but pleasant sounding female voice came on, and Charla began to explain about the animal that had invited itself into her morning so unexpectedly.

"Are you saying you want to surrender your dog?" the woman interrupted.

"It isn't my dog. It just walked in."

"So it's a stray?"

"Or it's lost. It looks lost. It's too relaxed not to have an owner," Charla added, thinking of the easy way the dog had sprawled itself on her couch.

"Well, I'll take a description in case the owners show up, but you should know that the dog was probably abandoned deliberately. What does he look like?"

Charla peered back into the parlor. She could just see the top of one ear and the long plume of its tail. "It's mostly black, I think, but it's hard to tell because it's so dirty. It's got, uh, white on one of its paws and it's sort of brown or rusty on its neck. It's got orange eyes. One of them is orange, anyway. I can't see the other one."

"Do you know what breed it is?" the woman asked.

"No. I don't really know dogs."

"Well, how big is it?"

"Big," Charla said immediately. "Very big. At least six feet long, because it's bigger than the couch and that's what it's lying on."

A long silence followed that. "All right," the woman said at last. "Okay. Well, we'll give you a call if someone asks for him."

Charla backed up until she was sitting at the table again, staring in disbelief at the wall since the woman wasn't here to face her. "Aren't you going to come and get him?"

"Ma'am, there simply aren't any kennels available right now, and I'm sorry, but even if there were, we just don't accept animals of the sort you're describing. Strays are too unpredictable to adopt out, and any large breed requires more maintenance than we can afford to give him."

"But what am I supposed to do with him?" Charla asked, feeling a little helpless and adrift. She could see the corner of the couch from here, and at the sound of her distress, the dog finally raised its head and looked sharply around, as though concerned.

"You can surrender him to the Humane Society in Salem, although I don't think they're open today." There was a short pause, and then a sigh. "And to be honest, you should know that their policies are very much like ours. They'll take the dog...but they'll probably euthanize it within three days if it hasn't been claimed."

Another silence, this one on Charla's end.

"Oh," she said finally.

"You have to understand," the woman continued, not unkindly. "The budget we have is laughable. We depend on donations for our basic supplies, and volunteers for maintenance of the kennels and record-keeping. Even then, we operate at a loss much of the time. Adoption fees only cover a fraction of each animal's medical needs. We just don't have the resources for an animal that size. No one does."

"Well...what am I supposed to do?"

"I can call the shelters and let them know you've got the dog, so if anyone asks for him here...." The woman let that trail off to show the unlikelihood of that scenario. "And you can place an ad in the paper, perhaps hang some fliers in the area where you found the dog. You can call the police and ask for Animal Control to come and get the dog, but

they'll just take him to the shelter."

Charla glanced out the window at miles of nothing and snow, wondering vaguely where to hang a flier. "Okay."

The woman sighed again, but "Good luck," was all she said before hanging up.

The dog was still looking at her, and still with that eerily human expression of concern.

"It's okay," she told it. "You can stay here for a few days...until your owner comes."

The dog didn't seem to be relieved by her assurance, but it finally lowered its head. Charla supposed she'd ought to feed it.

She got up from the table and started looking through her cupboards for something dog-friendly. She was a little lost on the subject of canine nutrition, but deduced that it couldn't be all that different from her own, except maybe with less emphasis on fruits and veggies. Using that as kind of a guideline, Charla made the dog a tuna fish sandwich, and then a fried egg sandwich in case the dog didn't like tuna. She had some honey mustard and some creamy horseradish for the egg, and relish and grated cheese for the tuna, and hummed a little as she arranged them on a plate. She took this, along with a bowl of water, and them into the parlor.

"Hey, dog," she said.

Thump, thump, went the tail.

Charla set the two dishes on the coffee table, backed up, and hunkered down to watch and see if it ate anything.

After a few moments, the dog raised its head to sniff the offering. It whined, dropped back onto the cushion, and continued to ignore her.

Several more minutes crawled by. The clock in the hallway tolled the hour and Charla realized a rather large chunk of her morning was now irretrievably gone. Might as well go back to work.

She picked up the lapis rough from the front foyer and returned to her workroom. The rock went on the shelf and Charla sat back down and stared at the table. Everything was still where she left it, just as though a dog had never walked into her house and lain down on her sofa. After a while, she lowered her goggles, raised her mask, and turned on the grinder.

At a quarter to five, Charla raised her head,

arched her aching back, and decided she was done for the day. She stripped on the way to the bathroom, had a good soak in a hot bath, and padded naked down the hall to the kitchen for a snack. She saw the tuna can and eggshells on the counter and only then remembered the dog.

Absurdly, the first thing she did was to jog back to the bedroom for a robe.

The dog was still on the couch. It had drunk the water, stripped its tuna sandwich of filling and eaten the egg and the slice of bread with the mustard on it, but otherwise had not moved.

"C'mere, dog," she said.

It raised its head over the arm of the sofa, gave her request some thought, and got up.

The dog was even bigger than she remembered, and its leisurely stretch as it slid off the couch only emphasized its mass. The mud balls had dried; they clacked together as the dog came towards her, wagging its tail and looking tired. Charla was afraid to look at the couch too closely. She'd paid almost two thousand dollars for it.

She moved into the foyer to open the front door and the dog stopped right there and gave her a hard, suspicious look.

Charla stepped out onto the porch in a show of good faith and spread her empty hands to show her good intentions. The dog followed, clearly not convinced.

Only after Charla got all the way down onto the snowy lawn did the dog condescend to move out to the bushes. It nosed around for several long minutes, checking often to make sure Charla was still well away from the house, and finally slipped around the hedgerow. She heard its heavy snuffling and grumbling, then silence, then a sharp whine and another, and finally a yipe right before it came trotting back. The dog shot up the stairs and into the house, head and tail down and eyes averted as though embarrassed.

Charla looked after him, frowning, and then went to see if she could find what had hurt it. She expected to find a broken bottle or thorns, a sharp rock, maybe. She saw a few drops of blood in the snow, but nothing that could have caused it.

When she went back into the house, the dog was again on the couch, and with every breath it took, it whined a little. Charla moved the coffee table out of the way and knelt beside the sofa, taking careful hold of each of the dog's paws in

turn, hunting for the boo-boo she was sure it had. She found a scab on its leg and a long cut on its neck, but both seemed to be healing and neither was openly bleeding. And there was no blood on the carpet, she saw. No blood in any of its paw prints on the porch....

Charla lifted its back leg, exposing its underside, and frowned. The dog's belly was almost bare of fur and swollen taut--red and shiny as with sweat, although dry to her careful touch. She put the barest amount of pressure beneath her fingers and the dog flinched and yelped, tugging its leg out of her grip and looking at her reproachfully. She stroked its head, thinking, and finally stood up and went back to the phone book in the kitchen.

She looked up Veterinarians.

Chapter Two

Milo Bickleman was right in the middle of convincing a fifteen-year old tabby named Mrs. Tate that a thermometer was her friend when his receptionist, Peggy-Do, stuck her spiky purple head around the corner and said, "Can you stay late?"

Peggy-Do was only her nickname, really. It was short for an even longer nickname, Peggy-Do-Dat. As in, Peggy do dis, Peggy do dat, poor little Peggy work all damn day. Although after two years as Milo's sole assistant, he had come secretly to believe that Peggy-Do was actually short for Peggy-Don't-Do-Dat. As in, mop up after nervous doggie? No, man, Peggy don't do dat. As in, drive two blocks to the McDonalds and pick up some sandwiches for lunch because the doc's up to his elbows in a Rottweiler? No, man, Peggy don't do dat, either.

Sometimes Milo found himself wondering whether five minutes with his belt, ten minutes in the corner, and five more minutes over his lap might give Peggy-Do the motivation to more exactly mirror her chosen nomenclature. Fortunately, he still had the whole Trisha-episode fresh enough in his mind to keep him from ever finding out.

And who knew, maybe Peggy would grow into her name on her own. She was only nineteen, and nineteen had a way of turning out okay once it washed the purple dye and egg whites out of its hair and took an accounting course. But in the meantime, if Peggy-Do was asking him to work late, odds were good it was only because she thought she'd have to if he didn't, and in the words of the Master, no, man, Peggy don't do dat.

"Can you?" Peggy asked, as these pleasant little thoughts unscrolled through Milo's mind. "I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

"What's up?" Milo extracted two claws from his lower lip with one hand and tried to coax Mrs. Tate back into her carrier. Mrs. Tate was not amused.

"There's some lady on the phone who says her dog is sick or something. She says it's an emergency."

There was an emergency clinic in Albany, and two in Salem, but it was considerably more expensive to treat an animal there and there were very few people whose scruples were such that they'd rather drive thirty miles out of the way and pay three times as much when they could just stay

home and inconvenience the local vet. It was on the tip of Milo's tongue to cry off and let Peggy-Do do what she did best, meaning say no, but in the end, he only sighed and shrugged.

"What the hell," he mumbled. "Tell her to come on in, then. We'll both work late."

Peggy-Do gave her patented Peggy-Don't snort. "Um, doc, it's Friday. And like most carbon-based life forms, I have a date. So the question is, can YOU work late, because--"

"I know, I know. Peggy don't do dat."

"You got it."

Milo recorded the cat's perfectly normal temperature in her file and tossed a liver snap through the carrier's wire door. Mrs. Tate angrily smacked the tasty treat back out and hissed at him. "Sure, Peg," Milo said, popping the liver snap back into the treat jar. "I'll be here. Give Mr. Rasmaussen a call and tell him his perfect little sweetheart is on her feet and ready to go home."

"Perfect little sweetheart," Peggy-Do echoed, giving the cat a mistrustful glare. "Yeah, right. Rotten little fleabag. I tell you what, I ain't carrying that miserable monster out to the guy's car unless it's wearing one of those Hannibal Lecter get-ups. Uh-uh. Peggy don't do DAT!" She stalked off in a righteous huff, and Milo took a moment to resign himself mentally to carrying Mrs. Tate out to her elderly owner's car.

Honestly, when he thought about all those years at Tufts University and again at the Bel-Ray Institute, and all so that he could come out to the edge of Nowhere, Oregon...well, sometimes it just filled a man's heart with a glowing lack of accomplishment. Sometimes he really had to work at remembering just why he felt like he had to come all the way out here in the first place, leaving his family and friends half a continent away.

There was a time when he'd actually thought that having his own practice, however small it may be, would somehow be more fulfilling than working as some nameless vet in a large office, borrowing prestige from the reputation of the higher-ups instead of earning his own merit. At that time, fresh out of college, Oregon had seemed like a dream come true--cheap land, pleasant scenery, no sales tax--but of course, that was all before he realized how many other starving young veterinarians had the same idea.

In Poho, for instance, where there were just

under six hundred human souls claiming residence, there were four veterinarians, and one of them had been old Doc Suggs, who was also the town's general physician and obstetrician, as well as an official deputy and coroner. Six months after hanging out his shingle, Milo Bickleman had yet to see a single client and had been rapidly reaching the end of his financial tether. And then, a wonderful thing had happened.

Doc Suggs had shown up on his office step in the middle of day, holding a ten-year-old Irish Setter bitch in his tattooed arms, and looking grim. "Macy boy done hit her with a car," he'd snarled when Milo opened the door. He hadn't bothered with an introduction and he hadn't needed to.

Milo had rushed them both into the back room to set up the X-ray, and with the dog muzzled, asked, "Do you know who she belongs to?"

"She's mine," Doc Suggs had said. His huge hands remained pressing lightly on the dog's head and shoulders to keep her flat while the X-ray ran, but one sausage-sized thumb rubbed steadily at the base of the dog's ear. "Name's Ember," he'd continued, and in answer to Milo's unspoken question, "I don't work on 'em myself when they're bad hurt. Can't be objective. You do what you can for her. You treat her like she was my daughter, is how you treat her. You need to talk to me, call the sheriff."

And then Doc Suggs had bent down and pressed a kiss on the setter's forehead, and then walked away without a second glance back.

Ember turned out to have three broken ribs and a fractured pelvis, as well as some internal swelling and bleeding. Her right lung had needed to be drained twice before she was stable enough for surgery. Milo spent ten hours working on her, and another two just sitting next to her in her recovery kennel, until he was sure she was going to be all right. When he'd finally called the Doc, it was nearly two in the morning, and the older man had picked up on the first ring.

When Ember went home the next day, sporting a nifty new wheelchair cobbled together from an office chair and one of Milo's old T-shirts, Doc Suggs had given him a handshake and a long, speculative look, but only grunted a word of thanks along with paying his bill. Three days later, the empty wheelchair was waiting on the office step with a note pinned to it explaining that Ember was doing

fine and her new chair had come in. And five weeks after that, Doc Suggs had retired from the veterinarian business altogether and given a blanket referral to all his clients, directing them to Milo's door.

Milo had invested in more equipment, hired his irreplaceable assistant, and built on another room to use for a surgery. He saw, on average, five animals in-office and at least one emergency house call each week. Four times a year, he made a circuit out to the local farms for livestock checks. He was not insanely well off, but at least he was comfortable and the town had taken to him. It was his own practice, with his own name on the business cards, and it was steady, mostly rewarding work. The other day, picking up an early dinner at Big Sally's Diner, he'd heard someone hail him as 'Doc' Bickleman. He was beginning to feel as though, after six years living in Poho, he'd finally arrived.

But back in the here and now, Mrs. Tate suddenly took it upon herself to show her own brand of welcome. She hooked one paw out through the wire door of her carrier and took off a strip of skin from his cuff all the way to the quick of his index finger, flattening her ears and purring when Milo yelped.

They glared at each other, cat and human, while Milo reflected on the paradox that even though a business could be moderately profitable, it wasn't necessarily all giggles all the time. Then Mr. Rasmaussen's querulous voice was calling from the other room, and Milo had to pick the carrier up (an act which brought many of his most favorite body parts within easy claw reach, thanks to all the damn air holes and the fact that there was no top-handle on the damn thing) and struggled the cat out for a happy reunion.

Once he saw Mr. Rasmaussen to his car and had Mrs. Tate comfortably settled on the floor where she couldn't slide around, Milo gave the retreating taillights of Peggy-Do's Kia a wave goodbye and went on in to await his emergency call. To entertain himself in the meantime, he started pulling the thicker patient files and updating them onto clean sheets. This action eventually carried him into the back room, where he became distracted by inventory. Checking the inventory took him into the supply closet, which was where he happened to be when he heard, muffled by the walls between them, a woman's voice calling,

"Hello?"

By the sound of it, she'd been calling for some time. Milo threw the clipboard holding the inventory sheets onto a shelf, knocked over half a dozen bottles of assorted medications, bent to collect them and hip-checked a broom, which fell over with a clatter loud enough to cause him to straighten up fast and whack his head a damned good one on the underside of the shelf, which, of course, knocked the shelf entirely off its pins and sent everything spilling in a heap to the floor of the closet. The shelf itself landed on Milo's foot.

"It's okay!" he called, gritting his teeth against the swears hammering to be let out. "I'm here! I'm coming out. Hang on!" He kicked everything into the closet and closed the door, knowing that he'd forget all this by tomorrow to the effect that he would open it up in search of some cotton swabs and be buried in an avalanche of Fibber McGee proportions.

"I'm coming," he called again, sliding through the tiny examination room. One had to close the door to the back in order to open the door to the front. The other exam room was bigger, but of course, it didn't open on the back room. What a maze. If he had it to do all over....

But the rest of that thought was utterly eclipsed when Milo Bickleman opened the door and saw his new client.

She'd been leaning through the reception window, no doubt trying to find someone who worked in the building, and her denim jeans cupped a perfect, heart-shaped bottom that was probably enough on its own to bring Milo's heart leaping to his throat. But when she heard the door open, she dropped back and turned, and it was just like you see in the movies, where time slows down and everything in the background slides out of focus and all you can see is that hair, that face, those lips, those eyes.

'She's gorgeous,' Milo thought, stunned. He wanted to say something, or failing that, at least close his mouth or blink or anything to avoid looking too much like an enormous, hairy frog, but his mind wouldn't let him. 'Are you insane? You'll blow it!' his mind shrieked, and his mind was right. His mind was always right about women. And so, Milo was powerless to do anything but stand in the doorway and be smitten.

Charla's first thought on seeing the veterinarian was 'He's gorgeous,' and that feeling carried with it a blush of mingled heat and hopelessness because she knew, she just KNEW she was going to blow it. She had no skill at this sort of thing, these little dances of courtship, and the veterinarian was obviously a man of the world, unlikely to be impressed by a half-hearted attempt.

She raced for something suave to say, something to spark his interest long enough to impress him with her real talents, but the sheer masculine force of him kept intruding, turning her mind to mush and filling it instead with woeful repetitions of, 'He's gorgeous, he's gorgeous...'

And he was. Six feet at least, an inch or two more even, and the overall size of him was reinforced by a barrel chest and comfortable solidity about the mid-section. His hair was long and brown and wavy, the sort that any girl would be crying-jealous over, and even tied back as it was, it was hard not to reach up and comb it with her fingers. He had a beard, like an overgrown soul-patch, growing just on his upper lip and chin, with two natural stripes of blonde growing through it in perfect symmetry. In conservative Poho, the effect should have seemed hippie-ish and strange, but instead it made her think dazedly of druids, and it felt just right.

He came towards her half a step, moving with a bear's power and heavy grace, and stopped again, not just filling the doorway now, but blocking it completely from sight. There was too much of him to stare at, too much to admire. His arms, his legs, his neck--all massive, manly appendages worthy of the rest of him. And his hands--great, stony blocks of thick fingers and slab-like palms, capable of cupping her whole cheek in tenderness or paddling inescapably across her entire bottom.

Charla almost swooned as that last thought flared and echoed in her mind. His hands were hands built for spanking, entirely built for it, for HER. She could feel a ghostly impression of heat throbbing over her bottom, as though the blush rising across her face had dropped and settled in her other cheeks.

He was looking at her oddly, and Charla realized he must have asked a question, but she couldn't remember what it was. Not without a sense of doomed desperation, she blurted out her name.

The vet looked startled, then confused, so clearly that wasn't it. He must have asked about the dog, instead.

The dog.

Charla's hormones instantly crashed and froze over. She was here with a beast in pain and now was not the time to make google-eyes at its healer. Later, perhaps, but not now. She looked down to see if the dog had suffered during her moment of weakness and found it gazing up at her with a dog's eerily-knowing smile.

"I'm sorry," the vet rumbled, and Charla closed her eyes against the shiver that tried to creep through her at the deep, bass timbre of it. So powerful, so commanding.... "I should have introduced myself. I'm Dr. Milo, er, Dr. Bickleman. Milo Bickleman. The doctor," he finished, then opened his mouth, closed it, and looked uncomfortable.

Damn. He'd noticed her staring and now he was freaked out. So much for later.

"And who have we got here?" Dr. Milo continued, in a bluff and hearty 'hail-dog-well-met' tone of voice.

The dog turned its ironic smile off Charla and looked the man over. It didn't look impressed.

"This is Dog," Charla said.

"Original." Milo gingerly peeled back the animal's lips and examined the eyes and ears.

"Well, it's short, you understand."

"For?"

"Dog who I do not own and to whom I am not becoming attached."

"Ah ha." The vet leaned through the reception window and picked up a clipboard and a few sheets of paper. He scribbled importantly for a while in silence, and finally said, "What seems to be bothering Dog today?"

Charla and the dog exchanged a glance, one which turned into a double-take on Charla's part, when she realized who her glancing partner had been. "Well," she said, somewhat slow to recover. "I don't know. But I'm sure it's serious."

"Okay." Milo scratched out a few more notes, and moved out of the doorway. "Why don't you take him on through to the back--you'll have to close this door before you open the other one--and I'll be there in a sec, and we'll give Dog a looking-over."

The dog grumbled to itself and stalked toward

the indicated door, so Charla nodded her agreement (not, she supposed, that her agreement was strictly necessary) and followed him. The elf-sized room, once she and the dog were squeezed inside, was rendered positively claustrophobic during the door-closing, and it was not without a sense of relief that they finally spilled out into the back room.

Charla had never had occasion to visit the back of an animal hospital, but even as unprepared as she was, she didn't expect something like this. She supposed she had imagined a more...well, hospitally appearance. This place looked more like a warehouse, or a factory, or something. There were racks full of cat and dog food, in four bag sizes and two can sizes, and beside that, a hip-high stack of cardboard boxes with masking-tape labels: Hamster and Sm., Iguana/Turtle, Large Bird, Sm. Bird. Along one side of the square room beyond were kennels of various sizes, arranged almost floor to ceiling. There were two stainless steel sinks and what looked for all the world like a free-standing shower for good measure, all liberally accented with hand soap dispensers, wall-mounted sanitizers, and paper and cloth towels. Machines and equipment that defied identification were pushed to one side, clearing an easy path to the kennels but blocking access to another room that Charla could only glimpse through a large, darkened window.

Keeping one hand on the dog's head in case it needed her reassurance, Charla tried to find a chink in the stacked machinery large enough to allow her some clue as to the dark room's purpose. There was a sign off to one side of the door, and by craning her neck and using the reflective sides of the equipment to their full advantage, she was able to make out 'Masks Required Beyond This Point'.

"O.R.," Milo rumbled from just behind her, and Charla had to suppress a jump and turn around without looking as though she'd been caught doing something forbidden. "I don't need it that often, but it's nice to have it around. Come on over here, Dog. Let's get you up on the scales."

Charla didn't see anything that even remotely looked like scales, but she aimed the dog at the high-backed steel platform that Milo was indicating and walked over. It was only an inch or two off the floor and she didn't see a needle or readout or anything, but this had to be the place because Milo didn't correct her.

The dog paused with one paw on the platform

and gave Milo another eyeing-over. It gave no sign that it intended to finish ascending at any point in the near future. The vet took advantage of its hesitation by making a few more notes, out loud this time, as though trying to assure the dog of his professional interest.

"Breed...large, medium-hair, unknown. Black. Sex?" he asked, raising an eyebrow at Charla.

'Oh, yes please,' she thought, and her face crawled with heat. "I don't know."

"You don't know?"

She lifted her chin slightly. "I was too much of a lady to look, and the dog was too dignified to offer."

Milo's face underwent a curious hollow-buckling effect, but he did not laugh out loud. Instead, he reached down and lifted the dog's tail.

The dog promptly reached back, very casually, and closed its mighty jaws gently around the vet's wrist. They looked at each other, and Milo let go. So did the dog, and they both stepped away.

"Male," said Milo, picking up his pen. "Neutered."

"Oh!" Charla was a little bewildered by the dismay that bloomed up through her chest at hearing that. "So he does have an owner, after all."

"Most likely. Some counties around here do have a program where they pick up strays, spay and neuter, and then release them again, but I'm thinking our boy here definitely had an owner at one time. You can tell he's been at the vet's before. Watch. Scales!" he commanded, pointed at the platform.

The dog's ears, which had been at full attention for most of the conversation, very slowly rotated back and flat. Deliberately, one might even say insultingly, the dog's eyes tracked down all the way to Milo's shoes and back up again. He sat down, and then lay down (not without a breathy whine), and finally crossed one paw over the other and glared at Milo.

Now it was Charla's turn to bite down on the laughter, which she did only with great effort.

"Would you like a muzzle?" Milo asked politely, narrowing his eyes at the dog.

The dog cocked one eye back at him, seeming to ask, just as politely, 'Would you like a tibia?'

"Come on," Charla heard herself say, and she bent to pat the dog's haunches. "We're doing this for you, you know. Please, get on the scales."

The dog scowled, but stood up and grudgingly

climbed aboard.

Milo pushed a button on the side of the machine and the platform promptly began to rise. Charla stepped back, but the dog only lay down, his expression making it very clear to all concerned that his good nature was being sorely tested today.

Once the dog was roughly three feet off the floor (a height that put his head comfortably on a level with Milo's as long as he didn't stand up), the platform stopped moving. The readout must have been on Milo's side, because the vet's eyes stayed fixed on something back there as he said, "One eighty-two. Sha-bang. That's a big boy." He stepped around to the front of the scales and ran his hands carefully down the dog's body. "A big boy in a bad way. Okay, Dog. Listen close."

The dog raised his head and stared at Milo.

"I need to check you out, and if I do one or two things that strike you as a trifle undignified, you'll just have to bear with me and believe that I'm doing them for your own good. And in the event that you forget, I'm going to ask you to wear one of these." Milo leaned to one side to open a drawer and came up with a blue scrap of nylon with Velcro straps.

The dog looked distinctly mutinous.

"It's okay," Charla said, reaching around Milo's arm to stroke the dog's neck and win back a part of his attention. "One time, I was skiing and I broke my leg. I knew the doctor was just trying to help by setting it, but I socked him in the jaw anyway. Pain makes you do things you regret."

The dog looked away, and a glimpse of fang showed briefly, giving him the illusion of reluctant consideration. Milo took the opportunity of distraction to full advantage and slipped the muzzle over the dog's jaws, fastening it swiftly and snugly. The dog sighed and rested his dark eyes on Charla.

"Such a brave boy," Charla murmured, slipping one arm around the dog's shaggy shoulders and rubbing at his muscled chest with her other hand. "You're being so understanding about all this."

Milo found himself fussing unnecessarily with the proper alignment of Dog's chart on the countertop, watching Charla's hand--so pale against all that black fur--rubbing comfort into Dog's tense body. He could actually feel a crawling sort of heat on his own chest, a kind of sympathy response to Charla's comforting massage. Somewhat embarrassed by the depth and scope of his attraction, Milo closed his

eyes until he was absolutely certain he could be a doctor again.

Chapter Three

Milo had worked with strays before. Rural communities like Poho, bordered by recreational wilderness and highways, saw more than their share of lost and abandoned animals, and thanks to Dog Suggs's sterling opinion of him, when the good folks of Poho picked up a dog by the side of the road, they usually brought it to Milo. So he was used to working with strays, used to the nervous blend of confused aggression and fawning desperation to please that such animals had when they were trying to struggle back to domesticity.

This dog was not a stray. Well, strike that, it was a stray in the textbook sense of the word, and Milo could almost count the weeks the dog had wandered through the back woods of Oregon by looking at the layers of filth and hard travel that coated the dog's fur, but although abandoned, alone and starved, the dog had not gone feral.

Which didn't necessarily make him friendly, Milo reminded himself. Especially now that the more invasive elements of the examination were about to begin.

As though reading his mind, the dog suddenly growled just a little and Charla immediately closed over it and cuddled, crooning comfort into its ears.

"I need you to do something for me, ma'am." He was careful not to look directly at her when he said it. The sight of the dog's head pressed into the soft swells of Charla's bosom was having some profoundly unprofessional effects on him.

"You can call me Charla. I wish you would." But she turned her head away as she said it, leaving Milo little doubt as to just how comfortable she'd be at hearing her name in his mouth.

'Doesn't matter,' he told himself sternly. 'You're a doctor, start acting like one!'

I just need you to keep talking to him for a sec," he said, producing a thermometer. "Talk a lot. He obviously likes the sound of your voice."

"What do I say?"

"Anything. You go skiing often?"

"Not so much now that I'm working. Actually, I pretty much stopped the day I broke my leg. They say it's important to get back on the horse as soon as possible, but the whole time I was in the lodge, I kept thinking, 'Let's see, at best, it's a ten minute slide down a snowy mountain, at worst, it's a two minute tumble and you get buried under an

avalanche, and in between, there's all these grey areas where you break your leg or ski down on your face or fall on your butt so badly that your suit rips off and you slalom off in front of a hundred people stark naked."

"That doesn't actually happen," Milo remarked, but he was grinning.

"It still didn't seem worth it. These days, if I'm for-real on vacation, I stay in hotels with swimming pools."

"For-real vacation?"

"I travel a lot as part of my work. Conventions and rock shows, mostly mining and buying, though. I'm a lapidarist," she explained. "A jeweler."

"My folks own a ski-spa," Milo said, cleaning off the thermometer and making a note. "Skiing and a swimming pool, not to mention sulphur baths, tea therapy and acupressure. You said you found Dog just today?"

Charla checked her watch. "About...eight hours ago. You know, I've been thinking, and I think maybe he belongs to the guy that used to own my house. I've only lived there about four years, and it just seems...well, from the way he just walked in and made himself at home...."

"That maybe he was home," Milo concluded. "It's possible, I guess. I've heard stranger stories anyway...and I'm disinclined to think of him as a stray." He lifted his eyes off the file and ran them critically down Dog's profile. "Eight hours, huh? Has he eaten anything?"

"Yes," she said confidently. "I made him some sandwiches and he ate the middles out and part of one slice of bread. He also had some water."

"Sandwiches?" Milo turned all the way around, both eyebrows slightly peaked. "What kind of sandwiches?"

"One was tuna and one was fried egg with mustard and horseradish."

Milo looked at her for what seemed a very long time over the top of his clipboard, his cheeks buckling and hollowing. At last, he said, "You've never had a dog before, have you?"

"I've never had a goldfish before," she answered honestly.

"Well, in the unlikely event that a goldfish walks into your house someday, I give you this word of advice: No tuna."

"I wouldn't give a goldfish tuna!" she protested. "It's practically cannibalism." She paused as a new

little seed of worry in her put down a few roots. "Is he sick because of the sandwiches?"

"I shouldn't think so," Milo answered. "When dogs don't like what they're eating, they just throw it up." But he paused. "Did he throw up?"

"No, but his tummy hurts." With a kind word to the dog, Charla took hold of a leg and carefully exposed the dog's red and swollen stomach.

Milo immediately fished out a stethoscope and moved in. He listened for some time, his eyes closed and peaceful, a faint frown fading in and out of his features as he moved the shell of the stethoscope here and there. Finally, he pulled the earpieces out and went to work with his hands, prodding with exquisite care under the dog's silent but watchful gaze.

There was a pause, very long and grim, and then Milo put on a pair of latex gloves and slipped around to the dog's tail again. A second silence, longer and darker than the first.

When Milo straightened up, all trace of his smile was gone.

Nervous now, Charla placed both hands on the dog's head and said, "What is it?"

The vet hesitated. "I'm not sure." He turned around to write on his file. Without looking at her, he said, "What I can do now is check him for parasites. That would be the simplest answer."

"Okay," she said, still steeled apprehensively against the bad news.

"But the fact is, as a Good Samaritan case goes, that's about the limit. I don't mind swallowing the cost up to this point, but--"

"What cost?" Charla asked, bewildered. "I brought him in, so I'm paying for him, and if you can fix him, I'll pay for it."

Now Milo did turn around, but he didn't look any happier. "Look," he said quietly. "Straight up, if this animal's been walking around for any length of time, he's going to have parasites. If he's down on his shots, he might have some diseases. But I'm not going to feel right about that stomach until I see it. I found blood sign in his stool, the dark and grainy kind, and that severely limits our possible problems."

"He's bleeding internally," she said, and Milo nodded. "How badly?"

"Hard to say from here. I'd need X-rays to be sure, but at the moment, I'm guessing he was hit by a car."

Charla thought about that, frowning. "I followed his tracks back to Murder Creek," she said. "Beyond that, I think the nearest road is Cooper Schooling, and I can't think there's much traffic."

"It only takes one car," Milo reminded her. "But the fact is, if it was a car, it's nothing that's going to heal on it's own and fixing it...well, before I could do anything, I'd have to get him stable. Now, he's slate-thin and hypothermic, he's got a fever and he's low on fluids. He may have been walking wounded for a while now, and his reserves are shot. I couldn't operate tonight, but I wouldn't dare send him home with you until tomorrow. His chances just aren't that good and raising them takes more money than I can swallow."

"I see what you're saying," Charla said. "And that's okay. No one's judging you, you have to account for all this stuff. But I meant it when I said that whatever he needs, I'll pay for it. He's somebody's dog, and somebody would want him to get some care."

Milo nodded, still looking at her with that peculiar blend of patience and pity that said something still wasn't getting through to her. "I need you to understand what you're committing to," he said. "The animal shelters around here will not take a large breed dog in good health and they sure as heck won't take one recovering from surgery. You'll have to foster him yourself."

"Okay."

"There's absolutely no guarantee that his owner will reimburse you for a thin dime when and if he shows up, and he might even sue you if he thinks he can."

Charla's brows lowered at exactly the same time and in exactly the same grim manner as the dog's, almost as if he were some canine mirror of her mood. "I'd like to see that," she said, practically growling herself.

"It happens. That's all I'm saying. Do you still want to do this? It's a big investment, and the dog might still die."

The dog, who had been studying Charla's face closely during this little lecture, turned and gave Milo a scathing glare.

"It just so happens that I have the time, the means and the money," Charla said simply. "There's no excuse for me turning my back on suffering. You do what needs doing. I can give you six hundred dollars tonight against costs, and settle

the rest later."

The vet looked slightly taken aback by this declaration, but he recovered quickly, and smiled. "Okay then. What I'm going to do is this: I'm going to give Dog here a quick bath and trim off some of these mud balls, see if I can't make him more comfortable and get a better look at him in the process. Then I'm going to take a couple X-rays and see what's going on inside him, do up some blood work, and if we have some in his type, I'll give him a little donor blood to take some of the pressure off his immune system. Then I'll strap on an IV for the night and get ready for surgery in the morning."

"Will you stay with him?" Charla asked.

"All night," Milo promised, and crossed his heart.

She smiled at him, then turned and cupped the dog's huge head in her hands. "It's going to be okay," she said. "We know what's wrong and we're going to make it better. It's going to hurt a little, but then it's going to heal. I'm going to keep you until your owner finds you. You're going to be just fine."

The dog blinked, solemn as a sphinx.

"Okay," she said, as if all had reached some momentous agreement. Turning back to a bemused Milo, she opened her wallet, brought out all the cash she was carrying--three hundreds and six fifties, set aside for the rock show she didn't appear to be going to tomorrow after all--and handed it over.

The dog was sleeping in the office's largest crate, an IV line taped down the full length of his right foreleg, and Milo was sitting on the floor across the room where he could watch him, eating a cheeseburger and talking on the phone to his brother, Ben.

Gentle Ben, they used to call him, back in the day. All the Bickleman boys were big, but the two sons of Laurance Bickleman (himself no dainty dewdrop) took size to an extreme well beyond any of their other relations, and Ben was a damn mountain of a man. He was also a marshmallow, the very image of his nickname, and a nationally-accredited animal trainer and breeder of prize-winning Irish Wolfhounds. Put Gentle Ben next to a stacked half-dozen blonde Wolfhounds, and a fella would be hard pressed to tell them apart.

Right now, at a quarter of nine on a weeknight, Gentle Ben was agreeably if distractedly, humoring Milo by pretending to share his brother's lascivious interest in the lady who'd brought the Mystery Dog to the office. "She sounds nice," he said.

"Ben, a Snickers bar is nice. Daffodils are nice. The cheerful chirping of baby chickens is nice."

"If a trifle irritating after ten hours," Ben remarked. He'd owned chickens at one time.

"This lady is not just nice," Milo continued stubbornly. "She's beautiful. Beyond beautiful. Stunning! Hair down to her hips. Huge eyes. Un-be-LIEV-able body. She had a figure like...like I could put my hands all the way around her waist."

"Could you now?"

"Sure wanted to try."

"Get her phone number?"

The innocent question, logical enough considering the direction and tone of their conversation, abruptly soured Milo's mood. "Yeah, it's in the file." He took a big chunk out of the cheeseburger and chewed morosely.

"What's wrong?"

"Nuthin'."

Silence. Gentle Ben, sex therapist, took the proverbial chair.

"I'm not going to call her," Milo said crossly.

"Why not?"

"She's not interested."

"How can you tell? She run screaming from the room or fend you off with a crucifix?"

"She's just not."

"How can you tell?" Ben countered doggedly.

"Dude, were you not listening just now? She's beautiful!"

"So?"

"Stunning!"

"So?"

"So, she's a Playboy Bunny and I'm the Michelin Tire Guy!" Milo looked angrily at his burger and polished it off in two more bites. "And I was staring at her and drooling, and she got freaked out. I know it. She couldn't look at me at all without turning beet red and inching away. I thought she was going to sic the dog on me."

"Maybe she likes you."

"Get real." Milo hunted in vain for another french fry, wadded up his empty bag, and tossed it expertly into the far trashcan for three points.

"How many gorgeous women do you know that like

having enormous, hairy strangers pant on them?"

A judicial silence, presumably as Ben consulted his little black book. At last, he said, "No offence, bro, but you're a dork."

Ah, Gentle Ben, sex therapist, with another brilliant insight. Such warmth. Such caring.

"I mean it," Ben continued. "Hell, I'm bigger than you and I don't stay home every Saturday night. Come to think of it, I don't stay home ANY Saturday night unless I got a little sugar baby staying with me. So you're a big guy, so what? Why shouldn't she be interested just because she's cute?"

"She's not cute," Milo argued. "She's--"

"I know, I know. Gorgeous, beautiful, stunning, blah blah blah. I get it. My point is, you got a lot to offer. You're smart, you're a good listener, you've got great hair...."

"You're describing an afghan."

"When was the last time you saw an afghan walking without a woman?" Ben asked in a reasonable tone of voice. "Come on, Milo, you've got a great personality."

"Personality is what you attribute to people who can only get dates by wearing paper bags on their heads."

"Now you're just being mean."

"It's called realism."

"It's called self-flagellation. Look, don't call the girl if you don't want to, but at least be honest about why you won't."

Milo rolled his eyes. "Oh, yay. Here it comes."

But instead of launching into chapter and verse of his award-winning "Why You Fear Rejection" seminar, Ben unexpectedly dropped it. "How's the pooch?"

Milo's gaze skipped automatically over to the crate. "Sleeping."

"You staying there all night?"

"I said I would."

"But you won't call her." Ben sounded amused. "Man, you is about ten shades of 'sucker', you know that?"

"We all got to have hobbies, bro," Milo sighed, resigned.

"What is he? The dog?"

"I don't know." Milo leaned forward a little, although there was little chance of seeing the dog any better now that he was soundly sleeping in the shadowed crate. "If he's a breed, I don't recognize

it. Mongrel, maybe. Half-rottie, half-Bernard, half-bull mastiff. And don't tell me that's three halves, bro. He's big enough to need three halves. We're talking big fella here. One eighty-two, emaciated."

"One--?"

"Eighty-two. And he's skin and bones. I wouldn't be surprised if he tops two-twenty when he's back on his feet." Milo inspected the dog's IV line, and then settled back against the wall. "Medium shaggy, two coats. Short ears, floppy. Long tail, fluffy. Black and tan, white bib. Muscles like the Hulk."

"Get an X-ray yet?" Ben asked, sounding distant and thoughtful.

"Yeah, I did. I called the lady right before you. Seems our guy's been eating garbage, and that's what's got his--"

"What I mean to ask," Ben interrupted gently, "is did you notice anything funny about his organs? Big heart, big lungs? Disproportionate even for his size?"

Milo, startled, climbed off the floor to fetch the prints, although he already knew what he would see. "Yeah, they were, come to think of it. I remember thinking the heart was swollen, bad sign but he doesn't act labored."

"Might not be. Got a camera?"

Gentle Ben, like many a work-at-home man, was a frustrated private detective, whose canine specialty afforded him few opportunities to shine. The unknown bloodline of a mysterious dog was as good as a red flag, and Milo didn't mind waving it for him. He found the digital camera he used for documenting abuse cases, took several pictures of the sleeping dog, and fired up the office computer (apparently, his technically-literate young receptionist had changed the start-up menu from a set of simple tones and a sunrise to a hippie-happy face who suggestively waggled its hairless eye-bumps and purred, "How do, Peggy-Do?" in a deep, if synthetic, sexy voice) and sent the shots to Ben's e-mail address. By the time he returned to the dangling phone in the back room, his brother was already humming over them.

"Well, I'm not pinning my reputation on a guess until I make a few phone calls, but I'd bet a million dollars that's not a mutt," Ben said. "Breeding may not be everything, but it always shows. How big is that crate again, Milo?"

"Three high, three deep, six wide."

"Christ, that's a big dog. Emaciated?"

"Believe me, the poor guy rattles when he walks. But other than the lump of miscellaneous trash he's got scraping around in his tummy, he's in pretty good health. Strong teeth, no bugs. I'd say he's two, maybe three years old." Milo settled back down on the floor and renewed his inspection of the dog. "He had an owner once. Had to. But whoever dumped him did it deliberately."

"I don't get it." Ben's confusion, like virtually all his emotional tells, was mild and thoughtful-sounding. "Sure as I'm sitting here, someone, somewhere, shelled out some major bucks for that big boy. Then they neuter him, which in itself blows my mind, and on top of that, they drop him off a cliff and let him wander the wilds of Oregon. Are you going to advertise him for Lost?"

"I'm not going to do anything. I'm the unbiased third party," Milo reminded him. Reminded them both, maybe. "But his temporary care provider almost certainly will. She's got that People-Are-Mostly-Good look about her. And who knows? Maybe his real owner will have a change of heart and come looking for him."

"The lady. His temporary care provider. Miss Stunning. I note--" The phone lines resonated with Gentle Ben's deep amusement. "--that for a man allegedly smitten, you haven't once let slip the lady's name."

'Charla,' thought Milo. 'Charla Savelle.'

"I don't have the file in front of me," he said instead, trying not to sound either ambivalent, which he definitely was not, or irritated, which he was. "It wasn't her name I was drooling over in the office."

A long, knowing silence. "Right," Ben said. "Milo, do this: Assuming the operation tomorrow comes through in Bristol fashion, give the lady a call. Tell her you're bringing the dog to her doorstep and invite her out--"

"No," Milo said curtly.

"Please, let me finish. Invite her out on a shopping excursion. You said yourself the lady, for all her stunning gorgeousness, was a complete sheep's-head at dog care. And who better to show her the ropes of 'temporary care provider' than a certified veterinarian?"

Actually, that sounded like a good plan. Milo found his eyes unfocusing as he thought of where to go and what products to recommend.

"Take your time," Ben suggested expansively. "Really educate the girl. And when supper time rolls around, herd her on in to a cozy, warm corner and buy the lady a curry and an iced chai."

"That's not really--"

"It is too." Ben overrode him without even raising his voice. "She'll be nervous about her new responsibilities and wanting to celebrate the dog's surgery. She might even suggest it herself. Come on, man, what's the worst that could happen?"

Milo laughed, a bitter and unhumorous sound. "The worst thing that could happen would be if we had a great time and started dating, and I end up spending all of my time with her feeling secretly miserable because I have to hide the fact that I'm a sexual deviant."

Another long silence, this one awkward.

"You're not a deviant," Ben said at last, and sighed. "Milo, if I'd known--"

"Don't apologize to me." Milo leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "I ruined what I had with Trisha, and I even managed to ruin what you had with Candy. I'm not going to set myself up just to ruin...something else," he finished lamely.

"Yeah, not when you can ruin your relationships just fine by not talking to anyone at all." Ben sighed again. "Okay, okay, have it your way. But just for the record, you didn't 'ruin' anything with me and Candy. There just wasn't enough foundation to crumble. And as far as I'm concerned, Trisha blabbing your bedroom secrets up and down the block is a hell of a lot worse deviant behavior than a little slap on the ass."

"Ben!"

"Well, it is," Ben said stubbornly. "Plenty of girls I've dated wanted a little knee-time with their me-time and I never thought it was the least bit kinky. Cherry-flavored edible body latex and a pet baboon is kinky, and if you ever meet a redhead named Evvie with a peerlessly exfoliated complexion and who smells like a monkey sundae, I strongly advise you to run the other way as fast as you can. And zigzag a lot, because she's a damn good shot with that baboon tranq gun. Milo, you need to get over yourself." A considering pause. "I could set you up with a few of my favorite past flames?"

Milo felt himself smiling, and pretended to entertain the thought, just as if Ben were offering a girl that wasn't more than a thousand miles away. "Just what I need. An in-depth soliloquy on all the

ways I don't measure up to you."

"Oh, well, that's a real problem, I'll give you that one." There was the soft rustle of Ben's phone shifting hands, and in a slightly sterner voice (Gentle Ben really wasn't built for stern), he said, "Milo, you're my brother and I'm getting just awfully fond of you, but I'm coming to the end of my tether with you and your love life. Trisha and her backstabbing blabbing was six years ago and you've let it come between you and every other girl you've met since. Now I've had it. Either you date this stunning dog-lady, or I swear on a stack of Bibles, I will come on up from Colorado and date her my damn self. Understood?"

"Understood," Milo sighed.

Chapter Four

Charla was astonished and a little alarmed at just how empty her house seemed to her. Having had a dog around, even for that brief stretch of time, had completely changed the way she perceived space and time. She'd come home from the vet, gone directly to the phone book, and called the Classifieds desks for *The Register-Guard*, *The Oregonian*, and the local circular, *The White River Rambler*. All three had taken her credit card number and promised to have her ad for a found dog running in the next day's edition.

Almost as soon as she'd hung up on the Rambler, the phone rang again, and this time, it was Dr. Milo's deep voice resonating on the other line. Charla had sort of melted into the nearest chair, holding on to the handset with both hands and staring dreamily at her Great Indian Artifacts calendar as he'd explained to her that the X-rays showed the best news he could have possibly predicted--the dog had eaten a garbage can. Probably without even chewing. Dr. Milo was setting up for surgery in the morning, the dog was resting comfortably tonight, and he would call again as soon as the situation was resolved. With a little luck, or so the good doctor claimed, the dog would be ready to come back to Charla's house in the afternoon.

Charla had floated around the kitchen after that, fixing her solitary supper and fantasizing about inviting the veterinarian over for a celebratory dinner. She was a good cook, she knew, and Milo had the look of a darned good eater, and between the two of them, she was sure she could spice things up. Mmmmmmm.

She'd gone to bed happy enough, but wakened the next morning with the same old doubts. Suppose she did ask him for dinner. What if he said yes? What if he came over and they ate dinner and got to talking and really hit it off? What if he wanted to stay for a while? What if he wanted to stay for breakfast? What if he took her in those strong arms and held her against his broad, powerful chest, and moved those huge hands over her body...at what point did she ask him if he would mind terribly spanking her a little first?

He might just leave at that point. Worse, he might stay and do it, and THEN leave. And the next day, all five hundred and seventy-nine citizens of

proud Poho, Oregon, would be calling her Spanky behind her back and giggling when they passed her in the post office.

No. No, it just wasn't worth it. If she wanted a man in her life so badly, as certainly she seemed to, judging by her reactions of the previous day, then she would go to Alt.com and hire one, just like everybody else. That was just how things needed to be done in the real world. You only casually bump into the man of your dreams in books and movies and other dreams. Charla Savelle did not work in dreams, she worked in stone.

So, glumly seated at her kitchen table with a black cup of sullen coffee, Charla renewed her vows of perpetual celibacy and wondered how the dog was doing.

The phone rang, and Charla sprang clear across the room, in one leap apparently, as she was almost positive that her feet never touched the tiles until she was excitedly breathing, "Hello?"

She expected Dr. Milo's bass rumble, and instead, she heard an androgynous, slightly nasal tenor.

"You found a lost dog?" asked the voice.

Charla was instantly deflated by the sound of a stranger, briefly encouraged by the possibility of the dog's owner reuniting, and then oddly devastated by the very same thought. "Yes," she managed, clutching at the neck of her robe as though for stability.

"Well, I think it may be mine. Can you describe it?"

'It?' thought Charla. She began to feel distinctly uneasy. "It may indeed be yours," she said in her most neutral 'That opal is NOT for sale' tone of voice. "The question, sir, is can YOU describe it?"

A long, considering silence. Too long, in Charla's opinion.

"It's a big dog," the voice hedged. "Pretty big. And dark. A big, black dog."

All of Charla's mental antennae were now fully a'quiver. "What breed?" she asked.

Silence. Charla thought she detected whispering. "Oh," the voice said, laughing. "It's just a mutt. I picked it up, uh, at the pound."

"Which pound?" Charla asked, and as further inspiration struck her, she added, "Did the pound microchip it? I can check its serial number with them."

More whispering, less quiet and more urgent.

"Can you tell me its sex?" Charla inquired.

Click. Drone.

Charla hung up her phone, trying to shake off the residue of apprehension that clung to her. Probably just someone trying to get a free dog. She really didn't need to feel this nervous.

Maybe she should have asked for a phone number. That way, if no one claimed the dog, at least she had a possible home to point him at.

On second thought, no. The dog was a good dog, a dignified and distinguished dog, and it deserved a home befitting of a gentleman. Anyone underhanded enough to try and claim a lost dog just so they could get out of paying to adopt one was no gentleman.

In fact, guaranteeing an acceptable match of dog and owner was a process likely to take some time. Charla might end up caring for the dog for a few months. Maybe she could teach it tricks.... She'd always been impressed by dogs that knew tricks, and her dog was definitely smart enough, should he take an inclination to the performing arts.

Wait a minute. HER dog? There was no 'her' dog. There was only 'a' dog and whether or not he could do tricks was of absolutely no concern to her.

The thought depressed her beyond the bounds of sanity and reason. There was no other excuse for why Charla should do what she then did. She picked up the phone and dialed her sister.

Mrs. Jeannette Farthing was comfortably ensconced with successful husband, precocious child, glamorous career, and matching furniture clear across the country, and she listened while making appropriate listening sounds while Charla talked at some length about dog, and veterinarian, and dog again, and finally interrupted in her usual, cheerfully backbiting way.

"Well, this is refreshing, in a way. I always thought you'd end up on the edge of nowhere with twenty or thirty cats. One dog, why, that's almost normal."

"It's not my dog," Charla said.

"Yeah, right. You're going to be hip-deep in squeak toys and calling yourself Rover's 'Mommy' in no time."

"Hardly."

"Have you thought about what you're going to do if no one claims him?" Jeannie asked.

"I dunno." Charla ran her fingers in little loops on the tabletop. "I guess I'll advertise a dog for a

good home. He's really friendly, for the most part, and really smart. Milo says he looks--"

"Milo?"

"The vet."

"We-elll now, you didn't mention you were on a first-name flirtation!" Jeannie's voice took on a silken singsong quality, the same tones that had been driving Charla crazy since the third grade. "And a Dr. Milo, no less. As long as you don't mention what he's a doctor of, you'll be able to hold your head high at the next reunion. Is he cute?"

Charla put a hand to her face as though she were trying to physically push her blush back under her skin. Her silence spoke volumes.

"Oh my GOD!" Jeannie gasped, and began to giggle. "Oh my God, after all this time, the flowerpot of love has finally broken over my baby sister's head. Too much!"

"Oh stop it."

"What's he look like? C'mon, give!"

Charla chewed at her lip, already regretting the lapse in judgment that had led to the phone call, but knowing that hanging up at this point would only make her sister more determined. And anyway, she wanted to tell someone, even if it was just Jeannette. "He's the most incredibly attractive man I've ever seen," she admitted. "He's got the most amazing green eyes--"

"Just a moment, please. Is this your idea of gorgeous or mine?"

Charla flushed. "Oh. Mine."

A snort of derisive humor followed that admission. "Ah. So, he's six feet tall and built like a hairy sumo wrestler. Check. Go on."

Charla covered her face again, her desire for girl-chat now lying curdled in the pit of her stomach. "There is nothing else. He's just the dog's doctor, that's all. He doesn't even know how I feel."

"Well, I'm sure that's for the best," Jeannie said. "All things being equal, you really don't need another small town knowing what a sexual deviant you are."

That was as good as a pair of scissors snipping off Charla's side of the conversation. Her shoulders slumped and she stared morosely at the kitchen table and wondered why in God's name she had called Jeannie in the first place.

"If you weren't such a sexual deviant," Jeannie continued, oblivious to the dead air crawling out of

Charla's end of the line, "then you could just ask the man out. You could take him to coffee, and to dinner, and go on dates and get married, and have, what is it they call that...? Oh, a life. But no, you had to go and confuse individuality with good old-fashioned kinkiness."

"I should never have told you," Charla muttered, as much to herself as to her sister.

"You didn't have to tell me," Jeannie countered. "The whole school knew about it, ever since that date with Todd Myerson."

Ah, yes. One date with the school's running fullback, which had been comprised of one really bad sci-fi movie, one set of misplaced reservations at a swanky restaurant, one bag of cheeseburgers eaten at the park, and three or four hours talking about everything that teenagers talk about when they think they've found a soul mate. Todd Myerson, whose tough jock image disguised a surprisingly shy human being. Todd Myerson, whose own personal fantasy had involved an anthropomorphic tigress, but Charla had managed to keep THAT to herself all these years. Todd Myerson, who went back to school the next day and promptly turned back into a pumpkin.

"You weren't telling me anything I didn't already know, but that's neither here nor there. The point is, you called me because you need advice, and the best advice I can give you is to go buy a magazine that caters to your sort of people, and answer any ad that doesn't contain the word 'inmate'. Do not pursue your dog's doctor under any circumstances unless you're trying to give your neighbors an excuse to run you out of town. Oops, the nanny's wanting me. Have fun with your new dog."

"It's not my dog," Charla said, but she was speaking to a dead line.

She hung up the phone and went to work.

The house was too quiet. Even with the grinder shrilling away at a fine piece of fire opal, the quiet had a way of creeping into her bones. Charla found herself more than once cocking her head towards the parlor, tense with the effort of listening, which was frustrating in itself, since the dog hadn't made that much noise even when he had been there.

And when she wasn't thinking about the dog, she was thinking about the vet. Oh, she tried to be self-deprecating about her fixation on the man, but

it was alarming how intensely attractive he was to her. Not just his looks, which she'd known at a glance would have an unsettling effect on her, but every other thing about him. His voice, that deep, sexy growl of a voice, literally made her knees all rubbery even when he'd been talking about checking stool for parasites. That took some serious 'sexy'.

She couldn't have picked a man more made for her if her name was Charla Von Frankenstein. He was educated, obviously intelligent--how refreshing it was to have a conversation with a man who used the correct number of syllables, for God's sake--and he had a quiet, thoughtful way of listening. Plus, he liked animals. You could never go wrong with a man who liked animals.

She'd spent enough time staring dry-mouthed at his hands to know that he hadn't been wearing a ring. That was promising. Of course, it didn't mean he wasn't seeing someone. At times like these, it would be really convenient if there was some sort of code or color or secret handshake that single people were required to use to identify themselves.

'Oh, come ON!' she told herself sternly. 'You're not in High School! Just ask him out. What's the worst he could do?'

But she knew better than to answer that, even in her own mind. She'd had one or two 'worsts' in her dating life, and sometimes it seemed that what was really the worst thing was that no matter how much you tried to be prepared, the reality of rejection was always so utterly unexpected. Guys never really say just 'no', they always say, 'What, with you?' or 'You're kidding, right?' or even, 'Is there money involved?'

And even if they do say yes, and assuming they don't excuse themselves at some point in the evening to dive out the men's room window and join the French Foreign Legion, there was still that crushing moment of rejection to look forward to when Charla asked if they could get together again and heard those three immortal words in reply: 'I'll call you.'

Wistfully, Charla shut off the grinder to trade out to a finer grade of polishing cloth, and thought fond thoughts about Dr. Milo and his huge hands. If only he was available. If only he was attracted to her. If only he was, well...a spanker.

Without realizing it, one of Charla's hands slipped down and around to rub at her bottom, as

though easing away a pain that no one had even put there.

She didn't dare to ask him. Not even if she miraculously grew enough courage to invite Milo to the movies. Not in a town the size of Poho. It was better this way. Safer.

Lonelier.

She went back to work.

Charla gave up on the grinder just after noon and threw her goggles down in vehement self-disgust. She'd been stopping every few minutes for the last two hours, convinced she could hear a phone ringing, and the constant stop-and-start had ruined what had started out this morning as a perfectly good potential pendant. Now she'd be lucky if she got an earring out of it. Dammit. Just...just DAMN it!

Stupid dog.

Why hadn't anyone called her? Surely the surgery was over by now. Were they expecting her to call them? No, Milo had specifically said he would call and he would.

But she felt as though she'd ought to be doing SOMETHING to show the dog that she'd been thinking of him. Oh, she'd steam-cleaned the sofa in the parlor, but she didn't think that counted. That was just common courtesy. Maybe she'd ought to buy him a little get-well card. A biscuit. Something.

Maybe no one had called because Milo had sensed her mournful dopiness the night before and was now avoiding her. The more Charla thought about this, the likelier it seemed, until she found herself picturing genuine discomfort on the vet's features and was unable to determine whether she actually remembered them or was just imprinting them now.

Center. She needed center.

Forget Milo. Forget the dog. Charla slipped off her work stool and went to the windowsill, to the half-dozen or so small fishbowls holding chunks of quarried but uncut rocks that were the prize of her collection. To one in particular, in fact.

It was a piece the size, and roughly the shape, of half a baseball--not quite flat on one side and bulging hugely on the other. The rough chalky surface had been worn smooth by years of careful handling; no dust came off on her hands but that

which had been put there by the morning's work. There were two small openings on the stone, one deep enough to be called a fissure, the other just a broad gouge that admitted some light to the hidden depths.

And when she held it this way, in both hands, upturned to the window, and put her eye to the deepest crack, she could see whole worlds of fire.

Opal. She worked with many stones, some more precious than others by the reckoning of them that care about such things, but her heart was in opal. Opal was fragile. Opal hid. Opal was difficult and precarious, but it burned. No other stone in the world had the same way of ripping up the eye with such aching beauty as opal.

Here, in this lump of unassuming shale was opal--ribbons of broad, fiercely flashing stone, and it was red and only red. No matter how you turned it, looking into the rock showed you only a close cavern of lava, fire unlike anything she could imagine, and that fire ran deep.

Opal was treacherous. All the fire that ran in this rock might be just what she saw, close to the surface of the crack. Or it might be layered throughout. Or it might--but surely not!--be everywhere, a solid half-baseball-sized opal thinly covered in quartz and chalk.

Charla had heard that when a certain British artist had first been given the Star of Africa, an uncut diamond weighed at more than three thousand carats, to be crafted into the Scepter for the Crown Jewels of England, he had spent several months in measurements. At the end of that time, confident that he could flesh the stone properly, this artist had taken up his jeweler's hammer and struck the diamond along a predicted fault. When the diamond did not crack as anticipated, the jeweler had gone away for a whole year, too unnerved to try again.

Even though no royal family loomed at Charla's shoulder, ready to post news of her success or failure to a frothing public, Charla still felt the enormity of the mystery of the stone every time she held it. It thrilled her, but it calmed her. Nothing else had the power to take away the rest of the world and renew her life with possibility the same way as the stone.

Someday, she would open it.

The phone rang, and Charla rose from her dreamy state of meditation like a bubble in still

water. She blinked around at her empty workroom until the sound of the second ring reached her, and then she set the stone carefully back in its place of honor on her windowsill and jogged to the kitchen.

"Hi there," chirped a young woman's voice.

"Hi," Charla replied, reaching slowly for a pen in case this should be another response to her ad.

"This is Peggy Weyland from Dr. Bickleman's clinic." A lilting twist at the end almost turned this into a question, or a song. "Is this, uh, Shh...Sharon Save-us?"

"Charla Savelle."

"Right. Oh! Right, I see it now. Great!"

"Did everything go okay?" she asked, hesitantly sure that it had. The chirpy young thing on the other end of the line would surely sound more somber if the dog had died.

"Oh sure, yeah, everything went--hey!"

A brief rustle and crackle of confusion ensued and when it ended, Milo's bass voice was rumbling in her ear.

"Charla? Miss Savelle, I mean." A pause. "It is 'Miss', isn't it?"

'He cares!' Charla thought, her stomach swooping out of her body and flapping around the room. "It is," she said, trying to sound casual and sounding robotic and grim instead.

"Well, Dog Doe came through with flying colors and we just tucked him away to sleep off the anesthesia." There was a rasping sound as he apparently covered the mouthpiece ineffectively with his fingers and his voice, faint but irritated-sounding, said, "For God's sake, Peggy, go file something and quit making kissy-fishes at me or I'm going to go through the phone bill and take a hard look at all the outgoing numbers!" When he came back, he was all professionalism once again. "We're keeping him on fluids, but he looks really good to me. He's put on eight pounds water weight since last night."

"Hey, great!"

"Yeah, I'm pretty exci--" The rustle of fingers on phone again. "I saw that, now darn it, go mop the back bay...Well, Peggy better do dat, or Peggy's gonna get a job dipping fries." His voice again, flat and almost snarling. "Excited. You can come get him in a few hours."

"Oh." Charla closed her eyes, chewed her lip, took a breath, and plunged. "Oh drat. When you said 'get him in the afternoon,' for some reason I

thought you meant tomorrow afternoon. I mean, you were talking about fluids and surgery and...and I just thought it would take longer."

"I'm...I'm sorry?"

"My car's in the shop!" Charla lied, clutching the phone with both hands. "Just...you know, winter tune-up. But I can't come get him today. Is there any way you could possibly...?"

"Sure. If...If you don't mind waiting until...."

He sounded utterly knocked off his feet.

But she was committed now, and with a sinking sense of desperation, she plowed on. "After work is fine. I mean, I know I'm putting you out--"

"No no no no! It's no trouble! I'm always going out..." A pause and a flapping-paper sound. "...along Route 40. Christ, *Route 40*?! I mean, uh, ha ha! That's practically next door to me. How...nice," he finished lamely, and cleared his throat again. "It's going to be at least six o'clock."

'Great!' thought Charla. Aloud, she said, "Fine," in what she hoped was a non-committal tone.

"So I'll see you then."

"Yep."

"With the dog."

"I appreciate it."

"Bye," he said, and hung up.

Charla hugged her phone, beaming, before throwing it back in its cradle and running for a clean shirt. She had just about five hours to get to the store and back in time to start the dinner that she intended Dr. Milo to unexpectedly interrupt. And although he hadn't exactly been turning cartwheels of joy at the thought of dragging her dog all the way out Route 40 to her house, she was sure that once she invited him in for a plate of lasagna, he'd feel like the trip was worth it. And for a cup of her Toe-Curling Chocolate Mousse, he might even come back.

Milo Bickleman turned three and one half cartwheels before colliding with the Senior Dog Weight Management Lamb and Rice Formula Chow.

Chapter Five

Charla Savelle's house was the very mirror of its mortgage-holder: a thing of beauty, all elegant lines and just a touch of mystery. It grew out of snow-dusted gardens at the end of a very long and heavily-wooded drive, with a sprinkling of ornamental trees, their branches bared and frosted with winter, to add a striking contrast to the towering firs and sequoias that crowded the outer grounds. The brown outline of dormant shrubs partially hid the starker outline of an ancient wooden fence; the gentle slopes and dells of the pasture it contained stretched all the way out to the spillage of blackberry bushes that acted as the eastern boundary. Milo could see a number of outbuildings dotted here and there around the property, including a freestanding garage that made no effort at all to disguise its humble origins as a tack and buggy shed.

The house itself was a deep, gunmetal blue, trimmed in cream and indigo, and was probably as old as any in Poho, although it stood seventeen miles outside the little town's incorporated limits. It was distinctly Victorian, tall and a little narrow, with a grand porch garnished with pillars and crown molding and decorative reliefs at every corner. The rails were sculpted, the steps were beveled. The round window above the porch was a rosette of brilliant color, and all the rest were lead-trimmed in diamond patterns.

Milo shook his head in mingled wonder and rueful envy as he kicked the door of his sagging Malibu open and stepped out into last night's snow. The tasteful residence of Dog's temporary owner was about as far as a house could get from Milo's mud-brown little ranch squeezed in-between two manufactured deals over on Dogwood Street.

He turned and reached out a hand to take Dog's collar--one of the cheap, lightweight freebies that his vet-supply catalogue people insisted on sending as an "enticement", and which he would not trust to hold a twenty-year old, three-legged Chihuahua--and Dog swiftly ducked under his hand and jumped from the car with a muted grunt of effort. The dog shook off Milo's steadying hand, stalked ahead of him a few paces, made sure Milo was watching, and then lifted his leg on Milo's front fender.

"Be that way," Milo said, without rancor, and patted Dog's head. He headed for the porch,

following the mostly-worn-down path left by Charla's boots and Dog's paws the previous day. He noted in passing a large, bare rectangle of gravel where, unless he was greatly mistaken, a car had recently been parked. Of course, she'd told him already that it was at the shop, and yet, Milo couldn't help but think that the stripes of tire-passage left behind in the snow seemed to arrow unmistakably, not out at the drive and the road beyond, but around and into the garage.

He ascended the front stairs, still thinking that over, kicked off the clots of snow, and stepped up to the door to knock. There was a flick of curtain, a tantalizing glimpse of one deep blue eye, and then the door whooshed open and released a gust of Italian-scented air.

"Dr. Milo," Charla said. "You're early."

Milo actually backed up a bit, head thrown back as if he'd been physically slapped by the good smells of garlic and pasta, and inhaled deeply enough to pop the top button on his tidy, tucked-in shirt. "Wow," he began, and then realized where he was and his mood crashed headlong into horror. "I'm so sorry!" he said. "I'm ruining your dinner hour!"

Charla bent and picked his button off the porch. "Don't be silly," she said. "Dinner isn't even ready yet." A heartbeat of silence while she studied his button, and then she held it out to him. "Will you stay?"

"Oh, no, I couldn't." Gosh, it smelled good, though.

"Please?"

"I just had a huge cheeseburger," he lied, and right on cue, his stomach growled thunderously.

They both looked at his midsection.

"Looks like you've got room for more," Charla observed with a small smile.

Thoroughly embarrassed now, Milo took another step back. "No, sorry, I'd love to, but I've really got to run."

Charla looked from him to the dog, and back to him with a curiously furtive expression. "Are there any special care instructions I should know...for after surgery and all?"

"Well...yes, I suppose there are," Milo admitted.

"Good." Charla swung the door open a little wider and stepped out of his way. "You'd better come in and tell me all about them. Dinner will be ready in a few minutes."

Milo looked helplessly around, but all he saw was Dog, and Dog's canine face was skewed with eerily human irritation. "O-okay," he said. "You talked me into it."

He started forward, and the dog waited until he'd gotten one foot over the threshold and then barged ahead of him, knocking him off-balance and nearly sending him crashing full-length onto his diminutive host. Milo frantically attempted to right himself before he fell all the way over and succeeded only by seizing Charla's shoulders for ballast and thrusting her with picture-frame-rattling force against the wall. His chest slammed against hers and their breath woofed together.

They stared at each other.

"Sorry," Milo mumbled, backing up.

"S'okay," Charla breathed, her eyes huge. She turned stiltedly, one hand fluttering up to touch the corner of her mouth as a strange sort of smile formed there, and walked unevenly down the hall, presumably toward the kitchen.

Milo shut the front door and scowled around, meaning to send the dog a dirty look, but the dog was cheerfully oblivious, his tongue lolling and tail high as he trotted into the adjoining parlor and climbed onto the sofa. "Bad dog," Milo muttered.

The dog panted happily and lowered its impressive bulk onto the cushions.

"I've, uh, I've got some pills for you," Milo called, wandering around the perimeter of the parlor.

"Did you say pills?" Charla reappeared in the kitchen doorway. "Oh, for the dog. He is all right, isn't he?"

"Oh, sure. As touchy as he is right now, it's just a good idea to follow up with a round of antibiotics and pain meds." He fished in his right jacket pocket for the two plastic bottles with Dog's name on them and rattled them enticingly at her. "But he's good," Milo assured her, as Charla came with hand outstretched. "All cleaned out. Here."

And with that, he reached into his left jacket pocket, drew out a folded biohazard bag, and put it right into her hand.

"Oh YUCK!" Charla cried, springing back and slamming into the wall. She was looking at the plastic bag in her hand with the same expression of horror she would give a human heart, clutching at the collar of her sweatshirt with her free hand as though she were trying to drag herself bodily away

from it.

Milo, bewildered, plucked it back out of her open hand and let it dangle from his. "You don't want it?"

"Why?" Charla asked, staring incredulously up at him, still almost doubled over in shock. "Why on this green Earth would I possibly want to KEEP anything that came out of that dog's digestive tract?"

Milo blinked at her, then at the bag, and then over at the dog, who was watching them both very closely. "It looked expensive," he said, shrugging.

"It...It looked what?"

Milo opened the bag and pulled out a glittering train of gold and clear fire; dozens, perhaps hundreds, of gems flashed and dazzled as they seemed to pour from their settings. Milo made no attempt to display it for her, but it couldn't help but catch the light. Heck, even if the jewels were only cubic zirconia, the necklace had to be worth something.

Charla's eyes had gotten even bigger, if that were possible. Her head fell to one side in a curiously detached movement, like a weight fallen off its pivot, and she took three baby steps forward, still hunched over and clutching her throat.

"It's clean," Milo said, nudging it at her. "I cleaned it. And I was pretty sure you didn't want to lose it. It had to take a pretty good string of weekends to hook it all together, right?"

"That isn't mine," Charla whispered. "My goodness gracious, I do believe those are diamonds. Wow." Slowly, keeping her eyes fixed on the necklace like a camera on a boom crane, she straightened. She took a half-step to the left, and then two to the right, and only then did she reach out to gingerly pinch the necklace between her fingertips and turn into the light for a closer examination. "I need my glass," she mumbled, and started down the hall.

"I'll wait here," Milo said, backing a little further into the parlor and trying to look comfortable there, instead of like a parka-wearing rhino in a dollhouse, which was what he felt like.

Charla stopped and blinked around at him, clearly called back to the present and the reality of her guest. "No, no," she said. "I mean, it'll be another ten minutes on the lasagna, anyway. Would you like to maybe see my workroom? Fair's fair. You showed me yours, so I'll show you m-

mine," she finished at a stammer, beginning to blush and pale at the same time.

Milo bit the hollows of his cheeks to keep from laughing out loud and pretended there was nothing remotely ribald in what she'd just said. "I'd love to," he said graciously, and lumbered towards her.

She slipped ahead of him, turning on lights as she went. The house was unfortunately as Victorian on the inside as it was on the outside, which made it a distinctly cramped layout for a man of his proportions, and it was all he could do just to keep from scraping the walls clean of photographs and framed art as he followed her. He didn't take a full breath until he was with her in the appointed workroom.

Charla was looking at him, anxious but shy, her hands knotted together at her waist. In an effort to please, yet without any real idea of what he should be looking at, Milo swept his gaze over the room with what he hoped was an expression of genial approval. In all honesty, it didn't look much like he'd expected. Knowing that she was a jeweler, he'd imagined a workspace rather like that of a watchmaker's--small, brightly-lit, and very neat. Charla's room...well...wasn't.

Two of its walls were lined with kitchen-style cabinets, the sort one buys one piece at a time at any home-and-hardware store. Thick, black fire safes were arranged over virtually every inch of counter-space, and their doors were all shut and padlocked. A long, low table was set up in the center of the room, dominated by a clunky elephant of a power tool, with a high stool positioned precisely in front of it. The windows were glazed with dust, allowing a diffused, misty quality of light to filter through, and on the wide sills in front of them were neat rows of octagonal fishbowls, perhaps a dozen in all. Fishbowls like that in any other house might have actual fish in them, the mean ones that have to live alone or they eat each other, but in Charla's tanks there was only water and rocks. Not even pretty rocks, just lumpy, rough-looking grey ones. In front of the windows were stacks and stacks of Rubbermaid tubs arranged to form a kind of table. Over every conceivable surface, there were rocks. Rocks and dust.

"It's very nice," Milo said.

Charla laughed. "Here," she said, and slipped around him to open one of the fire safes. "Don't

judge the kitchen until you taste the meat."

Rather than empty holes stacked deep with random knickknacks, the safe opened on a set of shallow drawers, and Charla pulled one of these out and handed the whole thing to Milo.

He looked down politely and was struck absolutely dumb. There were eight stones, precisely arranged, each one inky black and smooth as blown glass, flecked through with neatly-patterned shards of gold. There were circles, ovals, rectangles, squares, and even a trapezoid. The smallest was the size of a half-dollar; the largest, a long, thin slab that might have comfortably covered his pinkie finger.

"Porphory," Charla said. "Otherwise known as Chinese Writing Rock. It's quarried in California. Look here." She took the drawer away and replaced it with another. "By some miracle of nature and chance, the sprays of andalusite actually form real Chinese letters in these pieces. Joy. Chaos. Tranquility. Also rat, foot, and window, but people will probably buy them anyway."

"These are amazing."

"This is a rough," Charla added, taking back the drawer and laying a drab piece of what looked like broken tile in his hand.

Milo rubbed at the dark surface of the stone with his thumb, but could see nothing. "How can you tell what it's going to look like?" he asked.

"You can't."

"Then how do you know where to cut?"

She tipped her head to one side in a brief, lazy shrug. "It's not surgery, Dr. Milo."

Milo looked at the row of fire safes, considerably more impressed than he had been on first glance. "How many kinds of rocks...of gems do you have here?"

"Hmm, I think technically, you were right the first time. I don't have many gems. Just a couple emeralds and that ruby over there." Charla nodded at the Rubbermaid tubs.

Milo looked, and saw fifty or sixty rocks, ranging in size from thumbnail to volleyball, but nothing that looked like a ruby. He put his hand on the largest of them, a swirly-pink and brick chunk in a roughly-rounded shape, and craned his neck to try and glimpse a spark of red. "Where?"

"You've got your hand on it," she said, amused.

Milo yanked his hand back as though he'd been burned by it and stared at the rock in disbelief. The

kindest thing one could say would be that the rock was unassuming. More accurately, it was ugly. Of course, he thought, the slab of Chinese Writing Rock wasn't much to look at in the rough, either. Gingerly, he touched the ruby with one finger. "Is this...? This has to be the biggest ruby in the world."

"Hardly. See that?" She pointed at the top of one of the cabinets, where a dusty horse's head seemed to have grown from the woodwork, at about half-scale of life-size. "That's ruby, too. I didn't make it," she added before he could ask. "This kind of ruby doesn't facet well and it's not worth much. That horse would only see two, maybe three thousand dollars if I were to sell it, and the rough would only get me a hundred bucks. I have a friend who keeps giving them to me." She shrugged again. "I use them for cabochons and roses, other kinds of detail work."

"You don't like rubies, do you?"

"I don't care much for the 'sparklies' in general. No imagination. Oh, but speaking of." She held up the necklace and jingled it meaningfully, then slipped past him and hopped up on the stool in the center of the room. From a drawer in the worktable, she took a black, plastic hardhat with an eyeglass and a brilliant penlight mounted on it, and adjusted them as she peered intently at the jewels in her hand.

"Wow. Excellent workmanship," she breathed. "Hand cut, no laser trademarks, damned little inclusion. D-class. My gosh, I've never seen so many D-diamonds in my life! I don't see anything here smaller than a quarter-carat...."

"So it's not worth much?" Milo guessed.

Charla raised her head and stared at him. "I think," she said at last, "that you're confusing gold karat with diamond carat. For diamonds, carat refers to weight, not quality, and a quarter carat is a whole lot of diamond. I can't even begin to guess how much this is worth." She hunched over the necklace for a few seconds more, and then sighed and switched the light on her headset off. "Well, that tears it, doesn't it?"

"What do you mean?"

"The dog definitely has a owner, and that owner is undoubtedly beating some serious bushes looking for him." Charla studied the necklace as she spoke, but finished with a shrug and dropped the jewelry into a stone cup that sat unimportantly next to the

dominating lump of machinery in the middle of the worktable. "At least that gives me a jumping off point for finding them. I'll call the cops tomorrow and report it."

"You're going to give it back?" Milo asked, beginning to smile.

She looked at him, seemingly sincerely puzzled by the question. "Well, of course. It's not mine."

"Possession is nine-tenths," he reminded her.

She shrugged again, smiling back at him. "What would I do with it, really? Can you see me wearing it to the Post Office? Or to the BBQ Barn Dance at the Lamb Fair?" She laughed, a genuinely happy and untroubled sound. "Don't be ridiculous. I don't need it, and I don't really want it. I told you, I don't much like sparklies."

She chewed her lip, suddenly shy, and then went to the window, reached into one of the fishbowls and brought out a chalky hunk of stone, fist-sized and somewhat flat on one side. She patted it in folds of her sweatshirt to dry it and then handed it to him, saying, "This is what I work with."

He turned the damp rock over in his hands, glancing at her once to see if he could get some clue as to the instructions, and finally put his eye to a little crack in the shell of the stone. He turned it blindly back and forth, and as he faced the window, the darkness abruptly exploded into vibrant red. Milo experienced a dizzying rush of *deja-vu*, and suddenly he was six years old again, sitting with his brand-new-for-Christmas Viewfinder pointed at the living room lamp, watching Mowgli and Baloo leap to life in three dimensions right before his eyes.

He took the stone away, turned it over in his hands and looked again, and again the chasm of fire opened up in front of him, spilling away into eternity in direct violation of the laws of physics. "It's like fire!"

"It goes deep, doesn't it," Charla murmured.

"Miles," he agreed, and reluctantly returned it to the fishbowl in the window.

"Opal," she explained, and started to say more, but then stiffened suddenly. She'd been holding a binder in her arms, and now she thrust it at him hurriedly and ran from the room. "Dinner!" she called, darting into the kitchen.

Milo stood awkwardly in the middle of the room, waiting for her to either come back or call him to her, and when neither event transpired, he turned the binder over in his hands and opened it. It was a

photo album of sorts, with four photographs carefully arranged on each page. They were pictures of opal, of course, some in settings and others loose. Numbers and letters in what he was coming to recognize as Charla's neat hand were penned in some mysterious jeweler's code at the bottom of each page. He flipped through them, genuinely impressed by the skill he saw.

He supposed that anything another person did for a living was just intrinsically more interesting than one's own, but all the same, he couldn't remember Charla acting quite this fascinated about the collection of rectal thermometers in his own workroom.

Milo closed the binder and looked to see if he could tell where it was supposed to go. One of the cupboards was open, and he could see four or five other binders and a haphazard stack of magazines peeking back at him. Having nothing better to do, he wandered over and pulled a good handful of magazines out to flip through while he waited.

The first few titles were the lapidarist's version of his own *Healthy Pet* periodicals, jam-packed with in-depth articles on polishing grade rock cloths and the problems of bursitis and how they can be solved with the proper jeweler's bench. But when Milo shuffled the third issue to the bottom of the stack in his hands, he found himself looking directly at a lady's cherry-red ass, neatly framed by the bunched pleats of a schoolgirl's uniform.

He blinked, not just once but several times, actually squinching his whole face up by the end in an effort to dispel what he was sure he was hallucinating. The image didn't alter, and eventually, Milo was able to drag his eyes up far enough to read the magazine's title: *Stand Corrected*.

He shot a guilty look toward the doorway, but it was still empty. He peeled back the magazine's cover and ran his gaze slowly and thoroughly over a photo spread of two young farmer's daughters taken to task for their brazen ways in a stable. He turned a few more pages, and a receipt for a hydraulic press and twenty pounds of clear quartz fell out onto the floor. So it had to be Charla's, not a brother's or boyfriend's, or some other male now out of the picture. It was Charla's magazine, and great God in heaven, there were more of them!

Milo hunkered down by the cupboard, thumbing through the magazines, unaware that he was

holding his breath. All he could seem to think was that these were Charla's magazines, they were hers, and she didn't appear to be using them as research materials for a series of lectures on outrages on women's rights. These were Charla's magazines, and she wasn't reading them for the articles. These were Charla's magazines!

From the kitchen, she called his name, and Milo jumped and quickly shoved the magazines back into the cupboard. He took two steps towards the door, then ran back and shuffled the spanking stuff to the middle of the stack, fussily arranging the binders in the same slapdash way they'd been before he'd started messing with them. Again, he managed to point himself at the hallway, and again he aborted any actual leave-taking, this time to retrieve the binder that Charla had given him and put it on the work table so she wouldn't know he'd even been in the cupboard.

By now, of course, he could hear her coming down the hall after him, and he raced to the windowsill and grabbed the rock he'd been inspecting before, making a show of being so absorbed by looking into it that he'd been rendered temporarily deaf.

"Dinner's ready," she said from the doorway.

"Oh good!" he said heartily. Too heartily. He took it down a notch. "You're sure you don't mind?"

"Oh, it's no trouble. And besides, there's still those post-surgery instructions."

She waved him over and he followed her, his mind whirling with implications, down the hall to the dining room. He dropped into the chair she indicated and took the generously-portioned plate she offered him. He ate, he drank, he talked and he listened...and he plotted.

Although he was able, on the surface anyway, to appreciate the effort Charla had gone through, to taste the truly excellent food, and to ramble on pleasantly about the dog's post-surgical care or the mystery of the diamonds, all of his inner thoughts were focused on just how to make his next move. Should he put it off, set up another date, get her on his turf, so to speak, before raising the subject? Or should he just take the plunge? After all, if she'd gone through all this fuss--not just dinner itself, but arranging it to be ready when he dropped by, not to mention that little fib about the car in the shop which was actually (probably) parked in the garage--the odds were good that she'd be open to his

advances.

He was running out of time. The lasagna was gone, the salad was down to its last leaf, and there was only the hind of the garlic bread left. In a moment, she'd bring out a dessert and some coffee, and then he'd be obliged to bow out for the evening. He had to say something, even if it was just to ask her out another time. He had to say something. Anything.

Milo's heart gave him an extra-hard thud for moral support, and then he opened his mouth and said, quite calmly to his own ears, "About that car you've got hidden in the garage."

Charla's hand, curled around her glass, froze midway to her mouth. Her eyes were huge.

"The one that's supposed to be in the shop," he amplified, scarcely able to believe what he was about to say. Or do, if all went well.

Charla was staring, silent, waiting.

Milo put down his fork, laced his hands together firmly, and leaned over the table at her. "What do you suppose we ought to do about that?"

Chapter Six

The blood was rushing through Charla's ears, pounding and roaring like the tide. She wanted to believe that she wasn't actually hearing what Milo was saying, but she knew she was. Of course, he couldn't possibly mean what she thought he might be meaning...or could he?

Through numb lips, she whispered, "What do you mean?"

"You had me come all the way out here to drop your dog off when you could have just as easily come and got him at the office. I don't think that's taking your responsibilities as his care provider very seriously."

"It wasn't like that," she said mechanically, and then stopped, tipping her head to one side and regarding him with dawning wonderment. He knew.

Milo's gaze was steady, his voice implacable. "Then what was it like? Explain it to me."

"I'm just...." She felt a blush creeping up her face and dropped her eyes to her plate. "Not very good at flirting."

"Well...neither am I." Milo offered her a lop-sided smile when she blinked up at him, but just as quickly, he re-adopted his stern gaze. "But I don't think it's wise to start off supplementing your affections with little lies. In fact, I think that's downright bad."

She could only stare, her breath caught in her throat.

"One might say naughty." His eyes narrowed slightly, gauging her reaction.

She swallowed air with a dry click.

Milo said, "And I think you should be punished."

The contents of Charla's glass slopped raggedly over its side and splashed over her plate. She leapt up, dabbing at it with the tablecloth in lieu of a clean napkin, her eyes still wide and staring although she could scarcely seem to see. He hadn't said that. Or if he had, he hadn't meant it. Or if he did, he only meant...

What? What else could he possibly have meant? Was he going to tell her to run laps? Write 'I will not play games when I come on to strange men' one hundred times? Paint his fence?

Charla peeked up at him from under her bangs, her hands kneading at the damp tablecloth. He was still sitting there, watching her, immovable.

She had to say something. "Oh," she said.

"I don't think I'd ought to use my hand until we know each other better," Milo said, and Charla's legs simply turned to Jell-O.

She dropped into her chair and gazed at him, unaware that she was still holding the plate she'd been trying to dry, only now she was presenting it like a talismanic shield. "Would you like a wooden hairbrush?" she asked, a little breathlessly.

It wasn't until Milo's shoulders sagged that Charla realized he, too, had been holding his breath. And why not? He was going out on just as thin a limb.

A cold funnel of butterflies blew through her and left her hot and fluttery inside; Charla felt an overwhelming urge to leap up, clap her hands, giggle, or throw her arms around Milo's neck in naked gratitude just for finding her.

Hairbrush. How could one word make her so fascinatingly happy?

Milo pushed his chair back from the table. "Go and get it."

Reality asserted itself briefly through this living fantasy, and Charla blushed again, this time with consternation. "I, um, don't have one." She looked back toward the kitchen. "But I have a spoon."

She stood up and walked unevenly, like one in a dream, over to the counter. She set down her plate and took a wooden spoon from the jar by the stove where she kept such things. Her nerve failed her then, and she only stood there, staring down at the burners, holding her spoon out from her body at a strange angle as though it were a torch she were using to keep the dark at bay.

She heard Milo's heavy tromp as he came for her, and she expected him to take the spoon from her, but instead, he laid one heavy hand on her shoulder and said, "We can do this another time, if you want."

Odd, how he put that. He hadn't said, 'We don't have to do this,' only, 'We can do it another time'. The implication being that sooner or later, would she or no, it was going to happen. Her heart did another funny swoop from her chest to her stomach to her throat, and she shivered, but it was not an unpleasant feeling. Far from it. She shook her head.

"I didn't catch that," Milo rumbled.

She had to shape the word three times before any sound came with it, but at last, she was able to say, "Now."

He took the spoon, and then he took her arm and turned her around. "Put your hands on the wall," he ordered. "Palms flat. Don't fight me, and don't try to cover up." A long, unsure pause, and then, as a nodding acknowledgement to reality over fantasy, he added, "If you need me to stop, just say, uh, 'sugar'."

Charla nodded, giggling nervously for a second or two, and then managed to obey him. She squeezed her eyes shut and waited, her bottom clenching and trembling as she strained to hear the spoon cut through the air.

There was nothing though, nothing except the sudden smack as the blade of the spoon landed low on her left nate. Charla jerked, but the sting of it hadn't even had time to settle in before the next blow landed on the other cheek, and then the third and then--

And then a snarling volley of barks as the dog thundered in from the parlor, hackles up and fangs showing as he charged dead at Milo.

"No!" Charla shouted, and snatched the spoon out of Milo's hands. "Stop it, it's okay!"

The dog's legs locked stiff and he skidded the last few feet, actually bumping into Milo, although he never took his eyes off Charla. He cocked his head to one side, his canine brows furrowing.

"It's okay," Charla said again, and slowly gave the spoon back to Milo. She showed the dog a reassuring smile. "See, I like it! Go ahead, Milo."

The vet looked at her incredulously and then resumed his uneasy inspection of the dog's teeth. "Um...I don't think so."

"Go on," she urged, still smiling hugely.

The dog was looking from one to the other like a spectator at a tennis match, and his ears, tipped forward with interest, went flat the instant Milo gave Charla's bottom a half-hearted tap with the spoon.

"It's okay," Charla said, still giving the dog that lunatic grin. "Keep going."

Milo's arm swung with just a little more force, and the dog watched Charla's face intently, grumbling low in its throat when she only kept smiling. After two or three more smacks, the dog slowly settled to the ground, and finally lay its head on its paws, although he never lost that dark, suspicious stare.

"See?" Charla said. "It's fine. Now go lie down on your sofa." She pointed for good measure. "Us humans are doing something here. Go on, now."

The dog muttered something unkind in Canine, but it got up and stalked out of the room.

Neither of them said anything for a bit; they stood side by side, their heads craned at identical angles, trying to see around the doorjamb and into the parlor. There was a creak of springs as the dog ascended the couch, and that was all.

"Well," Milo said, and rumbled a shaky sort of laugh. "He certainly seems fond of you."

"He brought me diamonds and everything," Charla agreed, and turned back to him with shyly upraised eyes, half-afraid the mood had been ruined. "But I think I'd rather have a man who's good with a wooden spoon, if it's all the same to you."

"Oh, it's fine with me." Milo swept one dark eyebrow up and smacked the cup of the spoon resoundingly into his palm once or twice. "And since it appears to be all right with you, and at least moderately tolerable with him, I guess we can just pick up where we left off."

He lifted the spoon and circled it with clear significance, and Charla, heart soaring, turned and braced her hands on the wall again.

Milo traced the shadow of her spine with the very tip of the spoon down the loose hang of her sweatshirt to the belted waist of her jeans. Below the belt loops, she knew, the seam of her Levis delineated each round, full cup of her bottom. She was tingling wherever the spoon rested, even for only a second, waiting for that moment when he would lift it away and then bring it smacking back.

Almost as if he were reading her mind, he gave her a tap--just a teasing flick of his wrist that nevertheless bit deep and blushed hot. The layered protection of her denim jeans and cotton panties might as well not be there at all; even at a fraction of his strength, even in a playful frame of mind, Milo's hand was iron. She found herself bending lower on the wall, all the better to present herself to his attentions, and he applied himself obediently to task.

He was a big man, but despite the awkward manner he adopted when he'd been moving through her house, he showed a keen understanding of his strength, and an appreciation for her body. He was aware of her, and he showed it in the careful, almost worshipful way he woke her to sensation, priming her with heat and impact until she was gasping, drunk with the need to experience more.

He paddled every inch of her, pausing often to knead and massage her, gauging her thresholds by Braille, and then sending her to renewed heights of pleasure and pain.

It was not a spanking. She'd been spanked before, and this was as different from those little forays into discipline as gold is to lead. They may have the same weight, the same mass, and nearly identical proton values, but one is still base, and the other...precious.

Charla felt her sense of time and place slipping agreeably away. It seemed there was nothing tangible in the Universe beyond this room--the wall beneath her hands, the tiles beneath her feet, and Milo. She felt that she could stand here forever, experiencing nothing but the slap of the spoon.

Slapping...more of a tapping, really...or a knocking...

Someone was knocking at the door.

Charla raised one hand, too flustered to remember what the safe word had been, and Milo stopped mid-swing and put his hand on her shoulder, already framing an anxious question. She caught his hand and leaned her cheek against it, then shook her head. "Door," she said, trying to catch her breath. She laughed shakily. "Gosh, can't catch a break tonight, can we?"

"Guess not." Milo squeezed her shoulder, then put the wooden spoon on the table and backed out of her path. "We'll have to finish this another time."

There was never any question whether or not they were finished. Charla felt the bones go out of her legs again, and for a while, it seemed all she could do was hold the wall and gaze at the back of her man. Her man. Laying claim the way she refused to do with the dog. Ridiculous, maybe, but there it was. In that moment, nothing was quite as important as taking this man upstairs and letting him finish what he started.

That damned knock came again, and with it, a man's "Hello?"

Charla huffed her hair out of her face and straightened up, luxuriating in a good ass-rub for only a few seconds before making herself walk without hobbling as she went to answer the door.

It was Joe Barr, a man whose name and face she knew only because he had the Post Office box right next to hers and they'd had an uncanny knack for going to pick up their mail at the same time. From the faceless, inevitable gossip in town, she

also knew that he ran the feed store with his father and two brothers, that he was single, and that he'd had 'an eye' for her for nigh on these four years now. And God help her, but he had a forty-pound bag of Gravy Train in his arms.

"Miss Savelle," Joe began, shifting the dog food slightly in his strapping farm-boy's arms. His voice was not its usual timbre, but had the too-deep, wooden quality of one who had been rehearsing his lines all the way down her driveway. "I heard you got yourself a dog, and I thought I'd come by and see if maybe you already got someone, never mind," he finished, all without changing tone or facial expression.

Charla turned around and saw Milo doing his impersonation of Muhammad's mountain, coming toward them from the kitchen. She bit back her smile, took a deep breath, and looked back at Joe Barr. "This is Dr. Bickleman, the veterinarian."

Joe nodded, eyes downcast. "Yeah, I know who he is. I, uh, brought you some food for your dog," he added unnecessarily, and hefted the kibble a little higher.

"Thanks," Milo rumbled. He reached past Charla with one hand, plucked the heavy bag easily from Joe's grip, and tossed it over his own shoulder. He backed up a pace so as not to wallop it into her when he turned around, and then ported it off to the kitchen.

Joe watched him go with clear dismay, shuffling from one foot to the other on her slushy porch. "Well," he said at last. "I guess I ought to go."

"Thank you for the dog food," she said, feeling a little sorry for him.

He tossed off a glum shrug and trudged back to his waiting car, giving her a little dejected wave goodbye as he went. Charla shut the door and turned around in time to see Milo striding smugly out of the kitchen. He came toe to toe with her and there leaned against the wall, folding his arms over his broad chest and smirking.

"You bad girl," he growled. "Breaking that poor boy's heart."

"A girl's gotta have a hobby." She offered him a small smile and then ducked her eyes away, reaching back to rub at her bottom--still delightfully warm and tingly--not entirely unaware of the way his gaze followed her hand. "How would you feel about a little dessert?"

He started to lean in, but abruptly rolled his

head back and laughed at the ceiling. "Ah, you know what? I think I need to go while I still can."

She blushed, mentally rewinding her last words. "I was actually referring to coffee and cake."

"Believe it or not, I knew that." He scratched comfortably at his beard, an activity she recognized as the masculine mirror of her own meditative habit of finger-combing her hair straight back from the bangs. "But as much as I'd like to stay a little longer...I'm afraid that if I do, I'd end up staying, well, a lot longer. And it's too soon."

"Too fast," she agreed.

"But I'd like to come back and see you again." Suddenly awkward again, Milo stepped back to the parlor doorway and looked at the dog instead of her. "I was actually thinking...if you weren't too busy, that is...that maybe you and me and Dog there might take a tour of the local pet supply stores. Canine cannot live on kibble alone."

"That's a good idea. I'd appreciate the help."

He slid an eye back at her hopefully. "Tomorrow?"

"Noonish?" she returned.

"Sounds good. I'll swing by and pick you up. Till tomorrow then." He backed up a pace, turned to go, then paused and turned back. Moving swiftly and with great determination, he bent and kissed her firmly on the mouth, then turned again and stomped off to his car.

Charla watched him go, biting her lip to keep from calling him back and rushing headlong into an intimacy that common sense told her needed at least a little time to breathe. She waved at his taillights, and only after they were gone did she go into the house. She closed the door, locked it, and leaned against it, staring at her feet and working to bring her heart rate back to normal. She'd had a spanking--a good, sound spanking--and she thought she might very well be in love.

At last, she was able to float into the kitchen and go through the motions of cleaning up, vaguely aware that the dog had joined her at some point and had been bringing her the dishes from the table one at a time for a while now. Well, that was a better trick than just rolling over. She gave him a good scratch behind the ears and accepted a messy kiss on the cheek in trade.

"If it wasn't for you, I never would have met him," she told him, and he looked extremely pleased with himself. "Come on, handsome. Let's

go to bed."

Like a true gentleman, he went ahead to open the door for her.

Chapter Seven

Charla dreamed she was locked in an underground fortress where an arch-villain of Bondesque proportions was attempting to wrestle nuclear secrets out of her by dropping her in an enormous milk vat and filling it up with live raccoons. She drowned, of course, and woke up under a heavy layer of Dog.

She pushed futilely against the foreleg draped over her throat and squeaked in protest.

Dog grumbled sleepily and snuggled further into her collarbones.

"Move!" she gasped. "Get down! Get!"

Dog heaved a long-suffering sigh that literally rocked the bed, but he got up. As Charla's lungs flooded with precious air, he stepped down off the mattress and gave her a reproachful stare before wagging his way to the door. He pawed at the doorknob, nosed the old-fashioned switch lock to the release position, and then swiped the door successfully open. Without waiting for applause, he shuffled off down the hall to the stairs.

Charla yawned and slithered a little deeper under the covers, luxuriating in a sprawl before giving in to her early-bird nature and actually getting up. A three-minute shower and brisk toweling did much to restore her good humor after her rude awakening, and in preparation for her shopping date this afternoon, she even shaved. All the way up. Just in case.

When she came downstairs, Dog was dunking his head in the kitchen sink, his paw still on the tap, drinking straight from the faucet. He wagged when she came in, but didn't look around.

"I see you helped yourself to breakfast," she said, giving the torn top of the Gravy Train an arch look on her way to brew some coffee.

Dog raised his head, licking his chops, and considered the bag. He looked back at her, wagged again, unrepentant, and then turned off the tap and dropped heavily to the floor. He came over for a pat on the head, and then ambled out toward the front door.

She heard him fussing with the lock and then the hinges creaked as he went outside. All her life, she'd heard dog-owners of her acquaintance moan about having to take them out and take them in and take them walking....What was wrong with those people? This was easy. All you had to do was close

the door after them!

When the CoffeeMaster was hissing and spitting diligently away, Charla went to the phone and called the Sheriff's station to report the necklace. She got the station's machine, and left her name, phone number, and, after a moment's thought, her address, as well as a short message that she'd come across something expensive that didn't belong to her.

Dog came back in, she went and closed the door for him, and together they returned to the kitchen for kibble and coffee and toast. She generously allotted him her share of the kibble. He graciously accepted her offer of toast.

With breakfast out of the way and whole hours to go before Milo came and picked her up, Charla decided to soothe her industrious urges by taking a better look at the necklace. Dog followed her down the hall to her workroom, but after only a few minutes of watching her stare at a palmful of diamonds, he lost interest and wandered away to his sofa in the parlor. Charla let him go. Without Milo fidgeting at her shoulder or dinner burning in the oven, she was able to lose herself in the intricate gem-by-gem examination such a mysterious piece of jewelry required.

The first thing she noticed was that three of the diamonds--the first three, in fact, if one began counting from the first looped strand on the left side--were not gems at all, but very well-cut pieces of glass. Not even zirconia, but glass! She supposed the owner was using them as place settings until new diamonds could be found to replace them, but even that explanation rang a little hollow. After all, if one could afford the necklace at all, the cost of three loose diamonds, even three quarter-carat D-class diamonds of VVS2 clarity or better, was pocket change.

Of course, it could be that the present owner was a great deal poorer than the person who commissioned the necklace in the first place. Perhaps even poor enough to have chiseled the gems out him or herself; there were enough diamonds in this one necklace for Charla to live comfortably for the rest of her life, with enough left over to send the Texas Octuplets to Harvard.

But if the owners of the necklace were selling off the diamonds, why replace the settings? And if someone was sneaking the diamonds off and selling them without the true owner's notice (which

explained the use of glass rather than the far superior impersonator of cubic zirconia), why stop at only three?

The artist's signature--a string of scripted letters and Roman numerals--was hidden in the filigree connecting the settings. She didn't recognize it, but that hardly came as a shock to her; she was familiar with the more prominent workers of diamonds on the market today, but those Roman numbers translated into 1917, and she was reasonably sure that was meant to be the date of the necklace's creation. That, too, would explain the lack of laser inscriptions and cuts.

Still, this was a fantastic piece of workmanship, and Charla thought it unlikely that the artists responsible for it would simply disappear without a ripple. She went to the cupboard and began the tiresome task of searching through her contact binders for diamond dealers and designers. Page by page, patient as a cat at a mouse hole, Charla searched for the particular artist's code that would identify the father of the enigmatic necklace.

She got lucky. The binders were in alphabetical order, and the code matched one Agelzoff and Sons Fine Jewelers, in Venice, Italy. There was an address and phone number, but there was also an email address, and Charla liked that a lot better than trying to figure out what time it was in Italy or how much postage was needed to send them a letter. Nevertheless, long force of pre-computer-age habit did its work on her; Charla wrote all of Agelzoff's information down on a post-it note, folded the sticky side down, and put it into her pocket. Later, she decided, she would put it into her purse and forget about it, and all would be right with the world on THAT account.

That done, and binder open under her arm, Charla started upstairs, only to about-face and go back for the necklace. She had a Polaroid camera somewhere in the computer desk, and she thought perhaps she'd get a faster response from the Agelzoff's people if she included a picture. Twirling the necklace idly around her finger, she jogged up to her bedroom and fired up the old machine.

It took some firing, too. The computer was a gift from her labrodorite contact in Russia, and Charla only had it because he was tired of dealing with the miles of telephone cables between their two countries. She appreciated his generosity, of course, but had no interest in updating its software,

which kept her distinctly below the cutting edge of the techno-philes in her trade, and since all the lettering on the machine itself was in Russian, she still had no idea how to adjust the tone and contrast on the monitor. As a result, the screen was always a little too narrow, too far to the left, and the images were slightly jaundiced. She had a laptop, also, but it was even slower than the PC; she only used it when she took it with her to conventions, and then mostly to play Solitaire Cribbage during seminars.

The camera was right where she remembered it. Charla arranged the necklace on a plain black t-shirt, and took several snapshots. While they were developing, she went through her email and deleted a week's worth of old jokes and saccharinely-uplifting chain letters from the inbox, printed out an order for fifty lapis lazuli pendant-and-earring sets from a merchant in Austin, and turned down a merger request from an opal jeweler in California. With that out of the way, she set about composing what she hoped would be an eye-catching message to Agelzoff and Sons.

Ultimately, she explained that she was researching the necklace's origins, leaving out the circumstances by which she had acquired it, and asked for any information that they thought might help her. She peppered this unusual request with a number of discrete compliments on the necklace's design and quality, and signed with her full name, as well as that of her studio and her address and phone number. With any luck, she would get an answer from them in a few days.

Charla switched off the computer, slid the necklace back into her pocket, and started downstairs. It was only nine o'clock; noon was still ages and ages away.

Well, her workroom could stand a little cleaning, and that was a nice, quiet activity.

Quiet enough that when the knock sounded at her front door, she heard it easily. Surprised and a little pleased at the sheriff's quick response, she trotted down the hall with Dog at her heels to answer it.

It was not a man she knew, and in a town Poho's size, you got to know EVERYONE. This guy had the body of an ex-football jock, now ten years out of high school and gone a little soft. His hair was dark, his eyes small and closely set, and he had about a week's worth of beard crawling on his jaw.

His face was thick, abstractly unpleasant; there was something about him, something not on the surface, which gave a strong impression of general untidiness.

Beyond him, there was a matched set of blond men, so alike they had to be brothers, if not twins, huddling together at the corner of the porch. What was this?

"Is this the Marsh place?" the man in the doorway asked. His voice was cigarette-coarse but perfectly civil.

Charla nodded. She'd only lived here four years, and everyone in town still called this the Marsh place, as they likely would for the rest of Charla's life.

"Lady at the post office gave me directions out to your place," the man explained. "I lost my dog. I'd've called, but we're on a fishing trip. No change for the pay phone, you know how it is."

Charla nodded, not believing him for reasons that were not immediately obvious to her. Her eyes kept straying to the two men on the lower step, and they kept avoiding her efforts to make eye contact.

"I've been looking for him for three days," the man continued. "I'd appreciate it if you let me see him." He looked cautiously from Charla to the other two men and back again. "He's a big dog, mostly black. Neutered. He broke his halter in the woods, so he would'a been naked when you found him."

Charla nodded again and half-turned to look for the dog, only to see him standing silently about ten feet further back in the hallway. She moved a little to one side to allow the man on the porch to see, and the man's reaction was one of immediate recognition.

"That's him!"

The two blond men instantly perked up, but promptly returned to lurking when Charla looked their way.

The man on the porch shifted as though he were planning to come into the house, and Charla moved instinctively to block him. When he backed off, she said, "Do you have any proof of ownership handy? The dog's tags? Picture of yourself with the dog?"

The man shot Charla a look of annoyance, but rapidly swallowed it, and shook his head instead. "You don't bring that shit on a camping trip, do you? He had tags on his halter, but it broke and they must have fell off, but that's my dog! I can prove it. He was my dad's service dog until he died,

okay? Watch."

The man motioned impatiently for Charla to step aside and when he had a clear shot at the dog, he raised his chin and said in a loud, clear voice: "Shadow, ready-up!"

The dog didn't budge. The dog's ears didn't so much as twitch. The dog stood in the parlor doorway and looked and gave nothing away.

Charla frowned slightly and turned back to the man on her porch.

He looked absolutely stunned at first, and then a flicker of real heat shot across his features and vanished. "Shadow," he said, in a darker, meaner tone. "Shadow, ready-up!"

Nothing.

The man licked his lips, sending swift nervous glances in Charla's direction. "Shadow, phone!"

The dog continued not to move or to respond in any way.

"Shadow, dammit, quit messing around!" The man's face was darkening. He took a step forward, his foot landing south of the threshold, and that, at last, won him some reaction from the dog.

A growl, low and wet and very sincere, rolled down the hallway to the door. The dog's ears went flat; his head lowered as his hackles rose, but his eyes stayed locked on the visitor.

"Shadow!" The man looked frustrated, but more than that, he looked murderously furious with the dog. There was absolutely no exaggeration in that assessment; if he'd had a gun on him, Charla thought he would've emptied it in a second. "Shadow, if I've got to come in there and get you--"

"Look, I'm very sorry about your dog, and I'll certainly keep my eyes out for him," Charla began.

The man swung on her, his eyes burning. "Lady, THAT is my dog!"

Charla could feel the dog at her back, and tried to draw serenity from his presence, to help her stare this stranger down. She was beginning to feel distinctly afraid. "I'm sorry, but it's obvious that he's not."

The man's eyes flashed from her to the dog and back again. He turned to face her fully, taking a half-step towards her in the process, not just crowding her now, but aggressively looming. "Lady, I am not leaving here without--"

At the first movement, the dog's growls had slid rapidly up a short, sharp scale of pitch and volume, and when they reached the top, he let out a half-

dozen high barks. Charla flinched back, stunned by the violence of the sound, and as though her clearing the doorway were some signal to him, the dog tried to spring. His hindquarters flexed all the way to the ground, but when he lunged, his paws only slid over the hardwood floor. Like a dog in a cheap cartoon, he galloped in place, barking furiously, the powerful muscles of his enormous body coiling and bunching hypnotically in the light reflected from the kitchen.

The man on the porch had only stiffened for a split instant at the first bark, and then he'd been running, shoving his two companions ahead of him. They flew over the drive, kicking out chunks of stale snow, and raced towards the relative safety of an idling car just as the dog suddenly found traction and surged forward. Dog was not just barking now, but roaring; froth flew from his jaws in spurts along with the deafening battery of sound.

Charla put out her hand as though she actually thought she could catch and hold the dog as it flew by, but he knocked her not just to one side but completely off her feet. She struck the hall wall and then dropped to her butt on the floor and lay there, legs splayed, staring after him with her mouth agape.

The dog banged up against the driver's side window just as the man slammed himself inside, reared back and beat on the glass with his paws twice more, and then dropped and sprinted around to the other side where the two blonds were struggling with each other to shut their own door. They made it, barely; the dog lunged forward, teeth clacking against the window as he tried single-mindedly to bite. When that failed, he dropped, backed up stiffly, and then sprang again as the driver gunned the engine. The dog's head drove forward, clamped down on the passenger-side door handle, and ripped it away with nothing more than a squeal and a snap of metal.

The car took off, spraying out slush and gravel, and the dog charged after it, but stopped after only a hundred feet. He stood there in the driveway, watching the red lights of the car's escape, and slowly raised his tail. Wagging fiercely, he came jogging back to the house.

Shocked beyond powers of speech or reason, Charla's first thought was of the dog's stitches. She rolled onto her knees and crawled to meet him on the porch, running her hands frantically down his

stomach and fending off the drooling tongue of victory as she hunted for injury. There was blood on her fingers when she took them away--not a lot, but there it was.

Charla ran to the bathroom and came back with a box of cotton patches and tape, and the dog rolled onto his back without even being asked. The dog lay contentedly splayed on the front porch as she administered to him, the door handle of the stranger's car still clenched in his teeth. Every so often, the great plumed tail would thump once, as though he were chuckling to himself over a damned good joke. "It isn't funny!" she told him.

The dog closed his eyes and panted around the door handle, smiling the way only dogs can.

"There," she said finally, and stood up. "Gosh, I hope you don't chew that off. Maybe I'd better ask Milo for one of those lampshades."

The dog quit grinning and looked sharply at her. He rolled swiftly over and got up, backing away from her and frowning.

"Well, someone's got to think about your well-being!" she said angrily. "You are not a well dog in the first place, and the day after serious surgery is not the time to go ballistic and wrestle cars! They were already leaving! You didn't have to--"

The dog scowled and ducked into the house.

"Dog?" Charla looked after him, her feelings of anger melting into absurdity. For the first time since moving to rustic Poho, she felt like a hick--she was out on her front porch in broad daylight having an argument with her dog. "Dog!" she called, going back inside.

She found him in the parlor. The door handle was on the coffee table, and the dog was lying on the sofa with his head all way under the cushions. He sulked, ignoring her.

"I'm sorry," she said.

Dog hmphed.

"I'm sure you thought you were protecting me," she said, and gave him a tentative pat on the shoulder.

Dog raised his head out of the couch and gave her a long, despondent stare.

"You were very brave," she told him, and ruffled him behind the ears.

He sighed and dropped his chin onto his paws.

The doorbell rang.

Dog reacted at once. Ears pricked forward and hackles up, he leapt from the couch and stalked

stiff-legged just ahead of her as she went to answer it.

"Behave yourself," she said sternly. "You don't have a rabies tag, and they shoot strays in this county for biting."

The dog considered that, and backed up a few steps to let her open the door.

Captain Picard of the Starship Enterprise was standing on her front porch, badly disguised in a sheriff's uniform with a badge clipped to his belt. Deputy Jon Austin, predictably known around what passed for town in Poho as Jon-Boy, was standing just behind him, looking lazily out over her sleeping garden.

"Ma'am," said the Captain, touching his hand to the brim of his hat. "I'm Sheriff Noel Hatchett. I understand you have a...woolly mammoth," he finished, raising one eyebrow as his gaze flicked past Charla's shoulder.

"Hey, pup," Jon-Boy said with amiable calm. He dug in his shirt pocket and came out with a bone-shaped biscuit. "Want a cookie?"

Dog did not.

"This is the dog I found," Charla explained. "He's friendly. Come on in." She held the door for them, which Dog interpreted as an invitation to step forward and bristle. "Be friendly," she told him. "Or go lie down."

Dog grunted, backed up, and watched the two lawmen enter the house very warily. When they were all the way over the threshold, he stalked menacingly into the parlor and stretched out on the couch, hooking his chin over the arm so that he could keep an eye on them as they sat down on the remaining chairs.

Jon-Boy picked up the discarded door handle and gave it a thoughtful look.

"You said you had some found property," Hatchett said. "I hope you didn't just mean the animal."

"No, sir. I meant this." Charla took the necklace out of her pocket and let it slip through her fingers to pool on the coffee table.

Hatchett produced a pen, which he used to hook the necklace, and lifted it into the light. "How did you come by this again?"

"It came with the dog. Literally."

"Oh." Hatchett dropped the necklace into his palm, apparently no longer concerned with fingerprints, and took a closer look. "Huh. Where

do you suppose it came from?"

"Agelzoff and Sons, in Venice, Italy in 1917," she replied. She met their combined stares with calm. "There's an artist's signature on the setting, coded. I can get you a glass."

"I'll take your word for it." Hatchett ran the diamonds through his fingers again, then laid it carefully out on the coffee table. He brought out a one-time-use camera, snapped two pictures of the necklace and two of the dog, and slipped the camera back into his pocket like a magician completing a trick. "We'll be in touch," he said.

Charla couldn't stop the expression of surprise that poured across her face. "Aren't you going to take it?" she asked.

"Found property law goes like this," Jon-Boy began. "We make a sincere effort to locate the owner, advertise in a reasonable setting for two weeks, and if no one shows up, it belongs to you."

"Oh."

"Curious about this, though." The deputy held up the door handle Dog had bitten off, and then dropped it into Hatchett's open palm.

"Oh, that. I don't think that's related." Charla shrugged, and told them about the men who had mistaken Dog for their own Shadow.

There was a long silence as the two lawmen looked at her.

"You don't think that's related?" Jon-Boy asked at last.

"Yeah, I'm not liking that for coincidence," Hatchett said, and took another look at the door handle. "These men you're talking about, were there three of them? One dark-haired, two blond, driving a green Outback with a dented front hood?"

Startled, Charla nodded.

"We passed them on the road, but they were heading back to Poho. They said they lost their dog on a fishing trip?"

Charla started to nod, and for the first time, fully realized the transparency of that excuse.

Hatchett glanced out the window at the stale January snow. "Yeah, that just doesn't sit right, does it? I think maybe I'd ought to find those boys and have a talk. But I don't like the idea of you staying here alone," he added, giving her a hard look.

"I won't be. I'm going out with...with my boyfriend. We'll be gone most of the day, I think."

Hatchett nodded once, concisely. "Ma'am, I'm

going to leave Deputy Austin here while you're away, although I'd appreciate you not letting that get around. When you and your friend come home, it might be a good idea to ask him or some other friend to stay over. Or better yet, go to your friend's house. Just until we know a little bit more about our little fishing friends with the lost dog."

"Okay." Her hand was creeping towards the neck of her sweater. She forced it back to her side. "I promise."

Hatchett nodded again. "I'm not trying to scare you, ma'am, and I'll be honest, those fellas are doing the ass-opposite of sneaking around, so I'd consider it highly unlikely that they're actually up to no good. In my experience, someone who's really bent on making trouble is going to at least try to be inconspicuous."

"Like those two blond men," Charla said.

Hatchett looked at her for a beat or two, and then shrugged. "So I'm leaving Deputy Austin here, on the off-chance that they might show up here again with the intention of making a firmer bid for the dog. If you're not here at the time, so much the better. They'll either leave and go home, which is good, or they'll try breaking in and bump into Jon-Boy."

"Which is better," Jon-Boy remarked, smiling a little.

"Either way, we'll take care of them. You don't need to worry." Hatchett met Charla's eyes unflinchingly, and spoke his next words with great emphasis. "You are perfectly safe. All right?"

She nodded.

"I'll be in touch," he promised, and with a low word to Jon-Boy on the side, he left.

Chapter Eight

Trusting that the deputy would alert her to any visitors, expected or otherwise, Charla finally gave in to her nervous energy and went to work. She wanted to finish the shaping of the stone already mounted in the grinder, but her hands had developed an unpleasant little shake that came and went every time she let her mind focus too long on the things Sheriff Hatchett had said. Instead, she pulled out a Tupperware dish that held a single layer of polished opals and occupied herself with facing them with the clear quartz that gave them that glossy, rounded look of finished jewelry. Once that was done, she found another Tupperware container, this one half-filled with faced stones, and backed them with sardonyx, to make the fire of each opal stand out more impressively.

It was the sort of nervous labor that required damned little in the way of close attention to detail, but it necessitated concentration--not something she could lose herself in, in other words. It was, to put a finer point on it, exactly the kind of fussy little aspect of the job she tended to avoid, right up there with making and maintaining merchant contacts. Hence, all the little piles of half- and quarter-finished stones. And these were just the opals; one shouldn't forget that order lurking in her inbox for all that lapis.

Facing, backing, setting. Solid work, and plenty of it, but it couldn't satisfy her bone-deep need for action. It was just too quiet, and the shallow tak-tak of rock on rock only served to underscore the stillness. It made the air heavy, the room huge.

Easy to forget the deputy acquainting himself with her CoffeeMaster. Easy to imagine all kinds of dark corners around the edges of the oversized house she lived in, and easier still to imagine strange men--one dark, two blond--sneaking in to fill them.

It occurred to Charla that she had many times been intrigued by the intermingled puzzle of dog and diamonds. Intrigued, yes, intermittently fascinated even, but she had never been afraid and perhaps she should have been.

Never mind. Warm the stones. Paint on epoxy. Draw out the air and press together. Pay attention. The sidewalk kiosks and clearance-rack catalogues of this world are filled with the products of a lapidarist's wandering mind. Face it and let it cure.

Back it and let it hang. Set it and put it away. It's not necessary to wonder how far a scream carries on a still winter's night.

Wow. There was nothing quite like having a cop in the house to help a girl reacquaint herself with raw fear.

Charla arranged the last newly-set opal in the very last setting of a twenty-one stone necklace and placed it carefully on a velvet board with eleven other pieces--six strands, two three-stone bracelets, and three drop-pendants. She carried it to its waiting safe and locked it away, noticing only when she turned around that Dog had joined her at some point and was napping under the work table.

Looking at him, Charla felt the room, the house, the grounds outside, all collapse back into their normal dimensions, and the heavy apprehension that thickened her breath blew away. Silly to think about marauding strangers sneaking in through the bathroom window with Dog around.

But when Dog was gone? Briefly, Charla entertained a half-fantasy in which the faceless, wealthy proprietor of dog and diamonds showed upon her doorstep and was so grateful to have her heirloom necklace back that she let her keep the animal for reward.

"It's going to be hard to give you up," she said, surprising herself with the simple truth of that statement. How much easier it was to imagine letting the priceless necklace drop into some unknown hand than turning over a simple leash. A couple of million dollars worth of diamonds? Feh. But dammit, she wanted to keep the dog.

The dog, who had raised his head at once, and who now almost seemed to be frowning at her.

Charla sighed and knelt down at his side, rubbing his forehead with one hand and hers with the other. "I'm going to miss you so much," she told him. "But I bet you miss your real owner, don't you? You've probably got a forty-room doghouse with your own heated swimming pool. A butler. Jewel-encrusted collar and a matching set of food and water dishes from Stueben's. Heck, your real name is probably something spiffy and pretentious, like King Charles."

The dog came to the correct conclusion that she was blithering on at random. He dropped his head back onto his paws.

"You don't want to live here anyway," Charla continued, giving in to a sliver of self-pity. "In

some dilapidated old house on the edge of nowhere, eating Gravy Train instead of goose liver pâté. I'm probably going to get sued for exposing you to grunge as it is."

Dog heaved a sigh, got up, and left.

Charla watched him go, feeling more unhappy than ever, and wished Milo were here. Forget about the way small towns talk and forget about how fast or how soon certain things should happen in a new relationship--Charla decided to tell Milo about her unexpected visitors and ask him to stay with her tonight. She could put up with a few dirty looks and snickering at the post office as long as she felt safe tonight.

"Wurf."

Charla turned around, and there was Dog, head up and tail wagging, with a can of Diet Coke in his jaws. He came over and dropped it wetly into her hand and then lay down beside her and rested his heavy chin on her ankle.

Charla held the can against her stomach, feeling it still cold from the fridge, not to mention drooly from Dog, and smiled at him. "Thanks," she said thickly.

He thumped his tail twice. Don't mention it, sweetie.

"Ma'am?" Jon-Boy rounded the doorway, his usual expression of sleepy complacency now wrinkled in mild inquiry. "Are you expecting a visit from the vet?"

Charla leapt up, clutching her Diet Coke excitedly. "Milo's here?"

"Yup." Jon-Boy stood back to let her and Dog into the hall. "So he's the boyfriend you alluded to earlier, is he?" He sounded amused.

Charla tensed, cheeks flaming with sudden, incomprehensible guilt. "Is there a problem, Deputy?"

"No, ma'am. He's good people, as far as I'm concerned. It's just that this is the first I've heard of it, and in a town this size, that's saying something."

Charla felt herself blush that much hotter. "It's...kind of a recent thing."

"Well, I'm happy for you. For both of you. Small town living's a hard thing to handle on your own. You've been here four years, and he's been here six, and there's folks here who'd say you were both 'bout ready to pull stakes and go. Poho." Jon-Boy looked expansively around the hallway, as

though he were looking right through them, past the woods and the road, to the town beyond. "Lots of folks come to Poho looking to lose themselves and move on. We were beginning to think he was one of 'em. Heck, we knew you were. Glad you found each other is all."

The deputy tipped her a wink and moved past her to settle back in the kitchen with his cup of coffee, and Charla was still trying to think of something to say when Milo knocked.

Milo thought Charla looked flustered when she opened the door, never a good sign when one is about to embark on anything that could be considered a first date. He held out the cheaply-woven nylon leash he'd thought to bring, so thrown off his groove that he momentarily mistook it for a bouquet. Of course, by the time he remembered what was actually in his hand, Charla had already taken it.

"That's for Dog," Milo said, and instantly, his hand was itching with the need to strike his own forehead soundly and repeatedly. Of course, it was for Dog; what did she think, that he'd brought it for her? "Just, you know, until he picks one out he likes better."

"Right," Charla said, and started to hand it back, only to become distracted by the unopened can of diet soda she held in her hand. "Oh!" she said, sounding startled. "I forgot! Um, let me just wash this up and we'll be ready to go."

Milo watched her trot off to the kitchen, his eyebrows peaking. She...washed her pop cans? Well THAT took a little of the polish off.

"Dog had it in his mouth," Charla called, almost as if she could read his mind. "But I've got some fresh ones here if you want one for the road. They're all diet, though."

Oh. "Thanks, but I'm fine."

He felt awkward just standing on the porch with the door open, and on the grounds that he was only thinking of her heating bill, Milo went ahead and came inside. He shut the door, gave Dog a pat on the head, and lumbered into the kitchen to keep Charla company while she cleaned her soda.

There was a man in the kitchen.

Correction, Milo realized. There was a deputy in the kitchen. Deputy "Call-Me-Jon-Boy" Austin. Momentarily flummoxed, Milo quickly recovered his

equilibrium as he recalled a few of the less-intimate moments of the previous night's visit. "You must be here about the diamonds," he said.

Jon-Boy tipped his hat and nodded amiably enough, but his next words were deeply unsettling: "I hope not, doc."

"Let's go," Charla said, catching Milo's arm. She was smiling sunnily on the surface, but her eyes were anxious.

Milo, still looking at the deputy, did not immediately move. "Are we leaving him here?"

"For the moment," Charla said. She glanced around at the lawman, then tossed off half a shrug. "It seems so silly now. I'll explain it to you later. Come on, Dog, time to go!"

Dog made a point of pushing brutally between them instead of simply going around, although he pretended not to know how rude that was. He walked on ahead of them, wagging that plume of a tail in long, slow, pendulous motions, and when he reached the front door, he gave the knob a smack with one practiced paw and let himself out.

"How long has he been doing that?" Milo asked, letting himself be drawn away, for the moment, from both the subject and the person of the deputy.

"Oh, he could always do that," Charla said, but she paused as she closed the door, and added, "Is that unusual?"

He remembered her saying that she'd never had a dog, or even a goldfish, before. She had no reason to suspect that learning to open doors wasn't just a regular part of housebreaking. Like a new parent with a baby, everything was miraculous and nothing was abnormal. And like a new parent, she was ready to be fretful at the slightest suggestion to the contrary.

"Well, I've known dogs who could do it," he said finally. "He's just better at it than most."

Charla looked pleased. "Well, he's taller than most," she said, not quite boasting as she resumed striding to the car. "So the doorknob's at a much more manageable height. But he still hasn't gotten the hang of opening cars. Let me get that for you," she finished to Dog, and let him in to the back seat of Milo's Malibu.

Dog settled himself while Milo and Charla buckled themselves into their own seats, but he made it clear to both of them with stage-whispered grumbles and vehicle-rocking adjustments that the back seat of Milo's car was neither as spacious nor

as comfortable as the sofa in Charla's parlor. Once they were on their way, however, he seemed to enjoy the ride; his breath fogged the window in happy little pants and his eyes jumped from one interesting tree to the next.

Glancing aside, Milo noticed that Charla was wearing a near-identical expression of riding bliss on her on face, leaning contentedly into the worn upholstery and watching the world whiz by on her right.

"It's been a long time," she said, as if sensing his interest, "since I went for a ride. When you live alone, you have to do all the driving." She wrinkled her nose fetchingly, and then smiled again. "I miss going for rides."

"I'll take you for all the rides you want," he said, and took a few seconds to reflect on what a stupid thing THAT was to say. He cleared his throat, the better to punctuate a segue into meaningful conversation, and said, "When I had Dog at the hospital, I took a couple shots of him and sent them to my brother. He breeds Wolfhounds," he added, and Charla replied with a nod to show she grasped that concept, and a shrug to indicate she didn't know a Wolfhound from a Dachshund. "Well, the point is that he thinks he's identified your dog."

That got her attention. She sat up straight with a slightly stricken look in her huge eyes. "He did? Who is he?"

"Who...? Oh. No, I meant, he thinks he's identified your dog's breed."

The sigh of relief as Charla sank back into her seat was silent, but very telling.

Not without some sympathy, Milo said, "You've gotten pretty attached, haven't you?"

Charla nodded, and Dog thumped his tail against the back window. She reached back without looking to give the animal a friendly pat on the side, and when she spoke, her voice was flat with false cheer. "So! What is he?"

"According to Ben's contacts in the dog world, he's a Tibetan mastiff. It's not a standard breed according to the AKC, which explains why I didn't recognize him, but he sent a couple breed shots and stats to me, and I'm sure he's right. He's almost certainly purebred, and as far as Ben's concerned, if he weren't neutered, you'd have a show champion on your hands."

Neither Charla nor Dog looked particularly drawn by the siren song of show business.

"Does he know much about the breed?" Charla asked, her attention wandering back to the roadside. "Your brother?"

"He says they're big, which you knew. Highly intelligent, which you also knew. Excellent memory. According to legend, they never forget a face."

"I thought that was elephants."

"Easy to confuse the two, all things considered."

Dog thumped his tail again, and Milo could hear the coarse panting of his canine laughter.

It was a good start, and the rest of the shopping trip was a resounding success.

Milo wasn't much of a recreational consumer. He'd pretty much stopped sending presents for Christmases and birthdays as soon as he moved out of his parent's house, substituting lengthy phone calls on the appropriate day instead--except for his moms, of course. Both his biological mother and Mamasan, in a unique instance of perfect agreement, had threatened to guilt him to death if he didn't at least send a card, some candy, and fifty long stem roses three times a year. And really, it wasn't asking so much, considering that one had given him life and the other had sat up dabbing his fevered forehead long into his childhood nights.

But that aside, Milo was not a shopper. Fortunately, neither was Charla. Her expression as she stepped into her first PetsMart was priceless.

She'd stood rigid, one hand at her throat, the other white-knuckled on the temporary nylon leash Dog was condescending to wear until he picked one out to keep, and stared hugely around at the towers of merchandise--dog food, cat litter, fish tanks, squeak toys, wood shavings, bird seed, and cages of every size and description.

"You okay?" he'd asked, amused.

"My god," she'd managed at last. "Look at the BONES!"

When they left two hours later, some of the clerks were still laughing at her.

She bought a lot of stuff for someone who didn't really own a dog, although to be fair, she didn't really take the initiative on much. When Milo lectured her on health and nutrition, she picked up food and vitamin supplements. When he mentioned the importance of good grooming, she went through the aisles and came back with enough hygiene and beauty products to open her own doggie salon. And

of course, when they passed the toys, Dog felt compelled to add an enormous multicolored octopus that squeaked, jingled, grunted, and vibrated. The only thing Charla picked out without any prompting was a beef-basted bone of Jurassic proportions.

"You know," Milo said at one point. "Your finances are really none of my business, but..."

Charla picked up an extra-large Elizabethan collar from the little corner set aside for post-surgical products, turned it over in her hands hesitantly, and then put it in the cart. "I'm still way under budget," she assured him, moving on to study brushes.

Dog hooked his chin over the side of the cart, silently extracted the surgical collar, and snuck it back onto the shelves behind the shampoo.

"And we don't have to buy everything here," Milo added, giving Dog a stern stare.

"I know," Charla said, dropping an armload of clippers, trimmers, scissors, and combs into the cart. "Although it's kind of hard to imagine having to go someplace else. I mean, look at this place!" She started to steer the cart on to the next aisle, spotted the surgical collar poking out between two plastic bottles, and hung it helpfully in its proper place without any sign of recognition. "Oh, look, the collar aisle! Dog, do you want to go pick out a collar?"

Dog thought he could do that. He wandered ahead of them, tail sweeping slowly back and forth, stopping every few feet to give this or that collar the serious study it deserved.

"You know he's color-blind," Milo remarked.

"I know that," Charla answered, dropping her voice to a near-whisper. "But I don't want him to know that I know."

Ahead of them in the aisle, Dog abruptly and unexpectedly performed a Point. Perfectly rigid, his tail arrow-straight and ears up, one foot raised and nose quivering, Dog aimed himself unerringly at the aisle wall.

"Looks like he found something," Charla said mildly.

"Mastiffs don't do that," Milo said, startled. "In fact, most pointers don't do that!"

"He does it all the time. Every time the phone rings, in fact. He wants a halter," Charla added as she reached Dog's side. "Can you help me size it?"

"Mastiffs don't point," Milo said again, but he wasn't convincing anyone.

As soon as Charla touched the thick, black-and-brass halter, Dog resumed his usual stance, tail wagging with a great deal more enthusiasm than he'd shown up to this point. And when Milo knelt down and held the open halter out, Dog stepped into it with the same ease and excitement as a small child shrugging into a coat on his first snow day.

"You know what this is," Milo remarked, cinching the new leather tight. "This is a service halter."

"What do you mean?" Charla asked, but didn't look around. She was too busy trying to find a matching lead.

Patiently, Milo caught her hand and put it on the stiff handle that jutted from the center of the halter, smack between Dog's mighty shoulders.

Dog bristled at once.

No, he didn't bristle. He posed. His legs slid out and locked, his tail lifted and his head lowered, and his entire body coiled and waited for command.

Charla blinked at him. After a moment, Dog blinked back at her. With a sigh, the dog shook her hand off and trotted back to sit beside the cart.

Milo stood up, beginning to form some sort of observation on the excellence of Dog's training, but stopped when he saw the look on Charla's face.

She was not entranced. She wasn't impressed or even puzzled. She looked...scared.

Slowly, one hand creeping to the collar of her shirt, Charla said, "Shadow."

The dog's ears twitched.

"Shadow," Charla said softly. "Ready-up."

Milo turned all the way around and watched the dog study Charla. Just when Milo was about to conclude that the dog would not respond, the dog rolled forward and onto his feet. He stood again, slow and deliberate, all four legs evenly and precisely placed, in a pose no dog could take by coincidence. His golden eyes never left Charla's, where some dark realization was dawning.

"Those were your owners!" Charla said, her voice accusatory.

Dog ducked his head, scowling.

"What owners?" Milo asked.

"Some men came to the door this morning to claim him, and Dog...and Shadow attacked them! He practically ATE their car, and I got the Sheriff out there and everything and you!" She swung back on Dog, all her baffled hurt painted on her face for anyone to see. "You attacked them! How could

you DO that? They were worried about you!"

"Honey, er, Charla," Milo corrected, and gave her arm an awkward tug to regain her attention. "First off, dogs don't talk, so this interrogation of yours is going nowhere."

Charla and the dog exchanged a final injured glance, and then both faced Milo.

"Secondly," he continued, fighting the urge to address the dog as an equal in this conversation with only moderate success. "Considering the whole diamond angle, it may be a bit premature to assume that your visitors were actually claiming a dog they owned."

Dog wuffed and lay down, muttering to himself.

"And finally," Milo finished, "anyone that earns himself a good old-fashioned attack from a mastiff stands good odds of having done something dramatic in the past to deserve it. Dog may or may not have been defending you, but he almost certainly was defending himself."

Dog dropped his muzzle on his paws and watched Charla from the corner of his eye.

"Oh," she said at last.

"And even if you don't trust Dog's instincts on this one," Milo added, scratching thoughtfully at his beard. "I think you'd ought to trust the sheriff's. He obviously thought something was off enough to warrant leaving Jon-Boy at the house."

Charla nodded, looking at her feet. "I'm sorry," she said to Dog. "I jumped to conclusions."

Dog grumbled, but clearly couldn't stay mad at her. He gave her ankle a swift slobbering and jumped up wagging.

"Right," said Milo, ruffling the dog's ears. "And on that note, how 'bout we blow this place and grab some cheeseburgers? My treat."

Dog allowed as how that was quite possibly the best idea he'd heard today and the three of them headed off for the checkout lane.

Burgerville wouldn't let Dog eat inside, so they took their food to the park. There was the only car in the lot, and the only tracks left in the snow belonged to deer and other dogs. Dog entertained himself by investigating these, returning from time to time to the picnic table where Milo and Charla sat to demand another cheeseburger.

The snow had melted off the table, but they sat on their coats anyway, and huddled together just as

though they needed body heat to stay alive. After a few minutes of exaggerated shivering, Milo put his arm around Charla's shoulder and she didn't throw it off and run shrieking into the woods, so he guessed that was all right. The wind picked up, stirring up little snow devils on the ground and making trees hiss and rattle their branches at each other competitively.

"Pretty day," Milo remarked, raising his voice to half a shout in order to be heard.

Charla drew back and fixed him with a wry smile. "If you're going to talk about the weather, I guess the date's over," she said.

"No, hey! Give me another chance!"

She pretended to think about it, but at last she nodded and snuggled back into his side. "One more."

Milo's brain went conveniently blank. He sat and stared at the distant black smudge that was Dog gallumphing through the snow-frosted bushes and tried to think of something to say. "Pretty cold out."

He could have hit himself.

Charla snuck a glance at him from the corner of her eye. "It sure is. In fact, my fanny's just about frozen to this bench." She raised one hand to toy with the buttons of his shirt, shyly daring. "Maybe you could help me thaw it out some...?"

Milo checked behind him, just in case an SUV full of boy scouts and nuns had rolled up while they were eating, but the park grounds were as empty as only the day use lot of a public campgrounds site can be in the middle of January. There were no houses nearby, and apart from the Information Kiosk set up at the corner of the parking lot, no evidence of human life. They might as well be the only two people on Earth.

Charla was nibbling at her lip when he turned back to her, but she gave a fetching squeal when he unhooked her from under his arm and upended her over his ample lap. He gave her a couple of swats, rubbed them in to waken sensation, and then paddled away, not hard but very fast.

Her jeans were thick enough that he knew she couldn't be feeling much but there was no question of having her remove them. Even if this wasn't a public place, it was just too cold. Maybe at the end of this little interlude it would be fun to see her bare, blushing bottom steaming in the frozen air, but for now, he'd just have to suffer the inefficiency

of denim padding.

Gradually, his short, stinging slaps grew in force although he maintained his breathless, nightclub-bass tempo. He could see Charla's legs kicking out in quick, twitchy spasms and he could feel her arms around his shin clench, and he let these silent clues draw him a mental map of her secret and most tender places. The single spanking in her kitchen the night before had already taught him that she loved broad, heavy smacks centered on her bottom, and now, using his huge hand instead of the delicately-bladed wooden spoon, he could cover nearly all of her at one blow. He alternated these walloping whacks with the kittenish taps he liked best--slapping first one nate and then the other, watching them wobble and jump even in their snug denim package--sometimes breaking both rhythms to paddle at her thighs or to send swift, blistering smacks underneath to her sit-spot. Sometimes he paused just to knead her taut bottom, feeling the heat scorching off her as he cupped each throbbing globe in turn.

"I can't wait," he said, "for you to do something really naughty." He pressed his thumb into the high swell of her right hip and drew it slow and hard across to her left thigh, just to feel her squirm and hear her moan. "Not something really bad, you understand--"

"N-noo," she agreed, gasping as she crawled in place over his knee. "Just a little w-wicked. Like jaywalking."

Milo hauled back and gave her a haymaker to the full seat of her jeans, and Charla cried out as her hips jerked forward and ground against his knee. "Jaywalking is not cool," he told her sternly. "I want you always to use the crosswalks in Poho."

"There aren't any crosswalks in Poho," she panted, still shivering.

"Then don't walk to the store."

"I-I live seventeen miles from the store."

He bounced a baker's dozen of hard slaps over her in a rough spiral, saying, "Well, then what are you arguing about? Such a cantankerous little girl you are!"

She was trying to laugh, gasp, and get spanked all at the same time and it wasn't working. When he paused to massage at her tight, tender bottom again, she pushed herself up and swung around to straddle his lap. She caught him by the collar of his shirt and yanked his mouth hard against hers; she

licked his lips, sucked and bit at them, evading his kiss until she was damned good and ready to give it to him, and when she finally did, he thought he could sit and kiss her for hours. He tried to comb through the dark cloud of her hair, but she only let him do it once before returning his hands to cup her bottom, and she kept a good grip on one of his wrists to make sure he knew that was where she wanted him. With her free hand, she began to tug urgently at his shirt buttons.

A heavy paw almost as big as Milo's hand landed a solid punch to Milo's left shoulder, and Milo batted at the disturbance blindly. A matched pair of footsteps crunched around the table and then the paw socked him on the right shoulder.

Milo broke out of Charla's breathless kiss long enough to snarl, "Beat it, Dog! Human stuff!"

Dog's response was to ascend the picnic table alongside Milo and breathe heavily in both their faces. Charla recoiled with a hand clapped over her mouth and nose and Milo sat up and shouted, "What do you want, already?"

Dog, who already looked pretty irritated if the truth be known, now narrowed his eyes and then looked meaningfully past Milo's head.

Without the pulse of his quickened heart pounding in his ears, Milo suddenly became aware of a loud, rattling engine rapidly approaching. He craned his neck around just in time to see the park warden's government-green pickup roll into the lot.

Charla looked, eeped, fell backwards onto the frozen ground, and strangled a shriek with what seemed a great deal of effort.

The park warden saw them, waved, and rolled on over to say howdy.

Dog dropped back onto all fours, turned his back on Milo and sat down with a huffy thump.

"Sorry," Milo said sheepishly, and tried to pat him on the head.

Dog huffed and looked the other way.

"Oh, don't be such a drama dog," Charla chided, struggling to her feet and trying not to look as though it were a struggle.

Dog lay down, muttering under his breath.

The park warden was busily cranking down his window with one finger held up as a bid for patience on the part of his little audience. Milo expected to get a quote for a day use fee, with maybe a little lecture on not necking on the public grounds thrown in for free, but what he heard instead surprised him

to silence.

"One of you folks Miss Charla Savelle?" the park warden asked.

Charla, clearly taken aback, nodded and stepped forward, her hands knotting in the hem of her sweatshirt like a child called to recite.

"Heard your name on the radio," the park warden said. "Need you to go to the sheriff's station right now. Right now," he repeated, with a hard-looking nod.

"What's the matter?" Milo asked, and Charla said, "Why can't I go home?" in the same instant.

The park warden chose to ignore Milo completely, all his stern attention focused on Charla. "Burned down. Sheriff says not to go home 'till they finish putting the fire out," he said, and rolled his window up and drove away.

Chapter Nine

"Burned DOWN?!"

Sheriff Hatchett slammed the handset of his official telephone down in the cradle hard enough to make the potted plants lined up on the deputy's half of the desk jump. He leaned out over it, gripping the opposite edges of the long desk with hands that clearly itched to ball up and punch out at somebody, and glared hard at each of them in turn: Milo, Charla, and Dog. "Who," he said darkly, "in the HELL told you that?"

Milo tried to exchange a glance with Charla, but she had stepped forward to answer, to the effect that he actually traded looks with Dog, and that disturbed him so much that he missed Charla's question.

Hatchett's answer, on the other hand, was loud enough to shake dust off the ceiling. "NO! Who told you...Your house is standing there just as...Lady, if I knew who it was threw a scare like that into you, I'd...." Hatchett took a hard breath, and then another. He closed his eyes and slowly straightened up. When he looked at her again, it was with a tight control that might be mistaken for calm. "There was a fire, a very small and quickly contained *little* fire, and the worst damage that was done was a little scorching on the side of that set of counters you've got your safes on in the back room."

Charla nodded, but it was an anxious, unsatisfied sort of nod, and not the least affirming. She was twisting her hands in the waist of her sweater, apparently in the effort to keep from clutching at her throat, a habit Milo had already noticed was deeply ingrained in her whenever she was knocked off her pegs, but aside from the wringing of her hands, she was just as rigid as if she'd been carved out of stone. "Please, sir," she said, in a child's voice utterly unlike her own. "Was J-Jon hurt?"

Poho's sheriff had a reputation for being quick to spark and slow to burn out, but Charla's fear-filled question knocked the last shadow of anger from his whole body. It made him seem smaller, and absurdly, younger. He came around the desk and touched Charla's arm, and she fell against him for blind comfort's sake, shivering but not crying, not yet.

"Is it my fault?" she was saying, in a high,

miserable wail. "Is it my fault he's hurt? Was it the diamonds? Those stupid, stupid diamonds!"

"Hush," Hatchett said, patting her awkwardly on the back. He looked helplessly at Milo, but before Milo could move, Dog came forward and nudged Charla in the side.

She dropped to her knees and flung her arms around Dog's thick neck, burying her face in his fur and taking slow, steadying breaths. Dog leaned into her gently, licked her in the ear whenever she turned her head, and concentrated on comfort.

"It may have been the diamonds," Hatchett said, frowning down at the crown of her head. "I'm personally positive it was. But it wasn't your fault, so you can get that thought right out of your head right now. You did everything we told you to. You did everything right. If it's anybody's fault, it's mine."

"What happened?" Milo asked, since Charla was still breathing in even doses of calm and dog.

Sheriff Hatchett scowled and looked fiercely back at him, but his frustration was clearly directed elsewhere. "Jon answered the door this afternoon about an hour after you left, and two of your fellas were standing on the porch, looking extremely surprised to see a deputy instead of Miss Savelle. Jon says the car was idling, and he assumed the third man was behind the wheel, ready to peel out. That isn't his fault, either," he said quickly, defensively. "I might have thought the same thing."

Milo kept a tactful silence.

"While the two of them were on the porch trying to convince Jon that they were the rightful owners of your dog, the third man had entered the house from a rear window. He put something in Jon's back that Jon says might have been a gun, and the other two stepped up and disarmed him. They had a full..." Hatchett's eyes flicked to Charla, who had just begun to rise, swiping at her eyes. "They had a criminal kit with them," he said carefully. "Duct tape, blindfold. Other things."

Milo felt cold drop into the pit of his stomach and well out until even his fingertips were tingling. He reached out and pulled Charla into his side, just to feel her.

"Jon says one of the men stayed with him while the other two went into the back room where Miss Savelle keeps her safes. There was some heated discussion," Hatchett added wryly. "I don't think

they were expecting a multiple choice exam. In any event, they apparently rigged up something they must have thought would blow the safe of their choice, only they added a bit too much Drano. Boom."

"Is Jon okay?" Charla asked again. Her hands were back in the lower hem of her sweater.

"Yes, ma'am. He is. The two suspects in the back came flying out when the fire started, and all three of them ran for the car. Jon got free, radioed for backup, and put out the fire. Like I say, after the initial explosion, which must have been pretty impressive, the only thing that really burned was one side of the counter." A hint of his earlier anger sparked behind his eyes. "Who told you the house burned down? Was it that idiot Wicks, the park warden?"

"So everything's okay?" Charla pressed, overlooking Hatchett's last question.

"Except for the counter, and I think you can just sand down the side and re-stain. Might have to replace the top, though. It charred up really good on that side." Hatchett returned to his side of the desk and sat down, picking up a pen seemingly just to tap it against the top of a stack of manila folders. "Look, for what it's worth, I still don't think we're looking at a group of big-time diamond smugglers here. None of them were wearing gloves, none of them bothered to hide their faces, and when they ran, they not only dropped Austin's gun, but they dropped the pipe they were pretending was their own gun. All in all, we got about a hundred sets of all three fingerprints. We're running them now, and together with the description of the car they're using, I fully expect to have them locked up by tomorrow morning. These aren't professionals; they're three goons with a grade-A case of the dumb-shits looking to break into a criminal field they obviously know nothing about."

Charla nodded and Milo could feel her shoulders relax. She stepped back from his side but caught his hand in hers and squeezed. "Okay," she said, trying on a smile for size. "Okay."

Hatchett nodded, looking past them and out the window for a few seconds before turning back with an oddly guarded expression. "That said, I think it would be a good idea if you found a nice place to lie out until this thing blows over."

"Good idea," Milo said. "I've got a very comfortable couch--"

"No." Hatchett stood up again, locking his eyes meaningfully with Charla. "These guys aren't the sharpest tools in the shed, but they were smart enough to track you to your house from a phone number on a cheap flyer. By now, half the town knows you were stepping around Sugartree with the veterinarian, and if these idiots decide to try again, which considering the depths of stupidity we've seen so far is pretty likely, the next house they show up at might just be his. No, ma'am. I recommend you leave Poho entirely. Have you got family?"

For a moment, Charla looked absolutely horrified at that prospect, but then her eyes cleared and she stared thoughtfully into space. "I...yes. I've got somewhere I can go."

"Good girl," Hatchett said. "Will you be with someone?"

"Yes," Milo said firmly, and when Charla frowned up at him, he narrowed his eyes at her and said it again. "Oh yes."

She seemed to be weighing the benefits of argument, and apparently decided against it. She looked back at the sheriff. "Can I go back home and pack a few things?"

Hatchett considered this, head bowed and scowling. At last, slowly, he nodded. "Make it quick. We've got deputies stationed there now from Sugartree and Nickel City, and we'll probably see some state boys before too long, so I'm sure it's safe enough to go there, but if there's even a chance that our criminal friends are lurking around, I don't want to give them the opportunity to follow you to your safe house. In a perfect world, I could send a man with you, but...."

"I know," Charla said, and tried to smile again. "I understand."

Hatchett looked grim for a second, but he shook it off and stomped off toward the door. "Yeah, well, in a perfect world....I guess when next year's law enforcement budget measure comes up, you'll know how to vote, won't you?" He let himself out and vanished around the corner of the building, presumably to have a word with the fire department, but more probably just to give them a little privacy.

Charla's hand squeezed Milo's just a hair harder as the door banged shut, yet her expression remained calm, almost blank. "I guess so," she said softly.

Milo tried on a smile for her benefit and stepped in front of her to make her face him. "My place is closer," he said. To his own ears he sounded not just inanely cheerful, but perhaps a trifle psychotic as well, but it had the desired effect. Charla blinked and focused on him. "So let's swing by there first and pick up an extra pair of boxers and some socks and I am good to go."

"You really don't have to come along, you know," she told him, looking very small and scared and serious. "I'm going to be perfectly safe."

"Yeah, okay." He put his hands on her shoulders and looked down at her. "But will you be alone in this perfectly safe place of yours?"

She hesitated and her gaze slid toward Dog, who promptly puffed out his chest importantly.

"He doesn't count," Milo said.

Dog frowned and stalked off to open the station door. If he could have slammed it after him, he almost certainly would have.

"Well, then yes," Charla said at last. "I guess I will be alone, but I've BEEN alone for most of my life. If you're just coming to protect little old me from the big bad world--"

"No." Milo gave her a smile and half a hug, and felt her thaw a little under his arm. "Me coming along is purely for my peace of mind. I just found you; I wouldn't want to let you out of my sight on a good day, and throwing a pack of bomb-happy goons into the mix just aggravates the condition. Humor me, okay?"

Her hands crept around his waist and squeezed. "Okay."

Milo was sleeping when Charla pulled the car up to the mouth of the metal fence surrounding Foothills, but his eyes were open when she got back from unthreading the chain and working the rusted gate open. He sat up a little straighter and gave the weathered signs at either post--the professional-grade TRESSPASSERS WILL BE SHOT on the right, and the hand-written, *Assuming the dogs don't get to your sorry ass first!* on the left--each long considering stares before turning that same expression on her.

She looked mildly back at him, her hands folded on the steering wheel.

"Where are we?" he inquired.

"Foothills," she said, and put the car back in

gear. She drove over the threshold of the gate and stopped again, this time to go back and lock up.

When she got back to the car the second time, Dog was sitting up and looking just as dubious as Milo. She tried to give him a scratch behind the ears, but he ducked out from under her hand and gave an unidentifiable dead thing at the side of the road a really hard stare.

"We're where?" Milo asked, once she started driving again.

"About twenty miles west of Spencer," she answered. "In Idaho."

"Oh."

Milo joined Dog in giving the landscape out the window disconcerting looks while Charla navigated her way along the steep road that curled higher and higher up the bluff. It was a dirt road now, rough and full of ruts--some of them worn by time and the elements, while others had been shoveled out as part of the previous owner's cunning plan to keep casual intruders from investigating too closely--but it evened out at the top into a broad parking lot that U-curved around the cabin itself.

She'd never been here in the winter before. Seeing the cabin like this, in the dark and covered in snow, made it seem a stranger to her. She felt oddly invasive; she kept checking the windows as she parked, as though expecting to see a curtain twitch or a light come on.

"Summer home?" Milo was studying the cabin's unassuming exterior, and paying particularly close attention to the hand pump and the rough shower stall set up outside.

"I guess I could call it that." She parked, but made no immediate effort to get out. She only sat there, looking where he was looking, remembering how it was to see it all for the first time. "It belongs to a man named Jim Bithel. He was the one who taught me the trade, and he mined here for forty years. Some of the best and most beautiful opal in the world comes out of the ground right over there. His hands went bad--arthritis--and finally, he quit the business, but he said I could come out whenever I want, and I do. Every summer. This'll be the first time I've ever actually just stayed in the cabin, though."

"As long as it has a bed, I'm happy," Milo said, but he was looking at the outdoor shower again.

"It has three beds, I think," Charla said, and finally took pity on him and patted his hand. "And

indoor plumbing. Hot water, a phone line, electricity, and a gas stove, not to mention a workshop that makes mine look like a preschooler's Playdoh factory. It only LOOKS like the death-rattle of the modern world, I promise. Come on."

Milo wrestled with the luggage while Charla went to unlock the cabin's only door. It was dark inside, dark and stale-smelling and seemed even colder than it was out in the yard, and Charla stopped in the doorway and tried to acclimate her eyes. It felt so strange; she knew every inch of the cabin, but her memories were so intertwined with summertime that seeing it now was subtly distorting. She could not help but feel comfortable, but it was a ghostly homecoming, like visiting your school playground in the summer after you've grown.

"You okay?"

Milo sounded worried. He probably thought she was standing frozen in horror, staring at a roomful of rats and medieval torture devices. Or maybe just two blond men and their dark ringmaster.

For a second, the edges of her world seemed to blur; the fear she'd had slapped into her when she'd come home and seen the scorched walls of her workshop tried to slither up her body and in--dumb, mindless snakes of shock and misery wanting only to feed and nest and breed new fear--and she was pathetically grateful for Milo's presence. She'd tried so hard to convince him that he didn't need to be here, growing more and more irritated at the polite, passive way he had of ignoring her, and now it was all she could do not to run back and throw herself against him.

Then Dog was there, squeezing between her and the doorjamb and slobbering on her hand in passing, so that he could mosey on in and check out the arrangements. His tail swooped lazily left and right, a barometer of good humor and ease, and suddenly it was just the cabin again. No goblins. No ghosties. No strange blond men going bump in the night. Just the same happy cabin that had been her friend for seven summers and was waiting for her to turn on the lights and make herself at home.

"Charla?" Milo had left the suitcases and taken a few steps toward her, but stopped when she waved him back.

"Just trying to remember where the fuse box is," she said. "Stay where you are until I get the lights on. Milo?"

He had started back to the car, but turned now.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're here."

She left him looking after her and although she couldn't see his face, but she was sure he was smiling. She felt her way by Braille across the room to the back wall and soon had lights glowing and power flowing to the thermostat. There was water running in both sinks and the bathtub, proof that Jim had been by recently to perform his monthly maintenance, and even with the cabin stripped to the walls and packed away for the winter, Charla felt comfortably at home.

While Milo ported the luggage inside and shut up the car, Charla started feathering her nest. Jim Bithil was a big believer in plastic bins; all the bedding, all the toiletries and towels, and all the food that didn't come in cans or bottles was stacked and stored away in neatly-labeled tubs along the walls. She moved among them, working her way steadily through the plastic mountain, shaking out blankets and putting up boxes of cereal, and with every emptied tub, the place felt a little more like home.

The cabin from the outside was four walls and a roof, with one door and a minimum of windows, but on the inside, it made an effort to appear upscale. True, the "kitchen" was really just the west wall of the living room, all the appliances in a neat row with standing cupboards on both sides, but there were two bedrooms, and a full-sized bathroom, and even a little corner hutch for a computer. There was no Franklin stove, no trapdoor-capped root cellar, and the faucets had that bold look of Kohler.

"This is pretty nice," Milo said, setting the last case down and kicking the door shut behind him. He was looking at the dark eye of the television and the little shelf of videotapes above it with an approving smile.

"What were you expecting?" Charla asked.

"Moose heads and furniture made out of antlers," he replied matter-of-factly, and sank down into the cushions of the overstuffed sofa, just perfect for napping on after a long day out on the flats. "Dreamcatchers, Navaho blankets on the walls, big fish over the fireplace...you know, cabin stuff. Maybe you don't notice so much anymore, but this place looks really, really rustic from the outside."

"I think Jim's thought was that if it looked enough like a scene setting from Deliverance, that

no one would feel neighborly enough to actually come up here, where they might trip over an opal." Charla paused and ran an eye over the walls, her arms loaded with quilts, and smiled. "Jim isn't really what you call an 'outdoors' kind of guy. I think if he could have sheet rocked over the walls in here and sponge-painted them, he would have. Help me with the bed?"

"Sure."

Dog commandeered the sofa, and Milo followed Charla into the main bedroom, sending a glance at the second one as he came.

"Is this one yours or mine?" he asked, helping her sheathe a pillow.

"Don't be silly," she said.

"In this modern age, a man just needs to know where he stands. Or sleeps, as the case may be."

She shot him an amused look as she spread out a layer of quilts. "Do you need me to sign anything?"

He arched an eyebrow at her, uncharacteristically serious. "I've been burnt before," he said.

She thought of Todd Myerson and winced, her smile vanishing. "Yeah. Yeah, so have I."

He gave her an appraising stare as he unfolded another blanket. "What was his name?" he asked.

"Todd. Yours?"

"Trisha."

In unspoken synch, they came around to the foot of the bed and sat together, each facing forward but knees touching. Charla stared at the swirly dimple of a knothole on one smoothly rounded side of a log on the wall and played with the bottom of her sweater and tried not to think about what was happening at her house. She could see Milo peripherally, hear him breathing, and she supposed she ought to be shocked at herself for shacking up for an indefinite stretch of time with a virtual stranger, but she wasn't.

She wanted him to spank her--a good, solid spanking to make her forget about everything except herself and the feel of his arms around her as he comforted her afterwards. And then she wanted some soup, and she would eat the soup sitting down so that she could still feel the embers of the fire he put in her flaring up in new life whenever she moved. And then she would take him to bed, and for good or ill, that would put the last bounce in the ball of a new relationship. From that

point on, the best she could hope for was just to stand back and see how it landed.

Milo leaned in and gave her a shoulder-nudge. "If there's a phone in this place, you need to give the sheriff's station a call and let him know where they can reach you once they catch those boneheads."

"Tomorrow," she promised. "First thing. But right now, I'm not going to think about what's going on back there, not even the good parts, like Sheriff Hatchett or going home." She turned toward him, reaching up to comb his hair back over his shoulder so she could see his face. She could see herself in his eyes; it was like finding the ground under your feet again when you've been swimming for a long time, putting weight and gravity back into her world.

She wondered if she was ready.

"What do you want to think about?" he asked, catching her hand and holding it.

She thought she was.

"How safe I am when you're with me." She played her fingers through his, slowly pulling his hand back and down to rest on her hip. Her heart was pounding in her ears; her hand, resting over his, was shaking just a little. Her lips were numb, and when she spoke, she could hear anticipation stretching her words thin. "Make me feel safe, Milo."

He gave her a long, searching look and then he pulled her to him, not over his lap, but against his chest. He hugged her, and all she could hear was the steady beating of his heart; all she could feel was the warmth of his body, the softness of his shirt and the hard muscle beneath, the scratchiness of his beard where it tickled the top of her head, and his arms around her, all around her. The moment grew, caught outside of time where it could stretch out in comfortable quiet for as long as it took, and when he finally moved to lower her across his knee, she was tense but ready.

He started to spank her through her jeans, and he started out hard, quickly rekindling the coals of the spanking he had given her earlier that day. So much had happened after that she had forgotten the park, and lying over his knee on the picnic table, her breath puffing out of her in the frozen air as he slapped heat into her body. But she remembered it now, gasping as he woke all the sleeping parts of her pain and set them to wailing in

harmony.

When he had her whole bottom throbbing--a slow, relentless beat she imagined she could feel all the way through her body, even to the roots of her hair--he stood her up and bent to unlace her winter boots. She rested her hand on his back as he helped her step out of first one and then the other. He skinned off her socks, tickled her instep, and then pulled her sweater away from her waist. She started to unbutton her jeans, but he caught her wrists and held them implacably away from her body. She closed her eyes and lifted her arms, her palms upturned in unthinking supplication, and felt his hands unfasten her.

He slipped his fingers into the pockets of her open jeans and pushed them down, letting his thumbs press against her, sliding over her panties to her bare skin. She shivered as she felt them tracing an invisible seam all the way from her hips to her ankles, and for an instant, she even forgot where she was and why she had to be there, and just savored the rush of excitement his simple, slight touch brought out in her.

For an instant.

Then he was pulling her back across his lap and she went eagerly, her bottom flexing as she anticipated him. And for a while, Milo gave her the luxury of anticipation; he spanked her steadily, in a circular path around her full bottom, hard enough to sting but not so hard as to shock her mind blank of anything except sensation. But gradually, his cadence changed; he spanked too high or too far right, he spanked faster or slower, kneading her buttocks when she clenched them against him, and timing his blows to land when she had no breath to cry out.

It went on and on, interminable--the drumming of his hand on her bottom and the whistling gasps that were all the sound she could gather for complaint. She clutched at his leg, her fingers twisting and pulling at the loose folds of denim or dropping to yank mindlessly at his bootlaces. Her head tossed; her eyes darted from log to log along the wall, ultimately squeezing shut only to fly open at the next dull crack of his palm.

And then she was falling backward, falling up. He was lifting her, but not quite enough to let her find her feet. Milo pulled her off his lap just far enough to allow him to hook two fingers of one hand through the waistband of her panties. He

rolled them down, turning them into a loose binding at her knees, and then she was positioned over his knee again, feeling the cool air on her hot, bare bottom.

Her mind was awake again, crystallized by expectation. She gripped his leg and waited, mouth dry and stomach leaping. She realized that she was nervous and she hated herself for her nervousness. After all, this was what she wanted, wasn't it? Spanking, soup, sex--wasn't that what she'd just decided? She was ready, she was resolved, and what was he waiting for?

The first hard smack landed, the sound of it crisp and brittle, and she jumped without meaning to. It wasn't that it hurt so much, but it had been so long, the intimacy of skin on skin surprised her. The spanking continued, but it wasn't just some faceless experience of heat and sting, it was Milo's hand, it was Charla's bottom, it was him and her and THEM.

She wanted to get lost in it the way she had before, but the enormity and meaning of it kept intruding. He was spanking her, he was spanking all of her--not just the fun, playful parts that came out in the park, or the working side she kept with the stones in her shop, but the parts that came with three strange men who crawl in through windows and set fire to houses, and she didn't WANT to share that, dammit! She wanted to stop, now, before Milo saw that she was someone who got mussed-up hair and menstrual cramps and couldn't keep her house safe from intruders.

He didn't let her up just because she started to kick and squirm. He held on to her and spanked her and let her struggles build until her voice burst out and she threw back her head and howled. All the rotten, miserable, *damned* unfairness of the last day tore out of her, screaming up from her lungs to blow apart in the open air. She was rocking with his blows, her eyes squinched shut, her head shaking back and forth in violent negation, spitting and screaming in convulsive bursts until it was all up and out of her and she finally broke and slumped over his thigh. She began to sob, her small hands wrapping around his knee in a child's hug.

Milo did not stop, exactly, but his hand lost its punishing force. The spanking continued, but slower, softer--short slaps to keep the blush of blood high in her throbbing bottom, and long, sweet moments of cooling stillness as he rubbed her back

or stroked her hair.

Her tears tapered off into hiccoughs and sniffles, and finally, she just lay there, holding his leg with her face pressed into his thigh.

He was barely tapping her now. Mostly, he let his hand lie heavy on the hottest parts of her, sometimes kneading or brushing just his fingers at her in a half-swat. She could feel him looking at her, studying her, reading clues in her that she did not know how to hide from him.

A relationship. Not just someone who was going to be there for spankings and soup and sex, but a partner, half of her whole. Milo was hers, and it meant she had to share the good stuff and the bad...the dog and the diamonds.

Terrifying thought.

"Stupid diamonds," she muttered, but there was no heat in it. All the heat was either spanked in or screamed out and she couldn't help but feel better.

Milo got an arm under her and lay back, pulling her with him so that she lay half beside him and half over his chest. He laced his hands comfortably together around her waist and looked at the ceiling while she toyed with the tips of his beard.

"Thank you," she said.

"Anytime."

"Milo?"

He raised his head to an awkward angle to meet her eyes. "Uh huh?"

She propped herself up on his chest, staring intently back at him. "I want to skip the soup."

She didn't bother to explain that, but after a few seconds, he stopped asking.

Milo woke up in the grey light of predawn, put out his hand, and found Charla's half of the bed empty.

That was never a good sign. He got up.

He found her in the front room, sitting on the couch with Dog's head in her lap, holding something in both hands and staring at it with an expression of mask-like non-feeling.

That wasn't a good sign, either.

He found the light switch and turned it on, and she blinked, rising from her trance as though from sleep, until she looked all the way around and saw him.

The object in her hands was a rock, round, chalky, somewhat flat on one side. He thought it

might be the opal she had taken from the fishbowl in her workshop window and shown to him, all those ages and ages ago. He gestured at it, and her wide, vaguely-inquiring eyes went there obediently. "Is that...?" he asked.

She nodded. "Whichever one of them broke in...when he opened the windows, he took all the tanks and sort of stacked them to one side. They were all there, in a neat little row." She was silent for a little while, staring at it, and finally shook her head. "It was worse than the fire somehow. That he'd touched them, I mean. This was mine. It was special. And he touched it. He invaded my house and he touched it."

Milo had nothing to say to that, but he came over to the couch and sat on the arm, since Dog was taking up the cushions. He put his hand on Charla's shoulder and she started to lean into his touch without seeming to think about it. But only started to. She stopped, glancing up at him with eyes that seemed to want to be frowning, and then leaned away and looked back into her stone.

"I don't know why I brought it, really," she continued. "Except...there were all those cops there and...and I didn't want them touching it, either."

"It's special," he said, echoing her.

As if he'd argued, she nodded once, hard. "It might be the biggest stone I've ever seen...maybe even the biggest there is. It might be full fire. It could be...magnificent."

Beneath his hand, her body was still tense. Her eyes were staring and not happy.

"Or it could be nothing," she said, almost at a whisper. "Just a flash of something pretty that only goes as deep as the eye."

Color him paranoid, but Milo had the feeling they weren't just talking about the stone anymore. "You said this guy Jim had a workshop here, didn't you?" He gave her shoulder a little squeeze. "Well, since it looks like you've got a little time on your hands--"

Her hands clenched on the stone. "I...No. Someday, but not now."

"Why not?"

For a long time, she wouldn't answer, and Milo supposed that should have been his cue to get up and leave her to her self-pity, but he didn't.

Finally, she sighed and said, "Most of the time, stones like this open up on nothing. Just a skim of color over a whole lot of potch. And I...I'd almost rather have it like this...a dream of something deep

and sure and full of fire...then have something real but shallow."

"I hear that," Milo said, and before she, or even he, knew what he was going to do, he reached down and plucked the stone out of her hands.

She gasped as though she thought he was going to throw it against the wall or out the window, and at the sound, Dog raised his head and his hackles and growled around the room with sleepy menace.

"Nothing," Milo said, holding the stone just a little further out of her reach, even though she had not reached for it. "Nothing in the world just hopes its way into reality. If you want to know how deep the fire goes, you're going to have to work at it. If you just hold on to something in the rough because you're afraid it'll turn out shallow..." He turned the stone in his hands, running his eyes over the lumps and dips of the lumpy surface for a moment before locking his gaze again with Charla. "...then shallow is all it might as well be."

He caught her hand, turned it over, and dropped the stone back into her palm.

She held it loosely, but didn't look at it. Her eyes on him were wide, flickering between hurt and distant speculation.

Milo touched her hair, the side of her face, and stood up. "It's too early," he said, and yawned to prove it. "Come back to bed."

Charla looked at the rock, hesitated, and set it aside. She nodded once, timorously, then again with greater emphasis, and then got up and took his hand.

Chapter Ten

The first few days alone with someone are always a learning experience.

Charla learned that Milo's definition of a 'morning person' was someone who woke up on their own while there was still light out. She was herself in the habit of waking around six or seven o'clock, fixing a cup of coffee and perhaps some toast, and going straight to work until noonish. This was a real bone of contention between them, as it meant that Milo woke up practically every morning alone in the bed, and that really bothered him.

Charla tried twice to appease him by lying in bed until he woke up, but the experience was, at best, boring. Nothing to do but lie there in the dark, listening to Milo not-quite-snoring, and think about all the things she could be doing to that stone in Jim's workshop.

On the third morning, she sent Dog in after she got up and thought that would work out pretty well. But Milo had ambled into the workshop at nine and politely asked her not to do that again, as he had woken up on the floor with Dog sprawled out over all four corners of the queen-sized bed. He might not have woken up for a few more hours, except that Dog had been gingerly extracting Milo's sole piece of bedding--a pillow--from behind Milo's head and the dog's breath had triggered some primeval flight instinct in Milo's sleeping brain.

"So if that's going to be your alternative to being in there with me," Milo concluded, "go ahead and get up. Just leave the bathroom light on or something so I know you haven't packed up and left me in the night."

The curious mechanics of him/her/them also revealed themselves in another way. Charla had brought her laptop computer with her, and hooked it up to Jim's DSL the morning after they'd arrived in the Foothills. She'd turned it on once to make sure it worked, and then promptly forgot all about it, as was her wont. She had been peripherally aware of Milo lurking at her shoulder while she made the necessary connections, and in retrospect, she supposed she was lucky he hadn't swooped in like a vulture the instant the computer was up and running, as seemed to be HIS wont. It quickly became apparent to her that Milo's body was incapable of processing oxygen unless he was looking at pixels; if he wasn't eating, sleeping, or

complaining about how she'd left him to wake up alone in the cold still hours of the morning, he was sitting at her laptop, playing Clamdigger and chatting with his brothers on an Instant Messenger she didn't even know she had installed. But on the other hand, he also set up an electronic filing system for her various colleagues, contacts and clients, so it wasn't all bad, and besides, the last thing she really wanted was to have someone looming at her elbow while she was trying to work, even if that someone was Milo.

Being shut off from civilization can make or break a burgeoning relationship, and for the most part, Charla thought things were okay. She did not try to kid herself into thinking that three days of having to share a single bathroom and picking up each other's dirty socks made them soul-mates for life, but every day she thought they felt their way a little closer to each other and things were good. Things would probably be a little better if Charla wasn't calling back to Poho every morning for her daily Thug Update, an activity that she approached with all the grim determination of a woman scrubbing out the toilets after a New Year's party--something profoundly necessary, in other words, but nothing to look forward to by any stretch of the imagination. Hearing Sheriff Hatchett's voice telling her nothing had changed was always an abrasive scrape of reality across the delicate surface of her time alone with Milo.

And so it was Tuesday, and Charla was sitting at the grinder in Jim's workshop, pondering life in general and Milo's place in it in specific, thinking in the far back corners of her mind that tomorrow would mark exactly one week from the day she had first met either Dog or Milo.

It was a good thing to think about while she worked. Anniversaries of that petty sort required nothing from her but a glowy good feeling. She could ruminate on that and still keep her mind focused on her work. Cutting the valueless patch away from the true opal in the stone was lengthy, painstaking labor. There was no imagination in it, but it drew heavily on both instinct and skill. Until she could see more of the gem, she had to assume that it was too thin to survive any contact with the oscillating blade of the grinder. Hence, the object was to get as much of the milky patch off the opal as possible without actually exposing any of the precious stone itself.

Anyone else in this position would doubtless cough up some sentiment about how they enjoyed a good challenge, but Charla, although she enjoyed a good spanking once in a while, indulged no masochistic tendencies at work. There was no such thing as a 'good' challenge. The Devil was in the details and clearing potch was ALL detail work.

So she sat at the grinder, hunched over the work table close enough to feel the heat from the shrilling, spinning tool, not to mention all the little chips and stinging flakes that flew from the stone with every careful contact. Anyone watching her might think she was working at a snail's pace, but in point of fact Charla was really pushing the limits of how fast she could work without compromising quality because she wasn't wearing her goggles. Well, technically, she supposed she was--they were pushed up on her head, nestled in her hair like a clunky, plastic tiara--but they weren't over her eyes, and that was the important thing.

She knew better than to do it, of course. In fact, even as she'd gone to switch the machine on, she'd hesitated and thought what a dumb thing it was she was about to do. But the potch on this side of the opal was especially thin, and the jewel beneath was so big and so delicate, and Jim's goggles weren't sized right and they were kind of old and difficult to see through, anyway. So in the end, she'd left the goggles up and turned the grinder on.

She reasoned that she was still being safer than the average lapidarist. She was wearing her earplugs, after all, and her gloves. In some places, that probably qualified her for the Safety Star of the Month.

Anyway, she was almost done with this side of the stone, and when she finished up here, she'd take a good, long break to relax her eyes before she picked it up again. Almost done...maybe another hour...maybe less. And afterwards, she'd scrounge up a lunch for her and Milo, maybe toss the old octopus around for Dog, or have one of those brisk, refreshing walks in the snow she was always reading about. In the meantime, there were pseudo-anniversary thoughts to think about, just to take the edge off her brain while her hands did what hands do.

Charla hummed to herself while she worked--not a real song, just a drone about two octaves lower than the grinder itself--keeping harmony rather

than melody. She hummed and thought and carefully peeled her way that much closer to the fire hidden in the rock. She was nearly to the point where she was ready to stop when, from the corner of her eyes, she detected movement.

It was Milo, walking deliberately into her line of sight so as not to startle her and making a "Time-Out" motion with his hands. So utterly absorbed by her work she had become that the significance of this initially escaped her. She simply switched off the grinder and sat up, trying to clear her eyes of grit so that she could focus on him.

"What's up?" she said, removing her earplugs.

"You're wearing those," Milo observed, giving the foam plugs a pointed look, "and not this?" He reached up and tapped the face of the goggles twice, hard.

Now she remembered. Her hand jumped up, as though to pull the goggles guiltily into place, but apparently realized the futility of that course of action and clutched at the collar of her shirt instead. She didn't try to explain. She looked at him and waited.

Milo's brows drew slowly together, further darkening an expression that had been thunderous to begin with. "That's not acceptable," he said, either of the infraction itself or of her silence, and she flushed guiltily and dropped her eyes. "If you're going to be in this room, you're to have your safety gear with you, and if you're working with anything that has to be plugged in, then your goggles are on. Are we clear?"

She nodded and dragged her eyes up to meet his, almost flinching away again at the disappointment she saw.

"Why weren't you wearing them this time?"

She squirmed, knowing that any excuse would only sound that much more childish for being spoken aloud. "I couldn't see through them really well," she said hopelessly. "They're Jim's, they're really old."

"Then we'll find the nearest town and get you another pair, which is what you should have done when you first realized you couldn't see through them. Under no circumstances is it okay to play games with your eyes, or any other body part for that matter, and I should not have to feel like I have to police you in your own workshop." His eyes bored into hers a moment longer, and then he backed up and said, "Up and over the stool,

Charla."

Her heart slammed once, painfully, into her ribs. She had been six the last time she had been spanked for doing something really wrong, and the same trepidation that had chilled her child's bones was coursing through her now. There was nothing sexy or playful about Milo now, and the hand that unbuckled his belt and drew it hissing from the loops was a punishing hand. She did not want to obey him, but not to do so was out of the question. It would not occur to her until much, much later that she might have simply said no, that spankings should be for play only, and that Milo would almost certainly have respected that. She only eased onto her feet and turned around, her hands tying nervous knots in the front of her shirt as she bent over her work stool.

"Jeans down," he ordered, and his deep voice reverberated in her ears, made godlike by disembodiment. "And your panties. You've got ten coming to you, and you are going to take them bare."

Charla obeyed, her eyes still huge and staring, and then stood on her toes and went over the high top of the stool, crawling her numb fingers down the length of the legs until she could get a firm hold on the lower rungs. Her hair fell down around her face and across her eyes and she found herself transfixed by the only two floorboards in her field of vision, and by the line of glittering, white opal dust that had settled in between them. Her breath was slowly puffing that crease clean; she imagined it wouldn't take many swings of Milo's belt before her screams and sobbing gasps had scoured it completely.

Milo's hand rested heavily on the small of her back, securing her in place as he measured the arc of the belt against the full curves of her bare bottom. He drew his arm back.

"You don't have to count them, honey," he said, and then there was a whistling rip of air as he began to swing.

The first lick of the belt caught her right in the tender undercurve of her sit-spot, and the shock of it lifted her right off her toes. If she hadn't had such a death's grip on the lower rung of the stool, she might have skinned the cat like a schoolgirl and landed on her newly-bruised butt on the other side. But her arms had locked instinctively in a daze of pain and although her legs kicked out, she stayed in

place.

She didn't have to count them, he'd said, sparing her the futility of having to try. Even knowing that there would be only ten strokes, Charla still could not keep even a small part of her mind free of the scorching pain long enough to run a mental tally. With every swish of the belt, she would rear up on her toes and try and brace herself for the awesome shock of impact and the blistering sting that followed, but with every pop as the leather landed, her mind and body both were wiped clean in the pure fire of punishment.

Then it was done, and Charla was sobbing uncontrollably, twisting her legs together like a small child in need of a bathroom as she tried without success to work the sting out of her burning bottom without reaching back to rub. By the time Milo had rethreaded his belt, she had managed some modicum of self-control, but she still needed his strong hands to pull her upright and set her on her shaking feet.

He hugged her tight, but just for a moment, and then he took her arm in one hand and the stool in the other and brought them both to the nearest corner. Without a word, he thumped the stool down and pointed.

Charla stared at the flat, smooth surface of the unassuming furniture in dismay and burst into fresh tears. "No, I'm sorry!" she sobbed. "I mean it, I'm so sorry! Please, don't make me sit down!"

"Don't make me make you," Milo countered, his voice level and unflinching, and Charla knew there was no hope of reprieve.

She eased herself up, crying out as her bare cheeks first touched the seat and then settled her full weight upon it. The smooth wooden surface, still warm by the heat of her body lying across it, became stovetop hot under her burning bottom. Even more agonizing was the act of turning herself into the corner; the slight rightward movement felt to her as though some great hand had pressed a scouring pad to the hottest, stingiest part of her bottom and given it a vicious twist.

She sat, shuddering with uneven, sobbing breaths, her fingers digging into her upper arms as she fought to keep from lifting herself off the stool.

"I know it hurts," Milo said from somewhere behind her. "And I hate seeing you hurt. But, honey, your safety is absolutely not open for compromise, and you are going to sit right there

and think about how lucky you are that it's just your bottom that's sore."

And so she did. She didn't know how long she sat there, but she was certain it was the longest stretch of that particular increment of time that she had ever experienced. She sat, she stared at the corner, she cried off and on whenever the pain flared, but mostly she was quiet and she tried to think chastened thoughts.

At last, Milo gave her the okay, and then it was only one more scorching slide across the wooden stool and then she was down. She hobbled a little ways out from the wall, pulled up her panties, gritting her teeth, and then her jeans, and after that, the hurting finally started to ebb.

Milo pulled her against his chest and she let herself go in his embrace, almost dozing, listening to his heartbeat and her sniffing breaths, and feeling the slow burn of her bottom.

"All better," he rumbled, stroking her hair. "Now we can head on in to town and pick you up a pair of safety goggles."

She nodded, but made no move to get going.

"By the way," Milo added, still rocking her gently. "I came in here to tell you that you've got mail."

For a second or two, Charla was utterly bewildered, trying to picture Milo and a mailbox somewhere at the base of the Foothills. She wasn't even sure there WAS a mailbox down there. "What...? Oh, you mean on the computer?"

"What other kind is there?"

Charla pulled back reluctantly until Milo let her go. "Is it an order or something?"

He looked genuinely surprised at first and then faintly offended. "I don't read your mail!"

"Well, then how do you know I got anything?"

"I installed an inbox alert."

"Like," she said hesitantly, "a little voice that says, 'You've got mail?'"

"Sort of." He studied her look of complete incomprehension and explained, "Lieutenant Uhura from Trek pops up and says, 'We're being hailed, Captain'. I thought it had more class."

Charla didn't know quite how to respond to that without running the risk of another five minutes in the corner, so she forced herself to make only a coughing, noncommittal sound and went to go look at the computer.

Lieutenant Uhura was still on the screen. When

Charla ran the cursor over the actress's face and clicked, Captain Kirk's crisp voice said, "On screen!" and her Inbox came up. Hunched over the desk, one knee resting on the cushy chair she couldn't quite make herself sit in yet, Charla opened the only piece of new mail she had.

My dear Ms. Savelle,

We at Agelzoff and Sons are delighted by your interest in one of our heirloom pieces. That item was sold to a Mr. James Reardon in December of 1917 and was insured through our offices the following week. It has not been registered to another family, although the policyholder has been changed to accommodate the passing of Mr. Reardon. Our records show the present beneficiary is one Miss Marie Reardon. We have enclosed her address and phone number at the time of her application, but you should be advised that the policy has not been in adjustment since 1968. This is all the information we can provide you.

Again, let us say that your work in semi-precious stones is quite exemplary and it has given us great pleasure to hear from a colleague from so far away. We wish that we could be of more help to you, and would request that you contact us with any information you feel we should know in accordance with this matter.

It was signed 'Very Sincerely,' followed by the company signature and website banner. Below that, a two-line address in the United States and a five-digit phone number.

Charla fingered the collar of her shirt, thinking.

She supposed there was no real reason to believe that this Miss Marie Reardon had any connection to the dog...but there was a little itch at the back of Charla's brain that insisted Little Miss 1968 knew SOMETHING, all right. After all, Marie Reardon may be the beneficiary in the event of loss or theft, but the diamonds were sitting in Charla's back jeans pocket. And since the tone of the e-mail had been polite and informative and not at all interrogatory, Charla thought it safe to assume that no one had reported the diamonds missing.

Of course, it was possible that Miss Reardon had

misplaced the policy at some point in the last forty years. It was even possible that the diamonds had been stolen long ago and replaced with a clever look-alike so that she, or whoever owned them now, didn't even know they were gone. In any event, Charla decided she had a civic duty to return the diamonds to their proper owner.

"Anything important?" Milo asked, hovering at a polite distance and pointedly not looking at the computer that he no doubt longed to get back on.

"Give me a second," Charla said, and lowered herself gingerly into the cushioned office chair. Muttering echoes of her not-too-distant spanking flared up as she settled her weight and subsided slowly. She tried not to see anything portentous in that, even as she steeled herself to tell Milo a bald-faced lie: "I'd just like to give Sheriff Hatchett a call and see what's going on back home, if you don't mind."

"No problem," Milo said, shrugging. "I'll just take Dog for a walk."

Dog lifted his head off the couch where he had been comfortably dozing and gave Milo a long, incredulous look.

"C'mon, Dog," Milo continued, lifting down Dog's leash from the rack where it hung between Milo's and Charla's coats.

Dog scowled, pushed his head under the couch cushions and visibly increased his mass and gravitational effectiveness.

"Okay, fine." Milo hung the leash back up and shrugged into his own coat. "In that case, I will go on a walk by myself. And it will be a GREAT walk!" he called, opening the door. "It will be the best damn walk of my entire life! There's going to be rabbits and cats and chipmunks...and all of them cross-eyed and crippled so they can't run away!"

Dog's ears twitched, but he burrowed even deeper.

"Be back in a bit," Milo said, glowering at the furry mound covering the couch. "Dumb dog."

The door closed, the heavy tromp of Milo's boots receded, and Charla picked up the phone and called her accountant.

He didn't sound surprised to hear from her, but that in itself meant nothing; J. Dixon Wright rarely let emotion slip to the surface of his still waters, but he was always alert, always waiting for the right angle. He managed her money, invested for her future, and had full power of attorney over her

petty-cash account; he did the work of ten CPAs without breaking a sweat and on the side, he'd arranged for her business license, overseas contacts, import and export registrations, and six months of piano lessons. She was fully confident that he could provide her with a private detective on a moment's notice.

"Absolutely," Wright said, in the same level tones he used every three months when debriefing her on the state of her IRA. "Who are you trying to find and what information do you have?"

"I'm looking for a lady called Marie Reardon."

Dog's head came out of the couch cushions fast enough to send one of them toppling to the floor.

Idly, Charla reached over and patted Dog's head as she read off Reardon's old address and phone number, and named the date Reardon had been named beneficiary of the diamond's insurance. After a moment's hesitation, she even told Wright about the necklace itself and the manner in which it had come to her.

"How curious," Wright said, without sounding remotely curious. "May I ask if you are committed to the hire of a third person, or would it be all right if I ran a quick check for the woman myself?"

Charla sat back in her chair, faintly stunned. Wright was a fantastic Go-To guy and force of accounting power to be reckoned with, but she'd never thought of him as a frustrated private detective. "Can you do that?"

"There are," Wright said, with just a thin thread of humor underlining his words, "sites available on the Internet that can scan public records."

"Are there?" she echoed, absolutely dumbfounded.

"Indeed." He gave her a tactful pause to collect herself, and added, "Knowing this, perhaps you would like to locate one yourself...?"

"I wouldn't know where to look," she confessed.

"In that event," he said crisply, "I'll take care of it for you. It shouldn't take long to run, all things considered, and costs should come out to between fifty and three hundred dollars. I'll call you with the results in...I think...two hours?"

Charla hesitated again. "Can you e-mail me instead?" she asked. "I'm not at home, I'm in Idaho with the dog's vet."

"Certainly." No surprise. "I have your address. Was there another matter requiring my attention?"

"No, that's it for now." The stale-snow sound of

Milo's boots were coming back into audible range. Charla cast a nervous glance at the front door. "Thanks, Mr. Wright."

"You're very welcome." Click.

Charla hung up just as Milo opened the door. She folded her hands in her lap as if to demonstrate the innocent way in which they had entertained themselves during his absence and gave him a smile that was perhaps a tad brighter than strictly necessary. "Hi!"

Milo, stomping snow off his boots, looked at her. His brows slowly drew together in suspicion. "What's up?"

Dog sat up straight on the couch and whined.

"Too bad," Milo said, shooting the dog a cross look. "I asked you to come with me and you refused. You can just sit there with your legs crossed until the next time I want a walk."

But Dog wasn't looking at the door or his leash. His bright, oddly-human eyes had never left Charla's face, and for some reason, Charla found it difficult to meet his gaze.

Chapter Eleven

Sometime later, as the three of them lazed in the back room watching Animal Planet's latest stirring docudrama on giraffes with varying degrees of interest, Milo suddenly heard Uhura's sexy voice announcing a hail. Charla, who up until that moment had been contentedly curled against his side, sprang up and ran naked out of the room.

A view like that certainly had giraffes beat, no offence to the ungulates of the world, but still Milo couldn't help but feel a little rejected.

"Hon?" he called. "Something the matter?"

"On screen," Captain Kirk replied, and after a long moment, Charla added, "Just a second, okay? I need to make a call."

Dog, lying across the full lower half of the bed, stared in the direction of Charla's departure with an expression of deep concern furrowing his doggie face. Every so often, the triangle wedges of his upright ears would swivel or twitch as he listened to the faint murmurs of Charla's voice. And as the call went on, there was a disturbing thickness to the sound of Dog's breathing that another man might swear was a low-pitched growl.

"You know," Milo remarked, and Dog performed an action Milo had only ever seen on humans up until that moment: he turned his head towards Milo without taking his eyes off the door, affecting a kind of "I'm listening" attitude while making it clear his concentration was otherwise occupied. "It's cold," Milo continued, wondering in the back of his mind, as he did more and more often these days, just how damned smart a Tibetan mastiff was anyway. "And it might be a sporting gesture if one of us got up and got the poor girl a robe. What do you think?"

Dog's ears folded down briefly and he rolled his huge body up and over the foot of the bed. He stretched each leg individually as he touched down, shook his fur out vigorously, and then padded over to the closet. As Milo watched, the dog pawed the French doors open, bit down a bathrobe from a coat hanger, and carried it out of the room, pausing twice to try and bundle his burden into a more manageable mouthful.

Not that Milo was listening, but he noticed that while he couldn't make out more than just the pitch and tone of Charla's voice during her phone call, he heard her distracted "Thanks," clearly enough as she accepted Dog's gracious present. Then, to his

sleepy surprise, he heard her say, "Can you bring me a pop, please? A soda pop? Good boy," and he had to grab the pillow out from under his own head to quickly smother the incredulous howls of laughter that shook out of him.

Every time he thought he was getting a handle on the way that woman's mind worked....

"Thanks," he heard Charla say as he cautiously lifted the pillow off his face, and then he heard the crack-phsssh of a freshly-popped can of Coke.

Milo was still smiling, but now his humor was directed inward in grudging acknowledgement of his own jealousy for the world Charla lived in--a world in which it was perfectly natural for dogs to walk themselves and set out your wardrobe for you and bring you refreshing beverages straight from the fridge. All of this was perfectly normal and above-board and yet something as mundane as a laptop computer--a computer SHE owned--was treated as though it had fallen to Earth in an alien capsule and she was just the proto-ape whose job it was to keep an eye on it until its true masters returned.

Charla's innocence in the ways of computers seemed to Milo more than mere technological illiteracy; it was just that she had virtually no interest in the manifold ways in which the greater part of the world worked. Every so often, some small facet of Outside life, opal-working for example, would overlap her personal space and then she would demonstrate a clear intelligence and keen perception, but at all other times, she seemed perfectly content to drift along in total ignorance. It wasn't just tunnel-vision, it was tunnel-existence, and it was completely outside of Milo's comprehension. He couldn't imagine how she could look at anything--a car, a television set, the warp drive of the Starship Enterprise--without experiencing the fervent desire to know how it worked, or at least get the GIST of it. Sure, he neutered dogs for a living, but he could also install a sink, miter a corner, point to a camshaft, and power a light bulb for ten minutes with a couple snips of copper and a potato.

In short, Milo believed that curiosity was a human drive roughly on a par with the need to breathe. Watching Charla meander blissfully through her own private reality made Milo feel at times the way he imagined those marine biologists felt when they discovered silicon-based plants at the bottom of the ocean.

And, too, there were times when Milo suspected that Charla's steadfast disconnection was more than just a means of keeping her life orderly and simplified--it was a way of freezing out any attempt to share the parts of her too unpleasant to hang out in the open. Milo knew better than to assume that shacking up in the Foothills for seven days gave him proprietary rights to all of Charla's emotional lockboxes, but it bothered him all the same that she only shared the good stuff. He supposed it should have made him feel catered to, knowing that she was going so far out of her way to show him her best side all the time, but it didn't. It made him feel like a houseguest, made him wonder when his welcome was going to wear out.

Still, there were times when he really envied her. Her detachment from the ordinary lent her an aura of naiveté that was akin, in some odd fashion, to virginity. There was a newness about her, a way of looking at the world that was tinged with wonder. He'd been a kid the last time he'd felt that way; curiosity, he discovered, is a conquering drive. To be filled with wonder is to simply *accept*. He couldn't do that. It was too much in his nature to question.

Charla reappeared in the bedroom, now demurely attired in the bathrobe Dog had brought her, sipping on a can of Diet Coke. He thought that she looked withdrawn and strangely guilty, but had to admit that the turn of his thoughts just recently weren't exactly lending him an objective outlook. With an effort, he focused his attention back on the TV, submerging himself determinedly back in the world of giraffes.

"What's up?" Milo asked.

"Oh, nothing," Charla said, and said it with the sort of nonchalance reserved for very bad liars. She swung her legs up onto the bed, but didn't wriggle on over to his side. She drew up her knees and looked seriously at the television and kept her thoughts to herself.

Dog padded into the doorway and sat down, ears up, intently watching her.

Milo tracked his eyes from one to the other, girl to dog to girl, and finally rolled onto his side and stared at Charla until she looked around at him. "What's up?" he said again.

She gazed back at him, her hands knotting in the hem of her robe, crunching and rolling and twisting at the fabric the way she always seemed to

do when she was anxious about something. "It's nothing," she said at last. "Really. I just...got some news and I'm trying to think what I'd ought to do about it. It doesn't have anything to do with those guys who broke into my house and it's nothing you can help me with. I just...need to think."

"You want to talk about it? I'm a good idea man."

She smiled, but it was just a ghost of her usual humor. She shook her head. "No. I...It's one of those things where you already know what you have to do, you just have to talk yourself into it. And I don't want to talk about it any more," she added firmly, and used the remote to turn up the sound of giraffes clopping across the plains. "You want a pop? Dog can bring you one."

Milo looked at Dog, who flattened his ears and stared back at him. "I'll take a bottle of beer if you've got one around," he said finally.

Dog didn't move.

"You have to phrase it in the form of a question," Charla explained. "Like Jeopardy."

"Okay." Milo sat up and whistled sharply through his teeth to re-attract Dog's eye. When he had it, he said clearly, "Can you bring me a bottle of beer? Beer? In a bottle?"

Dog got up and left.

"See? He's a good dog," Charla said, distracted (or pretending to be) by an infomercial for a flippable waffle pan.

"Not that good," Milo countered. "He went into the bathroom."

And so he had, returning in short order with a bottle of aspirin in his mouth, which he deposited wetly in Milo's hand.

"No. Beer. A bottle of beer."

Dog frowned, watching Milo's face very closely, then went back into the bathroom. This time, he came back with the entire contents of the medicine cabinet: two bottles of vitamins, some eye drops, and an ancient prescription with the label worn off.

"Beer!" Milo shouted, exasperated to the point of laughter.

Dog barked right back at him, looking every bit as frustrated.

Milo rolled his eyes at Charla, who was smiling with a bit more animation than she'd previously shown. "Help!"

Dog bolted from the room.

Charla and Milo blinked at each other. She swung one leg out of bed and he sat up a little straighter.

"Did he hear something?" Charla asked uncertainly.

"I don't--"

Dog came back on the run with the handset of the telephone in his mouth. The telephone was not intended to be a cordless model, although Dog had unfortunately modified it in that manner, and Milo winced as he accepted it, hoping this Jim friend of Charla's was an understanding sort.

"Whoops."

"Don't worry about it," Charla said, reaching across Milo's lap to assure Dog with a few head-pats that the emergency, such as it was, had passed. "I'll, um, go to town tomorrow morning and pick up a new phone."

"I'll go with you," Milo offered. "Least I could do, seeing as how it was my fault this one got fetched right out of the wall."

But Charla was shaking her head, and that odd, guilty glint was back in her eyes. "Oh, I could be there and back again before you even rolled out of bed! Don't bother yourself, Milo."

"I can make an effort to get up early. For that matter, we could go right now. We'll have dinner someplace where we don't have to wash the dishes afterwards. Maybe pick up some fresh food for tomorrow, too, because no offense to this Jim of yours, but if I have to eat another can of soup--"

"I'll go shopping on my way back. Really, it's no trouble."

"Why don't you want me to come?" he asked, bluntly.

Charla looked shocked, as though she honestly believed her efforts to exclude him were subtle enough to have gone unnoticed. She looked away, toying with the hem of her robe again. "I'm not. It...I...It's just cabin fever," she said suddenly, and nodded once, to add conviction. "You know, I just want to get out for a bit, eat up some air and drive around until I feel like I can come back and sit quietly while I wait for the all-clear siren to sound back home."

Milo slipped an arm around her shoulders and she curled against his side contentedly and let him pull her close against him. "Honey, I know it's been hard, but it can't last forever."

"I know that," she whispered. "But...if I had a

way that I could...make things happen a little faster, you wouldn't stop me, would you?"

"Do you have any idea," Milo said after a moment's silence, "how ominous that just sounded?"

Charla giggled, but it was a singularly forlorn sound. She pulled gently back and sat up on her side of the bed, shaking her head. "Oh, just ignore me. I'm not even making sense to myself."

"Well, hang on now," Milo said, slowly sitting forward. "I think maybe we need to keep talking about this."

"No, we don't," Charla said, and hopped out of bed. "I'm hungry. Want some soup?"

Without waiting for an answer, she left for the kitchen, still smiling sunnily, but with one hand creeping steadily for a strangle-hold at her own throat.

Milo looked after her, deeply but imprecisely unsettled.

After an awkward lunch, Milo had suffered an equally awkward ride down to the nearest town that had both a hardware store and a grocer's open at the insanely late hour of seven in the evening. When he commented on Charla's silence, she had steadfastly maintained nothing was wrong and then transformed herself into a frenzied font of endless chatter to compensate. Milo, startled by the vehemence of Charla's sudden convictions on the subject of the weather, had attempted to include himself in the conversation, only to discover that there was NO conversation--there was Charla, talking. It wasn't any different from her earlier leaden silence, really, except that it was louder.

Milo's mood was distinctly darkened by the time they'd returned to the cabin with Charla's new safety goggles and a cordless phone. It didn't help that Dog was acting just as tense and out of sorts as Charla, with the glaring difference that while Charla was distracted by her internal demons, Dog was keenly, almost painfully, focused and the sole subject of his focus was Charla. As she paced the small interior of the cabin--washing the handful of dishes accumulated since breakfast, dusting, polishing fixtures--Dog did his impersonation of a stone statue, his eyes hooded and his powerful body poised to wreak a gargoyle's vengeance on his victim. Charla didn't even appear to be aware of

the animal's scrutiny, but it bothered Milo more and more and finally he'd forcibly dragged Dog out into the snow for some exercise.

The shaggy mastiff wasn't interested in a walk, but once the cabin door was shut, he'd seemed to give up and had trudged dolefully in Milo's shadow across the winter rock fields. He didn't stop to sniff a single tree or investigate a single strange track. He'd almost stepped on a chipmunk and his only reaction as the rodent raced off was a slight twitch of one ear.

"What's the matter with you?" Milo demanded, giving the leash a curt yank to get Dog's attention.

He got it, all right. Dog clamped his teeth around the leather lead directly below Milo's grip and wrenched it free. He growled once, glaring at Milo out of the corner of one eye, and then lowered his massive head and commenced to walking himself back to the cabin.

Milo watched Dog's retreat with a cautious eye, rubbing absently at the rope-burn the animal had left across his palm in the act of removing his leash. "Hey," he said. "Come on back here."

Dog kept walking.

"Shadow!" Milo called crisply. "Ready up!"

Dog took two more steps, but they were slow ones. After that, he stood in the snow, holding his limp leash in his mouth, seeming to consider Milo's request. At last, he shook out his fur, sighed, and assumed the service dog's posture.

"Now come here."

Dog wheeled about ponderously and stomped through the snow back to Milo's sides. His jaws were working, chewing and gumming on the lead as much as he could, and spitting the whole drooly mass into Milo's open hand when he reached him. 'So there,' Dog seemed to say, and sat down with his broad back to Milo.

Milo tried to dry off the leash as much as possible by rolling it over his pants leg, muttering anti-canine epithets the whole time in a voice he dearly hoped was not pitched too low for Dog to hear. If the way Dog's tail had started thumping was any indication, Dog could hear him just fine.

"...don't know what's gotten into you, either of you. It's not bad enough Charla's come over all moody, you've got to jump on the PMS bandwagon and pick up a sousaphone, don't you, you rotten dog. I just wish you'd remember I'm not the bad guy, here, I'm the guy who has to periodically take

your temperature, and you might want to remember that I can make that easy or I can make it hard. You--"

Dog's whole body suddenly exploded out of the snow and he tore off over the field toward the cabin.

The leash was six feet long and wrapped around Milo's wrist; the split second he had after Dog took off was not long enough to shake the damn thing loose and when the dog hit the end of the slack, Milo was pulled off his feet with such violence he might as well have been tied to a train. He executed a flawless belly flop onto the snowy flats and, using himself as a sled, helped Dog to re-enact a one-fiftieth-scale representation of the Iditarod dog challenge. Some supernatural instinct had Milo tuck his head and tightly close his eyes and mouth, but he was still using his scalp as a snowplow, and the winter terrain that wasn't whistling by beside and beneath him was taking a shortcut through the neck of Milo's shirt and out his pants legs.

It was, as they say, a short ride, but a memorable one: Dog swung to a stop and Milo tumbled in a wide arc after him, his momentum cut short by a clanging collision with the back tire of Charla's car.

"Oh my gosh!" Charla gasped, and Milo soon felt her warm hands patting at his cheeks.

Milo opened his eyes, slapped his way into a somewhat-seated position, and tried to get the world to stop spinning.

"Say something!" Charla pleaded.

Milo looked at her. "Aaaugh!" he said, conversationally. He clawed a little more snow out of his eyebrows, un-tucked his shirt and dumped its cargo of slush into his lap, and finally shook a little more sense into his head.

"Say something else!" Charla insisted, and leaned back to show her hand. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Thr--" Milo stopped mid-count, his eyes focusing hard for the first time on the car he rested up against. Specifically, on the open driver's door of the car and the little overnight bag lying on its side on the ground just before it. He frowned and looked up at Charla. "Where are you going?" he asked.

"Where? What?" She got up fast, and color Milo paranoid, but she sure looked an awful lot like she was blushing. "I'm not going anywhere!"

"Why are you putting your bag in the car?" Milo tried to gather his legs under him, and Dog slipped under his arm and braced his heavy body so that Milo could stand up.

"My bag?" Charla swung around, her hands twisting in the hem of her coat. "What bag? Oh, no, that's...I was getting that out of the car. It has...tampons in it!" She swept down on it, scooped the bag up to her chest and backed away from the car like it was on fire. "I'll just take these into the house!" she babbled, and fled.

Milo watched her go, his head still spinning and ice melting into some interesting crevasses. Finally, he reached over and closed the car door. He looked down at Dog.

Dog looked up at him.

"Good boy," Milo said in a low, thoughtful voice.

Dog wagged his tail once and aimed a growl at the cabin's front door.

Together, they went inside for the confrontation.

Charla was in the bedroom, standing in front of the closet with her overnight bag in her arms. Every so often, she would seize a handful of its contents, fling it into the closet and then stand rigid, gnawing at her lip and looking wide-eyed and anxious at the corner of the ceiling. Then she'd lunge forward to recover whatever she'd unpacked, and stuff it furiously right to the bottom of the bag. A few more seconds of silent standing, and the whole cycle would repeat itself.

Milo waited in the bedroom doorway, absently rubbing Dog's ear as he watched Charla work herself into an ulcer. "What's going on?" he asked quietly.

Charla looked over her shoulder at him, her expression distant and miserable. "I'm sorry," she said.

Well, he'd known it was too good to last. Milo kept his hand steady on Dog's head, trying to draw on the animal's Buddha-like inner strength to keep his composure, already fighting the inner flare of howling anguish that accompanies a break-up, already wondering what in the hell he'd done wrong. "Why?" he said, meaning, of course, why are you leaving me, why couldn't this work, why am I such a hopeless loser?

"I'm glad you caught me," Charla said, suddenly flinging the overnight bag onto the floor and running to throw her arms around him. "It's just happening so fast."

He patted her back, still grappling with the numbing-over process.

She pulled back to arm's length and looked solemnly up at him. "I found the lady who owns the diamonds. She lives in Boise! Just Boise! Can you believe it?"

"Um." Milo blinked several times, wondering if this was somehow related to the break-up, or what.

"Actually, I didn't find her, I had my guy find her. My accountant guy. Well, he's more than just an accountant, he's kind of a...well, I don't know what he is, really, but he does everything and I asked him to find the lady who used to own the diamonds and he did." Charla raked her fingers through her hair and started pacing the bedroom floor. "And she only lives in Boise! That's, what? Five hours away? That's nothing! So I called her and I asked her about the diamonds, very casually, because the diamonds were never reported stolen and she might not even know they were gone, but she jumped right at it and wanted to know if I'd found them and I asked if we could meet, but--"

Milo was beginning to suspect that no one was going to break up today. "What does all this have to do with you sneaking off in the car while I'm walking the dog?" he asked.

"I'm getting to that," she said patiently. "I asked Mrs. Reardon if we could meet--"

Dog growled and Milo patted his head absently.

--and she said yes, but her health isn't very good. She sounds really old, and she says she's been ill for several years, and she's very nervous about meeting a total stranger, and I can certainly understand that, so I said that you and I could meet her someplace public, but she said she couldn't leave the house and she was really upset about the fact that you're a guy and we'd outnumber her and everything, so I said I'd come alone, but I didn't know how to tell you without making it into such a big deal and I was afraid to just take off in the night because you'd wake up alone and think I'd left you or something ridiculous--"

"I would not," Milo protested, feeling heat crawl into his face.

"Well, of course you would," she argued, shooting him an irritated glance. "You think that when you wake up and I'm in the bathroom. I can just imagine your reaction if I left you a note saying, 'Gone to Boise, back tonight, soup in the fridge.' And...and I just didn't think you'd let me go

alone, because you've got these really primeval notions of just what a girl is capable of accomplishing without a man handy--"

"Now that's really not true!"

"Yes it is. Of course it is. And it's all right most of the time, but this...I just knew this was going to hit your buttons, Milo."

"And why is that?" he demanded.

She looked at him for a long time without speaking, and suddenly heaved a sigh and sank down onto the side of the bed. "Because I'd be going alone to some stranger's house. I know, I know." She put her hands up to the side of her head and closed her eyes. "Milo, I really, REALLY want to get rid of these damn diamonds. Really. I didn't want to sneak out on you, but I've got to go to Boise and I've got to go alone. Are you going to give me a hard time or what?"

There was no venom in her words. She looked tired and utterly defeated.

Milo didn't like the idea of Charla wandering into a stranger's house with a couple million dollar's worth of diamonds in her back jeans pocket. To borrow her own words, he really, REALLY didn't like it. Really. But if the owner was really as old and weak and sick as she said she was, then Milo couldn't, in good conscience, demand that she risk her fragile health just for Milo's peace of mind. Of course, this raised the question of whether or not the old bird might be exaggerating her frailty just so she could lure Charla into her wrinkled clutches, but surely that scenario was just the imagining of Milo's suspicious and cynical mind. After all, wizened old evildoers simply don't live in Boise, Idaho, and besides, the three goons who had tried to blow Charla's safe had all been young men.

Of course, if wizened old evildoers DID live in Boise, Idaho, it stood to reason they'd have an assortment of able-bodied minions scattered across the far reaches of the northwest states.

No, but seriously, there had to be a compromise.

"I'll tell you what," Milo said slowly. "You give me this woman's name, address and phone number. You, me and Dog will drive into Boise, have a nice lunch at some corner cafe, and then Dog and I will hang out in a park somewhere while you drive on up and see Miss Daisy."

Charla raised her head, her eyes gradually animating as she considered.

"You can have your interview, check out the lady's credentials, and then come on back and pick us up when you're through." He raised one finger, leaning toward her to emphasize each syllable of his next point. "Under NO circumstances do you take the diamonds with you to meet this person. If she asks, tell her the necklace is in police custody until proof of ownership is determined. If the lady checks out, you'll have the diamonds shipped to her or the lawyer of her choice, got it?"

Charla opened her mouth, closed it again, and nodded.

"Naturally, if I don't hear from you in an hour, I will have a S.W.A.T. team burst in through the sweet old dear's parlor window and shoot up the place. Agreed?"

She sagged with a smile and then flung herself into his arms. "Agreed!" she said happily.

"I'm going to spank you," he murmured, stroking her hair. "But not right now. Tomorrow morning, just before we leave, so you can sit in the car for five hours and think about what it does to a guy to have to catch his girlfriend running out on him without so much as a 'see ya'. Got that?"

"Got it. I'm sorry, Milo."

"Okay then. All settled. Let's go to bed."

She put a little extra squeeze in her hug and kissed him primly on the corner of his mouth. "Let's!"

Chapter Twelve

It was five-thirty in the morning when Charla decided she just couldn't stand it anymore and she had to get up. Even though she'd been awake until nearly midnight trying to shake out her nervous energy with a rigorous bout of opal-working, Charla just couldn't squeeze any more sleep out of her body.

Quietly, carefully, so as not to wake the slumbering giant who shared her bed, Charla slid out from under the blankets and darted out of the bedroom, snatching up the day's attire from the back of her bedside chair on the way. Once the bedroom door was safely closed, she relaxed and slipped into the bathroom for a leisurely morning shower. She didn't even have to worry about saving any hot water for Milo; with any luck, he would sleep so long he wouldn't have time to do anything but roll out of bed and into the car. No shower, no breakfast...and no time for spankings!

Wishful thinking, that. Milo struck her as the sort of person who took the Jell-O approach to spankings--there was always time to fit 'em in and always room to swing his arm. Still, a girl could dream.

But for now, time was all about a forty-minute vertical soak under the showerhead while the little bathroom was slowly transformed into a sauna. Charla lingered in the heat of the spray, breathing steam and dozing happily, her thoughts lightly circling the merry moment when she could drop those rotten diamonds into poor Mrs. Reardon's aged, palsied hand and be done with them forever. She finished, as she always did, by shutting off the hot water and letting pure jets of cold sluice over her for fifteen seconds exactly, firing her brain cells incontrovertibly into action and setting her skin alive with a delicious tingle. Then she hopped out, toweled herself briskly dry and dressed, ready to face the day.

The diamonds had been in the front left pocket of yesterday's jeans, and Charla took them out now and tossed them from hand to hand, wondering what to do with them. 'Under NO circumstances,' Milo had said, but Charla was determined to dump the diamonds and she wasn't waiting another damn day to do it. As soon as she saw Mrs. Reardon's insurance papers proclaiming her the rightful owner, those diamonds were as good as gone from Charla's

young life. It was only a matter of how to sneak them past Milo. If there WAS a spanking (ha, as though the word 'if' were in any doubt), he would either hear them jingling as her jeans came down, or he'd see them when they fell out of her pocket as she was pulled over his lap.

In a moment of brilliant insight, Charla propped her foot up on the bathroom sink and pulled the leg of her jeans up and her sock down. She carefully wrapped the necklace around her ankle three times and fastened the clasp, then replaced her attire, taking care to tuck the drop-strands of diamonds neatly into her sock. She gave her foot a good shake, but nothing came loose and there was only the faintest suggestion of a jingle, easily overlooked. A few practice steps around the bathroom proved that mere walking could not betray her; as long as she remembered not to kick during her spanking, Milo would never know she had it.

Flushed with triumph, Charla went into the kitchen for a self-congratulatory cup of coffee and some toast.

Dog was sleeping in front of the door, and he raised his shaggy head as she neared and gave her a long, suspicious look.

"No more sneaking out," she promised, dumping a healthy scoop of Folgers into the coffee maker. "I just want to be ready to go when Milo wakes up."

"Humph," said Dog, and dropped his head back onto his paws, still giving her the narrow eye as she bustled about preparing toast.

"I'm not even going to tell the lady about you," Charla said cheerfully. "I've decided. I mean, if she asks if I found a big, black Tibetan mastiff, I guess I'll have to say yes, but if she doesn't, I'm not going to volunteer. Although..." She slowed her movements, mid-butter, as a new thought occurred. "She did say she'd been pretty sick, and she's essentially home-bound. Maybe you were her service dog?"

Dog snorted.

"Well, okay, I'll ask if she lost a dog, and if she can't describe you, then tough luck for Miss Marie Reardon."

Dog growled.

"Hush," said Charla. "Eat your breakfast."

She set a bowl of kibble and a plate of buttered toast on the table and Dog finally got up and came over to eat.

"Is that dog eating off the table?"

Milo's voice, rich with the rolling thunder of the newly-awakened, brought Charla spinning around, and even raised Dog's head out of his breakfast bowl, although he gave his chops an insolent smack as he did so.

Milo was leaning against the wall for support, hair and beard bedraggled with sleep, but his eyes were definitely open.

"Of course he eats off the table," Charla said finally. "You told me yourself that big dogs should have their meals elevated."

"Yeah, but I meant he should have his own table."

"He's already got his own couch. I'm not buying him a dinette set."

Milo shuffled over and dropped into a chair, glaring at Dog. "You do realize you're in my place, right?"

Dog considered the patch of table directly beneath him for a few seconds, sneezed on it, and resumed eating.

"You," Milo said, "are a rotten dog."

Wag-wag-wag went the tail.

"I didn't mean to wake you," said Charla, setting a cup of Folgers's finest in front of him.

"Naw, it's all right. I meant to get up early. Maybe not this early," he added, glancing at the clock over the stove. "But that's all right. I still need to get cleaned up, and you're going to want to freshen up a bit after the spanking." He sipped at his coffee, added a little sugar and sipped again with a grunt of approval. "How many hours is it to Boise?"

"Mapquest said five."

"So, what, we should plan for six?" Milo cocked his head to one side, his brow furrowing as he did the math. "And she wants to see you at three. Assuming we want to walk around a little, maybe grab a bite to eat before you take off again, we should leave here in about two hours. I'd better get my shower now," he concluded, rising.

"We're almost out of hot water," Charla admitted, and when he sat back down and looked at her, she offered only a sheepish shrug. "I didn't think you'd be up this early."

"Little girl, you can answer for that, too," he told her. "Making a man start a six-hour drive on a cold shower. You should be ashamed."

"Well, it only needs a little time. Let me cook

you some breakfast and maybe by the time you're done, it'll be okay."

"Trying to win me over with food, eh? Well, it won't work. Can I have waffles?"

Charla checked the cupboard where Jim kept his kitchen appliances. "Yes."

"Okay then. I'll eat them, but I won't be placated. C'mon, Dog, let's go for a walk while the woman does her kitchenly duty." Milo got up, dropped a kiss on the nape of Charla's neck, and stepped into his boots on the way to the door, which Dog considerably left open for him after he went outside.

The instant Milo was shut outside, Charla nervously hitched up her pants leg and gave her foot a hard shake, but it passed the jingle-test yet again, even after a good stomp to try and dislodge it. Then, afraid to be caught fussing with her socks or the lower hem of her jeans, she quickly put herself back together and plunged into the business of waffle-making.

By the time Milo's heavy tread sounded on the cabin's porch, she had a plate ready to set before him, and even a burnt one for Dog. She gave herself a final, silent warning not to think about the diamonds or where they were hidden, just in case Milo's psychic antennae were a'quiver today, and then pasted on a big smile and turned toward him with plate in hand.

He was just stepping out of his boots again, and he had one fist up on the couch to help balance while he pulled them off one at a time. It was a fist, not an open hand, because he was holding something, or rather, some *things*. Long, thin, wooden things.

"I found an apple tree," Milo explained, catching sight of her expression as he came back into the kitchen. He set the switches down one at a time so that they leaned up against the refrigerator door--one, two three--stark black stripes against a white field.

Charla only stood, holding the plate of waffles in both hands before her like a shield, staring at them. She'd never been switched before, wasn't sure how to feel. She supposed the spanking was justified and had resigned herself to a degree of severity that would compensate for the crime, but she'd been expecting another round with Milo's belt. Charla understood belts. They hurt a lot, but they were pretty temporary, all things considered. The

mechanics of a belt being what they were, you could only hit a lady so many times, and fewer blows meant a speedier recovery. She'd planned on, say, twelve of the best, and then an extremely painful first half-hour in the car, but that she'd be more or less herself by the time they got to the interstate.

A switching....

The magazines Charla had at home had switching stories that tossed off numbers like sixty and eighty and a hundred and twenty. There were THREE switches staring back at her from the refrigerator door!

Milo cleared his throat, and Charla jumped a little and stared around at him. Her eyes felt like they were bigger and rounder than the plate in her hands.

Milo returned her gaze curiously, then hooked an arm over the back of his chair and looked at the switches, and finally looked back at her. He did not appear much moved by her distress. "I didn't make you cut your own," he pointed out.

"Thank you," Charla whispered.

Milo held out his hand and after a moment, she gave him his food. He started to eat and she stood over him, her eyes moving from the disappearing breakfast to the neat row of switches, trying to estimate how much time she had before...well, before.

"I want to skip this," she announced suddenly, and blushed when Milo didn't even glance her way. "I don't want a switching."

"Why not?" Milo asked, calmly, conversationally. He still kept his eyes down, addressing his waffles rather than meeting her in challenge.

"Because." Charla's eyes kept sliding back to the refrigerator door. "Because it's a dumb reason to get a spanking at all. I was willing to humor you, but I'm not going to get switched for it."

"It?"

She had to take a few seconds to refocus on him, blinking several times as though her eyes were trying to compensate physically for the process of switching mental gears. "What do you mean, it? The...thing. What I did."

Now he looked at her. "And what did you do?" Funny, he didn't look like he was making fun of her.

"I tried to sneak out instead of telling you where I was going. But I didn't actually make it out of the

driveway," she added, drawing her brows together as she made this crucial point. "Heck, I didn't even make it all the way into the car, so it's not like I actually committed a crime, here, and I don't think that INTENDING to commit a crime is the same thing."

Milo said nothing. He drank some coffee and sat back in his chair, meeting her indignant gaze with a kind of bland watchfulness that Charla suddenly found absolutely infuriating.

"Well, I don't! I should only get spanked for things that I actually do, and I didn't actually do anything last night. Now, if you absolutely have to spank me this morning, then I'm mature enough to let you, but you are not taking a switch to me, let alone three of them! I refuse!"

"Do you know what I thought when I saw you standing out there by the car with your overnight bag at your feet?" Milo asked, in the same even tones tinged with curiosity that he had used to say 'it?' moments ago.

Charla, working her way into a good lather on the subject of just what did or did not deserve discipline, found herself utterly derailed by those calm, polite tones for a second time. "W-what?"

"I thought you were leaving me. Just leaving. Pack up and get gone while I was outside walking the dog, and I'd come whistling in ten minutes later and find a note on the bathroom mirror written in lipstick saying, 'It was good while it lasted, See ya'."

Charla's mouth dropped open as the calm words that Milo spoke found meaning in her ears. Hurt dropped into her stomach from her heart and then ballooned out in a rush of twisting, churning heat. "I'd never do that, Milo!" she cried, feeling an oddly-cold flush crawling up from her neck to cover her face. "Never!"

"I thought, this is what happens when you agree to go to a cabin in the middle of nowhere with, let's face it, a virtual stranger. I thought, I should have seen this coming. The only thing that really surprised me was that you didn't wait for the middle of the night and take the dog with you."

"That's not fair!" But it was like looking at one of those funny fad 3-D posters; once you saw the whole picture, you couldn't un-see it. She couldn't stop herself from reliving the memory from Milo's perspective; watching herself in her mind's eye, she felt suddenly felt wretchedly deceitful. "That's not what I was doing!" she said, but it was a hollow

declaration.

"You never talk to me," Milo continued, and now he sounded hurt and faintly puzzled. "I can see how scared and upset you are, but you never let me talk it out with you. You don't share, Charla. Maybe you think that because I'm a man, I ought to be happy with a relationship that's just about good times and good sex and staying up late watching cartoons, but I'm not. Watching you put on your happy face every time you talk to me makes me feel like a houseguest, and then I turn around and you're packing the car. What's the logical assumption here?"

"I don't..." Her words caught in her throat like fishhooks. Charla took a breath and sank down into a chair, staring at her hands as they knotted in her shirt. "I don't want to share that," she said. "I don't want to hit you with all the...fear and all the...uncertainty I have to feel. I want you to love me!" she burst out. "How can you love me when I'm such a MESS!?"

She slapped her hands over her eyes and shut out the kitchen, taking ragged breaths until she was certain she wouldn't break down and cry. When she took her hands away, Milo was there, looking at her with such patience and concern that she felt like crying anyway.

"You're not a mess," he said. "You've had a bad situation blow unexpectedly into your life and you're dealing with it. Admirably, I might add. But it's not going to last forever."

"Sheriff Hatchett's never going to catch those guys," Charla blurted. There. Said. In horror, Charla realized it was probably even true, and now she did start to cry. "He's never going to catch them! They could come back any time!"

"If he doesn't catch them, it'll be because they don't come back," Milo argued softly. "Hatchett knows his stuff. And you had a good idea about giving the diamonds back to this Reardon woman. Hush, Dog," he added in a stern aside as Dog interjected a low growl into the thread of his words. "I'm sure it'll make the papers. Diamond necklaces probably get stolen every day, but they sure don't get returned that often. When those idiots see the necklace is back with its owner, they'll forget all about you."

"What if they don't?"

"Then Dog or I will take an arm off each of them and the Sheriff can arrest what's left," he said

reasonably. "But it's not going to happen. These guys care about the necklace, not you. I care about you, I'm the one that's going to keep coming back, but only if I've got something real to come back to. I'm not looking for a series of extremely pleasant one-night stands, I'm looking for intimacy." He considered the effect his words had on her efforts to remain composed, and then reached across the table to touch her hand. "Have you still got your special stone?"

Charla nodded, and got up to retrieve it from Jim's workshop, feeling at that moment as though a long walk through the dark cabin was exactly what she needed.

The opal was laying on a fold of fine dust cloth, still attached to a dop stick, awaiting a second round of polishing before she called it good, and she switched on her work light to look at it. It was not just one opal, really, but several; viewed from the side, one could see the many fine layers pressed atop each other with a fine sheen of colorless oilstone between. The oilstone made the layer beneath seem opaque when held at one angle, but turning it in her hand, would suddenly magnify the fire it had just hid. The opals were certainly thick enough to separate without danger, but Charla had already decided to keep it just this way--a half-egg-sized stone that perfectly fit the palm of her hand and burned in the light like a handful of lava.

In her wildest dreams, she had never imagined anything so beautiful could be hidden in the chalky potch, and it made her miserable all over again to realize she might never have opened it on her own. If Dog hadn't staggered into her living room and collapsed on her couch, she would never have met Milo. If those three thugs hadn't broken into her house and moved the fishbowl the rough opal had been resting in, she would never have brought it with her to the cabin.

Carefully, she heated the dop and removed it from the back of her opal, cleaning away the little ring of glue it left behind as she thought about adversity and intimacy.

"Can I see?"

Charla turned toward the doorway where Milo was standing, and held the opal out to him, but he didn't reach to take it. He only looked at it, keeping his hands clasped behind his back as though it were some astounding museum piece he did not dare to touch.

"It went pretty deep after all, didn't it?" he said, sounding both pleased and oddly wistful. "It took a lot of work, I'll bet. A lot of risk. Do you feel it was worth it?"

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Milo looked up, locking his gaze with hers. "Charla, baby, why can't you show me the same respect you show a rock?"

Charla's fingers curled around the opal; her arm dropped, her head bent, and she began silently to cry.

"Yesterday," Milo said softly, "Dog dragged me back to the house just in time to see you getting into a car and leaving me without a word. You scared the hell out of me and you're going to be punished."

She could only nod, feeling flushed and sick and hateful.

"You can tell me not to spank you," Milo said after a moment. "I'm not going to force you. I'll just go out and wait for you in the car and we'll both know where we stand when we get back to Poho. But discipline is going to be a part of any relationship that I'm in; when the woman I'm with insists in indulging dangerous or childish behaviors, I will refuse to tolerate them."

She nodded again, her hands wringing at each other. The diamonds around her ankle felt as heavy as dungeon shackles, her guilt in hiding them seemed painted in scarlet over her face, but her chest was frozen. 'This counts, you know,' she kept thinking. 'This is exactly the kind of dangerous and childish behavior he's talking about, and he's right, and he SHOULD'N'T tolerate them, why are you DOING this?'

Because it could be over. It could all be over. Once the diamonds went to their home, Charla could go to hers. All done.

Milo looked at her for several long-seeming seconds before saying, "You've been distant and secretive and insincere off and on since we got here, and you don't even seem to be aware of it. Now you will. I am going to use those switches on you in such a way that you are going to feel it for the rest of your life, and every time you do, I hope you remember that you are not an island, Charla. You need to think about how the things you do affect other people and stop treating them like their emotions just turn off when you're not using them."

She nodded, but didn't speak. Couldn't speak.

Couldn't BREATHE. He had to know that something was wrong, why did he have to keep drawing it out? Why couldn't he just come out and ASK her?

'Why are you making him have to?' the back part of her brain asked reasonably, and Charla bent her head that much further and bit her trembling lips.

"I'll be waiting," Milo said, and he left her in the workshop, alone with her guilt.

'One more day,' thought Charla, trying in vain to push the first huge tears back into her eyes. 'Only one. One more lie. I can do this. Then we'll go home. All done. Someday he'll ask me whatever happened to the diamonds and I'll say, 'Back where they came from,' and it'll be true and he'll never have to know I had them tied around my ankle today to sneak them past him into town. It's just a small thing, and it's only one thing. One more. Only one.'

Chapter Thirteen

She didn't make him wait long. And although he'd never seen a more miserable little girl in his whole life, she even came willingly. Only one of her hands was doing its woebegone twist-n-tug at the hem of her shirt this time; the other was locked white-knuckled around her opal. She kept her head down until she reached the couch in the cabin's main room, and then her eyes lifted only just far enough to see the switch in Milo's hand. She sighed, a shaky, horribly desolate sound, and her whole body sagged with defeat.

Dog, lying by the door, obviously reached his breaking point and scrambled up, whining, to plaster Charla's face with messy kisses.

Charla hugged the dog's shaggy neck for a moment, then pushed him firmly back. "No," she said in a voice that seesawed around and away from steadiness. "You're a good dog, but you need to go outside now. Human stuff."

Dog tried to lean into her again, his canine face anguished with the dumb need to comfort, but Charla only petted him once and pushed him away again. He stood, clearly undecided, then shot Milo a long, dirty look and stalked stiff-legged to the cabin door. He pawed it open with more force than was strictly necessary and moved out into the snow, his tail banging hard into both sides of the doorjamb in lieu of a good slam to go out on.

Milo went to close the door, fighting the irritating urge to follow Dog outside and try to explain himself, and as the knob clicked shut in his hand, he heard Charla's private, self-strengthening whisper, "One more. Only one."

If she'd said even part of the safeword at this point, Milo probably would have thrown the whole session into his mental dumpster. He'd never really believed the words 'She's suffered enough' could be honestly earned without physical penance, but here was living proof, and Milo wanted to let her go.

But as he watched her take up that stiff-backed, unhappy stance behind the couch, Milo could see that, internal suffering aside, Charla needed this. She needed something to hurt, to draw out everything she was keeping on the inside to a place where she could scream at it or cry for it, to be forgiven and wiped clean. She might accept being let off the hook now, but she sure wouldn't thank him for it. She was already there, in the secret

space where the penitent comes to be cleansed, and it was the worst kind of rude awakening to be yanked back out without punishment. As far as Charla was concerned, as dreaded as those switches were, they were already bought and paid for.

Milo ran the first of them through his hand, hunting for a good grip as he watched Charla take her place. The branch was not as flexible as he would have liked, and he knew he'd have to be careful with it. Although the wood beneath was green with the promise of a spring that had yet to unhood itself from the snowy season, it had a brittle feel in Milo's hand. He had cut three of them, not to put the light of righteous fear in Charla's eyes, but because he fully expected them to break early.

He gave the switch a few practice swings, listening to the high hiss as it cut the air and watching the way Charla's backside tensed and shivered as she heard the same sound. She was so nervous...but utterly resigned as she laid herself over the back of the couch. If only there was a way to seamlessly blend this moment of apprehensive stillness with the remorseful epilogue meant to follow. Milo swung the apple switch a few more times, steeling himself for that first impact, the first heart-wrenching wail.

"Jeans off," he ordered, hating the ogreish rumble of his voice and the way Charla's bottom seemed to flinch at the command. "Panties down."

Of course, everything she did at this point seemed to have a little-girl piteousness, but it seemed to Milo that she hesitated before she obeyed him, and that her hands shook a little when she straightened to unzip herself. But she didn't try to get out of taking her switching on the bare. She pushed her jeans over her hips and down to her shins. She didn't step all the way out of them, but that was all right; with her legs thus hampered, she was a whole lot less likely to kick. Her panties slipped down next, and the full, pale moon of her bottom quivered and broadened as she bent back over the couch and waited.

He rested his hand low on her back, his thumb just grazing the place where her buttocks swelled out from her narrow waist. The sight of her, quietly and modestly submissive, yet still in dreadful anticipation of his punishing hand, pulled at him. He could almost feel his senses growing taut and inhumanly keen; under his hand, he imagined he could feel her pulse pounding as she waited for him

to begin.

He lifted the switch, his own sense of self falling away until he could see her strictly as the disciplinarian sees the transgressor.

And then he swung.

The sound of the switch hissing on its short, brutal arc was deafening in the still cabin air and time itself seemed to slow and stretch out. He felt like he had whole hours to aim, to plan exactly how to let the first cut fall. He could see the last shiver coiling up Charla's spine, could take meticulous observation of the way her hips tried to escape by bumping forward against the couch in the split-second before the slim branch bit into her, laying a red stripe of pain right across her center, neatly bisecting the perfection of her pale bottom. There was a heartbeat of silence, and then a hoarse caw as shock finally lent Charla a voice, and time slapped itself back into place as she began unthinkingly to struggle.

Milo put a little more pressure into the hand that held her pinned against the couch and that was all. His other hand only rose back into position and let fall again, turning the single line of that first cut into an X, and then a star, and then an abstract of welts without meaning. The swish-whick of the switch filled the place between Charla's intermittent gasps and harsh screams, but as the switch warmed her, her cries slowly tapered away until the only sounds were the hisses of split air, the snap of impact, and the thud of her scrambling feet on the floorboards.

A part of Milo's mind was keeping count. At twelve cuts, the switch began to splinter. It cracked at fifteen, and Milo let it fall to one side. He ran his empty hand over the raised weals that criss-crossed Charla's bottom, as though gauging the depth of her remorse by Braille, then raised the same hand and brought it down again in a thunderous clap across the full swell of her right cheek. Charla bolted upright, a scream ripping rustily from her throat, but only banged with blind futility into the high back of the couch. Milo gave her left cheek a bruising swat of equal force, then another high over both of her nates, and finally pushed her further over the couch to bare the tender undercurve of her sit-spot for his last blow. Only then did he pick up the second switch and, while Charla was still shaking with sobs and squirming with the burn of the brief paddling, he lit into her again.

She came all the way off the couch, jack-knife

straight and screaming, trying to claw her way over the top of it to freedom, her eyes wild and unthinking. Milo, still swinging, pulled her around, using the momentum of her aborted flight to put his back against the couch and bring her over his knee. She latched onto him with a single, piteous wail, and then hugged his leg with both hands and wept as Milo beat the second winter-dry switch to splinters on her bouncing bottom.

When he set what was left of it aside, he gave her a second paddling, hard and thorough, first eclipsing the welts the switch had laid, and then bringing them out again in red relief against a slowly-purpling background as he spanked her. Charla was beyond crying out, almost beyond tears; she lay over his lap limp and drained, her ankles only twitching now and then, with all the force left in her small body reserved for the grip she had on his thigh.

Milo paused at the end of the paddling, rubbing the fire of it back beneath her skin, feeling raised lines in long cuts and the toughened swelling in smaller patches where his hand had landed the hardest. He kneaded at her, eliciting moans frail as a kitten's, until she was soft, responsive, and ready for the final switch.

When he took his hand away from her, her whole body seemed to clench on him, and now she spoke for the first time since she'd gone to lay herself over the couch. "Oh no!" she moaned. "No, no Milo! No, don't hurt me any more, okay? No more, I'm so sorry, okay?"

His hand closed around the thick end of the slim branch, but hesitated there, and Charla immediately began to squirm, clutching and twisting at his pants leg as her pleas became louder.

"Please, no! Please stop now! I'm so sorry! I'm sorry, Milo! I'm done now, okay?"

He raised the switch and she screamed with the same pitch and vibrancy as though he'd taken a fisthold of her hair and snatched her bald.

"That's enough," he said, and his voice went right over the top of hers in a bass rumble, heady as a thunderstorm. "The safeword is sugar."

He waited, and she shook on his lap, twisting and pulling at his pants and crying without words. Her wails rose to ear-splitting frequency as he raised the switch again, breaking off into gales of weeping when the wooden whip cracked across her bottom. She twisted, bucked, and struggled for a

few fierce seconds, and then fell over him, sobbing hugely and utterly without sound as he made the switch fly.

New welts appeared, popping palely into life over the wine-colored blaze of Charla's bottom, slowly reddening and blurring together as the long seconds crawled by. Charla cried softly, her shallow breaths choppily echoing the hissing gasping sound of the switch, but she did not struggle. She lay across his lap, clutching him with the limp desperation of the drowned, and did not even try to shy away from the blows that methodically snapped and bit at her. At last, the switch began to splinter, and Milo, watching it, could feel the high, drifting sense of "disciplinarian" begin to fray along with it.

He eased off, softening his arm and putting a little more time between each new cut; he did this without any conscious thought or effort, not to prolong the punishment, but to gently pull them both out and back into real life. By the time the switch gave up its wooden ghost, he was ready to let it drop and forget it, ready to pull Charla up and hug her against him, to feel her tears of remorse shuddering through his own body and give her back forgiveness.

But when his hands slipped beneath her arms, she tensed--just for an instant, perhaps, but undeniably there. Milo was thrown. He froze with his hands still awkwardly cupping her ribs, unclear as to how to proceed, as Charla continued to press her face into his thigh.

Time crawled. Milo was afraid to tug at her again, afraid to meet with resistance a second time, not knowing what it meant. He let go of her entirely, regarding the shivering back of her with unease, and finally reached down to stroke her hair. "Baby?" he murmured, and her hands tightened on his leg a little.

She was still crying, and to Milo's ears, those tears had a baffling ring of guilt. Not repentance, not even pain, but guilt.

After three switches. It made no sense to him.

"Charla, it's okay now." He went to lift her again, and again she stiffened, but this time, Milo steeled himself and pulled her bodily up and into his arms. "It's okay," he said again, more firmly, as he enveloped her. "It's all done and you're my good girl."

She wasn't trying to pull away from him, but she wasn't exactly melting against his chest either. She

only shook her head and rubbed her eyes and did her best to stop the flow of tears--tears still ringing with that eerie ghost of shame.

'Stress,' Milo thought, troubled. Living in the cabin this past stretch hadn't exactly been a nightmare, but it wasn't a dream vacation either. The most luxurious surroundings in the world would still seem like a prison, considering the circumstances of their confinement. That was it. That had to be it. She was tired and scared and she felt like she had to cope with it all by herself.

"I'm coming with you," he announced, and before Charla could mount an argument, he caught her under her arms and pulled her up to face him. "I hate what this is doing to you, baby. Living like this, I mean, not knowing what's happening at home or what's going to come out of this business today. You're emotionally exhausted and your judgment is shot, and maybe none of that can be helped, but you sure as hell don't have to go through it alone. I'm coming with you."

"No, Milo."

"I'll stay in the car," he said doggedly. "She doesn't need to know I'm there as long as you do."

"And when she opens up her front door and sees you?" Charla pressed. She gently pried one of his hands off her shoulder, used his knuckles to wipe her own eyes dry, and then held it loosely in her own hands. "I can't afford to get off on the wrong foot with this person. She's old, she's not well...what if she sees you and has a heart attack or something?"

"I'll be in the car, I'll drive for help." Milo sighed and glared away at the wall, feeling powerless and irritated. "I'm almost a doctor, I could do CPR and send Dog to drive for help."

Charla smiled, but it was a weak effort at best and she shook her head at him again. "The arrangements are already made," she said firmly. "And maybe you're right about me being emotionally shot--"

"Emotionally exhausted," he corrected. "Your judgment is shot."

"--All the better reason to do this and get it out of the way," she replied, and got to her feet, tugging her clothes on as she rose. "Maybe I don't really want to go alone, but more than that, I don't want to screw this up and have to do it again. The sooner I've got those stupid diamonds out of my life, the happier I'll be."

"Yeah. But I don't like it." Milo watched her zip herself back up, still frowning, and without thinking too much about what he was doing, suddenly reached over and patted her hip pockets.

They jingled.

Charla seemed to freeze in place for a second or two, staring at him with her mouth slightly open and new color rising in her cheeks. Then she slowly dipped one hand into her pocket and turned it out, showing him her car keys in her open palm, with the linty white cuff of her pocket jutting out from her hip. She didn't say anything.

"Just checking," he said.

She nodded once, averting her eyes as she tucked her pocket back in and replaced her keys.

"I've noticed you tend to forget you've got them on you, is all," he added, feeling as though some explanation were due her. "Not a good plan today."

"No," she said vaguely. "I suppose it isn't."

"All right!" Milo slapped his hands together, trying to pretend an enthusiasm he was far from feeling in reality. "If we're going to do this thing, let's get it done!"

"Let's," Charla agreed, but her voice was quiet, listless, and her gaze was unfocused.

"Are you ready?"

"It's just one more thing," she said, which wasn't quite an answer. She shrugged into her coat and moved to open the door without looking back at him. "Only one."

Charla left Milo on the mean streets of Boise during the Winter Snowdrop Festival with enough money to rent some ice skates and buy a couple mugs of cider or hot chocolate if the spirit moved him, although he warned her that he was about a thousand times more likely to find a cyber bar and play Clamdigger for the next hour than he was to strap on a pair of skates and see what it felt like to spend a little time as a human Zamboni. They arranged to meet at a Starbucks just down the street; Milo had joked that if he thought the Starbucks people would give Dog trouble, he'd just buy a cheap pair of sunglasses and pretend to be a blind man. Dog could look pretty official in his service halter when he wanted to, and even when he didn't want to, he was a fairly intimidating force.

Charla accepted a kiss from each of them, told Milo not to be such a fussbudget when he tried once

more to convince her to let the two of them ride along ("We can hide in the back seat. What the old bird doesn't know can't hurt her."), and went merrily on her way to see Mrs. Reardon.

The address led to a pleasant urban neighborhood, the sort without an abundance of small children or minorities, and that alone was enough to put Charla's teeth a little on edge. There was no security gate, but there were a few weathered signs warning outsiders that all who dwelled within were protected by Neighborhood Watch, although Charla seriously questioned whether any of the upstanding residents would actually condescend to patrol the cul-de-sac after dark, especially on a drizzly January day like today.

She hated places like this--every house the same design and painted from the same palette, with the same bushes in the same geometric cut of yard. She'd always thought of the people who lived in this sort of place as "Stepfordites." Her sister lived in a place like this.

'Oh well,' Charla thought, giving her ankle a discrete diamond-y jingle to reassure herself. 'I can stand it long enough to see Mrs. Reardon's certificate of insurance for the necklace and then get the heck out of here.'

Charla made it as far as the front porch of the little house, and then the door whooshed open and she found herself in the presence of a tall, grim-faced woman. She was an older woman, one whose still-handsome features had been made somewhat hungry and severe by the touch of frost in her hair and the creases of her skin. She still had a young girl's figure, but she dressed in clothes that made it clear to all who saw her that this was a matron well removed from the marriage market. Her hair was short, swept up, styled into a stern, unflattering cap. She did wear a little makeup, but not to a softening effect; instead, the painted colors only accentuated the hard set of her eyes and the downturn of her thin mouth. She didn't look that old and she didn't look at all frail, and when she reached out to take Charla's hand, Charla had to resist the instinctive urge to back out of range.

"Mrs...Reardon is it?" Charla asked uncertainly.

The other woman nodded once, and offered a brittle smile after a pause in which she seemed to consider the merits of expression. "My husband died several years ago, and I saw no reason to keep his name. My own, you see, was much more

familiar and comforting to me. I wasn't married very long. I couldn't...identify with being a Wurthlinger." She took a short breath, nodding as though this recitation had been a grim task she was glad to have done, and stepped back into the hall. "Please come inside and sit down. You can't imagine how anxious I am to speak with you."

She didn't sound anxious, Charla thought, easing into the house and allowing herself to be herded toward the parlor. Mrs. Reardon sounded more like a bad actress reading lines. But there was a definite tone of East Coast to the older woman's voice, and Charla had often heard it said that people kept a good grip on their emotions over there. Maybe she sounded wooden and strange BECAUSE she was so upset.

"I was quite astonished to receive your call," Mrs. Reardon continued, watching keenly as Charla picked out a plush chair and hesitantly sat. "And to learn you were so close by. Relatively."

"Yes, I was a little surprised you were in Idaho," Charla admitted. "The old address I had for you was in New York."

Mrs. Reardon's lips thinned and she lowered herself onto the settee opposite Charla. "I still consider myself to live in New York. This--" She looked around the parlor with rich disdain. "--is not living. It is rather an evil necessity I am forced to undertake. For the jewels, you understand. God, how I have come to hate those damned jewels."

She spoke this last in a dull voice little louder than a whisper, utterly emotionless in speech, but her face actually grew livid and her eyes wild with a murderous loathing. Mrs. Reardon stared into the far wall for several seconds after making this unnerving observation, and then slowly, her passionate revulsion ebbed out of her features, and she looked calmly at Charla again. "You'll forgive me my display of temper," she said dryly. "I think I should explain, and then you will understand me better. It began in--Would you like a cup of coffee or tea?"

Charla couldn't think of anything she'd like less than to share a drink in this woman's house, but there wasn't any polite way to refuse, so she nodded. "Coffee, please."

Mrs. Reardon rose and left, gesturing for Charla to remain seated. Her voice drifted back down the short hall from the kitchen, easily heard over the faint noises of preparation. "It began in 1968. I

was just seventeen and my father gave me a beautiful necklace for a present on the day I graduated from high school. It was a Reardon family heirloom and oh, it made my mother insanely jealous to see it on me instead of her. Ha!"

Smug snobbery and spiteful enjoyment seemed to be the only emotions Mrs. Reardon felt comfortable enough to show. Charla tugged at the hem of her sock, feeling the scratchy weight of the necklace around her ankle, and wished she'd been brave enough to bring Milo with her after all. She hated unpleasantness, and she didn't like this narcissistic woman or this rancid little parlor. There was no art or photographs or knickknacks or anything--just furniture and bare walls, like the set of a bad movie.

"I went to University," Mrs. Reardon went on. The aroma of rich coffee wafted out, and Charla sat back in her chair and tried to listen and relax. "Very tumultuous times, those were. I don't expect you to understand, but I had a very difficult time. I was a Reardon, you see, and to many of my so-called peers, I was the enemy. Wealth and privilege and power and beauty, all of it mine by birthright. Oh, how they hated me!" And she laughed again, that single, brittle sound of peevish satisfaction. "And soon they had even greater reason to hate me, because I took a lover, a man any one of those limp dishrags would have killed to possess."

Mrs. Reardon appeared in the parlor with a triumphant smile and a tray of coffee. She set the refreshments on the low table between their two chairs and handed one cup to Charla, gesturing distractedly at the little dishes of cream and sugar, but clearly more interested in the role of storyteller than of hostess.

"He was a revolutionary," Mrs. Reardon said. "The revolutionary, I should say. He had...socialist views, and I indulged them to make him happy. He reveled in love for me. Poor fool." Mrs. Reardon sipped at her coffee, smiling, before she continued. "I was already engaged, you see, to Charles Franklin Wurthlinger, of Wurthlinger Bonds."

Charla didn't know the name. In fact, Charla couldn't understand why the older woman thought she would be even remotely interested in hearing about some snobby socialite's college indiscretions and subsequent engagements, but Mrs. Reardon looked so expectant that she thought it prudent to nod and look impressed. Mrs. Reardon's smug

smile widened and she sipped at her coffee again, reminding Charla to start drinking her own. It was very full and sweet, some foreign expensive blend, no doubt.

"However, I confess that my lover had a certain...mesmerizing quality. His zeal and his...his passion electrified me. And I did something very foolish." Now, for the first time in this recitation, the older woman lost her self-congratulatory glow and looked, just for an instant, positively disgusted. "I gave him the necklace."

There was a long pause then, but Charla couldn't think of anything to say, and Mrs. Reardon wasn't looking at her anyway, so she just drank some more coffee and tried to look sympathetic.

"The plan, originally, was for him to sell the diamonds and use the funds to acquire...well, something, I suppose. I haven't any real idea of exactly what. Sometimes I rather doubt he did. But regardless, my young lover's dream of revolution was forgotten the instant he got a really good look at the jewels. I found out later that he left the campus that night and bought a one-way ticket to San Francisco. He spent the night in the Pierre Hotel." Mrs. Reardon laughed once, sourly. "It was New Year's Day, 1972," she said. "The night, ha!, of the great Pierre Hotel Heist."

Mrs. Reardon stood up, paused to give Charla a thoughtful glance and to fill Charla's cup from the carafe on the tray, and then she went to the desk in the corner of the parlor and turned back with a long scrapbook in her hands. She flipped through a few pages and set the book, open, on the arm of Charla's chair. A sepia-toned news article, complete with photograph of grim investigators and baffled proprietors, stood beneath the banner headline: PIERRE HOTEL ROBBED! MASKED MEN TAKE AWAY AS MUCH AS \$6 MILLION, COPS SAY! Charla nodded, muffled a yawn against the back of her hand, and nodded again until Mrs. Reardon took the book away.

"In the early hours on the morning of January 2nd, six men in very poor disguises exited a limousine," Mrs. Reardon said, speaking in the easy, not-quite-amused tones of one who is telling an oft-told and no-longer beloved tale. "They showed a .38 to the doorman, took him inside, and quickly rounded up the hotel staff. Without firing a shot, I might add. It is quite possible the gun wasn't even loaded that night. In any event, the employees

were bound, gagged, and thrown into the executive office. Two men were sent to lock all entrances except the front door, forcing any late-coming hotel guests to enter through the lobby, where the burglars could quickly and neatly apprehend them. The rest of the robbers went directly to the hotel safety-deposit boxes and began to open them. They worked for exactly one and one half hours, and opened fifty-four safe deposit boxes.

"Of course, my necklace was in one of those boxes, as my newly-repentant lover raced back to the campus to inform me. And there I was, and in such an embarrassing difficulty, because you see, the necklace wasn't really mine to give and certainly it wasn't mine to lose! But over the years, I grew quite adept at disguising my loss. After all, I wasn't expected to wear the thing at every occasion, and in the meantime, I had every confidence that the robbers would be caught and the necklace returned. Imagine my...chagrin, when they were not.

"Oh, some time later, two men were found trying to fence a small quantity of jewelry stolen in the robbery, but an incompetent prosecutor saw to it that they were given a brisk walk through a minimum security prison and afterwards, they couldn't be touched. But I kept my eye on them, you see. I had a veritable army of silent little soldiers scurrying about, lifting rocks and making notes, long after the police stopped bothering about the burglary, and I was finally rewarded. The statute of limitations had already run out, but I finally found the man who had my necklace and it was just a matter of getting it back."

"Call the police?" Charla asked, very faintly appalled at the mumbling, sleepy sound of her voice. She sipped some more coffee, trying to cover her lack of social manners by appearing appreciative of her hostess's refreshments.

"No, how could I? I had never reported the jewels missing, and besides, the theft itself was no longer punishable. Nothing was for it but that I would have to steal my own jewels back from the man who had stolen them from me! I took this house so that I could be close to my victim, and I brought my sons, the only two people in the world I could trust in this endeavor, to keep a close watch on the thief. Come on out, boys. I think she's ready."

The sound of heavy footsteps on the hardwood hall should have been alarming to Charla, but

strangely, it wasn't. She sipped at her coffee and watched as two blond men, a little blurry about the edges, came into the parlor and took up position on either side of her. "You must," she said, making an effort to enunciate, "be very proud."

"Oh, I am. Very proud." Mrs. Reardon smiled and took Charla's empty cup. "And I'm sure that the two of them and myself could have had the necklace back with no trouble whatsoever, had we enough time to formulate a plan--"

"You've got to have a plan," Charla agreed.

"But I didn't have that time. I received a letter from my mother's lawyers informing me that the Reardon family jewels are going to tour the world, and my necklace is being, well, subpoenaed I suppose, for lack of a better word. I put the matter off as long as I was able without drawing the appearance of guilt, but it comes to this: I must produce the necklace in the next six weeks, or they will be removed from my stewardship. Imagine the effrontery! It is MY necklace! They shouldn't be able to force me to tour it, much less threaten to take it away from me!"

"Bastards," Charla said cheerfully.

"Quite." Mrs. Reardon seemed to be moving away, although Charla was having more and more difficulty paying attention. "But it really didn't matter. We knew where the necklace was, and we had a foot in the thief's door, so to speak. Everything was going along according to my plan, and then, of course, the dog."

"F'course."

"But you found the dog, and then you found me, which means you must have found the necklace, too."

Charla tried to say something in the affirmative, but it came out as a snore.

"Well, we'll just have the rest of our little chat when you're done with your nap," Mrs. Reardon purred. "Take her downstairs, James. Sullivan, search the car."

There was more, but Charla lost track of it. She could feel herself being lifted, but she went to sleep in the middle of it, so that she dreamed, without words or images, of falling.

Chapter Fourteen

Despite having threatened to call out the National Guard if Charla didn't get back to him in an hour, Milo actually waited at the Starbucks until five o'clock before he declared himself officially concerned and called the cops. It wasn't a very helpful call; Charla couldn't be missing for another two days, although when Milo mentioned the fact that Charla had been meeting this complete stranger to discuss the recovery of an expensive diamond necklace, the officer on the other end of the line had grudgingly offered to send out a patrol car at some point in the afternoon "to check on things".

"Hypothetically," Milo said, keeping his voice hale and even cheerful despite the frustrated death grip he had on the handset, "If I were to drive out there and start shooting the place up, would that get you guys out there any faster?"

"Sir," the unseen cop sighed, "have you got a legitimate reason to think the lady's in immediate danger? Proof, for example, that this person she's gone to see is an arms dealer or a serial murderer? Because I would hate like hell to have you go shoot up some poor old lady's begonias and then find out your girlfriend got stuck in traffic."

Milo scowled. "I can appreciate that. But then, I'D hate like hell to stick around at Starbucks for the next two days and then find out my girlfriend got stuffed in an oil drum and buried under the begonias while I waited for enough time to go by so that I could file a report."

"Sir, just as soon as I have a unit free, I'm going to send someone out there to ring the bell and look around. That's what I can do. What you can do is hang tight, stay where your girlfriend can find you, and check back in another hour or two, okay?"

Milo was silent for a few seconds, during which time he resisted mightily the urge to pick up the phone booth and hurl it into the street. He was a big guy; he was reasonably sure he could do it.

"Okay?" the cop pressed.

Milo nodded, realized the cop on the line couldn't hear that, and said, "Okay." Then he hung up, picked up the phone book, dug out a few quarters as he turned pages, and called himself a taxi.

Charla rose to consciousness slowly. Like a bubble in a jar of honey, she floated on the surface of waking, hearing voices without the ability to attach meaning to words, until she popped back into place and her eyes slid open. Light came first, then shape, and finally focus.

She was in a basement, the kind with concrete walls and floor and very high windows that strained light through dirty glass and high weeds. Specifically, she was lying in the corner with her face pressed so fully against the cold concrete that for a second or two, she thought it was weighted down. But when she brushed her thick-feeling hand over her head she found nothing but hair, and when she got both palms braced adequately enough, she found she could actually raise herself up a little and look around.

There was a man sitting in a metal folding chair right in front of her. A dark-haired man with a week's worth of beard and a kind of thin malignancy hanging over him like the funk of cheap cologne. The man from her porch. One of the men who had broken into her home.

Charla looked away long enough to make sure she was fully dressed, and when she saw she was, she looked up again. "Who are you?" she croaked.

"John Smith," said the man, and smiled with half of his mouth. "That good enough for you?"

"It'll do," she said. She pushed against the floor with all her might and finally managed enough upwards momentum to break the enormous gravitational hold of the basement. Slowly, moving inches at a time, she got her arms and legs arranged so that she could sit upright. Her head felt slightly clearer for the activity, and she eyed John Smith's cheap chair with more comprehension and not a little envy. "Have you got another chair for me?"

"No. But sit tight." The man had started to get up, but stopped and looked comically surprised by what he'd just said, and then laughed, heartily. "I mean, wait a sec. Sit tight," he murmured, still chuckling to himself, and walked over to a stack of cardboard boxes. He shifted a number of these around and finally came back to her with a good-sized one, marked Sully's Comix in a child's scrawling hand. He set this down and motioned to it with the hammed-up graciousness of bad theatre.

The box gave a little under her weight, but only a little. Charla crawled onto it and eased her legs

out a little, rubbing at her thighs and knees in an effort to push out all the numb patches caused by sleeping on concrete. She was beginning to realize what had happened, and with that realization came the sure knowledge--not hope, but absolute certainty--that Milo would be here any second. All she had to do was stay safe until then, and learn as much as she could. "Are you going to kill me?" she asked.

'John Smith' had been watching her efforts with obvious amusement, but her question slapped a shadow of annoyance across his thick features. "Of course not. I never killed anyone and I ain't about to start with you."

Funny, how something that ought to be so relieving could sound so insulting.

Marie Reardon's voice sounded shrilly from the direction of the stairs: "Idiots! Both of you! She didn't turn the damn thing out to graze! Start calling motels! Find the goddamn dog!"

Smith turned his head slightly, not enough to see the stairs, not enough to hide the contemptuous smile he wore as he listened to the unseen woman's frustration. "Lemme ask you something," he said evenly. "For my own peace of mind, you understand."

Charla rubbed her arms slowly, working blood and life sluggishly up to her thick-feeling fingers, and considered all the ways in which this man's peace of mind could impact her own. "Okay."

Smith looked back down at her, one eyebrow inquiringly raised. "Did you find a diamond necklace in that damn dog's crap or what?"

"No," Charla said.

His other eyebrow went up. "No shit? I mean," he said, rolling his eyes. "No kidding? You really didn't?"

"No. He needed surgery. We found it then."

Smith 'ahhh'ed and nodded, then pursed his lips and looked down at his feet for several seconds before glancing up again, sharply. "Give it to the cops?"

"I tried. They wouldn't take it." Charla made two careful fists, one at a time, wincing, before letting her fingers shake out. "Seriously, who are you? How do you figure in? Are you a Reardon, too?"

"Hell no." Smith's scorn was as good as spitting on the floor. "I'd curse the God that made me related to that inbred bitch and her slack-jawed

kids. Buncha monkeys. No shit, like something you see in the zoo. Good for nothing but jumping around screaming at each other all the time. No, lady, I ain't a Reardon. I'm a nurse."

Charla was having a hard time processing that, and it must have showed, because Smith grimaced and stood up to turn his back on her.

"I went to school three extra years to be a nurse. Wanted to go all the way, but I didn't have the memory for it. Had the brains," he added, sending a swift glare back at her, as though daring his prisoner to argue. "But no one actually wants you to learn these days, all they want you to do is suck it up and puke it back out in the right order. Couldn't stand it, the hypocrisy of it, so I took the silver medal and settled for nursing. Only hospitals these days are worse than schools. Nothing but red tape and no money and pill-counters and cameras, so I went private placement. You know," he laughed suddenly, turning back to her, "it's truly amazing how many people will hire a guy to come right into their home without even checking up on him."

"Did you need checking up on?" Charla asked, trying to sound calm and unaccusing despite the crawling conviction that she was sharing her dungeon with a very bad man, but Smith seemed oblivious.

"Me? Naw. I'm just saying, twenty dollars buy a background check and if you're too cheap to shell it out, maybe you deserve what you get, you know? Not me. Not me," he repeated, frowning at the wall beyond Charla's shoulder. He was quiet for a time, his expression growing gradually thunderous. "Cheap bastards."

"Not much money in nursing," Charla said.

Smith snorted. "Goddamn video clerk makes more 'n me. And this guy, Fischler, had more money than he could spend. Literally. More money than he could even spend, all shut up in that stinking house and nothing to do all day but X off his day planner waiting to die. I didn't kill him," he said suddenly, shooting another of those glares at Charla.

"You said that," she told him. "You never killed anyone."

"Right." Smith sat back down in the folding chair, the set of his shoulders relaxing slightly. "Old guy had Parkinson's. Had family, but they were all out there on the East Coast somewhere. New York,

New Jersey. Somewhere. Never came out to see him. I think one of 'em called around Christmas one year, but that's it."

"I don't care!" Marie Reardon shrieked from upstairs, and Smith leaned back and sighed at the ceiling.

"Useless old bitch," he muttered.

"How did you find her?" Charla asked.

"She found me. Found the old guy making a whole lot of suspicious sales in vintage jewelry and homed in on him. Sent Tweedledum and Tweedledummer over acting like diamond insurance guys, like I couldn't see through that. I already knew about the necklace, I just didn't know the history of it, you know."

"But you knew it was stolen."

Smith shrugged one shoulder and gave her his slanted smile again. "Every once in a while, when the bills started coming in heavy, the old guy would show up downstairs in his town clothes with that necklace slung over the head of his cane. 'Get the car, Jeeves,' he'd say. That was his joke, my name ain't Jeeves." He seemed intent on pointing this out, as though concerned Charla might think he'd let something slip.

"It's Smith," Charla agreed.

Smith grinned, nodding. "Got it. Smith. 'Get the car, Jeeves, we gotta get us some jingle!' We'd go into town to this low-rent pawnshop on West 10th, and the old guy would get one of the diamonds pried out and replace it with glass. Can you dig that? Glass?!"

"I wondered about that myself," Charla said. "Why not zirconia at least?"

"Right, so I asked him the first time he did this and he told me it was just as well, 'cause no one was going to see it but him. Empty fittings look ugly, was all he said. He'd done this for a couple earrings and a watch already, and now this necklace, and I'd noticed he wasn't selling them as jewelry, always for diamonds and always just one or two at a time. Three years this was, and finally I asked him where he was getting the stuff. He just gave me this look." Smith leaned forward and showed his teeth in a hard, indulgent sort of smile. "And said, 'My Grandma gave it to me,' real slow, like making the lie so big it wasn't even a lie anymore, you know."

She did know, actually. It was a 'John Smith' kind of lie. She nodded.

"So I knew he was crooked. And when Ma Kettle up there sent her boys in their dumbass disguises to my door, I just told 'em they'd have to try a whole lot harder if they were gonna snook the diamonds out of me."

"So why work with them at all?" Charla asked. "You don't need them."

"Ah, I'm not a crook. I wouldn't know how to get rid of something like that. Couldn't exactly take it to the old guy's pawnshop, could I? And this Reardon woman actually has papers saying she owns it, so she could pay me and it would even be legal. All I had to do was steal the thing from Fischler, and it's not like he could call the cops, could he? Perfect plan. Perfect." Smith shook his head several times, ruefully. "Goddamn dog."

"Shadow," Charla said. "He was Fischler's dog."

"Finally owned up to it, did he? Flea-bitten bastard." There was some real venom in Smith's voice for the first time, but there was also a queer, cautious respect. "Yeah, he was. Old guy had it trained to do everything but drive the goddamn car and butter the toast. Sharp as a freakin' tack, that dog, and he made me. Made me from the first day. Oh, he let it go for a while, but after the boys came by, he was right on me all the time. Never left me alone with the old guy. Never! The only time he ever left the room was when I was right with him. If he had to eat, he'd follow me down when I went to make the old guy's meals. If he had to piss, he'd wait until I had to go get the mail or drive to the store. And when I quit leaving the house, the fucking fleabag learned how to piss in the fucking toilet!"

The rage in Smith's voice, the frustration on his face, were so far at odds with the comical imagery of his words that it was hard for Charla not to smile. She had to bite the insides of her cheeks, hard, sensing almost psychically that a little laughter now would quite possibly be the worst thing she could do.

"I knew the old guy had a safe or something somewhere in the house where he was keeping his crook stuff, but I couldn't find it. Three years, and I couldn't find it! I was so sure it was in his bedroom, too. Every second I had, I was in there, and after he lost his legs and his voice, I didn't even wait for him to go anywhere. And that dog! That god. Damn. Dog."

Smith closed his eyes, straightened his

shoulders, and took several deep breaths until he managed to unlock his white-knuckled fists. "I had to starve him out," he said finally. "That's a whole lot harder than it sounds, too. Fleabag can open doors, even refrigerators, and he can chew through a tin can if he's got a whole minute to himself. He'd wait until I was sleeping or in the john, and then he'd bolt and start scarfing. I had to lock him in when I left him and half the time he'd get out anyway. I hated him."

"The feeling's mutual, I think."

"Yeah, probably." Smith shrugged, acknowledging the dog's enmity but too familiar with it to be concerned. He said, "I kept thinking, when the dog got weak enough, I'd plant a tire iron in it, you know. But I never got the chance. The old guy died. I didn't kill him. I gave him his meds at 10 just fine and at noon, I walk in with his lunch and he was dead. And ain't that a kick in the ass, huh? Natural death and all, but there still might be a whatsit, an inquest, so I've only got a few hours before I have to report the body and I still haven't found Fischler's safe. I call the Reardon boys, and we start tearing the bedroom up. Fucking dog about took Jamey's leg off when we were looking under the mattress, so we threw a blanket over him and shoved him into the other room. The dog, not Jamey."

"I got that."

"Yeah, so when we're done tossing the bedroom and putting it back together all right, I realize it's awfully quiet in the other room. The door's locked, I know Shadow couldn't get out, but he ain't scratching or anything. Nothing. So I open up the door and what do I see?" Smith opened his arms, inviting guesses, but offered up the answer before Charla could play along. "That god. Damn. Dog. Is standing there with his head and half his damn body wedged into the wall, eating."

"Eating what?" Charla asked, not just making conversation now, but genuinely baffled. Her mind's eye had conjured an image of Dog, standing on his hind legs in a dusty shower of sheetrock debris, scarfing down fiberglass insulation.

John Smith nodded as though he could see her mental picture in a bubble over her head, but said, "See, the old guy has a safe built right into the wall, behind a panel, hidden. He must have had it put in when he first got Parkinson's, or at least when he got Shadow, because the safe don't have a

combination lock or anything. What it's got is three switches set up all around the room, all disguised, and he's got Shadow trained to hit them in the right order."

"Wow," Charla said, impressed. She could just see that--Dog going quickly and quietly around some grand Masterpiece Theatre-style library, pawing at fake books and hinged candlesticks. She could even see the great, plumed tail start to wag as the portrait of Whistler's Mother over the mantelpiece swung open to reveal his Master's secret safe. Whereupon....what? He courageously bolted down the contents in an effort to protect them from discovery by the evil interlopers? Charla knew Dog was smart, but that was a little too much even for her to swallow.

Then, in a burst of insight, she realized exactly how the enterprising Mr. Fischler had managed to teach his dog to hit those switches. "He had doggie treats in the safe," she said.

John Smith had been watching her, and now he grinned, an expression utterly without humor, and nodded. "A great big bowl of 'em. We opened that door and saw that safe and that big bastard stuffing his face, and we started yelling and Shadow just ate faster. Just gulped everything down, like he knew he was gonna get it, and it was his last chance, you know?"

Smith shook his head in an attitude of supreme disgust, glaring past Charla at the wall as he came to the sorest point of his recollections. "Then Sully grabs him, and all hell breaks loose. I told those idiots, hit him with a fucking tire iron, lay the goddamn animal OUT, you know? But no, he goes to grab him instead. Shadow went through those idiots like a bullet. Right through 'em and right out the window. Two stories, straight down, and away he goes down the street. He hits the woods out behind the church and he's gone, and the safe is empty except for a chewed up stock-folder and part of the foil of that bag of biscuits, and I've got a BODY in the bedroom and all this fucking MESS to clean up. So one thing and another, and it's more 'n a week before I can get away to start looking for him, and to be honest, I'd about given up when we heard about you."

"What were you doing reading *The Oregonian* in Boise, Idaho?" Charla asked. Really, she'd been meaning to ask this for some time.

"Dumb bastard luck," Smith said, emphasizing

each word. "We were looking at all the animal shelters, reading the papers for found dogs, and kind of zig-zagging around, you know? Then Sully got the bright idea to call these guys called the Large Breed Rescue Society and tell them about his lost dog, and they told him they'd found him and he was at a shelter in Salem. So we bust our asses getting there and there's this pissant little pile of nothing wagging its tail at us, and the lady just busting all out pleased with herself, and while I was trying to explain that I was looking for a dog that stood four-eight at the shoulder and weighed two-fifty, and she was trying to tell me there ain't no such dog in the world, the phone rings and it's this OTHER shelter down the road about fifty miles passing on the word that some lady found a six-foot long dog in her backyard." Smith shook his head again, baring his teeth, and suddenly announced, "I did the math on this. That damn dog went four hundred and twenty miles to get to you."

"Did he?"

"Yeah. And held on to the diamonds all that while. That's sure like him. Fucking dog." Smith returned his attention to the far wall, starting to glower. "And then pretending he didn't even know his own name. And did you know, we were out there at your house three times looking under all the bushes trying to pick through his shit? I hate that fucking dog. Lady." Smith looked at her suddenly, his head cocked to one side. "Why in the HELL do you have that many safes?"

"To hold the three and a half million dollars worth of loose gemstones I keep in the house," she replied evenly.

Smith gazed at her. He blinked once, slowly, like a snake. "Really."

"It's all that will fit, actually. The other quarter million has to just lie around in the rough."

He pursed his lips, made that half-spitting sound again.

"Sorry," Charla said, shrugging.

"Naw, it's okay. 'S not like you were there to tell us. Damn." Smith stood up and went over to lean his back against the wall beside her, looking broodingly at his feet. "That does piss me off a little, though. Out of curiosity, which one was it in?"

"None of them."

"Oh, that would have REALLY pissed me off. Okay. So tell me something, where is it now? I

mean, I don't suppose you brought it with you or anything." Smith, still looking thoughtful, reached over and got a hand under Charla's arm, pulling her to her feet in a brisk, no-nonsense manner. He slipped his hands into Charla's jeans pockets and came up with her car keys in one hand and the opal in the other. "What's this?" he asked, looking at the stone.

"Opal," she told him, trying not to let her sudden anxiety show in her voice. "It's something I'm working on."

Smith turned it toward the nearest window and squinted as he rolled the stone through his fingers. "Wow." There was genuine admiration in Smith's voice, proving that even a misanthropic thug like him had his good qualities. "That's really something. Looks like it's full of fire." He took the stone from his eye and glanced back at her. "Worth anything?"

Charla's heart thudded once, painfully, and then seemed to stop. "Some, I guess," she said, trying to sound casual. The opal was easily the largest she'd ever seen and the fire ran full deep. She hadn't bothered to calculate its worth--for her, the stone was most precious for its sentiment, as it had come to represent Milo in some strange fashion--but four figures was a certainty and even a high five wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

"What is it, a paperweight?" Smith shook it like a snow globe and then peered into its depths.

There was a knock upstairs, loud and assertive enough to draw the combined attention of Charla and her captor. They stared at the ceiling together and listened as someone, so heavy it could only be one of the blond boys, crossed to the door.

"If I've got to tell you to shut up," John Smith said conversationally and without taking his eyes from the exposed rafters, "I'm going to do it by socking you in the jaw. I don't like hitting ladies, but I'll do it."

"I know," Charla said, and even managed to keep her voice calm.

"Good. We just need to understand each other." Smith put the opal back in Charla's front pocket and shoved it down deep, turning his head only just far enough to fix the corner of one cold eye on her. "There's a lot of things I could do without killing you. So hush."

Charla only nodded. She didn't dare say anything anyway; it was all she could do to hear

over the pounding of her heart. She couldn't make out the words from clear down here, but she didn't need to. The rumbling thunder of Milo's voice was impossible to attribute to any other man, and she didn't need the exact words to know roughly what he was saying. Likewise, the high, angry sound of the blond's reply was unintelligible but perfectly plain--never saw a girl, never invited one over, never let one in the house, and even if he did, she already left.

Milo's quiet, yet rather insistent response was suddenly and unexpectedly cut off by the other blond's shout: "It's Shadow!"

John Smith did not just jump on hearing this, he actually grabbed one of the rafters above him and yanked himself partway off the floor, as though, in the grip of illogical terror, he were trying to slip upwards into the cracks of the floorboards and scuttle away like a roach. He recovered readily enough, but that swift, flinching bid at escape couldn't be erased and the look he shot at Charla was hot, embarrassed, and daring her to say anything. "You were supposed to come alone!" he snapped.

The accusation got to her in a way his simple threats and interrogatory manner had not. Heat flamed unwisely up her cheeks from her neck and popped right out her mouth as, "Yeah, well, YOU were supposed to be ONE little old frail lady and not a gang of hooligans!"

Smith started to snap something, blinked, and said, "Hooligans?"

Charla flushed. "Yes, hooligans!"

There was a tremendous scuffling uproar happening upstairs, terminating in a resounding crash as something huge and heavy hit the floor. "CHARLA!" Milo boomed.

"This wasn't supposed to be this goddamned messy!" Smith's voice was rising, his face darkening. "All we wanted was the diamonds!"

"And I came here to give them to you!" she shouted back. "If that crazy old bat hadn't drugged my coffee, she'd have gotten them out of my hand with a smile and a wave and you'd be singing camp songs all the way back to Westchester or wherever the hell you all came from and not a care in the world apart from how you were going to spend your share first!"

Smith opened his mouth for rebuttal, paused, and then closed it and gave her a long, speculative

look. "You brought the diamonds with you?"

Charla had seen the word "Ulp" written over the heads of comic book heroes in distress most of her life without ever realizing, until that point, that people can and do actually make that sound.

She blinked, lips clamped shut, and tried to think of how to recover.

Smith smiled. "All right," he said. "Tell you what. You give me the diamonds, I let you and your boyfriend go. Nobody has to get hurt."

"I've got a better idea," Milo said, stomping down the stairs towards them with a growl in his voice and thunder in his eyes. He'd never looked bigger, meaner, or more like an upright, inexpertly-shaved grizzly bear than at that moment, and coincidentally enough, had never looked better in Charla's eyes. "You let her and her boyfriend go and I won't pound you into pudding right where you stand."

There was a sound, a very small and uninteresting sound. It was almost insectile, like a click or a snap. It was just a little thing, and yet it stopped Milo cold.

Charla looked down and saw the strangest thing. There was a gun growing out of her side, just under her ribs. It wasn't very big or shiny, like in the movies; in fact, it was cheap-looking black plastic, and it looked ridiculously toy-like in Smith's man-sized hand.

"I never killed anyone," Smith said evenly. "Just so you know. And I don't really think this will kill her now, if I were to pull the trigger. But it'll sure hurt a lot."

"Son of a bitch!" One of the blonds came tumbling and panting downstairs, his face a patchwork of anger and bruises. He grabbed Milo, one fist cocked back, and sprayed a stream of foul words and spit into the bigger man's face. "I'll kill you, you--"

"No one's killing anyone," Smith said firmly, but before the last syllable had left his mouth, there was a string of flat, rapid pops, a shrill yipe, and a distant, triumphant roar:

"Got him! I got the furry bastard! I got him DEAD!"

Chapter Fifteen

Milo couldn't register the words right away. It took the sight of white horror pouring into Charla's face to even make Milo aware that the distant buzzing he had heard were words to begin with. While he was still trying to recycle the memory into sounds that had meaning, Charla stepped woodenly one pace forward, put her hand on the muzzle of the gun the other man was holding on her, and then slipped silently and gracefully to her knees on the basement floor.

"Oh," she breathed. "Oh, you. You."

That was all she seemed to be capable of voicing, but there was no insult, no curse word in any language foul enough to equal the naked condemnation in Charla's whisper. "You," she said, over and over, and the blanks she left afterwards just seemed to fill themselves.

As unbelievable as it might sound, Milo actually forgot about the gun and the man who had him by the shirtfront. He started for her, one hand outstretched, in immediate response to the bone-deep anguish in Charla's eyes. He remembered the gun only when the man holding it yanked Charla to her feet and put the barrel back into her ribs.

Charla turned her head to look into her captor's face, all of her bewildered loss printed for all to read. "How could you do it?"

"He had it coming," the man muttered, and then bared his teeth and gave Charla a good shake. "And I'm through playing around here! Diamonds! Now! Or I shoot off both your boyfriend's feet!"

But Charla was already bending. Her face still solemn and huge-eyed with hurt, she tugged up her pants leg, pulled down her sock, and unfastened the glittering treasure she was wearing.

"I can't believe you brought that here," Milo said stupidly. Part of him knew it wasn't the time or the place, but he couldn't help himself. Here, of all places!

Charla sighed, dipping one shoulder in acknowledgement, and let the necklace drop into the gunman's open hand.

The gunman licked his lips, all his attention riveted on the prize in the palm of his hand, utterly oblivious to Charla, who was walking sedately away from him and towards Milo.

There was a thunder of footsteps on the stairs and the other blond appeared, still holding a pistol

in one hand, absolutely exultant as he crowed, "Did you hear me? I GOT--"

Charla, without slowing her pace or so much as twitching one eye, moved calmly past Milo, drew back her hand and slapped the blond man right across the mouth. "Diamonds," she spat, as though it were a curse, and as the blond in front of her recoiled in confusion, she slapped him twice more. "For those stupid, STUPID diamonds!"

Then Milo had her, and the brown-haired gunman had him, and the blond without the gun was trying to keep the blond with the gun from shooting holes in Charla, who seemed insensible to any action but that of shaking free of restraint and slapping some more.

"That's enough!"

Charla kept struggling, and Milo only looked around, but everyone else stopped instantly, and both blonds actually cringed back a little.

There was a tall, grey-haired woman on the stairs, glaring down at the whole knot of them with an icy contempt. The weak, helpless Mrs. Reardon, Milo presumed, and his grip on Charla's shoulders inadvertently tightened.

"Mom," the blond with the gun began, shaking free of his brother's grip and pointing back at Charla with bruised indignation. "She--"

Mrs. Reardon slapped him. Not as hard as Charla had, but the blond man staggered into the wall and threw up both arms protectively. "Idiot!" she hissed. "Put your hands at your sides, right now!"

Slowly, the blond obeyed, and Mrs. Reardon slapped him three times more--back and forth and back again--before finally forcing her own hand down. "Charging through the neighborhood with a gun, shooting at a dog?" she snarled. Her slapping hand was twitching, clenching, obviously burning with the urge to rise and pound some more sense into the cowering, flush-faced man before her. "James Scott Reardon, I am thoroughly disgusted by you! Thoroughly! Give your brother the gun!"

James held out the weapon in a limp-armed aside, his hair hanging lankly over his face and a wooden, angry set to his shoulders.

Now, and only now, did Mrs. Reardon look at Milo, and it was a cold, furious expression. "Where did you come from, I wonder?" she asked caustically.

"Redfork, Colorado," he replied, truthfully

enough, but he was careful to move Charla from the front of him to his back before he said it.

"Sullivan," Mrs. Reardon said simply, and the blond twin who now had possession of the gun gave Milo a solid punch to the ear.

It took a younger brother to know an older one's tricks; nothing in the world hurts as much as an ear-punch, except maybe a knee in the crotch, but when you've been on the receiving end a few times, you learn to sense one coming even when you can't see it, and you learn to dodge without looking like you're dodging. Milo rolled with it, and came up with a burning heat instead of the migraine-bright blistering ache that the blow would have otherwise landed. He glanced at the twin, Sullivan, and had a sudden, wistful appreciation for growing up with Ben. He'd have to remember to give his brother a call, when and if he got out of here, and tell him that all those impromptu, unfair wrestling matches when they were growing up were forgiven.

"You were supposed to come alone," Mrs. Reardon said, her eyes skipping over to Charla.

"I did," Charla answered. "And I'd have left alone, without the diamonds, if you hadn't taken it into your head to kidnap me."

"You brought them," Mrs. Reardon said, her eyes flashing as she seized on Charla's words.

"She owned up," the dark-haired gunman said, after a shuffling sort of cough to attract Mrs. Reardon's eye. He held up the necklace in an oddly jerky motion, as though reluctant even to show it, much less part with it.

The old woman bared her teeth with vampire swiftness and actually stepped away, eyeing the precious jewels with white-hot hatred. "Just put them away!" she snapped. "If I never see those accursed things again--"

She took a sudden, sharp breath, and then another, and finally the bright spots of color that had risen in her thin face faded and she looked down at Milo with a degree of distaste that was more comfortably distant. "Now," she said. "What to do with you?"

"Well," said the dark-haired man, after another long silence and a second awkward cough. "I guess we should tape them up for a start."

Mrs. Reardon's eyes burned into Milo's for a long, tense moment. "Yes," she said at last. "For a start. Well. Thankfully, James had the good sense to wait until the taxi had left before charging around

the neighborhood with a loaded gun, but we can't assume that that idiotic episode went completely unnoticed. We need to get them out of here."

"The girl brought her own car," the dark-haired gunman said. "I figured we'd load them up, take it out to Sawtooth somewhere and leave it. After we're good and out of town, we'll drop a call from a phone booth to let the cops know--"

"Such a lot of subterfuge," Mrs. Reardon said, speaking with clipped, vicious sarcasm. "Especially when they've already seen our faces, been to our house, and have our names!"

The gunman scowled, but kept talking doggedly. "I'm trying to think of--"

"It's too late to try now," Mrs. Reardon said with a dismissive wave. "So you'd best leave the thinking to those who are best suited for it. Although, with one small alteration, your farcical little plan has real potential. Keep them separated," she added, turning to climb the stairs. "If one of them moves, shoot the other one."

"Look, lady," the gunman snapped, shoving past Milo and catching at the old woman's arm before she'd taken more than two steps. "Someone's got to know these two are here! They didn't find us in the fucking Yellow Pages!"

"If you have a point, Mr. Smith, I advise you to make it."

"You can't take them out and disappear them somewhere and think you're going to get away clean, THAT'S my point!"

Mrs. Reardon yanked herself out of his grip suddenly and advanced on him, white-faced and hissing. "Do you want to spend the rest of your life in prison, Mr. Smith? Because I do not, and I will NOT! You took a perfectly simple and sensible plan and turned it into a complete and utter FIASCO, and now you come whining to me about how to clean it up, and it will NOT stand, Mr. Smith, it will NOT. Shut up!" she snarled, as the gunman opened his mouth. "Just shut up, because your part in this is done, do you hear me? And unless you want very much to join your new friends on the floor of their spacious vehicle, I strongly recommend that you shut your mouth and do as I say. Take them upstairs, tape them up, and get them out in their car quickly and very, very quietly. Understood?"

The gunman glared, silent and tight-lipped.

Mrs. Reardon straightened, smoothed back one half of her hair, and turned her back on them. "I

want to be in New York by midnight," she said. "And I want to be in Indonesia before dawn. If you are wise, Mr. Smith, a characteristic I have very much come to doubt, you will find yourself a nearby country with no extradition treaty, and ensconce yourself as comfortably as you are able, because things may be a trifle rocky for the next few years."

And with that, she swept away upstairs.

Milo watched the other men exchange glances. None of them looked very easy in their minds, and no one was moving to take charge of anyone; Milo began to feel surreally absent from the scene, like the cameraman of a bad film noir flick. He glanced over his shoulder to see if Charla was still behind him, and the small action seemed to disturb whatever concentration was necessary for thugs to think at each other, because they all stirred at once and looked around, too.

Charla was there, of course, standing next to a clothes dryer with her arms folded and her hair in her eyes, and that same hollow-eyed stare of accusation still aimed at the man, James, who had been so happy about shooting Dog.

Dog. How horrible was it that Milo should get that socked-in-the-gut feeling over the animal's fate when Charla's, not to mention his own, was still in doubt?

James tried to stare Charla down, but could only take a few seconds of her silent condemnation before he dropped the effort. Shoulders hunched and gaze shifting aimlessly around the wall, he muttered, "I guess we ought to get going."

"Bullshit." The man called Smith threw a glare at each of the blonds, just as hard as if he was throwing a punch. "This is bullshit, and I ain't doing it."

"If we don't, Mom's going to--"

"The hell with your mom!" spat Smith. "If we do, we're going to get caught! There ain't no question! What do you do for a living, mister?"

The question caught Milo off-guard. "I'm a veterinarian," he answered, wondering what that had to do with anything.

Smith swung both his arms at Milo in a violent parody of demonstration. "Now somehow, some way, we managed to leave a trail out there broad enough for a vet to follow," he finished sourly. "A fucking vet. No offense," he added, in an absurd aside to Milo.

"None taken. But I didn't do any of the actual

tracking, anyway. That was all Charla."

All three of the thugs re-focused their attention on the appropriate party. "What do you do?" the other twin asked, with a twinge of optimism in his voice, clearly hoping for Charla to declare herself a senior member of Poho's Crime Scene Investigators.

"I play with rocks," she said flatly.

"She's good at it, too," Smith added, and then shook his head, like a dog throwing off water. "My point is, that at this particular moment in time, all we done so far is larceny and a little kidnapping."

"Unlawful discharge of firearms," Charla muttered, her eyes bright and hard as diamonds.

Jamey swung on her with one hand clenched white and snarled, "He had it coming, the bastard! You don't know him like I do!"

"Shut up!" Smith spat, his voice made hoarse by the strain of keeping it pitched too low to carry to the upstairs. "Just shut up, Jamey, before I clock you one, I swear to God, I will. You are missing the fucking point and the fucking point is that kidnapping someone for a couple hours is one thing, but killing 'em is whole 'nother fucking bowl of fruit. Shut UP!" he hissed, as the blond started to whine out some protestations. "It ain't worth killing somebody!"

Both the blonds stared at Smith with perfectly matched expressions of dumb amazement, but only one of them spoke. "Yeah," Sullivan said, speaking slowly and carefully, as to a retarded child. "Yeah, it is."

"Mom did say millions to you, right?" James added, looking and sounding doubtful to a degree Milo would have found comic if guns were not involved. "I mean, you know your cut of this will be from a couple of million, right?"

Smith actually gaped at them for a second or two before his mouth snapped shut and twisted sourly to one side. "All right, wiseass, is it worth dying for? Because when they catch you--and they will, you empty-headed little bastards--they are going to stick a needle in your arm almost before they're finished putting the cuffs on your fucking wrists."

The blonds looked into the mirror of the other brother's face for a few seconds of silent communion. Then both turned the same blank-eyed incomprehension back on Smith.

"Millions," said James.

"Mom says we only need twenty-four hours,"

Sullivan amplified. "I mean, even if people are already, like, *concerned*, they can't even get the cops involved until tomorrow and we'll be in India by then."

"Indochina," James corrected sagely.

"Whatever. What I'm trying to say is, you're missing the point, excuse me, the fucking point--"

Smith's left eye ticced and his mouth got even thinner.

"--and the fucking point is that you're in or you're out, so get the damn duct tape."

"No."

He didn't say it loud and he didn't do something heroic and film-noir-worthy, like wrestle the gun out of Sullivan's hands, taking a fatal bullet in the process, but saving the hero and his lady fair for instant redemption in the last reel, but Smith DID say it, and he followed up by digging the diamonds out of his front pocket and tossing them at Sullivan's feet. Then he turned his back on all of them and started up the stairs.

"No?"

Sullivan and Milo said it together, but Smith didn't even bother to stop and address them. His answer came grumbling back over his shoulder, almost inaudible over the clump of his boots on the steps. "I'm in or I'm out, huh? Well, it ain't worth killing for. Fuck you and fuck your mama. I'm out."

This obviously wasn't in script. The twins spent a little time staring at each other and exchanging half-completed sets of shrugs and inarticulate arm gestures, and their uncertainty only seemed to build as Smith's footsteps reached the top of the stairs and the faint, but still strident, tones of Mrs. Reardon came to their ears with, "Where do you think you're going?" Smith's reply was short, foul, and ended with, "You can have this back and you know what you can do with it."

"Do you honestly think I'm going to let you walk out that door?" Shrill, disbelieving, and more than just a little unglued.

Smith's answer wasn't belligerent so much as just tired. "Lady, who the hell am I going to tell about this?"

Rapid bursts of bargaining followed, pitched too low for those in the basement to hear. Sullivan and James traded a final set of shrugs, and then James bent down and got the diamonds. "I guess we better tape 'em up ourselves," he said, tucking

them away in his own pocket after a brief, covetous examination.

"Forget it," Smith said suddenly from above them. "I only got one principle left. You want to stop me? Shoot me."

The twins tensed, but evidently, Mrs. Reardon preferred to leave the more mercenary acts to others. She made no more argument, and the next sound they heard was the front door slamming, and finally, the muffled grind of an engine firing up and driving away.

Silence reigned once more in the basement, but upstairs, there was a brittle, rapid tak-tak-tak of heels on the dining room floor as Mrs. Reardon began to pace, muttering at herself in a voice that could only carry a tone of unbalanced outrage to those listening from below.

Sullivan shifted, pointing half-heartedly at the stairs with his gun. "You go first," he suggested.

James actually recoiled with his hands up. "No freaking way, Sully! You go first, she likes you better, anyway!"

"The hell with that, she can't tell us apart." Sullivan started to say something else, glanced at Milo, and brightened perceptibly. "You go," he said, and pointed the gun at Charla. "Both of you. Go on, up the stairs."

Yeah, right. Up the stairs and out the door, if he could manage it. "Come on," Milo said, moving aside to let Charla go before him. The twins had a great time with that--Milo heard himself called a 'chicken' for the first time since the third grade--but didn't even seem to be aware that they were more or less putting their prisoners on their honor not to escape when they reached the top of the stairs. His heart pounding, willing his plans not to show in some subconscious way, they went on up out of the basement.

There was a door at the top of the stairs, and that door had a lock on it. Milo could see the dining room beyond it, and off the dining room, of course, was either the hall leading to the front door, or a sliding glass panel leading to a covered patio and the back yard. No matter where the old lady was, there was going to be at least one clear shot to the outside. The twins, still making playground noises about Milo's masculinity, weren't exactly walking right on his heels. He'd have plenty of time to slam them away and make a sprint for it. And if the old woman was in arm's reach, so much the better.

She had a gun--Milo was pretty sure Smith had given it to her--and Milo knew better than to bank on her not being willing to use it, but he found the prospect of possibly getting shot at in the kitchen slightly more attractive than definitely getting shot at if he were taped up in the back of Charla's minivan. It was a risk. He meant to take it anyway.

Charla had her foot on the upstairs landing when Mrs. Reardon silenced the spinning wheels of Milo's plans by stepping fully into view and leveling Smith's little black gun square between Charla's eyes.

All four of the persons moving on the stairs stopped in their tracks.

"How...fascinating," Mrs. Reardon said, her thin lips hardly moving and her voice just a dry, upper-East-Coast murmur. She sighted elaborately down the gun's lines, closing one eye in a mockery of aim. "It's like a camera, you know. Just point and click."

Mrs. Reardon stepped back, but kept the gun level, and motioned for them to come out into the dining room. "Mr. Smith has left us," she announced. "That simplifies matters. I have called the airlines and arranged for a flight, but that doesn't leave us much time. James, the tape is in the second drawer."

As one of the blond twins moved into the kitchen, Charla unexpectedly took a step forward, and the gun, which had dropped slightly, jerked back into head-shot-level.

"What about the diamonds?" Charla asked, completely ignoring the gun. Her head was cocked inquiringly to one side, and her tone was calm and even slightly caustic. "I mean, this whole thing was to keep your mother from finding out you'd given them away, so how are you planning to get them to that Smithsonian tour, huh?"

Mrs. Reardon flinched, blinked, flinched twice more.

"What about the diamonds?" Charla demanded again, each word like a hammer striking, and Mrs. Reardon actually stepped back. "What about that? While you're lounging on the beaches of Indonesia watching our murder investigation on the news from your satellite TV, *what about the stupid diamonds?!*"

"*I don't know!*" Mrs. Reardon screamed suddenly. "I don't know shut up shut up about those bloody things I don't know!"

The gun in the old woman's hand was rising in quick, miniscule jerks, ticced steadily upwards as by the hand of a distracted puppeteer, and Milo could feel his whole body tensing almost independent of thought, ready to spring.

But--

James stepped out of the kitchen, saying, "Mom, I can't find the t--"

Mrs. Reardon spun and struck like a cobra, shrieking, "It's in the drawer the second drawer you puling little shit don't make me get it for you!" and shot her son three times in the hand he'd been using to thumb back at the kitchen drawer.

Milo didn't remember grabbing Charla or running for the hall, but he only got one running step forward before his leg went out from under him on the slick hardwood floor and he went down right on top of her. The next thing he felt was Mrs. Reardon's hand in his hair, banging his head on the floor as she screamed, "And you stay there, you just stay right there!", apparently thinking he'd merely hit the deck at the sound of gunfire.

Milo stayed, his head spinning, feeling Charla curl into his side and listening to James hollering while his mother snapped, "Let me see it! Hold still! Oh, just wrap it up and let's go! Honestly, James, the things you do to yourself!"

"That was a good try," Charla whispered. "I'm sorry it didn't work. Did I trip you?"

"No, I just slipped." Milo shifted to try and take some of his weight off her and she immediately pressed that much further under him, her little arms snaking around his waist and hugging tight. "That was a pretty good try yourself. The psychological approach. I like it."

"Thanks. I watch a lot of Law and Order: Criminal Intent."

"There," Mrs. Reardon said, and did something that made James yelp. "Now you hold the gun and I'll tape them. You only need one hand to shoot someone!"

"Milo," Charla whispered, her voice breaking a little. "This may not be the time or the place, but I had a really nice time this last week. Except for today, I mean. Well, part of today was all right. The early part."

"Me, too," Milo said, feeling absurdly like laughing. 'The early part' of this morning felt a million years away.

"Yeah." Charla's arms were suddenly jerked

from Milo's waist as Mrs. Reardon rolled them apart and started binding her. "A really nice time. I'm sorry we're going to die."

Chapter Sixteen

Mrs. Reardon may have been new at this business of using duct tape to tie up prisoners, but she obviously believed in erring on the side of caution. Milo's wrists were wrapped separately before they were bound together, and the old lady used enough layers of tape to almost equal the thickness of real handcuffs. When she was done, Milo could hardly feel his hands much less move them. Still, old instincts died hard; Milo tried to wriggle, thinking somewhere in the more panicky corners of his mind that maybe if he sweated a little, the glue would unstick and he might stretch the fibers out and manage to shuck them off. What exactly he was going to do after that, with two guns pointed at him, he had no idea, but it was a start. Milo wriggled his wrists.

"Stop that," Mrs. Reardon said testily. She was adding another layer of tape to Charla's wrists. Having done Charla first, she'd evidently decided her methods had improved since binding Milo, and wanted to make sure the i's were dotted on her first prisoner.

Milo stopped, then realized Mrs. Reardon was addressing James, who was gloomily rubbing at his crudely-bandaged hand. He started wriggling again, more covertly this time, as James sullenly protested that his hand hurt.

"I'll give you a matched set in a minute if you don't stop complaining. Mother has a headache, so get in the car and take him with you. We'll be along in a minute. Move!"

James turned whatever filial feelings he might be feeling into a rough shove on Milo's shoulder, nearly knocking Milo off his feet as he was propelled out of the dining room. Milo skidded again--he never could get his balance on this sort of shiny wood finish, it never seemed to matter what kind of shoes he was wearing--but at least there was a rug laid down in the middle of the hallway. And of course, almost as soon as he got his feet squarely under him, he was thinking of barreling down the narrow hall and out right over the top of the twins once that front door was open. He didn't really need his hands completely free after all, they were bound in front and not behind him, so if he could just knock Sullivan down and get the gun, he might still be able to get them out of this. Mrs. Reardon had her gun just sitting there on the dining room

table while she was taping Charla; all Milo needed was for Sullivan's attention to wander for just a second....

Not that Milo could really hope for Spooner and McGlock's Famous Diversion Parade to come blowing down the street, but anything would do. A random patrol car wasn't completely implausible. Hell, a paperboy would do.

Sullivan's eyes never moved from Milo's face. The barrel of Sullivan's gun stayed roughly on line with Milo's heart, even when James jostled roughly by him to go and open the door.

'Good grief, I'm really going to die,' Milo thought, and felt only a kind of vaguely-defined irritation. He still had that library book....

James opened the door, let out a scream and dropped the car keys and they all turned around.

Dog was standing in the driveway between Charla's car and what was presumably the Reardon's. His sides were heaving and his right hind leg was dragging, but he was steady on his feet and his eyes were clear and blazing with intelligence. He lowered that massive, wedge-shaped head and showed about a thousand teeth in the sort of soft, liquid snarl that dogs only use when they damn well mean it.

This was the best distraction Milo could have possibly hoped for, but before Milo could even shift his weight to bull James out onto the porch, Sullivan had yanked him back and thrown Milo to the floor, his gun aimed, and clicking frantically away with the safety on. James, on the other hand, immediately sprang back into the house and slammed the door shut just as Sullivan finally got his gun sorted out, to the effect that two bullets went right into the middle of the vintage oak door.

Milo rolled fast out of the way, fully expecting 200 pounds of Tibetan mastiff to bang into that same door like a medieval siege machine, knocking it and the wall that framed it explosively into the hallway, but it never happened.

Dog came through the parlor window instead.

Some trick of dormant precognition had Milo glance into the parlor just in time to see Dog driving forward, black fur rippling over bulging mastiff muscle, as Dog jumped over the lawn, just one mighty leap carrying him over the hedges surrounding the house, over the high porch rail, and directly into the center of the double-paned sheet of commercial-strength glass.

The window seemed to buckle and fold, almost as if transmuted to a liquid for just a split-second, and Dog seemed to flatten, as though he had taken on the two-dimensional properties of the glass as he tried to pass through it. A white web of cracks sprang up across the full length of the pane, there for an instant, and just as suddenly gone as shards blew violently into the room in a wash of glass and blood and crashing sound.

It was almost a different dog that hit the carpeted floor of the parlor and skidded heavily across the tinkling glass to collide with the far wall. A new dog--bigger, meaner, whose fur stood up in furious spikes or lay flat in smears of pouring blood, glittering with glass dust. Dog's lip hung in foamy tatters; one ear and most of his scalp was shorn clean away, but the light of intent had not dimmed in his eyes, and he did not waste even a second in complaint over his wounds. He sprang.

Except that he didn't, really, he only LOOKED like he did, and when both guns swiveled to lock on a target that was not hurtling in from the left side of the parlor after all, Dog came in low from the right, his head darting to one side to snap savagely at Milo several times in rapid succession. In the same fluid motion, as Milo threw himself backwards in shock, Dog swung back and sank his teeth into Sullivan's leg.

And while Milo was still lying stunned with the thought, 'He fainted, the dog actually fainted!' cycling through his brain, Dog reared up like a bear with a flapping salmon caught in its jaws and threw Sullivan back through the broken window and out into the lawn.

The gun, jarred loose in the act of flight, fell to the sofa, bounced off the cushions, and clattered to the floor. Milo and James both lunged for it, but Dog got there first, using one huge hind paw to swipe it under the furniture and then pivoting to head butt James in the gut hard enough to literally knock the man off his feet and into the wall. James crashed to the floor on his butt with his legs out before him and his hands pressed to his stomach. He looked wildly at Milo, belched hugely, and curled up on his side, squinching his eyes shut and groaning.

Milo, his hands still thrust out to grapple for a gun that was now underneath about five hundred pounds of antique knick-knack shelving, suddenly realized that the duct tape encircling his wrists was

perforated in about a dozen places by dog bites. It had been no random, furious attack by a Dog made mindless by pain or rage, but a deliberate, concentrated effort to free Milo's hands.

The implication was so staggering that for a second, Milo couldn't do anything but heave himself up onto his side and gape at Dog.

Dog looked back at him, and damned if he didn't wink.

"Stop it right there. Both of you."

Dog swung his blood-matted head slowly around and locked eyes with Mrs. Reardon as Milo struggled to flip back in a position where he could see the hallway.

The first thing he saw was Charla, her bound hands reaching for Dog. All the fear in her face, Milo knew, was for him and for Dog; none of it was reserved for herself or the gun that pressed a pale dimple into the side of her temple. She might not even be aware of it yet. She was funny that way, Milo thought stupidly. She just tuned things out.

"Do you know, I honestly believe you can understand me," the old woman said, almost conversationally. She never took her eyes off Dog, never bothered even to glance Milo's way. Clearly, she knew where the real threat in this room lay. "So perhaps you can understand this." She gave Charla a hard jostle, twisting the muzzle of the gun against her head at the same time, eliciting a distracted sort of squeak from her captive, who finally seemed to become conscious of her situation. "I am going to walk out that door, and if you so much as twitch an ear at me, I'm going to put a bullet in each of this girl's appendages in alphabetical order."

Dog's gaze bored into the woman's as Mrs. Reardon took the first cautious step forward, then his head dropped as he considered the gun, and then dropped again to look at the floor. For a long time, Dog studied the hallway as the woman holding Charla inched a little closer. Then, moving just his orange eyes, Dog looked around at Milo.

And stepped back.

Not just back, but back and to one side. Slowly. Deliberately.

Milo twisted his hands against the duct tape, now well-bitten, and felt them tear just a little bit.

"Good boy," Mrs. Reardon said. "You just keep backing up, you son of a bitch." Her matronly shoes clacked on hardwood, too loud in the heady

quiet, like the muffled click-tik of Dog's claws as the animal gave way steadily before her, out of the dining room and into the carpeted hall.

The tape split with a frayed purr that sounded deafening in Milo's ears, but which was masked by the low, shuffling footsteps as the old woman stepped onto the slender hallway throw rug. Milo rolled onto his stomach, holding his hands together tightly beneath his chin, trying not to be too obvious about gathering his legs beneath him.

But Mrs. Reardon was nothing if not observant, and for a second, the gun shook as she wavered between keeping it pressed on Charla or threatening Milo to lie still. Not even a second, really. A split-second only.

Just long enough for Dog to lunge down and forward, seize the edge of the hall rug in his jaws and yank violently up and back.

The rug popped out from under two sets of feet with a locker-room snap and the old woman dropped with Charla on top of her, her arm pinwheeling for balance, and the gun skittering back into the dining room.

Milo managed a frog-like hop that took him just far enough to hook Charla by her ankles and pull her into the parlor with him as Dog leapt over them both and executed a full-body slam on Mrs. Reardon's chest. Dog's mouth opened, and Dog unleashed a dragon's roar dead in the old woman's face, his teeth close enough to dimple the pale skin of a very submissive prisoner. As the echoes of that conquering cry began to fade, the grating sound of Dog's panting breath became gradually more obvious. He sat down, straddling his captive, and then lay down, and then finally lowered his head to his paws, rolling one orange eye backwards to look at Charla.

"Oh Dog," Charla whispered.

"Damn you." Mrs. Reardon hands fell slowly to her sides and clenched. "Damn you and damn your dog and damn those bloody...bastard...diamonds."

Milo could hear sirens as he finally got an edge up on the tape around Charla's wrists. He let her crawl towards Dog as he got up and went to check and make sure that everyone was where they were supposed to be: one bad guy gagging in the parlor, one bleeding in the bushes, and the big bad boss lady lying white-lipped and silent beneath a great, panting Dog. Having done that, his mental To-Do list inexplicably emptied and Milo wandered into the

parlor, turned over one of the sofa cushions to find a glass-free side and sat down, experiencing the first symptoms of traumatic shock with a distant, clinical wonder.

He could hear Charla's shaky whisper, "Oh baby, hang in there, it's going to be okay," and the slow, weary thump of Dog's tail. He could hear some frightened housewife outside babbling about a bear attack and a drive-by shooting, and then he heard someone very close to him say, "Sir? I need you to come outside."

"We need a vet," said Milo, although he didn't, couldn't, resist the hands that led him to the door. "Right away. My dog's been shot."

There was a tangle of assurances that everyone was going to be okay, including the dog, and when it ended, Milo was sitting in the front passenger seat of a police car, wearing a blanket, and feeling unpleasantly numb all over. He watched the commotion stream in and out of the house through a strobe of flashing lights.

"Is anyone dead?"

Milo lifted his head in an oddly sluggish startle, and looked into the back seat. There, behind a pane of worn plastic and safety mesh, was Mr. John Smith.

"No," Milo said finally.

Smith craned his neck to an uncomfortable-looking degree, trying to see past the emergency cars to the house. "I thought I was going to have trouble getting someone to believe me, but they just picked me right up. We weren't even the first ones here." Smith watched the paramedics lift Sullivan out of the bushes and onto a gurney, his heavy brows wrinkling. "Christ, you must have gone nuclear. What'd you do?"

"I didn't do anything. Dog saved us."

"What....Shadow?" Smith slowly sank back and stared at Milo, then suddenly sat forward and looked again at the shattered parlor window, the medics rushing in and out with more gurneys. "I thought Jamey shot him."

"He did."

A team of paramedics, with Charla among them, suddenly poured out of the house, bearing a litter between them on which a huge mountain of black fur and bloody sheets had been settled. They vanished into the back of an ambulance; the lights dipped, the sirens came on, and rig rolled away.

"That dog. Jeez. That dog. Don't take this the

wrong way," Smith said finally, settling back into the seat again. "Because for what it's worth, I guess I hope he makes it, but I really hope I never see that goddamn dog again."

The vet's building where the ambulance had taken Dog had a very nice surgery, but it didn't have a kennel large enough to hold Dog afterwards. They ended up putting him in one of the examination rooms, and Charla sat with him, his huge, bandaged head in her lap, and her hands moving gently and endlessly through what little fur he had left. They'd shaved most of it, in the most ridiculous patches, so that he was one Tibetan mastiff who looked a little like a French Poodle, caught halfway through a good old-fashioned Egyptian mummification.

A very nice policewoman had brought Charla's car to the vet's parking lot, and then had brought Charla her purse from the front seat, as well as a huge cup of Starbuck's coffee and a bag of hamburgers, 'for when he wakes up', she'd said, patting the sleeping Dog's side on her way out. Charla drank the coffee herself. She didn't think Dog would mind.

Everyone had been so careful to keep Charla informed of every little thing, and she supposed it must be because they all were afraid she was going to fall into screaming hysterics if she was neglected. She was too tired to tell them not to worry about her, and she didn't think they'd believe her anyway. No one believes the person who insists that she's all right.

But really, the only truly bad moment came when a cop showed up with an evidence box with the words "Savelle Necklace" printed on the side and tried to give it to her.

"Take that thing away from me!" she'd ordered, stridently enough that Dog, even with all the massive post-surgical pain-killers swimming tranquilly through his system, opened one glazed eye and growled.

"It's yours," the young cop had stammered, clearly taken about by her reaction.

"No, it isn't! Anyway, it's evidence!" And then she'd burst into tears. "I don't want it and I won't touch it and you can't make me, it isn't even MINE! It's evidence, so you keep it, okay?"

"Look, lady, when a guys steals your wallet, we

don't keep it as evidence." The cop had licked his lips several times, ducked out in the hall long enough to answer his radio, and then came back in saying, "We can't keep this, lady."

Charla only cried harder, covering her face with both hands so she couldn't even see that stupid box. Dog, still growling, began laboriously to rise.

"Listen, we got to do something with it, but you don't have to take it home." The cop floundered for something more to say and suddenly, "Can we mail it somewhere for you?"

Enlightenment struck, and after rummaging briefly through her purse, Charla sent both cop and diamonds away with the name, number and address of Mssrs. Agelzoff and Sons, Fine Jewelers, in Venice, Italy written on a crumpled post-it note.

But that was the only hitch.

Milo showed up at last and sat with her until a perky young thing in paw print scrubs stuck her head in to say that they were on the news, and then Milo had bolted out to call his folks before they saw him on TV. He'd reappeared almost an hour later, groaning and rubbing his eyes, and told her that if she found a small Oriental woman and several strategically-shaved grizzly bears camping on her porch when they got back to Poho, not to be alarmed.

It was two more days before Dog's doctor pronounced him healthy enough to travel though, and another eighteen hours before Charla and Milo arrived back in Poho. And yes, the small Oriental woman and the grizzly bears were there. Milo's first words when he stepped out of the car were, "Ben, I want to thank you for punching me in the ear all those times when we were kids," and the little Oriental woman's wails of greeting swooped to the left and turned into a stream of indignant scolding in two languages before Milo's brother could finish saying, "What? Huh? I never hit you! Mama, I was eight! Ouch!"

The arrest of Marie Reardon and her sons was just a flicker in the national news, and most of that on the East Coast where the other Reardons nested, but it transformed Charla and Milo into the biggest celebrities Poho had ever seen. Someone from the *White River Rambler* had even come out to take Dog's picture for their little paper, to accompany their rather breathless rendition of the sensational events in Boise. Once the journalist had actually seen Dog, however--great zipper tracks of blue

stitches puckering the scabby patchwork left after surgery, tattered lips dripping steady flows of drool, and the grotesque gargoyle's head, still lumpy and stubby and lopsided from the newly-acquired lack of ear, with one milk-white eye just beginning to peer from the swollen slit on the right side of his head--he had changed his mind and taken Charla's picture instead.

Milo's relatives went away, amongst much hugging and promises of great bodily harm if Milo did not bring Charla to dinner for Easter (not to mention a secret aside from Mama-san to Charla that if Charla broke her baby's heart after taking him into the mountains and seducing him, that she could expect a midnight visit from the Oriental Express and a solid hour of paddling with the sole of her size-four silken slipper. Charla believed it). There was even a phone call from Charla's sister, which had ended halfway through Jeannette's remark that Milo's picture on the news had looked just exactly like a hairy sumo wrestler, honestly, what did she SEE in him? And the purple-haired Peggy-Do had actually volunteered to stay and work her full shift so that Milo could take half-days the first week of his return to see to Dog's recovery. This, Milo informed her, was noteworthy.

But the sensation did, eventually, begin to die down. By the time Dog was hobbling freely around the house on his plaster-wrapped leg, Charla was able to go all the way to the post office and back without being stopped and asked for an autograph, and something that had been clear to her only peripherally began to make itself known in a more concrete sense.

Milo.

He had been living with her since their return to Poho. Without discussion, without even a need for discussion, he had just planted himself in her house and now lived there as easily and naturally as she did. He slept in her bed each night, and ate at her table. He held her, and he kissed her, but he had not spanked her.

Charla's mind worked in such a way that she tended not to notice the things that felt right. That she noticed the absence of spankings, and that she felt their lack so keenly, was a disturbing shadow of emphasis on just how wrong that felt to her. She didn't know how to grapple with something like this by herself, and anyway, Milo had said back in the cabin that he wanted to know about things that

bothered her, that it was a sign of healthy intimacy.

Of course, so were spankings, and if application of the one had soured, than perhaps....

No. She would refuse to see it like that. Of course Milo wanted to spank her. He just didn't want to do it while she still upset. She determined to tell him at the earliest possibility that she was sufficiently recovered from her ordeal to submit to discipline. And he would spank her. He would.

So that night, as she held Dog's head in her lap and let Milo swab and re-anoint the last of the bad scars, Charla took the plunge.

"I'm okay," she announced.

Milo's huge hands, made into a ridiculous size when holding that tiny tube of Neosporin, paused. Even Dog looked up.

"Excuse me?" Milo said finally.

"I'm okay," Charla said, blushing. "If you were wondering."

"Should I have been wondering? I mean," he hastened to add, "I'm glad you're okay, I just didn't realize there was any doubt about that."

"Oh." Charla stared at the top of Dog's head, feeling somewhat thrown by this revelation.

"...Charla? Hon?" Milo finished smearing Dog and wiped his hands off on his jeans, now looking concerned. "What's up?"

Well, she had two choices that she could see. Tell the truth and look like an insecure idiot, or stay silent and look like a depressed idiot. Or, third choice, she could tell a lie and maybe get spanked for lying because she knew she was no good at lying.

"Milo..." She felt all the tension drop out of her all at once and looked up at him helplessly. "Why haven't you spanked me?"

Milo couldn't have looked more baffled than if she'd said, "Milo, why won't you bring me a live monkey in a pickle jar?"

"Why do you need a spanking?" he asked finally, and looked around the living room as if he might discover she'd been coloring on the walls. "Did you do something?"

It was her turn to gape. "I-I hid that stupid necklace on my ankle and snuck it out of the cabin after you told me to leave it behind! Did you forget?"

"Oh." Milo's face underwent a curious melding of comprehension and concern. "That."

"Don't...don't tell me you were never going to

spank me for it!" The possibility had never occurred to her; Charla could feel her hands knotting nervously in the hem of her shirt. "I'm sorry, Milo! Please don't make me--" But don't make her what? Make her not get spanked? How ludicrous!

"See, the thing is...Look, when I was in school, my surgical instructor told us all a story and I'd like to tell it to you, okay?"

Charla clenched her hands to make them still. "Okay."

Dog, who loved a good story, promptly rolled over and tucked his paws in the air, looking deeply interested and content.

"Early in this guy's career, he had a small boy, maybe six years old, come barreling in to the clinic with a bunny in a box. The bunny was dead, unfortunately, and the kid was absolutely hysterical. Turns out the bunny was a house-bunny, and the kid had had it explained to him many times that the kid should never, never take the bunny outside unless mom or dad was with him. Well, one day mom and dad had company, and the kid was bored, so he decided to sneak the bunny outside to play. No problem, normally. The backyard's fenced and the bunny's not a runner. Except on this particular occasion, there's a dog in the next yard over. There's not usually a dog in the next yard, but they are also having company and their company brought their brand-new coonhound with them."

"Oh no."

"This kid was inconsolable, and absolutely convinced that he had murdered the bunny. In his mind, the dog didn't even take a part-share of the blame. The kid had it all. My teacher told us this story to make us aware that the guilt that people can feel isn't always in the same proportion as the actual blame. I've seen it myself, over and over."

"I don't think I understand the connection."

"The kid in the story let his bunny go outside without mom or dad being there. That broke the rules, but mom and dad wouldn't have known about the coonhound next door either. No one could have foreseen that. The kid did not deserve what he was doing to himself."

Charla chewed at her lip, her fingers twitching and plucking at a fold in her shirt. "I still don't--"

"You snuck off with the necklace," Milo said with a sigh. "But you didn't deserve anything that happened to you at that house. None of it. And I don't want you to think for even one second that it

would have gone any differently if you'd left the diamonds at the cabin. If anything, it might have been a whole lot worse. That lady was seriously unscrewed on the subject of those diamonds."

"But--"

"I wasn't going to spank you," Milo continued gently, "because I didn't want you to think that I was spanking you for getting kidnapped. That wasn't your fault. None of that was your fault. You let the bunny outside, baby. You didn't unleash the coonhound."

"Oh." A knot in her chest she hadn't realized existed untied itself a little. "Okay."

"Better?"

"Yeah."

Milo watched her rub Dog's belly for a few minutes. "Want a spanking anyway?"

She looked up quickly. "Yes, please!"

"Well, okay." Milo got to his feet and helped her up, too. "As long as we're clear on the reason."

"Because I asked for it nicely," she said with a prim little nod, and ran to get a wooden spoon.

She was a good cook, one who prided herself on the excellent scope and quality of her utensils, and it took a little time to select just the right instrument. A larger spoon, to cover greater area? Or a short-handed spoon with the wide, shallow blade? That one would make the best pop when it struck home...or maybe the batter spoon?

In the end, she settled on pure sentiment; she chose the same spoon she had picked for that first time, here in the kitchen with Milo. She came back to the doorway, her cheeks burning with a strange, sourceless welling of pride, holding it out for the sheer pleasure of watching his huge hand close over it.

"Dog," she began, but Dog interrupted her with a long, groaning snort. He took himself into the parlor and lay down on his couch without requiring any further command, but the single glance he shot in the direction of Milo and the spoon was eloquent enough. Human stuff.

"So much for bending you over the sofa," Milo remarked, giving the spoon a few practice smacks into his palm.

"I like it better in the kitchen, anyway," Charla answered, walking backwards into that same room. "All these high-backed chairs."

Milo caught one by the arch and pulled it around to him, but stopped Charla as she began to bend

over. Instead he planted his foot on the center of the chair's seat and patted his thigh.

It was considerably higher than the level of her waist. Charla hesitated, but only for an instant. She inched forward, and Milo stopped her again.

"Aren't you a little overdressed for this party?"

Charla slapped her hands in surprise over her back pockets, amazed that she could actually forget something so thoroughly ingrained in ritual as undressing. "Sorry," she said, unzipping, and then coyly, "Do you want to pat me down for hidden diamonds?"

"I think I'll save that for after," Milo replied, and gave her a playful smack when she bent to push her jeans around her ankles. "Now up and over you go, baby. Put your hands on the table and leave them there, or it's ten more strokes for you."

Charla pressed herself up against the bar of his bent leg and gave a little hop to place her hips right on target before see-sawing over, catching her weight by slapping her hands on the kitchen table. There she dangled, her toes reaching for, but not finding, the floor. She could feel a cool breeze tickling over her bare bottom and thighs, and it brought out a shiver in her that had nothing to do with cold. She felt externally numb, inwardly molten; her whole inner being was electric with anticipation, excitement, and wonderful trust.

Then that first crack of the spoon shot through her, shattering her stillness and bringing all of her nerves thunderously to life. First shock, then pain, then sting, and then CRACK all over in a different place.

Charla kicked, tentatively at first, but more wildly when she realized that suspended over his lap like this, she couldn't possibly dislodge herself. She felt him paddling her and she struggled with real enthusiasm, let her bucking hips and kicking legs throw off his aim so the pop of the spoon could land in unfamiliar territory.

Then she stopped, quivering and breathless, content to lie and let the artist paint where and what he would.

The first shocking sting of sensation was passing, leaving Charla with a keenly heightened appreciation of all her senses. She could actually feel her flesh puffing and tightening, could feel the tingle of the air tickling each newly-blistered point of impact. And she could feel Milo's hand, caressing the very edges of what must be a brilliantly

blushing bottom.

She reached back, not to cover herself or futilely push back at the spoon, but just to feel--to cup one burning cheek in her own hand and feel its heat in her trembling palm. Milo had paused, checking the course of the spoon in mid-swing; she could feel his eyes on her, could almost see that familiar faintly-surprised-greatly-amused expression spreading across his features, but he didn't say anything. He let her explore herself by touch, and when she returned her hand back to the table, he said, "Well?"

"I think it must be beautiful," she replied. "It burns in a beautiful way. It burns deep."

There was a pause, and then a clatter as Milo tossed the spoon on the kitchen counter. Then she was spinning, pulled up and around, twirled as effortlessly as a child in his great, strong hands. "I need to take you upstairs now," he said seriously, holding her easily in his arms. "So if you've got other ideas, speak now, or forever hold your peace."

Someone knocked at the front door.

They both glared in that direction, but Charla was quickest to recover. She placed her hand on the side of Milo's face and turned him back to her, saying, "Let 'em wait."

Milo grinned, turned towards the stairs.

Someone knocked again, urgently, and someone was calling, "Hello?" in a masculine and unfamiliar voice.

"Oh hell. Put me down." Back on her feet, Charla swiftly stepped into her jeans and yanked them up, paying the price for her impatience by scraping denim across her freshly-blushed backside. Still wincing, she danced in place for two or three seconds, then whirled on Milo and said, "Hold that thought. I'll get rid of whoever it is. Wait here."

Milo grumbled something inaudible and dropped onto the chair he had so recently been using for a footstool, plucking up the spoon and toying with it in a tolerable imitation of patience.

Good enough. Charla darted down the hall to the front door and flung it open with her glare of ill grace already firmly in place. It froze there, became perplexed.

There were two men on her porch. One of them was a complete stranger, broad-faced and beaming, but the other was none other than J. Dixon Wright, her rarely-seen accountant.

"Good afternoon," Mr. Wright said, in the same grim-yet-faintly-distracted manner he had always affected when dealing with her.

A chill blew through her, cold and bright and hard as diamonds.

Chapter Seventeen

Charla stared at her accountant, faintly aware that the stranger was chirping at her, as a frown gradually puckered her brow, and finally said, "What are you doing here?"

"This gentleman," Mr. Wright began, indicating the man beside him with a barely perceptible jut of his chin. "Came to my offices this afternoon inquiring after your home address. When it became clear to me that he intended to invite himself onto your personal property, without calling--" Here the professional veneer covering Mr. Wright's words chipped to allow pure disdain to show through. "--I took it upon myself to accompany him."

"I appreciate that," Charla said, startled.

"So do I."

And that would be Milo, coming up behind her and probably looking just as dark and menacing as any single young lady could want when there was a strange man on her porch. All she needed to complete the threatening tableau was a snarling, milk-eyed Dog, and oh, here he was, shouldering into the doorway beside her.

"This isn't working out at all the way I'd planned," the strange man remarked, with a rather strained-looking smile. His gaze dropped to Dog; he paled slightly, but made his mouth go a bit wider and even hesitated one hand up. "Nice doggy."

Dog flattened his remaining ear and growled.

"Listen," the man said, hastily withdrawing his hand and offering a business card to Charla, instead. "My name is Bill Vance, and I'm with the New York offices of Hadley and Garlinghouse Insurance. See?"

So the card said. Charla handed it back to him. "I don't need any insurance."

Dog growled again.

"No, I know, I'm not selling you anything. I'm...look, do you recognize this?" From his inner jacket pocket, Mr. Vance withdrew a Polaroid picture of a painfully familiar necklace.

Charla stepped back before she could stop herself, then had to grab Dog's collar before the animal decided the action had been some silent request for back-up. "I don't have it anymore!" she said, somewhat shrilly.

"I know. You returned it." Mr. Vance tucked the photo away, looking puzzled by her response. "You don't remember that?"

She did, now that he mentioned it. Vaguely.

"Well, see here's the deal: Mrs. Reardon--"

Dog's low growl erupted briefly into a full-throated snarl, and Charla got her hand back on his collar fast.

"--hasn't legally been in possession of the necklace for some time," Mr. Vance continued, eyeing Dog closely and taking a few discrete steps back. "Her mother filed suit demanding that the necklace be produced, and that suit was processed while...things were happening in Idaho."

"So?" Milo asked.

"So, since it's kind of against the law for Mrs. Re...for certain persons to profit during the commission of a crime, legally the necklace was in your possession at the time of the suit, Miss Savelle."

"At the risk of repeating myself," Milo rumbled. "So?"

"So, one of the bylines of the elder Mrs. Rear...elder party's suit was the necklace be reappraised prior to the renewal of the insurance. She suspected the necklace was long gone, you understand, and she wanted the maximum benefits from it. Now, if the necklace had never actually been recovered, our offices could have contested that...but as it turns out, the necklace was recovered and it was recovered while it was in your possession, Miss Savelle."

"That's the second time you've said that," Charla observed, and her eyes skipped over to Mr. Wright. "Why does he keep saying that?"

"Because he is a frustrated drama major from a state college," Mr. Wright replied.

"Hey!" Vance glared at the inscrutable accountant, got distracted by a subtle renewing of Dog's growls, and started fishing in his inner jacket pocket again. "During the course of the events in Idaho, someone, somewhere, asked what you wanted done with the necklace and you instructed that it be sent to our offices, by way of Agelzoff and Sons, and our offices, Miss Savelle, habitually reward the return of stolen property with a ten-percent finder's fee. They've authorized me--"

"Wait a minute, what?!"

"--to present you with this check for two million three hundred thirty-four thousand dollars," Vance finished, and thrust said check out at arm's length, trying to glare at everyone at the same time. "Surprise."

Charla flinched back from the check the same way she had from the Polaroid picture, and sent Mr. Wright a look of desperation. "He can't make me take it, can he?"

"No."

"What?" Now it was the insurer's turn to step back. He looked at the check, as if making sure it hadn't transmogrified itself into a handful of snakes while he wasn't looking, and then stared at Charla with frank exasperation. "What do you mean, 'make you take it'? Who doesn't want two million dollars?"

"Those diamonds are King Tut's curse," Milo said flatly. "I wouldn't take that money if you pulled a gun on me."

Dog barked once, a canine's stiff nod of agreement.

"I don't want it," Charla said again.

"Well, I can't keep it!" Vance looked at all of them, his incredulity turning to alarm. "Lady, no one's going to believe you wouldn't accept the check! I'll lose my job! I'll go to jail!"

"Rip it up," Charla suggested.

"I can't do that!" Vance flattened the check protectively against his chest, now positively aghast. "First of all, I'm a federally-insured finance courier, ripping up a check is against the law!"

"It is not," Mr. Wright said, with a contemptuous twist on every word.

"It could be! You don't know! Besides, the budget-people back at the office are STILL never going to believe you actually ripped the check up, they'll just void payment after a while and send you another one!"

"I don't want it!"

"I don't care! You have to take the money!"

"No, I don't!" Her fists were balled. She was actually stomping her foot, all of her frustrations and fears boiling out of her in a child's tantrum. "I don't I don't I *don't!*"

"You want to leave, mister, right now," Milo advised, beginning to stalk out onto the porch, pushing the baffled Bill Vance ahead of him with nothing but pure intimidating presence.

"What's the matter with you people?" the insurance agent demanded, looking absurdly as though he might start crying.

Dog barked.

Into this rapidly-degenerating fray, Mr. J. Dixon Wright raised one hand.

Silence.

"Perhaps," the accountant said calmly. "I could make a suggestion that might prove beneficial." His eye fell on each of them in turn, beginning with Vance and ending with Dog. "To all of you."

It was midway through a Wednesday morning when Katie Swanson's life changed. She didn't know it yet.

She pulled into the tiny parking lot outside the Serene Paws No-Kill Shelter and parked in the Director's space, already noting that although the annual Drive For Donations carnival was in full swing, the place wasn't exactly packed. Maybe two dozen people, six of them wearing the Serene Paws volunteer t-shirt, and a couple of pets were passing among the few booths, and judging from the giant thermometer none of them were buying anything.

This year's goal was the same as last year's: Fifty thousand dollars raised and fifty pets adopted. So far they had accumulated just over nine thousand bucks, a couple dozen donated bags of various brands of kibble and cat litter, and had adopted out three kittens and a terrier named Jack. There were only three days left in the Drive.

Katie sighed, swallowed her cynicism, pasted on her Serene Paws smile, and went in to the building, mentally slapping her brain until she had it halfway convinced that things were going to get better. The shelter had struggled along a hair's breadth over the red line for seven years, and it would struggle on just fine for one more, Drive or no Drive. And in all fairness, they weren't doing all that worse than last year.

Katie pushed through the door and into the inviting wet-dog-and-coffee smelling interior of her second home and the first thing she heard was the hushed voice of some little kid's father saying that she didn't really want the brown doggie, he was too old and wasn't a real breed and if she wanted a doggie, he'd get her a nice new puppy from a pet store. The second thing she heard, almost before she had her fist fully uncurled, was top-volunteer Debbie whispering in her ear to tell her that Jack came back. Peed in his crate, apparently. Couldn't have a dog that wasn't housebroken. God, sometimes Katie hated coming here. One of these days, she was just going to stop.

"Poor Jack," Katie sighed, and dropped her

purse behind the high counter that divided the lobby into Us vs. Them sections. "Anything else?"

"Nope, that's it. Oh, well, the face-painter didn't show, but that's nothing new, right? Oh, and some guy gave us a hundred dollars in the cake auction!"

Katie tried to feel perky about that. "Well, that's a nice sign."

"Yeah, and Margo's new owners came by with her for a while. Her new name's Trudy, isn't that a vile name? Ugh. Trudy."

"My aunt's name is Trudy," Katie remarked, absently scrolling through her emails.

"Oh, sorry."

"Don't be, she's a perfectly vile auntie. Is Margo still here? I wish I'd seen her."

"No, they left, but she looks good, Katie. She looks really happy. And we adopted out another kitten, the little orange tabby."

"That's good," Katie said, thinking, 'He'll probably be back in six months,' and immediately hated herself for thinking it. 'Happy thoughts,' she told herself viciously. 'Happy thoughts, dammit! These people can sense defeat!'

The bell over the door tinkled, and Katie turned by reflex to welcome the potential adopters and/or donators, and her smile of greeting became an instinctive yelp of alarm.

There was a huge, hideous...*thing*...on a leash, standing in her lobby. A dog, she realized, and despite all the horrific things she had seen come through those doors in her time, she could not even begin to imagine what must have happened to make it look like that. "Oh, you poor guy," she heard herself say. "Come here, boy."

It came, raising and wagging its huge, plumed tail and cocking its only ear rakishly to one side. One of its eyes was poached white and blind, but that couldn't dim the clear light of intelligence and good humor that radiated from its calm gaze. Katie's hands found an un-savaged spot under its chin and rubbed, and the dog grinned up at her as if to say, 'You're being pretty presumptuous, but I'll allow it, 'cuz my chick's not watching.'

"Who's a good boy?" Katie crooned, rubbing her careful hand over the roadwork of stitches on the dog's face. "Oh, and who's a brave boy?"

"Lady, you have no idea," a deep voice laughed.

It was only then that Katie saw the four people who had come in with the dog, three men and a woman, and all of whom were waiting by the

courtyard doors for her to finish the petting so they could go on in to the carnival. She found herself oddly reluctant to let the big dog go, and he was far too much a gentleman to walk away from a lady in the midst of an affectionate display. In an effort not to appear awkward, she said, almost shyly, "What's his name?"

"Dog," said the woman, smiling warmly back at Katie.

Katie laughed. "That's original."

"Well, it's short you understand."

"For?"

"Dog of whom I hope someday to prove myself deserving."

"That's a good name." Katie gave the dog's shoulder blades a scratch. "I'll give you a nickel if you'll let me keep him," she said, pretending to be teasing.

"Tell you what," said the woman. She crossed the lobby, reaching into her jeans pocket as she came, and held out a rock. "I'll give you this if you'll let ME keep him."

It was warm to the touch, about the size of a walnut, and fit neatly and smoothly into Katie's palm, where it burned like a nugget of magic fire. It wasn't a bag of dog food, and it wasn't a round of Parvo inoculations, but Katie felt herself touched all the way down to the heart of her just the same. She turned the rock in her hand to catch the light, amazed by the way depth and heat and brilliance seemed to pour out of it. "What is it?"

"It's a paperweight," the woman replied over her shoulder. She and the dog were already strolling back to their party at the courtyard doors. "It inspired me once," she said, coming in under the arm of what was clearly her man with an utter lack of self-consciousness that gave the simple gesture depths of meaning. "I don't need it anymore."

"Thank you." Katie put it on top of the precariously-piled accounting sheets that filled her In-box and found that it could make even THAT abysmal mess seem pretty. "Maybe it'll inspire me, too. I could use it."

Katie watched as the group of them all went out into the courtyard together and, after a brief discussion and a great deal of pointing, headed in the direction of the cake auction.

"Thank God," Debbie sighed as soon as the glass doors had hushed shut after them. "For a second there, I thought they were dropping that monster

off."

"I'd have taken him," Katie heard herself say, still staring at the doors as though she could still see the dog standing on the other side. "He has a big spirit."

Debbie snorted. "He has a big body! I could have ridden that animal! Bareback!" Suddenly, she started and dropped out of sight to rummage through the old-memo box, conveniently located on the floor under a desk. "Hey, didn't we get a call a while back about a big, black dog that walked into some lady's house? I'm sure we did! Hey, what if that was him? I bet it was!"

"Yeah." Katie felt herself start to smile as her eyes were tugged back to the burning stone on her financial reports. "Looks like he found a nice home, didn't he?"

"Looks like he got a nice home dropped on his head, if you ask me. But yeah." Debbie's voice softened. "He's got some nice people with him. Sometimes it all works out."

"Yeah, sometimes." Katie heaved a sigh and shifted her gears back into the here and now. "The rest of the time, it works in the red. I've got the desk, Debbie. If you'll go play booth-gopher for an hour or two, I'll wear the clown costume for the water balloon fight at three."

"Oh, you're on!"

Katie settled herself behind a desk with some long-overdue balance sheets and tried to get comfortable with number-crunching. She couldn't seem to stay focused, not even when faced with all that red ink. The stone, that useless little present, kept drawing her eyes. It looked like such a little thing, but it was full of fire, and that fire burned so deep....

She was gazing into it when the little group and their big, black dog came back through the lobby with a coconut cake proudly borne between them, and all of them looking more pleased than any confectionary purchase had ought to make someone.

And she was still there when Debbie came flying back into the lobby, white-faced and wide-eyed and waving what looked suspiciously like a cashier's check frantically over her head like a flag.

"You won't believe this!" Debbie was screaming. "You are NOT going to BELIEVE this!"

Inspiring, the lady had said, and maybe Katie wouldn't have gone quite that far, but damned if

she didn't feel a *little* better.

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