



TERRY ODELL

WHAT'S
IN A
NAME?

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by

[Terry Odell](#)

ARe Edition

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Kudos for Terry Odell's **What's in a Name?** A Daphne du Maurier Finalist, A Gayle Wilson Award of Excellence Finalist. 2nd Place, Volusia County Laurel Wreath 3rd Place, Aspen Gold Romantic Suspense. A Top Pick from Night Owl Reviews, Four Stars from RT Magazine

Dedication

To Dan, who thought it was "cute" when I started to write.

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What's In a Name?

Terry Odell

Chapter One

The thud from the front porch was definitely a knock.

Kelli Carpenter jumped, clutching the plastic shower curtain to keep from slipping. "Just a minute," she called as she reached across the cascading spray to twist off the taps. So much for the hot, steamy shower she'd been dreaming about while she lay, freezing her butt off in a stinking mud puddle, waiting for the perfect shot. She squirmed back into her grimy jeans.

From the road, she heard the distinctive roar of Harley engines. The knock repeated, growing more insistent.

"Take it easy," she muttered. Without bothering to towel off, she slipped her sweatshirt over her head, working her damp arms into muddy sleeves while she headed for the door, her mind racing through the possibilities of who would be there. Only park rangers ever came by. But they wouldn't pound unless something was wrong. And if they did, they'd call her name. The familiar fear gnawed at her belly. Had someone found her?

Shit. She'd forgotten her contacts and although she doubted any of the rangers would notice—or care—she hadn't survived as Kelli Carpenter this long by neglecting the details. She hurried back to the bathroom and inserted the lenses, turning her pale gray eyes into a nondescript brown and grabbed her oversize tortoiseshell-framed glasses. "Coming!" She hurried through the living room and peered through the window.

Her stomach flipped at the sight of a total stranger on her porch. Hardly anybody knew about this field station, tucked away in the mountains of Washington state. Behind him, she caught a glimpse of a gray pickup truck, the one that had pissed her off by hugging the center line when she'd driven home.

Calm down. He's lost and wants directions. Tell him what he needs and he'll be gone.

"Yes?" she called through the door, trying to remember if she'd locked it.

"I'm looking for Kelli Carpenter," a deep male voice said.

Kelli. Not Casey. Okay. She inched the door open. Swallowed. Twice. A man waited on her porch, wearing jeans and a windbreaker over a black turtleneck, holding an olive-green duffel bag. He stood at least six-two, with black hair that hung almost to his shoulders, and a five o'clock shadow at least two days old.

"I'm Kelli." She forced herself to meet his eyes. Dark chocolate brown, they grabbed and wouldn't let go. He stared, a little longer than necessary and she crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly all too aware her bra lay on the bathroom floor.

She took a step backward into the dimmer light of the living room. "Is something wrong?"

"No, nothing." His startled expression dissolved into neutrality. "I...um...I suppose I'd expected a man." He took half a step forward.

Avoiding his eyes, she took a deep breath and managed a quick smile. "Can I help you with something?"

He dropped his duffel and extended a hand. "Sorry. I'm Blake Windsor. I'm here to repair a dormitory cabin. If you'll point me to my room, I can put my stuff away and take a look before it gets dark."

She ignored the offer of a handshake and suppressed a shudder at the thought of a stranger invading her home. "I'm afraid there must be some mistake. There's no room for you to stay here."

He raised an eyebrow and looked beyond her. "I can take the couch. No problem. Jack Stockbridge said you'd be expecting me."

Her mind whirled. Because he knew her boss's name didn't mean he was legit. Camp Getaway was hardly a secret project. A ripple of fear crept up her scalp. The way he looked at her when she opened the door, like he was studying her, and not in a man-woman way. A man hadn't looked at her like that in a long time, but not so long she didn't recognize the difference. Had someone connected her to Robert after all these years? No. If they had, that man on the porch would be here with handcuffs, not a duffel bag.

"I haven't heard from Jack Stockbridge, and I'm sure he'd have told me if someone was coming." *Don't antagonize him.* She kept her tone civil. "I'm very sorry, Mr. Windsor, but I suggest you start down the mountain. These roads can be tough to navigate in the dark."

The shrill ring of the telephone interrupted. She twisted her head toward the kitchen. Should she answer the call there, where she could keep an eye on this stranger? Or take it in her office, where it was private? But that would leave this man free in her space. She waited for the answering machine.

Jack Stockbridge's voice floated across the room. "Kelli? Jack. Are you back? If you're there, Kiddo, pick up."

Kelli dashed to the kitchen and picked up the receiver on the red wall phone. Its old-fashioned rotary dial stared at her like a multi-eyed alien.

"I'm here, Jack." She cocked her head at her visitor and raised her eyebrows. With a nod of understanding, he backed out the door.

"I've been trying to reach you all day. You ever answer the phone? Or check your messages?"

"Hey, I've been out, doing what you pay me for. You know how hard it is to get decent bird pictures?" She paused, waiting for him to say the inevitable, hoping she was wrong.

"You love it and you know it." He cleared his throat. "There's been a change in plans. Thornton's pushed up the schedule. Wants to open right after Labor Day."

"Labor Day? That's not even two weeks from now. What happened to spring? You know our deal. I do the environmental studies—alone—and then you send in the labor crews."

"Kiddo, I know, but there's no way to finish on time without help. If we lose the funding, it's all over. I can't replace you at this late date and the dorm cabin has to be repaired, pronto. I've sent a handyman to take care of it. I'm sure you'll manage."

She glanced at the front door. "Six-two, long hair?"

"Yep. Blake Windsor."

A lead ball filled her stomach. "He's here."

* * * * *

Blake rose and walked along the porch, catching a glimpse of Kelli pacing the kitchen, her movements restricted by the phone's twisted cord. For an instant their eyes met and she spun around. He almost winced at the daggers she'd shot him.

He left the porch and wandered the yard, checking for a cell phone signal. Nothing, just as it had been for the past five miles. So much for calling his boss and telling him this was a wild goose chase.

He peeled off his windbreaker and tied his hair back. After some stretches, he began a tai chi form to work the kinks out of muscles stiffened by hours behind the wheel of that overloaded EnviroCon pickup. Driving a Ford F-250 over the winding mountain roads was like driving a tank, but his classic Corvette wouldn't fit the handyman image.

He moved through the form, trying to focus his mind, but he couldn't shake the surprise seeing Kelli Carpenter had given him. How his boss could think the frumpy brunette who'd answered the door was the elegant Casey Wallace was beyond him. He couldn't imagine the sleek blonde in the photograph his boss had sent ever having a streak of mud on her cheek.

She'd caught him staring, and he hoped she'd bought his flimsy "wrong gender" excuse. He spared another quick glance toward the house. Still on the phone, she pounded one fist against her hip.

Something rustled in the bushes. His head snapped toward the sound. Trees and bushes and things that slithered and crawled were not on his list of relaxation pastimes. Why couldn't this Kelli, or Casey, or whoever she was, live in Cancun?

"I need a favor," Dwight Hollingsworth had said. "You'll be compensated. The Connolly acquisition is a done deal. You're nearby. You know the carpentry business. Take a couple of days, do the handyman routine so she won't suspect anything, then tell me if she's the woman in the picture. That's all. Yes or no. I'll expect your call."

And Dwight had hung up the phone, and that was that. The boss had spoken.

To refuse Dwight—or question his motives—would be career suicide, or at the very least, a major setback to Blake's calculated plans. He sure as hell wasn't ready to start over, so here he was, out in the woods, keeping his eyes open and his mouth shut, cursing the fact that his boss knew he'd been raised by a carpenter.

What the hell. Dwight's "compensation" meant Blake would be making a whole lot more money than his father ever had for a home repair job. That might make it a little easier to play handyman for a few days.

"Mr. Windsor?" Kelli leaned over the rail of the front porch, and the expression on her face said she wasn't happy with whatever Jack Stockbridge had told her.

"I'll be right there." He grabbed his jacket and jogged to the porch. "I take it everything's cleared up?"

"Jack explained it. He said you should be done within a week."

"I hope so, but that's his estimate not mine. I'll have to check it out before I can tell."

The look on her face was like a kid who'd just found out there was no Santa, no Easter Bunny and she'd be stuck going to summer school instead of summer camp. A twinge in his chest surprised him. "Hey," he said. "I'm pretty good. Maybe I'll be finished sooner."

Her expression brightened only a little. "If you give me a few minutes, I'll clear a room for you. I hope someone told you to bring your own food."

He nodded. "I promise not to be any trouble."

The look she gave him said he was already too much trouble. But there was something else. Not only the irritation and confusion he'd seen when he'd arrived. Something else. Pain? Fear? His gut told him she was hiding something.

Before he could work on that thought, she disappeared through a doorway at the far end of the room. He brought in his food, such as it was. While he found places for everything in the small U-shaped kitchen, his stomach rumbled. Trying to get here before sunset meant he'd skipped lunch on the road.

"Your room's down there," Kelli said. He turned and looked in the direction she pointed. She'd left the door to a narrow hallway open. "Sheets, blankets and towels are on the bed. I've got some work I have to do." She practically jumped to avoid

physical contact when she passed him.

He carried his duffel down the hall and stopped at the open door. White walls, white painted nightstands between the three white metal-framed cots, white sheets, white towels. There were no curtains on the tiny window, but if there had been they'd have been white too, he guessed. A navy blue blanket was the only color in the room. He lifted the sash, letting in a faint pine breeze. As he put his Dopp Kit in the tiny bathroom, the front door slammed, followed by the sound of a car driving away.

Hopes of sharing a welcoming meal with the woman in the photograph dissolved like froth in a latte. He sighed and went to the kitchen.

After wolfing a can of stew and two peanut butter sandwiches, Blake took advantage of Kelli's absence. His quarters were on one side of an open living area. Expensive deadbolt locks secured two doors on the other side. Kelli's domain. So much for checking her out.

He wandered through the space. Plain, utilitarian furniture. Frumpy, just like Kelli. In front of a brown and beige plaid couch, a scarred wooden coffee table held a small stack of books. He strolled over and glanced at the titles. A battered copy of the complete Sherlock Holmes, an Agatha Christie collection, and a paperback mystery. He opened the Holmes book and rifled the pages before setting it down exactly where he found it.

An easy chair, a mate to one by the couch, faced French doors overlooking a lake. Binoculars and a field guide to Western birds lay on a small table beside the chair. He could see the Kelli he'd just met spending time here. Not the Casey he was looking for.

Nothing here told him Kelli was Casey Wallace. Dwight hadn't said anything about collecting fingerprints, or DNA samples, not that he had a clue how to do it, but he'd given his word to investigate and he owed Dwight more than a quick peek. He'd have to get her talking. He made his living reading people and was damn good at it.

But for now, he was a handyman, not a corporate negotiator. He stood on the porch, listening as the unfamiliar noises of the wilderness faded under the growl of distant motorcycles engines. To him, it was the motorcycles that sounded like home. He took a deep breath. Instead of exhaust fumes, he smelled dirt over something he could only describe as "green".

He drove the truck down to the cabin and had a look around. The roof needed a lot of work and plywood covered the window openings. Inside, the plumbing was in bad shape. He began unloading the materials Jack Stockbridge had supplied, unpleasantly surprised at how easily he slipped into contractor mode, assessing what needed to be done and mentally prioritizing tasks.

He heard his father from the great beyond.

There's no shame in working with your hands, son. Learn to take care of the basics and you'll never want for a roof over your head.

He ignored the ache in his gut. He'd sworn he'd never pick up a hammer or cut another board as long as he drew breath.

Now that the sun was down, the temperature dropped. Late August at four thousand feet was nothing like the weather he'd left behind in Seattle. He stomped on the porch, rubbing his arms against the chill, and eyeballed the small stack of firewood. He saw no need to freeze. If Kelli objected—well, he'd apologize, but at least they'd be talking. He carried an armload of wood inside and lit a fire.

Not much later, Kelli stomped back into the house, her face ruddy from the chill night air. She'd changed out of her muddy clothes—and the smudges on her cheek were gone. He gave her a friendly smile. "Welcome back. It was getting cold, so I started a fire. Hope you don't mind. I'll be glad to replace any firewood."

She glanced at him, at the fireplace and gave her head a noncommittal tilt.

Okay, that hadn't worked. He tried again. "If it's not being too nosy, may I ask where you've been? Please don't tell me there's a gourmet restaurant out there."

She went to the closet and hung up her parka, then crossed the room to the kitchen. "Running a trap line. We have to account for any protected or endangered species inhabiting the area."

Ah. An opening. "Doesn't trapping an endangered animal kind of defeat the purpose?"

She shook her head and gave him an eye-rolling look somewhere between ridicule and annoyance. "These are Sherman live traps. Nothing to hurt the animal. First thing in the morning, I'll photograph and release anything I catch." She opened the refrigerator and peered inside.

"Nothing dangerous, I hope."

She slammed the refrigerator shut. "No and it's no concern of yours. You're here to fix the cabin, nothing more."

"Simply trying to be neighborly," he said. "Am I allowed to use the living room? Far left side of the couch? Or should I take one of the chairs to my room? I didn't bring any furniture." He tried to keep a jovial tone in his voice, but he heard some irritation bleeding through.

She turned toward him. "Sorry." For a moment, her eyes met his. "I've been by myself a long time. I'm not used to sharing. This space is open territory, okay?"

"Okay. Can you tell me more about this project? What did Stockbridge call it? Getaway something?"

"Camp Getaway." She put a container in the microwave, then turned to face him. "The plan is to bring inner city kids up here. Get them away from concrete and drive-bys for a while."

"Sounds like a worthwhile undertaking. Maybe keep some kids from a life of crime."

She gazed into space. "Yeah."

The microwave beeped and Kelli took out something that smelled like a Chinese restaurant. His mouth watered.

"Why don't you eat by the fire and get warm?" He tried the smile that usually attracted women like a magnet.

Kelli found a fork, poured herself a glass of wine and walked toward him. And kept on walking.

* * * * *

Kelli sat at her desk and poked at the reheated stir-fry. After a bite, she pushed the container aside. She needed to work, not think about the punk who held up convenience stores, killing people. People she loved. A place like Camp Getaway might have turned him around. She wondered if being left alive was some kind of punishment for her sins.

She shook off the thought, grabbed a pad of paper and started making a list of everything she needed to do. With Thornton's new start date, she was way behind schedule. And the sooner she finished, the sooner she could get out of here and away from Blake Windsor.

She tried to assure herself the man who was sleeping in a room exactly twenty-eight paces from her door couldn't possibly know anything about Robert. Windsor was a handyman, sent to work on the project. Jack had vouched for him. Checked his references. He'd never send anyone who couldn't be trusted. Still, the less contact she had with Windsor the better. No way was she going to risk spending the rest of her life in a Mexican prison.

The phone interrupted. Jack again?

"Hey Kelli, it's Ranger Peterson. Doug. I wanted to make sure you were all right."

The hairs on her neck prickled. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing major. It's the annual end-of-summer biker retreat, but a couple of fraternities are here, too. There was a fraternity versus biker difference of opinion. Probably escalated by alcohol."

"I've heard the bikes all day. Nobody ever comes onto this property. I'm fine."

"Okay. There were some campsites messed up. Petty vandalism. Law enforcement's on it. You want me to come by? Just in case, you know?"

"No, but thanks. Good night, Doug."

Hanging up the phone, Kelli shook her head. Even though he was a naturalist, not a park cop, Doug Peterson protected the park like it was his own backyard. Shortly after she'd arrived, he'd made some overtures. They'd reached an understanding that she wasn't interested in anything other than her job, but every now and again he'd test the waters.

She stood, arched her back, and went to the window. The bike noises seemed to

be getting closer. She waited, listening, and they faded away.

She sighed and turned to the paperwork for the Environmental Impact Statement. What seemed like hours later, only halfway through the mounds of paperwork, she gave up trying to fill out the requisite forms. Too restless to sleep, she clicked the computer mouse and opened her games folder. After setting the difficulty level to "evil", she blasted Snoods, imagining Robert's face as she wiped the colored icons off the screen. Robert was gone now, too, like the Snoods.

The smell of congealed Chinese food on her desk turned her stomach. She picked up the container and headed for the kitchen, remembering at the last minute to put on her glasses. She reminded herself to keep her guard up.

Seconds later, she was glad she had. Instead of being asleep, Windsor stood at the stove, his back to her. Her heart thumped against her rib cage. She froze. Before she could retreat, he faced her.

Chapter Two

Blake adjusted the burner under the teakettle. Kelli stood there, clutching the remains of her dinner, like she wanted the floor to swallow her. He tried his smile again. "I'm making chamomile tea. Want some?"

Kelli lowered her head. "No, thanks. I need to wash my dishes."

He watched her, obviously struggling with the dilemma of joining him in the confined space of the kitchen. Without giving ground, he reached out his hand. "I'll do them."

Her chin lifted and her eyes, red-rimmed behind those big glasses, met his. "No need." She edged into the space, turning sideways, arms tight at her sides, managing to avoid any contact when she bent over to scrape her leftovers into the trash can.

Something creaked outside. He jumped backward, jostling Kelli. The trash can tipped, spilling its contents over the linoleum. His stew can rolled across the floor, leaving a trail of gravy drippings. Kelli sucked in a loud breath.

"Hey," he said. "Sorry. I heard something outside and it startled me."

She pushed her glasses up on her nose, but didn't look up. "It's okay." She bent over, cramming everything back into the trash.

He wet a paper towel and crouched down beside her. She smelled of soap and—green, like outside. Not the expensive perfume he was used to on women. Strangely enticing. "Let me. It was my fault."

Avoiding his eyes, she scrambled to her feet and backed out of the kitchen, almost cowering. Thoughts of domestic abuse flashed in his mind. But how would that relate to Dwight? Blake had been so busy jumping to do Dwight's bidding, he hadn't really played out why his boss would want to find someone like Casey—or Kelli.

A clattering from outside had him on his feet. "Did you hear that?"

Kelli half-turned and shrugged. "Probably a raccoon. They like to get into the garbage cans if the lids aren't secured."

"Raccoons. I can handle that. Davy Crockett tails, Lone Ranger masks, right?" He smiled. The tiniest quirk of her mouth told him he'd made his first bit of headway.

She raised her eyebrows. "Of course it might be a bear."

"A bear?" *Bears? Holy crap.* Involuntarily, he stepped back and saw one corner of Kelli's mouth turn up. First law of the boardroom, and he'd blown it. Never let them see fear. Round two to Kelli.

He tried to recover some ground. "Um . . . should I check to see if the lids are tight?"

She gave an exasperated head shake and rolled her eyes. "They're fine. Besides, the bears knock over the cans. That wasn't loud enough."

"It doesn't bother you, having bears so close?" He did *not* want to get up close and personal with the natives. He wondered if Kelli would think he was a wuss if he drove the fifty yards to the cabin every day.

"Oh, I don't mind the bears," she said. "It's when the deer eat my herbs that I get really mad."

"Touché." He held up his hands, palms out in mock surrender.

"Actually, the two-legged creatures cause most of the problems. One of the rangers called to tell me about trouble with some campers. The Park Service takes care of it. Nobody's ever come out this far."

"Anything to do with the bikes I've been hearing?"

She nodded. "Bikers and frat guys. But the rangers are on top of things."

As if on cue, the bike noises were back. Kelli glanced toward the door.

"Are the building supplies secure?" she asked.

"Not really." As the roar grew louder, he glanced in the direction of the cabin. "I thought you said nobody ever came by."

She lowered her head and massaged her neck. "There's a first time for everything. I'm going to go check it out."

"No. Let me go."

Her head lifted. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Windsor." Her expression belied her words.

"I insist. No need for you to go out. It's late. I'll move everything inside the cabin and get a padlock on the door."

She studied him for a moment, as if weighing all the options and consequences. "Suit yourself."

"I'll get a jacket." He went to his room, wondering what had possessed him to volunteer to go outside in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere. In bear territory. He thought of the expression on Kelli's face when he'd volunteered, and he knew.

He pulled a leather string from his pocket and tied back his hair. Shrugging into his parka, he had one hand on the front doorknob when Kelli came out of her room. "Here," she said and stretched out her arm, extending a large Maglite. "Whistle." He accepted the light, letting his fingers brush over her hand before her words registered. "What? Did you say 'whistle'?"

"Yes. Most wildlife wants nothing to do with humans. Make noise. They'll know you're coming and leave you alone."

"Thanks. I think."

He clicked on the bright beam and swept it back and forth across the driveway as he started for the cabin. Nothing seemed unusual, but how would he know? Every now and then he stopped, shone the light into the bushes and up into the trees. Somewhere in the distance, an owl hooted. At least he thought it was an owl. Trees creaked. Bushes rustled. Or things in the bushes rustled. But nothing came scurrying across the roadway, or swooping down from the sky.

The trees that lined the path brought images of the haunted forest in one of the few books he'd owned as a kid. It had scared him then, too—or his brother had when he'd read it to him with melodramatic sound effects.

Whistle? A lost cause. His mouth was too dry to manage more than a feeble note, but he figured his singing would scare the hell out of anything lurking in the trees. He burst into a shaky but loud rendition of *Bad, Bad Leroy Brown*.

* * * * *

Kelli watched as Blake worked his way down to the cabin, sweeping the flashlight up, down and around. Afraid of a little wildlife. Drop-dead, soap-opera-star gorgeous. Chamomile tea, for God's sake. He was probably gay. Heck, even his hair looked better than hers did. The thought of Windsor under her roof became a little less intimidating.

She wondered if he was really going to whistle. Instead, *Bad, Bad Leroy Brown* floated through the air. She caught herself before she laughed out loud. Windsor's off-key singing would definitely keep the critters at bay.

She absently rubbed her hand where Windsor's had touched her when he took the flashlight. A frisson ripped through her. It had been an uncalled hand, with very well-tended nails.

Her mouth dried up. There was no reason a handyman couldn't be gay, but soft hands? Her brain whirled. It made no sense. Undercover cop? Private detective? Didn't fit. They wouldn't be spooked out here.

Was he really going out there to keep the project supplies safe? Or using the cover of the bikers to do some sabotage of his own? Whoever Blake Windsor was, he

was not going to stop Camp Getaway from opening on schedule. She darted into her room and retrieved her thirty-eight from the nightstand drawer.

She pulled on her parka, stuffing her revolver into the pocket. Moving through the shadows alongside the road, she approached the cabin, sticking to the cover of the trees. A faint glow filtered through gaps in the plywood-covered window openings. A moment later, Blake came out, picked up one of the new windows propped against the exterior wall, and carried it inside. He returned for another and she noticed the heavy work gloves on his hands. So, he protected his hands. A fragment of tension dissolved.

Reminding herself it was for the kids, she stepped forward. "What can I do?"

He jumped but recovered quickly, flashing her a smile. "I'm just moving everything inside. These are custom windows. If they break, you'll be behind schedule."

"It's good to know you take your work seriously."

"No point in doing a job if you can't do it right."

She reached for a window. Good grief, she didn't want to like this guy.

* * * * *

"I never had my tea," Blake said when they were back in the house. "Please join me. It'll warm you up." He gestured to the chairs beyond the counter. "Have a seat. It'll only take a couple of minutes."

Kelli hadn't spoken a word while they'd worked and he'd backed off trying to engage her in conversation. But he'd made progress and wasn't going to lose what little advantage he had.

She hesitated and he found another mug in the cabinet. "Humor me?" He turned the burner to high and willed the water to boil before she could change her mind.

"Okay. I'll be right back." She disappeared into her room.

The kettle whistled and he stared at her closed door. When he heard the knob turn, he smiled and poured boiling water over the tea bags. "Relax. It's just a cup of tea. Sit. Please?"

Kelli slid into a chair—the one farthest from the counter—and rearranged the salt and pepper shakers on the red Formica tabletop. He maintained the silence while the tea steeped, then stirred milk and honey into the mugs. "Here you go." He leaned across the counter and set one mug onto the table.

She took a sip and her eyes met his for an instant. "Not bad."

"Ah, another convert." He stayed where he was, leaning against the kitchen counter. "Nobody thinks you can put milk and honey into chamomile tea, but I prove them wrong every time."

She took another sip and a tiny smile teased her mouth, although she didn't look

at him again. He stepped around the counter and pulled back one of the three empty chairs. He lifted his eyebrows in question, pleased enough when she shrugged. He set his mug down, then took a seat.

"Been here long?" he asked.

"Around six months."

"Where are you from?"

"I move around with the work." She studied her tea.

He waited, content to watch Kelli accept his presence, seeing some of the apprehension leave her eyes. He tried again.

"Have you worked on a lot of these camp projects?"

She shook her head. "Usually I do straight environmental studies. Document what lives there. In and out in a matter of days. But this project is a new venture for EnviroCon. Thornton, the backer—he's some kind of philanthropist—he's done a bunch of similar ones. Camp Getaway could be the first of many for Jack and it's important to him."

Although she still wouldn't look at him, her tone had softened. The project was clearly important to her, too, and not simply because it was her job. She sipped her tea then set the mug down. Her fingers, with their short, unpolished nails, beat a quiet tattoo on the handle.

"This job meant long-term studies, tons of government paperwork, planned curriculum, not to mention getting permission to bring kids in. If they're going to stay in the dorm, it'll need a Certificate of Occupancy." She raised her eyes, almost in challenge. As if she didn't think he could do his job.

"I can handle it. Fitting the new windows into the old openings will be the trickiest. Driving that road with them was nerve-racking, but they survived the trip and I think they're safe where they are now."

She gave him that same exasperated headshake he'd seen earlier. Even exasperation was better than the way she avoided and ignored him.

He smiled. "What? Did I do something wrong?"

"On a winding mountain road, it's considered common courtesy to hug the shoulder, not the center line when there's someone behind you." She mumbled the words into her mug.

He thought back to the drive up, of a Wrangler zipping past him when he'd been trying to get a cell signal. "Sorry. Lesson learned. Most of my jobs don't involve mountain driving."

"And where would those jobs be?"

Another step forward. She'd actually initiated a question. "Seattle most recently, but I move around with the work, too." Crap, he was tired. He'd almost said Chicago.

With a nod, she stood and carried her mug to the sink. "Thanks for the tea, Mr. Windsor. We both have an early start tomorrow."

"Good night, Kelli." He fixed another mug of tea and brought it to his room, along with the Sherlock Holmes book. To the tea, he added a generous shot of Scotch from the bottle he'd brought with him. Along with convincing him tai chi would help him relax, his sister-in-law extolled the calming virtues of chamomile tea. He never told her about the Scotch.

On his narrow cot, Blake tossed and turned, listening to unfamiliar night noises. When sleep wouldn't come, he replayed the night's events.

Kelli, or whoever she was, had appeared out of the darkness, nearly giving him a heart attack and then slipped into rhythm working beside him. Together, they'd secured all the supplies, but for two people working side by side, they might as well have been on separate planets.

He wondered why she intrigued him. In his world, he'd never give her a second glance. He imagined unfastening the clip she used to hold back her hair, watching it tumble past her shoulders. Running his fingers through it. Taking off her glasses, giving him an unobstructed view into the depths of her brown eyes. He groaned and tried to find a comfortable position on the lumpy mass masquerading as a mattress. When that failed, he picked up the book and started reading. Maybe some of Sherlock's powers would rub off on him.

Sunlight streamed through the bare windows. Blake crawled out of bed, dealt with a lukewarm shower and staggered into the kitchen for coffee. Kelli's Jeep was gone, but she'd locked her doors. He made a peanut butter sandwich and went to the cabin.

He'd been working about twenty minutes when he heard the Jeep approach and stop. Aware he was being watched, he focused on his work, giving Kelli a quick nod only when she wheeled the Jeep past him on her way to the house.

When the afternoon sun beat down, he moved from the roof to work inside where it was cooler. He heard Kelli drive off again and he stepped out of the musty confines of the cabin, tugging the rawhide thong from his hair. He shook his ponytail free, trying to dispel some of the sawdust. The cabin floor was covered with it. More clung to his clothing and he slapped his jeans and stomped his feet in a futile attempt to be rid of it.

He needed a break and he needed to report to Dwight Hollingsworth, not that he had much to say. He'd demand Dwight tell him why he was really here, or—or what? He'd go back to Chicago and start work on the Whitaker account? No way. Dwight had insisted he play carpenter in this godforsaken wilderness, and that's what he was going to do. It certainly had nothing to do with wanting to help Kelli.

He drove about a mile down the winding dirt road before finding a spot wide enough to pull over. He checked for a phone signal. Nothing yet. Running his fingers through his hair, he sat for a moment, listening to birdsong and the wind rustling the leaves, not the traffic noises he was used to. He got out of the cab and opened the

lockbox in the bed of the truck.

He wrested the large manila envelope from under the spare tools. Although he'd encountered only a few cars, he jumped down from the truck and hiked down a trail until he came to a clearing. Once he was certain he was away from any eavesdroppers of the human variety, he unfastened the clasp and slid out the small stack of papers.

The grainy eight-by-ten photo, blown up from some magazine column, showed Casey Wallace beaming at her tuxedo-clad husband, who was holding a framed plaque and smiling for the camera. Casey wore a low-cut red dress which displayed an ample bosom and clung in all the right places. He tried to superimpose Kelli's face on Casey's. Subtract the blonde chin-length bob and the wispy bangs. Add glasses.

He stared for a good five minutes, but Kelli wouldn't pop. Hollingsworth must be grasping at straws.

He sighed and leafed through the background papers. Computer hotshot, married at twenty-three, almost ten years ago. One son, born a year later. Newspaper clippings—society pages, Casey an adjunct to her husband. An article about a convenience store robbery-shooting, killing the husband and three-year-old son.

He looked at the photocopy of a newspaper obituary. A blurred black-and-white photo of the memorial service, with the grieving family virtually unrecognizable.

He scanned the reports from Hollingsworth. Nothing he hadn't read twenty times. Kelli Carpenter had a perfectly normal history with no apparent connections to Casey Wallace, except in Hollingsworth's mind. Kelli had a degree in environmental science from UCLA, had worked for Stockbridge at EnviroCon for the past three years.

Why Hollingsworth connected the two women eluded him, but Blake would do what he was being paid to do. And for now, that would be to tell Dwight Hollingsworth there was no way Kelli and Casey were the same person. Or to hire a licensed PI, not an Mergers and Acquisitions executive who grew up pounding nails.

Rustling leaves, flickers of motion, and the distinct feeling of being watched sent a tingle across Blake's skin. Some sort of bird in the tree? A flash of movement in the underbrush had him leaping to his feet. Crap, there were probably snakes out here. What the hell was he doing in the woods? He stuffed the papers back into the envelope and jumped up, brushing debris from his jeans. Again, something moved. Blake froze. He debated whistling. Or shouting. Seconds later, a distinctly human figure moved deeper into the woods. Recognizing a park ranger uniform, Blake relaxed. He must have wandered across the park boundary.

He drove another twenty minutes, eyes flicking between the winding road and his cell phone readout, before he got a clear signal. Five more minutes before there was a turnout in the road. He punched in Hollingsworth's number and got the cool, efficient voice of Mrs. Madison, Hollingsworth's assistant.

"Is he in?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Windsor. He's meeting with Mr. Griffith—his campaign manager

—until four."

Blake felt a tingle of excitement. "So, he's really running?" He saw the door out of Mergers and Acquisitions opening.

She hesitated. "Well, he hasn't announced it officially, but from what I hear, they're discussing strategy. Rather loudly at the moment, as a matter of fact. Once they iron out the details, I expect Mr. Griffith will call a press conference. He seems quite eager to move forward."

He wondered if Mrs. Madison was eavesdropping, then dismissed the notion. The woman was privy to all of Dwight's doings without having to resort to subterfuge.

"I hear you did a great job with the Connolly account," she said. "How are you enjoying your vacation?"

Vacation? He hesitated. Dwight Hollingsworth had said to keep this a low-key investigation, with no links to Hollingsworth Industries. If Mrs. Madison was unaware of it, it was downright subterranean. "Fine. Weather's great." Where the hell was he supposed to be? "Um ... no need to bother him. It's not important. I'll check in when I get back."

"Very well, Mr. Windsor."

So, Dwight was really running for governor. That meant there would be some holes to fill. Blake planned to move upward in Hollingsworth Industries. Several notches. To do that, it looked like he'd play handyman a little longer.

* * * * *

At Henry's General Store, Kelli handed Hank her envelope. "This needs to go Express Mail."

"No problem." He passed her a small box. "This came for you." The curiosity in his eyes was obvious.

"You have a cutter? I'll check it out."

He slit the tape and pushed the box across the counter. "How's the new guy? Getting the place fixed?" Faded blue eyes showed grandfatherly concern.

"It's going fine," she said. "They've moved up the deadline, so we're busy."

"He cleaned me out of peanut butter when he got here. Doesn't seem to be an adventurous eater. Big guy, though. Quantity over quality, I'd say." Hank grinned, revealing yellowed teeth.

She unfolded the padding and ran her fingers along the cool metal inside. "Signs for the nature trail," she told Hank.

She went back to her Jeep. Before she started the engine, she pulled out her cell phone and called Jack Stockbridge to tell him the signs had arrived and the Environmental Impact Statement was on its way.

"How's Windsor working out?" he said. "You okay?"

"Fine and yes."

"You know I wouldn't have sent anyone if it wasn't absolutely necessary. But it won't be long, and you can go back to being your own solitary self."

"I know. I'm sorry I overreacted when you called yesterday."

"Kiddo, you know I'll do whatever you want. I owe you one."

She relaxed her grip on the phone. "No, you don't. I've told you a million times, all Justin needed was a little redirecting. He has the skills, but he needed a better outlet for them. How's he doing, by the way?"

"Getting top grades at OSU and a part-time job at a software company. Making me and Margaret proud parents."

She took a quick moment to share the pride. Justin Stockbridge was a formidable hacker, but his compulsion to see how much he could get away with would have gotten him caught sooner or later. Back to the issues at hand. "So, what more can you tell me about Windsor?"

"Not much. Thornton recommended the guy when I told him we wouldn't be ready in time without immediate help."

"Thornton? I thought all he did was throw money into the project. I didn't know he actually looked at the little people doing the work."

"You might think about removing the stick from your cute little behind, Kiddo." Stockbridge's voice had taken on an irritated edge.

"Sorry." She fingered through her mail. "The new schedule's adding some pressure. I worked most of the night."

"Look, Thornton called, apologized for moving the start date. Said he'd heard good things about a handyman agency, Windsor had come recommended and suggested I call. You know EnviroCon needs this project. The man talks, I listen. The agency was legit. Windsor was available. Enough? Or should I dig deeper?"

"No, it's all right. I overreacted." She put the Jeep in gear and tried not to think about the way her heart rate picked up every time she looked at Windsor. Maybe her body was telling her she was ready to live again, picking someone safe to practice on. Nothing serious. No relationships. Just getting comfortable being in the same room with someone carrying the XY chromosome set.

Camp Getaway would open and she'd be on her way to another assignment. Never staying long enough in one place for anyone to connect her to Casey or Robert.

Back at the house, she settled at her desk with a sense of accomplishment. When she was a kid, she'd always eaten her vegetables first, saving the good stuff for last. With the government paperwork on its way, she felt like she'd finished her beets and was ready for something yummy.

The next most important item on her list, a Certificate of Occupancy, wasn't exactly dessert, but it was Windsor's responsibility to bring the cabin up to code, not

hers. Still, she ought to check. As she strolled down the path to the cabin, she told herself it was important she keep tabs on his progress.

Blake called down from the roof when she approached. "Everything all right?"

She squinted into the sun and looked up at him. Her heart did that tap dance again. He'd taken his shirt off and was on hands and knees, hammering shingles. Shading her eyes with a forearm, she said, "Fine."

"You want the nickel tour?" He stood up, balancing on the pitched roof without any trouble.

"No—you keep on doing what you're doing. I'll only be a minute." She stepped inside, inhaling the scent of fresh-cut wood. Without the plywood covering the windows, the room seemed bigger. Sawdust danced in the gold afternoon light, swirling in the breeze, dusting her like a winter snow flurry. In place of stacks of lumber, she imagined the cabin with ten bunk beds lining the walls. She heard children whispering in the dark before falling into a dead sleep the way you did after being in the mountain air all day, hiking along the trails.

Unbidden, a smiling cherubic face flashed in front of her. Lucas. He'd have been in third grade now, like the first group of kids coming here. Memories burst through her defenses. The smell of talcum and baby breath when she lifted him from his crib in the mornings. The warmth of his hands resting against her bare shoulders when she carried him. The weight of him as his body relaxed into sleep. She blinked back tears.

I'm sorry. It was all my fault. What kind of a mother runs out of milk for her baby?

That was another lifetime, when her universe was normal. And happy. Charles and Lucas were gone. Nothing could bring them back. And then too-good-to-be-true Robert Kilian had stolen the life she'd tried to put together after she'd lost them, leaving a life of looking over her shoulder as his legacy.

She'd tried to lock the memories away someplace deep inside her, but they refused to stay buried.

"I should get to the windows tomorrow or the next day." Blake's voice from the doorway made her jump. "Once the roof is fixed and the windows are in, she should be weather-tight."

She kept her head down. "Sounds like you've got everything under control."

His footsteps told her he was coming inside. She tensed. He walked past her, to a small cooler in the corner and removed a bottle of water.

"It gets hot up there." He peeled off his work gloves, took a swig and wiped his mouth.

She nodded. In the dim light, his eyes didn't grab hers. "You need to watch it. You can get a real burn at this altitude, even if it doesn't feel hot."

"Thanks for the advice. I'm afraid it might be a little late though." He turned so his back faced her. "What do you think?"

Think? She thought of rubbing sunscreen on those broad, well-muscled shoulders. That fluttering below her belly started up again. Ridiculous. She pivoted and strode toward the door. The nature trail could wait until morning. Right now she needed to burn off these impossible feelings with hard, physical labor. She glanced at him over her shoulder. "What I think is that you should put your shirt on, Mr. Windsor."

She marched to the storage shed, loaded a wheelbarrow with a pick and shovel and headed toward a level spot near the lake. Plans called for a fifteen-foot fire circle and she attacked the brush and rocks with a vengeance. A place for roasting hot dogs and making S'Mores.

Hot dogs. Lucas loved hot dogs. From the vendor in the park or cut up in macaroni and cheese. The kid would eat them cold if she'd let him. Charles always let him.

Oh, God, how could it still hurt so badly? She abandoned the wheelbarrow and walked down to the water's edge. The sun hung over the mountains waiting to drop the curtain on another day.

You're watching over him, Charles, aren't you? Our Lucas? And Luke, I know you're taking good care of Daddy. I love you two. I should be with you.

Chapter Three

From inside the cabin the next morning, Blake watched Kelli drive away. Yesterday afternoon she'd stuck close to the property, clearing brush and moving rocks, avoiding him as if he had some contagious disease. Now, he figured he had at least an hour. Being a million miles from nowhere had its advantages. Even so, he waited a good ten minutes before he went to the house in case she'd forgotten something and decided to come back for it.

The deadbolts to her rooms were fastened although he expected no less. He went outside to check the windows and spotted Kelli's bedroom curtain fluttering. A stroke of luck. She'd locked her doors but had left her window ajar.

The screen came off with a touch, the sash lifted easily and Blake hoisted himself through the opening, trying to ignore the uneasy feeling of stepping into a universe beyond his normal boundaries. At a glance, her bedroom told him no more about Kelli Carpenter than she did in the flesh. The dresser displayed an assortment of dried plants in a clay pot, but no photographs. Nobody to think of while she dressed, slept, and went about her life? The top drawer revealed a pile of neatly folded utilitarian cotton underpants and bras. He couldn't see any of those under the clingy red dress in the picture.

In the second drawer he found T-shirts, and sweaters in the bottom one. Everything looked like it belonged to the Kelli Carpenter he'd met. He moved on.

Beside the bed, a white porcelain reading lamp sat on a white-painted nightstand. What was it with this place and white? He sat on the bed and eased the drawer open. Nothing visible but a box of tissues and the paperback he'd seen in the living room when he'd arrived. Tucked into the corner of the drawer was some kind of a satiny fabric. A pouch of some kind. When he moved the tissue box to reach for it, he discovered another box, this one of ammunition for a thirty-eight revolver.

When it hit him that ammunition meant gun, but there was no gun in the drawer, he decided he absolutely didn't want to be caught in her quarters. Maybe she was one of those people who practiced good gun safety and kept the weapon and ammunition separate. Or maybe she had a loaded gun with her. His heartbeat quickened when it dawned on him she might have blown his brains out if he'd done anything to piss her off. Postponing any plans to check out her office, he slid the drawer closed, straightened the bedcovers and climbed out the window, careful to leave it ajar, exactly the way he'd found it. With frequent looks over his shoulder, he replaced the screen and jogged back to the cabin.

* * * * *

It was after twelve when Kelli returned from her work on the nature trail. Finding yet another batch of forms in the fax machine, she went to her desk and pulled out her legal tablet, drawing a fat line through "nature trail signs". She moved on to the next item on her list. Activity sheets for the youngsters. She assembled her field guides, her notes and powered up her computer. Sounds of hammering alternated with the buzz of a power saw, eventually fading to white noise.

By four, she'd had enough. A shower, dinner, and maybe she'd find her second wind. She moved into the bathroom connecting her office to her bedroom. The power saw's whine seemed louder and she realized the bedroom window was open. Had she left it that way this morning? She hurried into the bedroom and took a quick survey, but everything seemed exactly the way she'd left it.

Stop it. He's out there doing his job and you need to get on with yours.

Perfect gentlemen didn't go snooping through other people's things. She sucked in a breath. It was time to rejoin civilization. She put in a fresh pair of contacts, clipped her hair atop her head and slid her glasses back on. The reflection in the mirror was comfortably Kelli. She wondered if she'd even recognize herself as Casey anymore. And if she couldn't, nobody else would. She wrapped her mind around that thought as she went to the kitchen.

In the pantry, she found a bottle of merlot. She opened it and set it on the counter to breathe while she decided how to dress up chicken breasts.

She started by chopping some onions and garlic. Unless you were making brownies, you could never go wrong with onions and garlic. After a quick shuffle

through her recipes and a check of the refrigerator, she decided on a Dijon orange and honey glazed chicken. Over rice. She set a pot of water on the stove and measured the rice. A salad, and maybe green beans to round things out.

She'd begun browning the chicken when she heard Blake's boots clumping on the porch. The door opened and he peeked in, as if he wanted to make sure the coast was clear before coming inside. No question he was keeping his distance. She tried a smile and found it came easily enough.

His eyes widened and he smiled back. "Smells good." She followed his gaze to the array of ingredients she'd spread out and saw a hint of longing cross his face. "Real good."

When he gazed back at her, those brown eyes sucked her in and she took a calming breath. "I'm making enough for two, Mr. Windsor. I've been avoiding you and thought you might like to join me for dinner. Consider it a peace offering."

"Only if you'll call me Blake."

She nodded. "Blake."

His grin spread and he ran his fingers through his hair. "Hell, you can call me whatever you want. I'm sick of canned stew and peanut butter."

"It'll be about half an hour."

"Let me get cleaned up and I'll help."

"I've seen you cook. How about if you set the table?"

"Smart woman. I'll be back."

Her hands trembled, but only a little, as she poured the rice into the water. She hoped Windsor—Blake—wouldn't think her rude if she started on the wine before he joined her. Too bad if he did. She took two glasses from the cabinet and poured one, downing it like water before setting the bottle and glasses on the dining table.

Get a grip. It was only dinner. How many times had she cooked for Charles' business associates?

She made sure her thoughts stayed away from the times she and Charles had cooked, side by side. Sometimes abandoning dinner for what he called a bedroom break. Images of Robert intruded, his rugged face turned feral when he'd poised himself above her. Her knees quaked and she leaned against the counter, fighting nausea.

* * * * *

Blake rushed through his shower, damp-dried, and found a pair of clean jeans. The thought of dinner that didn't come out of a can nearly had him out the door half naked. He dug through his duffel bag and chose a navy blue turtleneck, slowing down to think. To plan.

Be cool. Why the sudden turnaround in the Ice Princess? He wanted to give her

the third degree. She might have the same motives. He made sure his cover story was fresh in his mind.

Rubbing his jaw, he stepped back into the cell-like bathroom. He needed a shave. While he lathered his face, he laid out his plan to garner her trust and impress her with his restraint. This would be an evening of civility, filled with proper small talk of the project, with only the slightest venture into her past.

He finished dressing and strode down the hall to the kitchen. Whatever she was cooking had his empty stomach begging. He stopped short when he spotted Kelli leaning on the kitchen counter, pale and shaky. She looked his way and although she covered well, the pain in her eyes was unmistakable. He felt another twinge in his chest.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He took a step forward, arm outstretched, but dropped it when Kelli backed away.

Kelli sniffed and dabbed at her eyes with the towel she'd tucked into her jeans. "Fine. Onions." She kept the towel to her face. "Wine's on the table. Help yourself."

She was reacting to more than onions. Whatever had inspired her to invite him to dinner hadn't eliminated her need for distance. He poured, then picked up a glass and extended it toward her, careful to leave room for her to take it without touching his fingers.

She released the towel and took the wine. Her hands were steady. "Salad's in the fridge. Dressing's in the jar."

He crossed behind her, not making contact, but close enough so he smelled her over the cooking aromas. Fresh and soapy. He took the bowl of salad from the refrigerator, tossed it with the dressing and placed it on the table. "I think I was volunteered to set the table too."

He gathered plates and silverware, arranging them on the table. When he finished, he raised his wineglass. "To Camp Getaway."

Kelli returned the toast and sipped her wine. Once they were seated, he took a bite of chicken. Sweet and tangy at the same time. He swallowed, wiped his mouth on his napkin and sighed. "This is delicious. You think I could make it? What's in it?" He took another bite without waiting for an answer.

"It's nothing exotic—mostly orange juice, honey and some Dijon mustard."

Thank God she was talking. Plain, everyday conversation. "I know those. You think regular mustard would work?"

She shrugged. "You could try."

Before long, the food was gone and they lingered over their wine. Blake stood and carried his dishes to the sink. "I'll wash," he said. "But please. Stay where you are and keep me company."

He filled the sink with soapy water and worked his way through the pile of dinner dishes. Kelli sat with her elbows on the table, chin resting in her hands. She wasn't

actually watching him, he thought. More like staring right through him, a dreamy expression on her face. Maybe it was the wine, but she appeared relaxed.

He fought the desire to lean over and kiss her. He knew better than to mix business with pleasure, especially with someone as skittish as Kelli. They'd talk, and he might find out what she was hiding. Because she was definitely hiding something, whether or not it was her identity. "I saw you working by the lake yesterday," he said.

Her eyes focused again. "I was working on a campfire circle. You know—marshmallows, songs, ghost stories."

He raised an eyebrow. "You really think inner city kids'll be singing Kumbaya?"

She laughed.

"That's better."

"What?" Her eyebrows lifted.

"I think tonight's the first time I've heard you laugh."

He saw her stiffen and went back to concentrating on the dishes. He finished the last pan and reached for a towel.

"Let them drain," Kelli said. "I'll put them away later."

"You're only saying that because you want to find them again." He wiped his hands. He went to the table and picked up his almost-empty wineglass. "Join me in the parlor, ma'am?" He tilted his head toward the couch. "Would you like a fire?"

He didn't wait for her response. He set his wineglass on the coffee table and moved to the fireplace. Kelli brought what was left of her wine and tucked herself into a corner of the couch. She met his gaze and there wasn't any fear in her eyes. His face grew warm and it wasn't from the beginnings of a fire. Heat spread a little lower, too.

Stop. Tonight was for talking. He sat on the couch, on the end farthest from Kelli, laid one arm along its back and crossed an ankle over his knee. "So. Tell me more. Who is Kelli Carpenter and what is she doing here in the middle of nowhere?"

She paused for a minute, looking into the fire. "This is an important project." She swallowed the last of her wine. "Hard to believe a drive-by hardly fazes the kids who'll come here, but they'll freak at an owl."

Not so hard to believe, considering the way all those night noises had robbed him of a decent night's sleep. But at least she was talking. Tempted to simply ask if she was Casey Wallace, he reminded himself to take it slow. No obvious references, Dwight had said. Besides, he liked the way her eyes lit up when she talked about her work.

"Found any interesting creatures in your traps?"

"Nothing endangered. The most exotic species were a red tree vole and Preble's shrew."

"Are those things I'd want to avoid?"

"I doubt you'd even notice—they're tiny. Harmless."

He shifted, stretched his legs and turned so he was facing her. "What made you

choose this line of work?"

"I went to Yosemite one summer and fell in love with the great outdoors. Never looked back."

Everything she said matched the reports he'd read. "School?"

"UCLA." She leaned forward to put her glass on the table next to his. "What about you? Why the temp agency?"

"You mean, why not have a steady job like a normal person?"

She flushed. "I didn't mean it like that. You seem to know what you're doing and you could probably—"

"Make big bucks in a huge construction company. Not my style." Not a lie. Although he was enjoying the work this week, he didn't want to go back to a life of washing sawdust out of every bodily orifice. "I make enough to meet my needs." That wasn't a lie, either. It merely avoided the fact that his real job had nothing to do with construction. And the fact that his needs had grown and it took more to meet them. He saw her hesitate before speaking, as if carrying on a conversation was something stiff and rusty from disuse.

"You been with the agency a long time?" she asked at last.

Oh, so now who was grilling whom? He paused to finish his wine. "Depends on what you mean. Construction Temps has offices all over the country. That's the beauty of temp work. A few jobs for one company and you can go try another one somewhere else. I work for a while, take time for myself, then get back on their active list. No strings."

He caught her eye wandering toward his left hand. "No responsibilities for anyone but me," he added. That much was true.

"I understand." Her words were almost a whisper. Some of the pain he'd seen earlier had crept back. She stood and carried both glasses to the kitchen.

He watched her wash them, rinse them and meticulously set them on the counter, as though performing the mundane task would bring her peace. And he wondered how bringing her peace had become important to him.

* * * * *

Kelli dried her hands and went back to her seat by the fire, determined to finish this evening as one normal adult talking with another. And as they talked, she wasn't thinking of Windsor as a threat. When he'd bent over to start the fire—well, he had some delightful looking assets. What was she thinking? She felt herself blush. Had to be the wine—they'd finished the bottle.

Blake leaned back, crossing his hands behind his head. His eyes grabbed hers again and she fought to break his gaze. He wasn't looking at her the way he had when he'd first shown up—not exactly. Besides, he couldn't be interested in her that way. It

was like he was analyzing her. She studied the flames flickering in the fireplace.

As if he was unaware how uncomfortable he could make her, he went right on. "You must travel a lot for this job. Anyplace interesting?"

Interesting? Like the trip to Mexico where Robert had lured her with promises of romance? And had ended up dead? She kept her voice steady. "They're all interesting. Different habitats, different flora and fauna."

"Are you sure we haven't met? You look familiar."

She fought to control her rising anxiety. A logical question for normal small talk. His expression was curious, but bland. *Chill*. She shook her head. Forced a smile. "I hear that all the time. I guess I have one of those faces. I'm sure we haven't met. I'd remember you." She barely breathed, watching his face.

He shrugged, and she exhaled.

He stretched his legs in front of him. "So, where else have you been? Maybe our paths have crossed."

"I doubt it. My work leans toward keeping developers and the people you work for out. EnviroCon is connected with nature groups—the ones who buy land expressly so people can't build on it. Leave a few acres of the planet the way Mother Nature created them."

"Ouch." Blake gave her an easy smile. "Hey, even a city boy like me knows fresh air is good for you. I may prefer the city, but it doesn't mean I can't appreciate the great outdoors—from a respectable distance, of course."

"Don't tell me you've never gone camping? Your dad never took you fishing? What did you do as a kid?"

His face clouded. "My old man didn't have time for those kinds of things. He worked. Moved us around—wherever the jobs were."

"It must have been hard on your mom."

His gaze grew distant. "She died when I was three—I never knew her."

"I'm sorry."

"Dad did the best he could."

Did she see bitterness there? Regret? A touch of anger? "Single parenting is tough. My dad died when I was little. Mom remarried, though." When she realized she'd just divulged her own childhood, not Kelli's, she bit her lip. Nothing in Blake's demeanor said he'd noticed. She buried Casey's memories a little deeper and brought Kelli back.

He stared into the fire for a moment, then gave her a smile, but there was a tinge of pain behind it. "Enough dwelling on old memories. Tell me. Where does Kelli Carpenter live when she's not in the field?"

She kept her expression neutral. Normal small talk. Don't panic. "It depends. I find a motel near the site, or if there's a stretch between assignments, EnviroCon has temporary employee housing."

"So, where's your next job?"

"I don't know. I was going to be here until spring, but since everything's pushed up, I'll have to see where Jack needs me. What about you?"

Blake raised his eyebrows. "I haven't thought about it. I'll probably stick with Construction Temps a while longer—they've got some big projects in the works—a shopping center, I think and some condos outside of Vancouver."

"Covering more of the Earth with concrete."

He tilted his head. "I happen to prefer city life. You might like the solitude of the woods, but in the city, you can be surrounded by people and still be alone."

"We do live in different worlds, don't we?" She stood, anxious to escape before she let any more Casey slip out. "I'm going to call it a night. I think the wine has caught up with me."

Blake rose from the couch. "I've got a lot to do tomorrow myself. Thanks for dinner. I'd offer to reciprocate, but unless you want peanut butter or canned stew . . ." He grinned.

From behind her closed office door, her fax machine rang, undoubtedly delivering the next batch of paperwork hoops she had to jump through. Nothing that couldn't wait until morning.

* * * * *

As he lay on his lumpy cot, content after a day spent working with his hands in the fresh air, Blake raised his eyes heavenward.

All right, old man. I'm enjoying myself. I hope you're satisfied.

No numbers to crunch, no bottom lines to figure—and better yet, no pale, drawn faces, eyes filled with defeat, frustration and anger, staring at him across the conference table. Or haunting his dreams.

Rain thudding on the roof woke him the next morning. He groped for his watch on the bedside table. Shit. It was almost ten. Waking with the sun didn't work if the sun didn't come out. Once he'd finally fallen asleep, he slept like a dead man. Not even the usual sounds of Kelli fixing her breakfast had penetrated.

He still hadn't figured out what made her run hot and cold, but he'd taken advantage of the warm times and enjoyed the evening.

When she'd stayed on the couch, instead of moving to the chair, he'd ached to lean over and take off her glasses. To touch his lips to hers, to see if they were as warm and soft as they looked. Instead he maintained his distance, keeping his self-made promise not to press. But his body still responded. Holy crap, just thinking about it had him stiff.

A gust of wind hurled a sheet of rain against the window. He debated blowing off work until it stopped, but lost the internal argument. He had plenty to do inside and his

schedule didn't have days off built in. He might be a failure at getting a positive ID on Kelli Carpenter, but he was damn sure going to have the cabin ready for a white-glove inspection before he left. He tried to convince himself it was all a matter of maintaining his handyman cover, but the way Kelli's eyes lit up when she talked about the project and the kids—he wanted to keep that light there.

He rushed to get dressed and hit the kitchen. A lingering aroma of coffee told him Kelli had already come and gone. A note propped up by the coffeepot said, "Help yourself."

He mouthed a thank you toward her door. Not bothering with jelly, he scooped some peanut butter onto two slices of bread and squished them together. He bit off a chunk while he poured coffee into his thermal mug, heaped in some milk and sugar and took a swallow. Even after lingering on the warmer, her coffee beat his usual instant. Blake switched off the pot and took another swig. Get the caffeine into the bloodstream. He drank half a cup and refilled the mug. Screwing down the lid, he jogged the distance to the cabin and dashed inside, brushing the rain from his shoulders.

He sensed her before he saw her. A glint of light reflected from her glasses. Kelli sat on the floor in a far corner, legs crossed, hands in her lap. Maybe he had gotten to her last night after all. He grinned and took a step toward her.

"Thanks for the coffee," he said. "Next pot's on me." He removed the lid and took a long sip, feeling cobwebs drift away. He swallowed the rest of the sandwich, licking the remnants of peanut butter from his fingers.

"No problem," Kelli said. She didn't move.

He washed the sandwich down with more coffee before he spoke again. "What brings you to my humble office?"

"I got a very interesting fax this morning. From Jack Stockbridge." Kelli's voice was flat. "Who are you, Mr. Windsor? Is that even your name? And why are you really here?" She shifted ever so slightly so he saw the revolver pointed at his midsection.

He took a deep breath and tried to clear the panic from his brain. Not to mention the peanut butter from the roof of his mouth. Slowly, carefully, he raised the coffee to his lips, keeping his eyes fixed on Kelli, making sure she understood he wasn't going to try anything. Think. Regroup. Slow things down. He swallowed the rest of the coffee, then crouched and lowered the cup to the floor, staying low to present a smaller target.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "I'm Blake Windsor. I've got ID if you want to see it, but it's in my room."

"Who do you work for, Mr. Blake Windsor?" Her voice was a quiet monotone. She sounded like someone who didn't care if she shot him. There was no malice, no fire, only dull resignation.

The room flickered for a moment and his mouth filled with the dry, metallic taste

of fear. "Construction Temps. Exactly like it says on my references. Jack Stockbridge checked them."

"Oh, yes he did. And they were very good. Just like they were supposed to be. Only then Jack called the company again. He worries about me, all alone in the woods. I'm like family."

His heart pounded. He had assumed Hollingsworth took care of his cover story. What had they found out? Blood drummed in his ears. Kelli's face seemed to fade in and out, like an image that wouldn't stay focused. "What's the problem? Isn't my work good enough?" His words sounded thick, as if he still had a mouthful of peanut butter.

Kelli uncrossed her legs. She gripped the gun in both hands and her arms were extended, braced on one raised knee. "Oh, your work is excellent. But Jack didn't use the number for Construction Temps from your resume. He looked it up himself. Those people have never heard of Blake Windsor. It appears nobody named Blake Windsor has ever worked for Construction Temps. Anywhere. So I ask again Mr. Windsor. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"I can explain," he said. "But I don't talk well with a gun pointed at me." He held his hands out, palms outward, in submission. "I'm not armed. You're not going to shoot me."

The gun wavered, but Kelli didn't lower it. "I don't know why I bothered waiting around," she said. "But I had questions and you're the only one with the answers."

He waited, motionless. Kelli wouldn't shoot him. She couldn't. But when he searched her eyes, he found them as lifeless as her voice. She got to her feet, keeping the gun trained on him. Closed the distance between them. The scent of her soap floated above the sawdust. He gathered his legs beneath him, preparing to spring. His heart hammered against his ribs. The room spun. This was not the way he expected to die. In a desperate move, he lunged forward. And everything went black.

Chapter Four

Kelli slipped the revolver into her pocket, wondering if she'd have had the nerve to shoot him if the drug hadn't kicked in. She stood over Windsor's inert form and took one long, last look at his face, its handsome features relaxed, water droplets shimmering in his hair. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I thought I could come back. I guess I should thank you for reminding me I can't trust anyone."

She found a roll of duct tape in a box in the corner. Good old MacGyver. Duct tape fixed anything. She knelt at Windsor's feet and wrapped several layers of the gray tape around his ankles. His wrists were a little harder to manage, since he'd fallen with one arm underneath him, but she pulled it out and secured his wrists together behind his back. "Don't worry. Someone will come for you."

She thought about taping his mouth, but what for? He could scream all he

wanted; nobody would hear. And she didn't want to take a chance he'd get sick and choke. She wasn't sure how the animal tranquilizer affected humans, especially when taken orally.

She'd searched the cabin while she waited for him and found nothing but innocent paperwork. Plans for the cabin, an inventory of supplies. Maybe she'd have more luck in his room.

The rain had picked up and she dashed back to the house, where she dumped the remaining drugged coffee and washed out the pot. She went into his room and shook the contents of his duffel onto the cot. Not much—shirts, a few pairs of socks, some underwear. The second cot held his dirty laundry. She pawed through it, but it was all clothes. His wallet sat on the bedside table next to a nearly-full bottle of Scotch. She found his driver's license. Blake Windsor, it read. So, maybe he was who he said he was. But it was an Illinois license, issued two years ago. A Chicago address. Not Seattle.

He'd said he moved around a lot. Maybe he didn't get around to changing licenses every time he took a new job.

Why was she making excuses for him? She looked some more. About three hundred dollars, mostly twenties. Probably hit an ATM before he arrived. A folded sheet of paper. She lifted it from the wallet and smoothed it out. Stockbridge's company logo and directions to the site.

Slow down. Think. She took his wallet to her office and copied his driver's license and social security card. She needed to be somewhere with internet access. Give her a day and she'd know everything there was to know about Blake Windsor.

She'd found Stockbridge's fax early this morning. As soon as she'd read it, she left a message on his machine that she was leaving. Her part of the project was almost complete. There were probably half a dozen people EnviroCon could send to finish the job.

She hadn't decided what to do about Windsor when she left the message, but Jack would take care of the project. Right now, all she wanted to do was leave. Disappear. Again. This time, she'd take everything with her. It might not be a lot, but she was *not* going to start from scratch. Nor was she coming back to get it.

After replacing Windsor's wallet, she got busy packing. Her laptop sat on the desk, reminding her she needed to back up the project data and leave the files for her replacement. An hour later, she stood in the middle of her office and contemplated the stack of possessions stacked in the middle of the room. Half a dozen cartons and a couple of suitcases. Didn't say much for her life, did it? Maybe not, but it was her life and she was going to get on with it.

In the bathroom, her fingers trembled as she worked her hair into a single braid. Her breathing was too fast, her pulse drummed. She leaned against the sink.

Deep breath. Slow down. She'd be out of here soon enough, call Jack and they'd figure this out. Heck, he'd probably have Windsor identified before she got as far as Henry's store.

She added her toiletries to the essentials she kept in her gym bag. Outside, the wind howled. The lights flickered, went out, came back on. She set her Maglite on the desk just in case. Even though it was after noon, the storm had transformed everything to a black and white television show.

She considered grabbing a carton of yogurt, but the thought of eating turned her stomach. She picked up the phone to let Stockbridge know she was on her way. Dead. The lights flickered again. Definitely time to leave. She added her revolver to her gym bag, picked up a carton of books and headed for the Jeep parked beside the house. She froze. All four tires were slashed. The park's troublemakers? But why would they come here for the first time, and in a storm? No, it had to be Windsor's handiwork. No wonder he was late this morning. What else had he done?

Shit. She'd moved Windsor's EnviroCon pickup to a clearing behind the cabin and she'd already disabled it. Double shit. She went back into her office to retrieve the coil wire she'd removed. The lights had gone off again and she shone the flashlight into the desk drawer. While she rummaged through the jumble of paper clips, rubber bands, markers, and other desk detritus, she thought she heard something—someone?—pounding on the porch. Windsor? No way. Even if he got loose, he would damn sure not be knocking. Must be the storm.

"There you are," she muttered to the elusive coil wire. Stuffing it in her pocket, she headed for the door, yanked it open and stared at a park ranger, hunched over in a wet uniform. Doug Peterson? Good. He'd help her fix the truck and carry her gear. She raised her eyes and felt the smile melt from her face when she met the eyes of an unfamiliar ranger. Her heart thumped.

"Kelli Carpenter?" the ranger asked, shouting above the wind.

She nodded, unable to find her voice.

"Ranger Ned Decker, ma'am. Doug Peterson sent me. Are you all right?"

At that moment the lights came back on. Taking it as a sign she needed to relax, her nerves quieted a little. She'd met most of the rangers, and even the ones in law enforcement were protecting the parklands, not digging through old Mexican police files. Enough paranoia. These were the good guys. She put Decker in his early forties, curly brown hair that teased his collar, a thick brush of a mustache and permanent crinkles etched around his eyes.

"I'm fine, but did you see my Jeep? Have you had any trouble in the park?"

"I noticed, ma'am, and we had some bikers lately who got a bit unruly. Maybe they came this way." He crossed his arms across his chest. A gust of wind spattered rain into the house.

"Come in," she said. "You're soaked."

"Thanks." Decker removed his hat, brushed water from his parka and stepped inside. "Yeah, someone had a flat." He gestured to his wet, stained trousers. "Playing Triple A is going to cost me in cleaning bills."

"Were their tires slashed too?"

"Nope. Normal, everyday run-of-the-mill flat. But I'll be sure to let headquarters know about your ... situation." He pulled a pack of Doublemint gum from his pocket and extended it toward her.

She shook her head in refusal and tried to focus. Should she tell Decker about Windsor? Caught between wanting to get Decker to cart him away and wanting to pretend he never existed, she decided in favor of the latter. No need to mention Windsor. Jack knew he wasn't a handyman. That was enough.

"Where's Peterson?" she asked.

"Looking for some missing hikers on the north trail."

That sounded like something Doug Peterson would do. "I don't think I've seen you before. Have you been assigned here long?"

"Seems like it, but it's only been a week. Things have been busy. And I don't think I've adjusted to this stuff you call air, if you get my drift. Where's the oxygen?"

She remembered her first week at four thousand feet. "Oh, it's there. You just have to work harder to get enough of it into your blood cells."

He laughed and the crinkles around his eyes deepened. "I like that. You a scientist? Peterson said something about environmental studies for a camp or something."

She explained Camp Getaway, and he seemed genuinely interested in the project, unlike Doug Peterson who barely tolerated it. Kids encroaching on what he protected as his land worried him.

She glanced at her watch. How much longer before Windsor started making noise? Decker seemed willing to chat forever. "I'm sure this storm must be keeping you busy," she said. "Lots of people to check on?"

"Oh, not many. As a matter of fact, just one, if you get my drift."

Before she processed his words, a loud crack and a crash resounded from outside. Kelli started, bumping into Decker's chest when he stepped toward her.

"Sorry," she said automatically.

He took her hands to steady her. "No problem. As a matter of fact, this works fine for me."

Decker's eyes squinted and his grin turned to a leer. A ball of ice formed in her gut. Visions of Robert exploded in her head. Decker tightened his grip, laughing scornfully at her attempts to kick him. "Fighting isn't going to help, bitch. You might as well relax and enjoy yourself." He shoved her into the bedroom, onto the bed.

Terror flooded her. She scrunched her eyes closed and squeezed into the tiniest ball possible. No. This couldn't be happening. Not again. She told herself to fight.

Heard herself whimpering instead.

His boots clumped across the floor above the pounding in her ears. He snorted. "Scared, bitch?" He stomped on the floor. She cringed each time the floor vibrated. She didn't care. Didn't feel. He crouched beside her. She smelled his minty breath. His hands pulled her arms away, stroked her cheek.

* * * * *

Blake groaned at the pounding in his head. Who let the drum corps into his room? He opened his eyes. Things blurred and spun, moved back and forth. He tried to rub his eyes and panicked that his arms were gone. Adrenaline rushed through his system and his head cleared a little. He remembered the gun. But the pain in his head told him he was alive.

Slowly, he assessed his body. He could wiggle his feet but couldn't move his legs. His stomach hurt where his belt buckle pressed into it. Okay, he was on his belly. Had to sit up. His brain sent messages down the line, but they seemed to get waylaid before they reached his limbs. Christ, she'd put something in the coffee. It beat being shot, he guessed. He took a deep breath, coughing as he inhaled sawdust from the cabin floor. The coughing banged his chin on the floor. That didn't help his head.

With supreme effort, he rolled over. Great. Now he was lying on his hands. A wave of nausea washed over him. Everything whirled again, got bright, then dark.

The next time he opened his eyes, the room had stopped spinning. The snare drums had left the corps, but the basses still pulsed. His shoulders ached and his hands were numb. He managed to squirm onto his side before another dizzy spell hit.

Please, don't let me be sick. The thought of lying in a pool of his own vomit gave him the strength to work himself into a sitting position. Bands of duct tape secured his ankles. From the feel of it, he assumed his wrists were bound the same way. Another MacGyver fan? He inched himself across the room until, bathed in sweat, he leaned against the cabin wall. Panting from the effort, he waited until his breathing evened and his head cleared some more.

Where had Kelli gone? He recalled her face, her eyes empty, robotic. He knew the look. Hopeless despair.

Shit, why was he wasting sympathy on her? She had problems. So did everyone. He struggled against the tape, trying to stretch it enough to work his hands free, but Kelli had wrapped too many layers.

If only he could get his hands in front of him to see what he was doing. Short of dislocating his shoulder, he couldn't get his hips through his arms. Half an inch more. Might as well be a yard.

He inched backward to the corner where his tools lay spread on the floor. He closed his eyes, visualizing the location of each tool. Again, his father's voice broke in.

A place for everything, son. Time's too precious to waste in the looking.

His fingers located the utility knife. He'd be as likely to slit his wrists as the duct tape binding them. Stop. Think. He managed to extend the blade and work the handle into the back pocket of his jeans. Slowly, carefully, he edged the tape against the blade. Patience. Little cuts. Test the tape. More cuts. Try again.

The sound of the tape ripping came a split second before his hands flew apart. He grabbed the knife and slit the tape around his ankles. He pulled himself to his feet and stepped outside. A glance at his watch told him he'd been out for nearly two hours. And, apparently Kelli had taken his truck. He set out for the house. The storm had lightened to a gentle shower, refreshing him as he wobbled along the path. A scream pierced the air and he broke into a staggering run.

He slowed when he reached the foot of the stairs. He strained his ears, trying to pick up sounds from inside the house. After that one scream, there had been silence. For a fleeting moment, he debated ignoring it. After all, she'd drugged his coffee and pointed a gun at him. Trussed him like a turkey. Stolen his truck.

He made a quick circuit of the house, listening at windows, trying to stay out of sight. And trying to ignore the pain in his head and the way the world kept going out of focus. A throaty laugh—a man's throaty laugh—came from her bedroom. He rushed to the front porch. His head throbbed as he climbed the stairs. The front door was ajar. Her bedroom door was closed. He tiptoed over, tested the knob. Unlocked. The male voice growled from inside. And a female voice, whimpering. The sound sent bile to his throat. Much as he wanted to pay Kelli back for what she'd done to him, this was not what he would wish on her.

He pressed his fingertips to the door and it creaked open a few inches. He held his breath and peered inside. A man, hands at his hips, hovered above the bed, his back to the door. Blake leaned aside enough to reveal what the man's body blocked from view.

Blake thought the fear on Kelli's face would be forever etched in his mind. She was on the bed, cowering, her eyes glued to her captor. The man shoved Kelli onto her back. Why wasn't she fighting? Resigned to her fate? Afraid he'd hurt her more if she fought back? Even her whimpering had stopped. The man reached for Kelli's waist.

Had she passed out? Blake inched the door open wide enough to admit his body and took half a step into the room. The man's boots and parka were by the bed. His hands dropped to his waist. He heard a belt being unbuckled, a zipper released.

"Let her go, you scumbag!" Blake barreled across the room, caught the man by the shoulders, dragged him away from Kelli. Scumbag, tangled in his dropped trousers, stumbled and fell backward, bringing them both down. Blake ignored the pain that shot through his shoulder when he hit the floor.

He tried to subdue the creep with a forearm to his throat. The man squirmed

away, kicking and flailing and managed to reverse their positions. Blake's head crashed back onto the floor and stars shot across his field of vision. He shook his head to clear it, realizing immediately it was a stupid idea. When he focused, Scumbag had shaken free of his pants and was leaning over him. The guy was wearing boxers with yellow happy faces. Blake was *not* going down to a man who wore smilies on his shorts.

He scissored his legs, caught Scumbag around an ankle with one, and kicked out with the other. While the man struggled to regain his balance, Blake flipped over to his knees. The room spun. Before he could rise, he suffered a powerful kick to his back and went down again. He rolled, brought his legs over Scumbag's. Both men tumbled on the floor, exchanging blows with elbows, knees and fists. Blake stopped keeping track of where Scumbag's blows were landing and concentrated on connecting with his own. Something sliced across his ribs. Pain built on pain. His reflexes were off and he searched for Scumbag's weaknesses. At the moment, all the weakness seemed to be on Blake's side. Dazed, he gasped for breath. Scumbag hovered over him, an evil grin on his face, a knife in his hand.

"Time for you later," Scumbag said. "After I finish with the girl, if you get my drift. You get to watch." Blake heard a dull thunk, saw Scumbag's eyes widen. The man's mouth hung open and he crumpled.

Blake got to his knees, taking a moment to suck air, fighting the pain. Then he looked up and saw Kelli standing behind Scumbag's inert form, clutching a Maglite.

"Good night," she said. "If you get my drift." Then she collapsed. He caught her right before she hit the floor.

"Kelli?" He supported her across his knees, stroked her face. "It's okay."

Eyes wide with terror, she looked down at herself then back up at him. Pulling away, she dropped, hands raised as if to ward off a blow.

"Hey. It's over. I won't hurt you. Promise." He kept his voice soothing, but Kelli's eyes stared past him into nothingness. He'd kept Scumbag from raping her—hadn't he? Crap, he didn't know how long he'd been out, or how long the creep had been there. Had he interrupted a second—or third—attack? "Kelli. Come back. Please?"

One hand clutching the waistband of her jeans, she scooted backward on her bottom until she leaned against the bed. His adrenaline was wearing off and he fought a wave of nausea. Already, his shoulder talked to him and a burning sensation built in his belly.

He sat with his head on his knees. His ragged gasps were the only sound. He dreamed of a long sauna followed by an eon in a Jacuzzi. Half-dazed, he heard his father's words.

The pains of a job well done are part of the reward, son. Take some pride that you've put your whole self into the work.

His mind drifted to the time his father had pulled him and his older brother out of school to help meet a deadline. The three of them had worked until after dark, his

father shrugging off all their whines and complaints. Few words were spoken until they got home and had cleaned and put away every blasted tool to the old man's satisfaction.

Good work, boys. You were true men today.

And then he'd sent them in to take a long hot bath and had rubbed the knots out of their aching muscles until they'd fallen asleep.

Regret and remorse at never thanking his old man layered themselves above the aches and pains and some of the fog lifted.

A moan from Scumbag snapped him back. Blake grabbed the man under his shoulders. A knife clunked to the floor. He stuck it in his belt. Despite the pounding in his head, Blake dragged the man across the house and shoved him into his tiny bathroom. Too bad he didn't have any duct tape here—and he wouldn't leave Kelli long enough to get some from the cabin. He cut the cord from his bedside lamp and tied Scumbag's wrists and ankles.

Dizzy, dripping sweat, he rushed back to find Kelli. Her eyes were open and she sat on the bed. Holding the effing thirty-eight. The knife dropped from his fingers.

Another wave of nausea swept through him. "Go ahead. Shoot me. Just let me pass out first, okay?"

Chapter Five

Kelli watched Windsor collapse to the floor as if someone had removed all the bones from his body. Her memory was full of holes, but an all-pervading fear clung like pond scum. Had she killed again? Knowing the memories would return, yet not sure she wanted them to, she stared at the body lying at her feet. And at the knife on the floor beside him. A bloody knife. In a moment of rage, she kicked it across the room.

Blake's moan brought a mixture of fear and relief. He wasn't dead.

She stood, left the room, and had gotten as far as the front porch before she turned around. If she had stabbed him, she couldn't let him bleed to death. She wouldn't have another death on her hands. Shaking, but determined, she returned to him and crouched beside the body.

Stop thinking that. Not body. Windsor.

When she tried to turn him over, her hand came away sticky with blood. She saw Robert, heard him laugh, remembered his blood. No, Robert hadn't done this. Had she? Had Windsor tried to hurt her? Had she managed to protect herself? At what cost?

She struggled to get him onto his back. Her Maglite was on the floor beside him. She shone the beam over Windsor. Beads of sweat glistened on his forehead. He'd faded beyond pale and his breathing was rapid and shallow.

She worked the bloody turtleneck out of his jeans. With a washcloth, she dabbed away the blood and assessed the damage. Not as serious as she feared. Knife wound, she figured, running along his rib cage, ending near his waistline. Not too deep. More slice than stab, except at the end where most of the blood was coming from. His ribs had most likely deflected the blade preventing serious internal damage. He'd be okay. She had to believe that.

A flash of a fight between Windsor and someone else surfaced through the clouds in her brain. A park ranger. He'd cut Windsor, she hadn't. But why had Windsor been fighting with a park ranger? Peterson? Should she turn Windsor over to the rangers? No, something felt wrong there. She took a deep breath. The memories would come back in good time. She turned to her patient.

"Come on, Windsor. Stay with me. You're not going to die on me. If you deserve it, I'll see you rot in prison, but I'm not going to let you die, understand?" She shook his shoulders, rubbed his cheek. He groaned and his eyelids flickered.

"Tired. Cold."

"Wake up, Windsor. Please. Help me out here and then you can sleep. I promise." Kelli got her arms under his shoulders and pulled. "That's right. Sit up."

Windsor gave her a glassy-eyed stare but struggled to a sitting position.

"That's it. Can you make it to the bed? Lean on me."

Windsor sat on the edge of her bed, head between his knees.

"Relax." Pass out again, she wanted to say. Unconscious is better. She handed him a towel. "Press this against your belly. I'll get some bandages."

He groaned, but obeyed. "Maybe you should have shot me. I'd feel a whole lot better."

"Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere. Head. Shoulder. Ribs." Each word was a whispered effort.

She backed into the bathroom and dampened a towel.

"Um ... Kelli?"

"Yes?" She peeked out at Windsor. One hand clutched his belly, the other rubbed his forehead. He swallowed several times.

He raised his head but didn't turn. "I'm sorry ... I think ... God ... I'm going to be—"

She grabbed the wastebasket and set it between his feet. His hair hung in his face as he leaned forward, violently ill, his body racked with spasms. He gasped with each one. Compassion overtook her and she knelt behind him, holding his hair back with one hand, pressing against his forehead with the other until he'd emptied his stomach. When his spasms stopped, she brought him a glass of water.

"Rinse first. Don't drink yet."

His hands were covered in fresh blood. Apparently oblivious to it, he followed her instructions then sank back onto the bed. She pressed the towel to his belly. Put

his hands on top of it.

"Apply pressure, Windsor. I'll be right back." She dumped the contents of the wastebasket into the toilet and flushed. When she returned he was out cold, the bloody towel on the floor. She turned on the bedside lamp and studied him.

Unconscious or not, he seemed to be in pain. She removed his work boots. His socks were soaked. She pulled them off, too. Shit, he was totally drenched. She had to get him patched up. She reached for his belt and hesitated.

For God's sake, she'd been married. Had a son. The male body was nothing new to her. She unbuckled his belt and pulled off his jeans. Briefs, not boxers. Low rise, navy blue. Those she left alone. There was no way she could work his turtleneck over his head without his help. She retrieved the house's first-aid kit and using its scissors, cut the shirt and wrestled it off his body.

She filled a bowl with warm water, soaped a washcloth and went to work cleaning him. Searching the kit, she found an assortment of butterfly strips, some larger gauze pads and tape, a few foil packets of alcohol swabs and a bottle of hand sanitizer. Using a gauze pad, she wiped his chest with the hand sanitizer. She sealed the edges of the cut with butterfly strips, covered it with a thick pad of gauze and taped it down. Nasty bruises had already surfaced around his shoulder. She wondered if she should check his back, but he was too heavy. There was no blood on the back of his turtleneck so she let it go.

His breathing had steadied. Since he'd collapsed on top of the bedcovers, she draped a fresh sheet and blanket over him. She pulled a chair from her office, placed it near the door and watched his chest rise and fall.

* * * * *

Blake opened his eyes. Good Lord, everything hurt. Slowly, he got his bearings. Camp Getaway, but not his lumpy mattress. He turned his head and immediately regretted it when a blinding pain shot through his head. He gasped, which shot fire through his rib cage. "Holy crap," he muttered.

"You're awake," Kelli said.

Moving only his eyes, he noticed her watching, but from well out of reach. As if he could move enough to do anything. She held the gun in her lap. The knife was gone. "How long—?"

"Half an hour." She stood, but didn't move closer. "How do you feel? Can you travel? I need to get out of here."

At the anxiety in her tone, he bit off the obvious, "Are you kidding?" in favor of a more neutral, "Give me a minute." An inch at a time, he worked his way up to a sitting position, fighting the dizziness at every increment. Sweat trickled down his spine.

"What happened to Scumbag?" he asked.

She cocked her head. "Who?"

"The guy attacking you."

Her face paled and she sank into the chair. She looked around, her gaze stopping on the uniform trousers in the corner and he saw her remembering. "Oh, God. It wasn't you. It was Decker."

"Decker?"

"Park ranger."

So Scumbag had a name. "I don't think he was a real ranger."

"He's gone. I guess." An expression of panic crossed her face. "Did you—"

"I tied him up and locked him in my bathroom after you knocked him out."

"I did?"

"With your flashlight. Do you remember?"

She shook her head. "Not really. I was afraid I'd stabbed you."

"No, I think you saved both our skins. You have any idea who he is? Did you call the cops?"

She shook her head. "Phone lines are still down." When she lifted the revolver, his mouth got dry. But quick as a rabbit, she was out of the room. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and rose to a standing position, grabbing the headboard for support. He seemed to be moving in slow motion. Naked except for his briefs and bandage, he spied his wet jeans beside the bed. He stared at them, knowing his head would explode if he bent down to pick them up.

Before he gathered the courage to try, Kelli was back, with dry clothes. "Here." She tossed them on the bed. "I'm going to start loading the truck. You want me to pack your stuff, or can you handle it?"

Right now, he wasn't sure he'd be able to handle getting his socks on. "If you don't mind. And a couple of aspirin would be great." She turned toward the door.

"Wait," he called after her. "My truck. It's gone. But Decker must have something nearby."

"I moved your truck. It's behind the cabin in the trees." She took two steps toward him, eying him warily. "Are you sure you're okay? If you pass out, I can't carry you."

"I'll make it."

"It'll take me a while to get everything loaded. You should rest."

"Can I help? We need to get out of here. Scumbag—Decker—will raise a ruckus."

"It's not likely anyone would be close enough to hear him, but I took care of it."

What had she done? He'd have heard a gunshot. She must have seen his puzzled expression.

"I gave him some orange juice." She smiled for the first time since last night. "My special recipe."

"If it's anything like your coffee, he's going to have one hell of a headache when he wakes up. Not to mention an upset stomach."

She shrugged. "Guess so. Is that how it affected you?"

"You don't know the half of it." He laughed, although it was little more than a wheeze, followed by a stabbing pain in his rib cage and another cacophony in his head.

Her smile faded. "Let's get something straight. I don't know who you are or why you're here. When I saw Decker tied up in your bathroom, I remembered enough to know I owe you. This morning, all I wanted was to get away from you. The truth is, I still do, but I need some answers and until I get them I'm on you like white on rice."

He watched her face grow more and more confident, a look he hadn't seen before. He nodded. "I'll get dressed." He reached for his jeans. Something in his lower back tightened and he froze, waiting for the spasm to pass. He spoke through clenched teeth. "Back. Spasm. Aspirin?"

By the time she got back, he'd put his clothes on and walked the length of the bed a few times, trying to loosen stiffened muscles. She held a bottle of water and a pill bottle.

"Ibuprofen. Aspirin's not good if you're bleeding."

"Anything." He swallowed three pills and gulped the water down.

He sat on the bed and closed his eyes, hoping the medicine would take effect before it upset his stomach. "How's the packing coming? I could help, I think."

"You can help by getting yourself to the living room. Make sure you can walk." She went through the bathroom into her office. He saw her pass, carrying a carton and dragging a suitcase.

He stood. The room tunneled around him, fading to gray at the edges. Pure masculine pride carried him to the couch. As he sank onto it, he was aware Kelli had been watching. He gave her a weak grin. "I'm okay." She moved toward the kitchen. He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"Windsor." He blinked awake. Kelli stood two feet from his chair, with another glass of water and a vial of pills. "Phones are still dead. I need you to trust me when I say I don't want to involve the Park Service with Decker until we're far enough away. If you think you need medical attention, I'll risk it and drop you off at the ranger station. But I won't stick around."

He didn't need any complications either. Once he felt well enough, he was on the first plane to Chicago. "I'll be all right."

She held out the pill vial. "I've got a muscle relaxant."

"There is a God." He squinted at the vial, but the words swam.

"I don't know the dosage for someone your size. One wipes me out."

"Give me two. Out would be nice. Was this what you put in the coffee?"

"No, that was an animal tranquilizer. I have it for bears in case one gets frisky." She tapped out two tablets and he downed them even before she handed him the

water.

* * * * *

Kelli lingered a moment, watching the tightened muscles in his face. Listened to his labored breathing. Afraid of shock, she got a blanket and covered him. She still had no clue who he was, or why he was here. She asked herself why the hell she was taking him with her, but didn't want to consider the answer yet. She'd do the same thing for an injured dog. Besides, what was the saying? Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.

A few trips back and forth from her office and she had everything piled under the eaves of the front porch. Windsor barely stirred while she worked. The furrows in his brow had smoothed and his breathing was deeper.

In his room, she stuffed his dirty laundry into a plastic trash bag then put everything into his duffel. And almost laughed. A compulsive organizer, Charles had called her. Look at her—getting ready to run and she was sorting laundry.

She hesitated before going into the bathroom. Gun at the ready, she pushed open the door, but Decker was out. She'd put a hefty dose of the tranquilizer into the orange juice and her revolver had convinced him he was thirsty. He should sleep for hours.

With Windsor's toiletries packed into his Dopp Kit, she had the last of his belongings. Shit. What about his tools? Too bad. Jack could deal with them. She slung his duffel over her shoulder and set it on the porch.

What about Decker's clothes? She went into her room where his muddy trousers lay in a heap in the corner. When she picked them up, what she'd thought was mud looked more like blood. Probably Windsor's. It might be better if the cops didn't find them right away. She'd stash them in Windsor's lockbox, along with the knife.

On the couch, Windsor's legs stretched out in front of him and his head lolled back. Looked like the muscle relaxant had kicked in. In sleep, he seemed harmless enough.

Satisfied he wasn't going anywhere, she grabbed her flashlight and jogged to his truck. The deluge had lessened to a fine mist. Once she replaced the truck's coil wire, she drove toward the main road. Decker wouldn't have hiked in. Maybe his truck would give some indication of who he was. She found the Park Service truck about twenty yards down the road in a shallow pull-out. Pulling the sleeve of her parka over her hand, she yanked the door open and shone the light in the cab.

Cardboard coffee cups, fast food bags, and gum wrappers cluttered the seat. She popped open the glove box and found a San Francisco Giants baseball cap crammed on top of maps. Doug Peterson was a Giants fan. Her pulse jumped. Decker was no ranger, she was sure of that. But the Park Service personnel shared the limited number of vehicles. All this meant was that Peterson probably had used this truck. Didn't it?

No time for those thoughts now. Once she was the hell out of here she'd call the authorities. Let them figure it out.

She climbed back into Windsor's pickup and leaned over the steering wheel. Was she doing the right thing? It didn't matter. She couldn't leave Windsor behind. He'd saved her life.

* * * * *

"Let's go, Windsor. You've had an hour's nap. That's plenty."

Blake blinked at Kelli's voice and sat up. He took a moment to take inventory. Groggy, a little dizzy, but with luck, he'd get into the truck on his own steam. Aware of Kelli watching from the porch, he hoisted himself up, gripping the back of the couch as he shuffled around it. The pill had dulled the pain enough for him to get out the door without seeing stars. At the edge of the porch, he paused, telling himself it was because he didn't want to fall down the steps. Not because he wanted to feel Kelli's arms around him.

Kelli's hand was at his elbow. Strong, but it might as well have been a wooden arm rail for all the compassion it exuded. He used it for balance more than support and made it to the truck without passing out.

She climbed into the driver's seat and peered at him. "You tell me if you're going to get sick. I'll pull over."

"Thanks." Kelli hadn't closed her door yet and the dome light illuminated the cab. He looked at her more closely. "What happened to your eyes?"

"Nothing." She turned and stared straight ahead.

"Must be the bonk on the head, or the after-effects of the drugs. Didn't they used to be brown? They look gray now."

"And they could be green next week. Let's go."

He clicked his seat belt shut, leaned against the window and let the pills take over. When he opened his eyes, Kelli was standing beside him, the door to the truck open. It was dark outside and his head felt like it was filled with oatmeal. He groaned. "Time is it?"

"Two a.m. Can you walk?" she whispered. "I need you to get out of the truck and go to the door over there. Room nineteen. Put this on." She handed him a knit watchman's cap. "Stay low. I'll be right in."

He looked around. They were parked in the lot of a Fifties-style motel, in front of the open door of an end unit in a string of little bungalow rooms. He understood. The open truck door would block him from any prying eyes in the office. He tucked his hair under the cap, slid out of the seat, wavering a moment to get his balance, then made his way to the door in a half-crouch. Stay low, she'd said. No problem. Standing up—

that would have been a problem.

The room smelled of must and mold with an overlay of pine cleanser. That was about all he noticed before the bed floated up to meet him.

Chapter Six

Kelli kept an eye on Windsor as he stumbled toward the door, holding her breath that he wouldn't collapse before he got inside. She'd driven until she couldn't keep her eyes open and then a little longer until she found a motel that looked seedy enough so nobody would ask questions.

The acne-faced desk clerk had given Kelli's grime-covered body a skeptical look, but she'd seemed willing enough to buy the sob story about repairing a flat tire in the rain. Apparently anxious to get back to her television program, the clerk had accepted cash, hadn't pressed for ID, and had given Kelli the room she'd asked for—the one at the end of the row.

Kelli grabbed her gym bag and the case with her computer from the truck and let herself into the room. Windsor lay on his side on top of one of the two double beds, his hair fanned out, one arm dangling off the edge of the bed, with the knit cap on the floor by his fingertips. Motionless. Her heart skipped and she stepped to his bedside to make sure he was breathing.

Once she saw the rise and fall of his chest, she stood there, trying to understand why she hadn't cut him loose. Not because she was attracted to him. That was impossible. She had questions and he had to have the answers. Nothing more. She chalked the fluttering in her chest up to exhaustion.

In the tiny bathroom, she locked the door and took the longest, hottest shower she dared. Still exhausted, but clean, she slipped into the other bed and fell asleep before she had a chance to worry about what had happened, or what would happen next.

Kelli started awake, disoriented and with a pounding heart. Faint traces of sunlight drifted through gaps in the curtains. One glance at Windsor in the other bed brought back the memories. She looked at her watch. Six. She'd slept four hours. That would have to do. She should be good for at least four more hours on the road and maybe get far enough away so nobody could pick up their trail.

"Wake up, Windsor. Time to hit the road." She touched his shoulder and when he didn't respond, she shook him gently. "You can sleep in the truck."

A grunt answered her.

She headed for the bathroom. "Five minutes," she called over her shoulder. It was more like fifteen, but it took a while to get a halfway decent haircut using the first-aid kit scissors. She bundled the cuttings into the plastic motel laundry bag—she'd toss it

somewhere in case anyone came looking.

She climbed into her jeans and tugged a bulky sweater over her head, then called out, "Okay, Windsor. Your turn."

No response. She came out of the bathroom. He hadn't moved. She hurried to him and pulled the hair back from his face. Shit, he was burning up.

"Windsor. Wake up. Just for a minute?" She shook him, less gently than before.

He moaned and turned onto his back, put his forearm over his eyes. Grimaced. "What?"

"Let me look." She pulled his shirt up and peeled away the gauze. The butterfly strips had held, but the cut was an angry, weeping red.

Windsor's eyes were glazed. He squinted at his midsection, then at her. "Not good?"

"Could be worse. I think it needs disinfecting, though."

He nodded and let his head fall back onto the pillow.

She had ibuprofen, a few more muscle relaxants, but nothing in the way of antibiotics. Shit, the cut hadn't looked that bad yesterday. Was there something internal? And how would she know? "Hold still a minute." She pressed on assorted places on his abdomen, watching his face for a reaction. "Where does it hurt?"

"Everywhere. Nothing specific. Think it's mostly bruising. Back hurts. Kidney punch, I'll bet. Probably piss blood for a few days."

"Can you sit up? Let me look?"

He gave her a lopsided grin. "Sure." He grabbed her hands and swung his legs over the side of the bed. She eased his shirt up his back. Huge purple splotches decorated his back.

"Well?" he said. "Anything to worry about?"

"Only some nasty bruises. But you've got a fever. Wait here and I'll get you some ibuprofen."

"I don't think I can wait. Bruised or not, the kidneys are operational."

She looked at him, then understood. "Oh, yes. Of course. I'm done in there. Don't lock the door, in case—"

"Yes, ma'am. You finished?" He stood up, wobbled for a moment, but then seemed steady on his feet.

She knew she was blushing. Ridiculous. Two adults. She'd shared a bathroom with a man for years. Great. Now she was embarrassed about being embarrassed. "Go."

While Windsor was in the bathroom, she eased back the window curtain and peeked around the parking lot. The same cars as last night. She pulled the bedcovers back from Windsor's bed and assembled gauze, tape and more butterfly strips from her personal first-aid kit. Where the hell was her tube of Neosporin? She must have forgotten to pick more up the last time she did a major shopping trip. Plenty of alcohol

swabs, though. And a bottle of iodine.

Twice, she tiptoed to the closed bathroom door, wondering if she should check on him. She heard water running. Some sharp intakes of breath. A few groans. Finally, the bathroom door opened and Windsor walked out wearing a towel around his hips. His smile was forced and he doubled over, his hands outstretched toward the bed before he was halfway across the tiny room.

He clutched the edge of the mattress and sat. "Sorry. Shaky. Tried to clean up some. I was pretty ripe."

For half a moment, she considered leaving him here. No way could he travel. His brown eyes looked at her, full of pain and insecurity and she knew she wouldn't.

"Lie down. You've been beat up, cut up, and you've got a fever."

"And probably a concussion. Unless you've got a twin who keeps popping in and out, I'm seeing two of you." He settled back on the bed.

"I'm going to clean the cut, okay?"

"Sure." He closed his eyes.

"This might sting a little." She swabbed his chest with alcohol wipes and patted a gauze pad doused with iodine along the wound.

"Holy mother of—"

She clamped a hand over his mouth. "Suck it up, Windsor. We don't need anyone wondering what's going on."

"If they're wondering, they sure as hell won't be thinking this is what you're doing. Holy crap, woman, that hurts."

After cleaning the incision, she put a fresh dressing on it. "All done. I'm going to go find us something to eat. Get some rest."

"I think I liked it better when you were avoiding me." He studied her for a minute. "Your eyes are still gray. But your hair is gone."

"Good catch, Windsor. Only took you half an hour to notice."

"I'm not my usual observant, charming self today."

* * * * *

Blake heard the door close, the truck start, and the whoosh of tires across the parking lot. Kelli had taken full control, and even in his condition he could tell this wasn't new to her. Along with her looks, her entire personality had changed. She seemed to know what she needed to do. But for all her gruffness, when she'd bandaged him her touch had been gentle. He resigned himself to letting her take charge until he could stay awake more than twenty minutes at a stretch. And walk more than ten steps without needing to lie down.

He glanced around the room. She'd taken his cell, even the room phone with her. His cash. Left him with nothing. She said she'd be back. Her gym bag and computer

case sat on the second bed.

Overwhelmed by a sudden fear they were empty decoys, he slid out of bed and knelt beside them. Clothes, her laptop, a collection of flash drives, and some paper files. That she hadn't abandoned him gave him some small comfort, and he crawled back into his own bed and sank into the mattress.

He woke, teeth chattering, drenched in sweat. Kelli wiped his forehead with a damp cloth.

"Sheesh Windsor, we're way beyond out of towels. I've already lifted half a dozen from the maid's cart and you're sweating like a pig."

Her tone didn't match her words and he saw worry etched in her face.

"Fever's breaking," he mumbled. "Good sign."

She helped him sit up enough to swallow two ibuprofen with some orange juice she poured from a plastic carton. "I brought you breakfast."

He worked his way up to a sitting position, bringing the sheet along. Why hadn't he put on some underwear before he got into bed? Kelli picked up the towel he'd dropped beside the bed, spread it across his thighs and perched a Styrofoam takeout box on his lap. If she noticed his hands shaking when he tried to pop the lid, she made no effort to intervene.

She poured him another cup of juice and put a liter bottle of water on the night table. "Scrambled eggs, toast and plenty of orange juice. Fluids, Windsor. Lots of fluids. Flush out the infection." She tore open a packet of jam and spread it on a slice of toast for him. "See how you feel after you eat something." She headed for the bathroom.

The slice of toast weighed as much as an elephant, but he brought it to his mouth. Bit off a piece. Chewed. Swallowed. Took another bite. Tried some eggs. Some of the shakiness left. No wonder. He hadn't eaten anything since yesterday and he'd thrown up all of that. With each bite he grew stronger. He gulped the juice and scraped up the last bit of food from the container. Sated, he lowered the box to the floor and leaned back against the headboard.

Kelli peeked around the bathroom doorway. She'd wrapped a towel around her head, turban style, something women seemed born knowing how to do. "Feeling better?"

"Much. I think I was hungry."

"Rest for an hour. Then we hit the road."

"I think we need to talk."

"And I think you need to rest." She disappeared into the bathroom like the bird in a cuckoo clock.

He needed exercise, to get moving again, not rest. He got out of bed, wrapped the sheet around him and took three laps around the small room before the dizziness ruled. He glared at the bathroom door. Now he'd rest. He made it to the bed and

collapsed.

Aware of noises, someone moving in and out, doors opening and closing, yet unwilling to let them register, he slowly rose from sleep at the touch of a hand on his forehead.

"Fever's down. We need to go." Kelli's voice floated from above the bed.

He opened his eyes and blinked at the redhead staring down at him. He worked his tongue around his mouth until he could speak. "Where are the green eyes?"

She flashed a quick grin. "I'm working on that one. Meanwhile, I'm going to finish loading the truck. "If you want to clean up, be quick."

"Do I have to cut my hair, too?"

"No, I thought we'd make you a blond." She gave him what he'd come to think of as The Shake. He was beginning to like it—the look of exasperation, the way her hair bounced, her eyes rolled heavenward and her eyebrows furrowed as she shook her head.

She headed for the door. "Try to remember you were never here. Watch the little things, like leaving the seat up." She was gone before he could retort.

He sat up and looked around. She'd made her bed. Replaced the phone. On the chair were a pair of his jeans, a clean blue chambray work shirt, underwear and socks and the knit cap. He gathered them up and took them into the bathroom. The spotless bathroom. One damp towel and one dry one. Whatever towels she'd used for him and her hair were nowhere to be seen. Nothing pointed to her transformation.

She'd left his Dopp Kit by the sink. No sign of blond hair dye. Good. For a second, he'd thought she was serious. He rubbed his fingers over his jaw. If Kelli was into disguises, maybe a beard would be a good idea. Besides, he couldn't leave whiskers in the sink now, could he?

With a tremendous sense of accomplishment, he washed, got dressed and made it outside under his own power. Kelli stood by the hood of the truck, ready to help. He gave her a thumbs-up and climbed in, tossing his kit on the seat between them next to two bottles of water and her backpack. His head was clear, his pain was tolerable.

"Go for it."

Once they'd put the motel and whatever town it was in behind them, he ended the silence. "Time to talk. Who the hell are you and why is Dwight Hollingsworth looking for you?"

Chapter Seven

Taken by surprise, Kelli shot a look at Windsor. "Who the hell is Dwight Hollingsworth? I've never heard of him."

Windsor twisted in his seat, then grimaced and tugged the seat belt away from his midsection. "Okay, then let's start with the easy one. Who are you?"

She kept her foot steady on the accelerator. Her heart was pounding so hard she thought Windsor could see it through her shirt. She'd prepared herself for his questions, hoped her face didn't give her away. She fixed her eyes on the road. "I'm Kelli Carpenter. ID's in my wallet." She nodded to the pack between them. "Help yourself."

"I'm sure your ID is impeccable. Who are you?"

"Jesus H. Christ, Mr. Blake Windsor, phony handyman. You're the one who shows up pretending to be something you're not. Why don't you tell me who *you* are. Or if that's too much trouble, who's this Dwight Hollingsworth guy?"

Pain lines etched Windsor's face again, but she didn't give a shit. She hit the accelerator, changing lanes, passing cars, not caring that the constant side-to-side motion had to be hurting Windsor's injured torso. She glanced over, thought he was turning a little green. Good. They had at least an hour of mountain roads left.

He shifted in his seat and cracked the window. She saw him swallow, the sweat beading on his upper lip.

Screw him. She turned up the heater. "I'm waiting. Who is Dwight Hollingsworth?"

"You've never heard of him?" The words came out slow and deliberate, as if he had to concentrate to form each one.

"Has the fever affected your hearing? How many times do I have to tell you? No. Never heard of him. What part don't you understand?"

"I work for him. He's a very rich man in Chicago. Aspirations to become the next governor of Illinois."

"Chicago? I've never lived in Chicago. And if you don't want to ride in the back of the truck, you'd better tell me what he wants with me—or what you think he wants with me."

"I don't know. I hoped you would. He thinks you're Casey Wallace. He hired me to see if it was true."

She ignored the ringing in her ears, the pounding in her chest when Windsor uttered the name. "Who's Casey Wallace? It's not me. I told you who I am."

"So, if you're not Casey Wallace, any ideas why Hollingsworth thinks you are?"

"We're still talking about you, Windsor. What is it you do when you're not pretending to be a handyman?"

There was a prolonged silence. She waited. When she turned to look at Windsor, he was slouched in the seat. "I help Hollingsworth make money." His voice was flat.

"I take it you're not exactly a financial advisor, or a stockbroker, or something like that?"

He expelled a puff of air. "No. More like a . . . negotiator. I help him acquire companies. He pays me to convince executives they'd be a lot happier as subsidiaries

of Hollingsworth Industries."

"Convince how? Threaten them? Their families? You go in with a gun?" She watched his face and the flash of indignation she saw was real.

"No. Sorry to disappoint you, but I work with numbers. Bottom lines. And I like to think I'm helping them out in the long run. I'm good at it, and I like the lifestyle it provides."

A glimmer of something—regret?—replaced the indignation. Maybe he did a little more than crunch numbers. "How in the world did a ... negotiator ... end up playing handyman on a Good Samaritan project?"

"Hollingsworth knows my dad was a contractor, that I grew up working with him. But I preferred using my brain. Went to school, got my MBA."

"You're a corporate bully. How does Hollingsworth hook up with EnviroCon and Jack Stockbridge? I'm getting a headache here."

"No clue. Hollingsworth hooks up with just about everyone. Consummate politician. He sent me to check you out, and he set up the handyman cover. And speaking of headaches—" He unzipped his kit and pulled out the ibuprofen. Swallowed some, took a long pull from the water bottle. "Kelli? Look, this was a last-minute deal and I didn't take the time to ask a lot of questions."

"Shut up, Windsor. I need to think for a while."

Okay, for some reason this Hollingsworth had connected her to Casey. Was he connected to Robert? After all these years, had someone found something?

Crap. She was comfortable being Kelli. She'd changed identities before, she could do it again. But not without a damn good reason. Jack might know more. No way would he sell her out. He couldn't. He didn't know her past, but she trusted him with her life.

Thornton? He'd recommended Windsor. He was rich. It made sense he'd be connected to Hollingsworth. Money stuck with money.

Did she dare risk a call to Jack? She glanced at Windsor. Eyes closed, he leaned against the door. Not asleep, from the way he grimaced against the motion of the truck. Shit on a stick. He'd kept that creep from raping her. "Windsor?"

"What?" He didn't open his eyes.

"How well do you know Thornton? Phillip, I think. Stockbridge always called him Thornton. His offices are based in Denver."

"Don't, other than he's behind Camp Getaway. Never heard of him until this job."

"There has to be a connection. Stockbridge tells me Thornton gave him the name of your temp agency, specifically mentioned you. But you don't work for the temp agency. You work for Hollingsworth. Ergo, Thornton and Hollingsworth have to connect."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I don't know. And I can't think straight."

She saw the pain he was trying to hide and sighed. "For now, I think the best

thing we can do is stay off everyone's radar until we get a few more answers."

"You have a destination in mind, or are we just driving?"

She shrugged. "I'm working on it. If someone wanted to get in touch with you, where would they look?"

This time he opened his eyes. Wide. "Me? They'd call my cell. I have a place in Chicago, but I'm away a lot. I stay in hotels."

"Check your cell for missed calls, but don't use it."

"How? You took the damn thing—along with everything else."

Right. Everything was in her bag behind the seat. With the thirty-eight. "I'll get it for you next time we stop."

"I don't suppose that can be at a gas station. Soon? Please?" He gave her a puppy-dog grin. "You said fluids. I've been a good boy, but I've reached my limit."

* * * * *

Bladder straining, Blake had his seat belt off and the door open as soon as Kelli slowed the truck by the restrooms behind the gas station.

She gave him an impatient eyebrow raise. "Go. I'll drive around to the pumps, fill up and come back for you."

Standing at the urinal, tears of relief stung his eyes. It seemed like Kelli had hit every pothole in the road and kept to the speed limit once he'd made his needs known. He swore she'd done it all to torment him. And that tractor she'd followed at twenty-five miles an hour for the last ten minutes! Too bad the driver hadn't heard Kelli's little lecture about not hugging the center line when someone was behind you.

He washed his hands and stepped out into the overcast daylight. For the time being, he didn't care who the hell she was. The way she had her act together spoke of experience. She'd been cool when he threw Casey's name in her face, though. No reaction. But the fact she hadn't stopped to call the cops at the first opportunity meant she didn't want to get involved. Not that he minded, since Dwight sure as hell wouldn't be pleased to have one of his associates implicated in something as messy as an attempted rape.

His headache had toned down to a dull throb, and he was hungry. By tomorrow, he figured he'd be able to put two thoughts together. Meanwhile, this was Kelli's show and he was stuck with it.

Kelli parked the truck near the restrooms and got out. Ignoring him, she opened the door to the ladies'. Blake wandered over to the F-250 and found the doors locked. So that's how much she trusted him. Not that he blamed her. He wondered if she expected him to stay hidden in the john until she was ready to drive away. There was a tree at the edge of the parking area and he leaned against it, legs shaking, afraid if he lowered himself all the way to the ground he might not be able to get up. He

pressed against the bandages under his shirt. Sore, but not on fire anymore. He'd put his money on the concussion, not the knife wound, causing most of his misery, and it seemed to be wearing off. At least Kelli's clone had stopped showing up.

When Kelli emerged, he studied her while she strode to the truck. Her short hair framed her face in auburn waves, giving her a more confident look. No longer the timid recluse. Even her walk had changed to a nonchalant swagger. She unlocked the driver's door, slid in and backed the truck to where he stood. He pulled himself in and she wheeled away almost before he closed the door. He didn't have his watch, but he'd bet the entire stop hadn't lasted more than five minutes.

"Are you going to tell me where we're going?" he asked.

"No." She picked up a cup from the holder and held it to her mouth. He smelled coffee. His mouth watered.

"We going to stop for lunch? Or dinner?" The glare coming through the windshield obscured the clock. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Doesn't matter. Food's in the back. You can make a sandwich."

He twisted around and found an assortment of plastic bags. She'd shopped for more than breakfast and hair dye earlier. One bag held clothes. In another, he found Power Bars, a loaf of bread, some apples and a jar of something called Nutella. Thank God it wasn't more peanut butter. He read the label. Chocolate and hazelnuts. He twisted open the lid and sniffed. His stomach begged. He dug a little more and found napkins, plastic utensils and paper plates.

Blake slathered a slice of bread with the dark, rich spread and took a taste. Heaven. He devoured it, then made a true sandwich. "Can I fix you one?"

"Yes, please. Thanks."

He took a swig of water. A small one. "I wish you'd trust me. I'm on your side."

After a long pause, she looked at him. "Maybe you shouldn't be," she whispered. The pain in her eyes wrenched something inside him.

He made her a sandwich and she ate it as they drove in silence. She extended her coffee. "It's black."

"No tranquilizers?"

One corner of her mouth lifted. He took the cup and let his fingers touch hers a second longer than necessary. She gave him The Shake. Oh, yes, he definitely liked it. That was Kelli. Although he kind of liked not having to handle this new Kelli with kid gloves.

What the hell was he thinking? She'd held a gun on him. Twice.

He swallowed some of the coffee. It was gas-station-scorched from sitting on the burner too long, but it trickled some life through him. "You said something about checking my cell phone." He handed the cup back to Kelli.

"On the seat."

He looked, moved a sweatshirt aside and found his phone lying alongside his

wallet. Only one missed call. He checked the number. Hollingsworth. He asked Kelli what she wanted him to do.

"If it were me, I'd ignore it."

His thoughts moved through his brain like someone slogging through a mudslide. "The ranger. He didn't just happen to see the cabin and take his chances someone might be there for him to—"

She whipped her head toward him. "Give the man a gold star. He showed up, knew exactly who I was and knew enough to tell me Peterson sent him."

"So you think Dwight Hollingsworth sent him?"

"Makes as much sense as anything else. Two people show up looking for me. Seems like there's got to be a connection."

"Hey, I'm not the bad guy here. I can't see Dwight sending me to check on you and then sending someone to ... you know—"

"Oh, say it, Windsor. Rape me. Kill me too, most likely. You saw the knife."

"I've never known Hollingsworth to condone the kind of thing."

"Oh, that's wonderful. Condone. Any other ten dollar words to make the man look like a saint? Who else could it be? She glanced at him, then fixed her eyes on the road. "Would you bet your life that he's not behind it?"

He fingered his bandaged torso. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if there was any truth to what Kelli was saying. And if maybe he'd been a target, too. For now, she was right. He'd ignore the phone call.

Kelli rubbed her eyes, and he noticed again how exhausted she looked. She needed a break. He manipulated his shoulder, pleased that it felt looser. "I'm feeling a lot better. Want me to spell you?"

"I'm good for a while longer." She drained the rest of the coffee.

He gave her another hour.

Wiping his hands across his face, he groaned in what he hoped was a convincing tone, embarrassed when he realized it wasn't all a put-on. "Umm ... I hate to slow you down, but I'm not feeling so hot." Truth be told, he was starting to ache again. The truck's bench seat didn't recline and Kelli had pulled it forward to reach the pedals. Now that he'd spoken the words aloud, the misery he'd been ignoring pushed its way to the front of his consciousness.

No exasperated head shake this time, but concern. "Head? Stomach? Should I pull over?"

"No, not that. I think ... maybe ... been sitting up a long time. I need to lie down for a while." He squirmed in his seat, pulled the seat belt away from his lap.

"I guess we've gone far enough. Not much we can do until tomorrow."

Ten minutes later, she swerved the truck into a small strip shopping center. "Hang on a little longer? A couple of things I need to do here."

He nodded. He waited while she went into a small internet café, then checked his

wallet. She'd left him twenty dollars. Nothing more. His ID, credit cards, everything else was gone. He stepped out of the cab and tried to loosen muscles that had stiffened on the drive. Tomorrow would be even worse, he knew. Everything always hurt worse the second day. After peeking in the windows of a camera shop, a bicycle repair shop, and a used bookstore, he wandered into the internet café where Kelli sat at a terminal, clicking through sites, stopping every now and then to key in information. She glanced up when he came in, but from the way she immediately went back to the computer, he figured they weren't supposed to know each other.

At the counter, Blake ordered a cup of coffee, loaded it with cream and sugar, and took it to a small table. From there he could watch her, even if he couldn't tell what she was doing.

He'd finished half his coffee when she got up and left without acknowledging his presence. When he heard the truck door open, close, and the engine turn over, he abandoned his coffee, nonchalantly making his way toward the truck, although his painful, lumbering gait was anything but casual.

Kelli glared at him when he'd hoisted himself into the cab. "I thought you needed to lie down."

"I thought maybe walking around would help. Everything gets tight when I sit." He waited. When she didn't say anything, he pressed. "Are you going to tell me what that was about?"

"Later. Now I'm going to see if the motel down the road has a room, assuming you still want to lie down."

He stared at her face, pale and drawn and her red-rimmed eyes. "I do."

Within five minutes, she'd pulled into another fleabag motel, telling him to stay in the truck. When she returned, she climbed in and started the engine.

"No rooms?" he asked.

"In back. I'll drive around."

Kelli parked in front of unit twenty-six and got her gym bag and backpack from behind the seat. He let her go inside, waited two full minutes, then followed. He saw the two double beds, standard motel issue, saw Kelli glance from one bed to the other. For a fleeting moment, she was the frightened, insecure woman he'd met when he'd arrived at Camp Getaway. He wanted to tell her everything would be fine. Hell, he wanted to tell himself everything would be fine.

Then she straightened and went back to the truck, returning with the shopping bags he'd seen behind the seat. She plopped them on the sagging easy chair in the corner, then disappeared into the bathroom with her gym bag. He heard the shower running.

"What were you doing at the internet café?" he asked when she came out, wearing sweats and towel-drying her hair.

"I made a plane reservation to Atlanta and booked a room at the Marriott for

three nights."

"Plane reservations and hotel rooms? After the lecture on not doing anything that can be traced?"

She sank to the edge of one of the beds and lowered her head into her hands. He wasn't going to get The Shake this time. He waited, standing above her.

Her words replayed themselves. Plane reservation and hotel room. Singular. His heart lurched into his throat and he didn't know why. Hell, if she wanted to go her own way, so much the better. He would tell Hollingsworth she wasn't Casey Wallace and be done with it. "I see. Well, thanks for patching me up. I should be fine on my own by tomorrow."

She looked up at him, totally confused. "What? I told you, until I figure this out, I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"So we're both going to Atlanta? When?"

"Jesus H. Christ, Windsor, use what brain cells you have left. I made the reservations, yes. But we're sure as hell not going where someone thinks we're going. This way, if they're tracing me, they'll be looking in Atlanta. We're going to keep driving."

She rummaged in one of the bags and pulled out four cell phones. "Prepaid. Virtually disposable. Almost impossible to trace."

"Oh." His face flushed hot. "Even without a concussion, I think I'm out of my league. Were you a spy in another life?"

Chapter Eight

Another life, Blake had said. How close he was to the truth. Kelli rubbed the towel over her hair, momentarily taken aback at its shortness. At the sound of water running in the tub, she hoped Windsor wouldn't soak his bandages. She wasn't sure she had the strength to change them now.

Her eyes burned, and she had the bone-weary ache and general nausea that demanded sleep. Now. Eating something would probably be sensible, but she didn't have the energy to chew.

She crawled under the covers and closed her eyes, but tired as her body was, her brain was running like a hamster in its exercise wheel. How had some Chicago businessman connected her to Casey? If he'd been sure, someone would have dragged her back or had her arrested. No, for now she believed Windsor. And for now, she'd have to trust him. How did Ned Decker connect? Had Hollingsworth sent him, too? Her mind couldn't untangle all the swirling thoughts.

Light filtered under her eyelids when the bathroom door opened. Darkness returned and she heard Blake's quiet footfalls enter the bedroom, sensed his presence

at the foot of his bed. She half-opened her eyes. Light from curtains that didn't quite close let her see his form bend over his duffel. In the shadows, his bruises disappeared and she watched the muscles of his back ripple when he picked a pair of briefs out of the bag. He let the towel fall from his hips. Nice ass, was her last thought before she drifted off.

Later—she didn't know how much later—she awoke to the sounds of frenzied breathing. Hers. Robert hovered above her, gripping her shoulders. "No!" She thrashed with her arms and legs, saw the glint from his eyes and struck out. A strong hand held her wrist.

"Shh. Kelli. It's a nightmare. It's Blake. Come on, Kelli. Wake up."

Oh, God. Heart pounding, drenched in sweat, she looked up into Robert's face and watched him morph into Blake Windsor. He held her with one hand, the other clutched his midsection. She found her voice. "Okay. I'm okay. Go back to bed."

"Give me a minute." He turned on the bedside lamp and she threw her arm over her eyes.

She heard his breathing even out, realized what she'd done. "I hit you? I'm so sorry—I thought you were—I didn't mean it—are you all right?"

He pulled his hand away from his middle. "No big deal. Caught me off guard. You pack quite a wallop." He smiled, but his eyes glistened with unshed tears of pain.

"I'm sorry."

"You already said that. It's not enough."

"What are you talking about?" She dragged her fingers through her hair, surprised again at the new feeling. Then the memories fell into place and she shuddered.

"Your nightmare. You need to talk about it." Blake's voice was quiet, almost soothing.

"I ... can't."

He turned off the lamp and the parking lot lights filtered through the curtain gaps, leaving the room in shadows. "I think you should. Talking helps."

"No. Please, go back to bed. We both need to sleep." Even in the patchy light, she saw his eyebrows lift. But he shrugged and turned away, leaning toward his own bed.

"Blake?" As if her hand belonged to someone else, she felt it reach out, her fingers brushing his. So warm, so strong. She felt hot tears drip from her eyes and nothing stopped them. He turned around, sat on the edge of her bed and stroked her hair.

"It's okay. It's okay."

Those words seemed to be the permission she'd needed. The sobs burst forth—wet, sloppy and hiccupy. He pulled her against him. She buried her face in his chest and listened to soothing tones of his voice. His hand moved up and down her back. The hairs on his chest tickled her nose. He smelled like the motel soap. For the first

time in far too long, she felt safe.

"Scoot over," he said.

She started to protest, but obeyed and adjusted the covers over herself. Blake pulled the covers from his bed. He sat against the headboard, legs outstretched next to her and covered himself with his own bedclothes. A perfect gentleman. She gave him a half-smile.

"That's better." He put his arm around her shoulder. "I like your smile. Are you warm enough?"

She nodded, leaning into the crook of his shoulder. She felt heat radiating from him, felt him wince and she jerked away. "I'm sorry. That's your bad shoulder, isn't it? And you're hot. Fever?"

He pulled her back against him. "If you apologize once more, I'm going to have to get ugly. I'm fine. Now, that iodine, or whatever you poured into my belly—that hurt. This was a twinge."

She almost laughed and rested her head against him again. Things seemed to settle inside.

"Who's Robert?" he asked.

* * * * *

Blake felt Kelli stiffen at his question. He gripped her just enough to keep her close to him. She was right—his head throbbed, his wound burned and his fever was back. But there was nothing he could do about any of that, and she needed help.

Her chin lifted and she looked him in the eyes. "Robert? Who's Robert?"

"That's what I asked you. You were calling his name. Screaming, more like it." He rubbed his thumb down her cheek, wiping away the tears. "Did he abuse you? Are you hiding from him?"

"Hiding? Good Lord, no. Robert is dead." She paused, twisting the blanket in her fingers and lowering her head. "I killed him." Her voice was barely audible. "I guess someone figured it out."

His pulse quickened at her words. He tucked his finger under her chin, demanding she meet his gaze. "Talk to me."

"I can't."

"We've been through that. Yes, you can. It's one in the morning. Neither of us is getting back to sleep for a while." He waited. Her silence filled the room and he finally broke it, staring at her when he asked, "You're Casey, aren't you?"

She didn't respond but he was right. Everything alive had drained from her face.

He summarized the information Hollingsworth had given him—the newspaper story and magazine photo, how he'd been sent to check. Kelli sat, unmoving, while he explained, and for a moment he feared she'd withdrawn the way she had when

Scumbag attacked her. When she finally spoke, it was more of a whimper.

"It hurts to go back. Don't make me. Please?"

The pain in her voice cut more deeply than Scumbag's knife. "My brain might be firing on half a cylinder, but if I understand where you're coming from, maybe I can help think of a solution." He set his hand next to hers. "Take my hand. Squeeze as hard as you need to. We'll do this together."

"I can't." Her voice trembled, but her hand inched over, making tentative contact with his fingers.

"We can. We will. Together." An involuntary shudder ran through him. His fever had shifted to chill mode and he clenched his muscles against the shivering.

Kelli whisked her hand away. "You need more ibuprofen. I'll get it." She wriggled away and padded toward the bathroom before he could say anything.

Teeth chattering, he dug through his duffel for something warmer to wear. His fingers wrapped around his bottle of Scotch. He could use a drink. He set the bottle on the night table and struggled into his sweatpants and shirt. Pain, chills and fever notwithstanding, he wasn't going to let Kelli off the hook. He needed to hear her story—and she needed to tell it.

Kelli returned with the pills and two plastic cups of water, handing him one while she sipped from her own. She looked calmer, with her hair damp around her face from washing away the evidence of her crying jag. He saw her eye the Scotch.

"Help yourself," he said. "I think we could both use a drink."

Without answering, she gulped the rest of her water, then poured herself a generous shot. After taking three ibuprofen, he did the same. Kelli crossed the room and slouched into the chair. He watched her pound back half her drink. She set the cup down, wiped her mouth and stared at him.

He took a sip of his own drink, feeling the warmth course down to his belly. He wanted her back beside him and cursed himself for giving her an excuse to get away. "Sit with me?"

"It's easier here." She raked her fingers through her hair. "I don't know where to start. Everything got too complicated."

"How about the beginning? Maybe what your mother named you when you were born?" Crap, he wanted the light on so he could see her face. But he knew why she'd moved away. Hiding—from herself as much as him.

"My real name? Karen Christine Abbott. But that turned into Casey by the time I was three and it stuck." Her voice was a detached monotone, void of any feeling.

"So, you were Casey Wallace."

"After I married Charles, yes. But after the accident, I fell apart. Totally."

She stared into space. He waited and finally, she spoke again.

"Charles said I'd been working too hard. Maybe I had. I normally worked from home, to be with Luke. But the last few jobs had some out-of-town work and Charles

didn't like me being gone so much. That Luke had to be left with a sitter."

"Those can be tough choices," Blake said.

She leaned forward in the chair. "You know, sometimes things seem to be going right, turning for the better and then someone yanks the universe out from under you. The last job I was on, the company decided they didn't need me after all and paid me half my fee for my trouble."

"Why did they let you go?"

She shrugged. "I didn't care. It meant I could go home, take time off and mend some fences."

He waited out another long silence.

"I decided to make up for my so-called neglect, and the three of us went on a picnic. We had a great time and I told Charles I wasn't going to take any more out-of-town jobs until Luke was older. On the way home, I remembered we were out of milk, so we stopped at a convenience store. Luke was tired of being stuck in his car seat so Charles brought him in to pick out a treat. They were in front, looking at toys by the counter, and I was in the back at the dairy case."

She sipped her Scotch. "I don't know exactly what happened next. According to the reports, some thug came into the store. He had a gun. Told the guy behind the counter to empty the register or he'd shoot everyone. Apparently the store had been held up five times in six months, and the clerk pulled a gun from behind the counter. All I remember was a whole lot of noise, a whole lot of blood, and Charles and Luke lying beside a pile of potato chip bags."

The pitch of her voice hadn't changed. It could have been a public radio newscaster reading a report. Until her hand moved toward the table at her side and threw the cup, whisky and all, across the room.

He worked himself off the bed and limped to her side. He tried to scoop her up, but he simply didn't have the strength. She looked up at him, her eyes huge and bright and everything inside him went hollow. He slipped her arm around his waist and she got up and walked back to the bed with him. This time she pulled all the covers back and sat alongside him, their sweats the only barrier.

"You're lucky to be alive," he whispered.

"If I'd been a better mother, we'd all be alive. If I hadn't been out of milk, we would never have stopped in that store."

"You can't blame yourself." He took her hand and she didn't pull back.

"Guilt doesn't listen to logic."

Images of his father, of his brother, flashed through his mind. He looked at Kelli until they went away. "They caught the guy who did it, right?"

"He was dead. The clerk shot him. Forensics figured out whose gun shot who, that the punk was high on meth and had a record, but what difference does it make? They're all dead."

He squeezed her shoulder. "Go on. It's better to get it out."

"Somehow, I got through the funeral and all the legal crap by pretending it wasn't me. It was like someone else could take over my body when I had to do something. But I couldn't stay in that apartment. Every time I turned around, there was something to remind me of . . . them. I wanted to run and hide. So I did."

"But your family?"

"My mom died the year after Luke was born and my stepdad remarried and moved away not long afterwards. Charles' folks—I don't think they cared. I was tolerated—someone they put up with in order to see their son and grandson. I think it was easier for them to deal with the loss by blaming me."

"So you decided to become Kelli Carpenter?"

"No. That came later." Her voice was barely a whisper now. "First, I tried to forget who I was. I even had a nose job."

He turned her face to his and ran his finger down her nose. "That explains why it was so hard for me to see Casey in you. She had a fine nose—not the sort one would think of having fixed."

She relaxed a little. "Well, I needed the surgery because of a deviated septum, but having the surgeon tweak the shape helped me forget who I used to be. There was a different person in the mirror. It helped."

He squinted at her. "Nope. I still don't see you as the woman in the magazine picture."

A hint of a smile came back. "I'll bet I know which one. I was three months pregnant in it—I had boobs then."

"Tell me more. How did Casey become Kelli?"

"Did those files Hollingsworth gave you say what I did when I was Casey?"

"Nothing specific—only that you worked with computers."

She gave a cackle that might have been a laugh. "Yeah—that I did. Founded a computer security company. Trust me, I was good. I've been hacking since I was twelve. It was no trouble to transfer funds from my bank accounts and get new ID under my maiden name. As far as anyone could tell, my company closed its doors. Casey Wallace got on a plane to South America and never came back."

"I took my computer and not a lot else and went to a small town in New Hampshire. We'd vacationed there when I was a kid and it felt . . . safe. I was Karen Abbott, thinking I could go back in time and everything would be good again."

Blake took another sip of whisky and offered the cup to Kelli. Karen. Casey. She downed the rest and he refilled it. "Go on."

"There are still holes in those next few months. I have nightmares, or flashbacks—I can't tell. I stayed there for months. Hiding. From me, mostly. Trying to forget."

"You never really forget, though, do you?"

She shook her head. "No. It just stops hurting quite so much. And then one day, I

was ready to live again. I moved back to California, enrolled in Berkeley and studied environmental biology. As different from my other job as possible."

She swirled the plastic cup in her hand. "The real Kelli Carpenter was my roommate at Berkeley. She decided to do missionary work in Africa. She fell in love with someone in her group and wrote she wasn't coming back. I met Robert. I'd finally recovered enough to allow someone to get close. Let myself think I loved him. Wanted—needed someone to love me, to love someone. Fill the emptiness."

She gave a muffled sob. "It was semester break and we were camping down in Mexico, near Ensenada. Just the two of us. A secret getaway.

"I ... don't know when things got ... out of hand. We'd been hiking. And fishing. I'd cooked dinner. All normal. After we ate, he ... changed. Everything was different. He was an animal."

His breathing accelerated and he struggled to keep it steady.

Her voice was choking now and the words weren't flowing as quickly. "He grabbed me. Ripped my shirt. Started getting rough. Said I'd like it. I said no, but he kept ... kept—"

Blake could imagine what Robert must have done. His teeth clenched at he thought.

"I don't need the details. I get the idea."

"I don't remember the details. He wouldn't stop." She was gone now, somewhere else. Well inside herself. He doubted she knew she was crying.

"Shh. It's okay." It could never be okay.

As if she hadn't heard him, she continued. "We'd been drinking. Wine. Too much, maybe. I grabbed the bottle. He grabbed it back. It hit something and broke. I held on and ... so much blood. I caught his carotid, or jugular, or something."

"Self-defense," he whispered.

"Maybe, if you're thinking straight. But there's no statute of limitations on murder, and I don't have enough faith in the system to risk it. Especially in Mexico. All I could think of was running away. That's what I'd done before. I ditched his car about five miles from the border. Then I walked across in Tijuana with all the rest of the tourists, took a train to San Diego, and a bus back to school."

"Nobody missed him?"

She continued in the same monotone. "It was pretty rough terrain—I got rid of his wallet, shoved him into a ravine. Figured by the time anyone found the body, assuming the animals didn't get it first, I'd be gone."

He took her hand. Unlike his own, hers was steady. "His car?"

She shrugged. "I left the keys. Some locals probably made good use of it. Robert hadn't told anyone we were going, so if—when—anyone noticed he was missing, they had no way to know where to look. He was a flunky in some big accounting firm. I'd

never been to his office, never met any of his colleagues. I don't think anyone knew we were seeing each other."

The ache in Blake's chest wasn't due to his injury. Words couldn't get past the thickness in his throat. He pulled Kelli into his chest and massaged her neck. Let his fingers graze her jawline, then move up to her temples.

She gave him a weak smile. "You sure you want to stick with me? Men in my life have a way of dying violent deaths."

"To quote a friend, 'like white on rice'." He rubbed circles on the palm of her hand with his thumb. "Keep going."

"Since Kelli had decided to stay in Africa, and I knew everything about her, I took over her identity. I cut my hair, dyed it brown, started wearing tinted contacts and glasses. Any records will show Karen Abbot dropped out of school and disappeared. Kelli Carpenter transferred from Berkeley to UCLA."

She rotated the glass in her hands. "I became an expert at hiding, being a loner. Jack Stockbridge respects that and doesn't pry. But there's this constant fear someone will find out I'm a murderer and that'll be the end."

"Enough." He took the whisky from Kelli. "You need to sleep. So do I." He made a tentative move to leave the bed. Knowing it was the only thing to do, knowing Kelli knew it, he still felt disappointed when she didn't cling to him, when she mumbled good night, turned away from him and curled into a ball.

He pulled the covers over her. "Good night." He sipped what was left of his Scotch and stared at the ceiling for a long time before he fell asleep. There were connections, answers in there somewhere. Maybe they'd figure it out tomorrow. His last thought was that she'd called him Blake, not Windsor, when she'd needed someone.

Chapter Nine

At six, Kelli woke up to use the bathroom and tried to get back to sleep, but last night's conversation—okay, breakdown—was stuck in a loop replaying in her head. Something didn't make sense, but she couldn't figure it out. Hollingsworth and Robert? Hollingsworth and Thornton? Robert and Thornton? Scumbag and Robert?

She heard Blake's rapid breathing, interspersed with quiet moans and went to his bedside. A palm to his forehead told her his fever was up again. His eyelids flickered, but didn't open. She eased the covers down and his shirt up. He was soaked with sweat. She peeled back a corner of his dressing and looked at his injury. The upper portion of the cut seemed to be healing well enough, but at the bottom, three of the butterfly strips would need replacements. The area around them burned hot beneath her hand.

She looked at the furrows in Blake's brow and her fingertips automatically

reached out and massaged his temples. Why had she started thinking of him as Blake? After unloading everything last night, she supposed it made sense.

His breathing evened out and she saw him relax. Saw the slight upturn at the corners of his mouth. She eased her hands away.

"Don't stop. Feels good."

"I see you're awake." She turned on the light over the bed. "I need to fix your bandages."

His eyes opened. He blinked, then sat up and pulled his shirt over his head, then tossed it on the floor. She gave him an exasperated look and he grinned.

"What's so funny?"

"Nothing. Do your Florence Nightingale thing and get it over with."

She pressed the tape back against his chest. "You want a bath first? Cool you down. No point in getting fresh bandages wet."

"Will you come wash my back?"

"Joke all you want, but I've got the iodine, remember?"

He grimaced. "Ouch." He got out of bed and stumbled on unsteady legs to the bathroom.

She got out the first-aid kit and the tube of Neosporin she'd bought. That, plus ibuprofen, were the best she had and she hoped they'd keep the fever, pain and infection at bay. What Blake needed was a couple of days in bed, sleeping, not riding in a battered pickup.

Pickup. Crap. If Ned Decker, or whoever he was, had been sent by Hollingsworth, or had any connections, he might have put a lookout order on the truck. And she was running out of cash. Her stomach rumbled and a wave of dizziness shimmered over her. She needed to eat. They both did.

She stood outside the bathroom door, listening to the sound of splashing. "You all right? Try not to get the cut too wet."

"I'm fine."

"Hungry?"

He was quiet for a moment. "Some, I guess."

"Will you be okay if I go get us some breakfast?" She heard water gurgling down the drain. And the stifled gasp of someone trying very hard not to let on he was in pain, or the least bit weak. She felt the door resonate. He must have fallen against it. She went and sat on the edge of her bed, waiting.

The door opened and he emerged, hips wrapped in a towel. You'd think he'd have learned to take some underwear in with him. Her eyes lingered a moment too long before she snapped her gaze to study the cheap print on the motel wall.

"What are you thinking?" He moved past her and sat down on the other bed.

"You were a million miles away."

"Nothing." Heat rushed to her face. *Oh, just admiring your body—right.*

He leaned against the headboard, tucking the sheet around his hips. "I don't think so. But why don't you get the torture part of the morning behind us?" He smiled and she went to work.

The smile vanished. She watched him grit his teeth when she pulled the rest of the tape off his chest. Heard the gasp when she peeled away the loose butterfly strips. He squinted his eyes shut when she worked the Neosporin into the cut and gripped the sheet when she resealed the incision with new butterfly strips. They both sighed with relief when she taped on a fresh dressing.

He opened his eyes and they grabbed her again. She shook off her response.

"Do I get a lollipop?" His expression was pure puppy dog now.

She went to the shopping bags. "What about a Power Bar?"

He feigned a pout.

"Take ibuprofen. Drink fluids. I'll get you some breakfast. There's a coffee shop across the parking lot."

With one last glance over her shoulder, she left Blake and walked across the asphalt. She sat in a booth, sipped at a cup of coffee while she waited for their breakfast, and punched Stockbridge's number into one of the new cell phones.

"Kiddo, I've been worried sick about you. What's going on? Did Blake Windsor do anything to hurt you?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I think he's on my side. But I'm going to have to ask you to trust me. I need some help. We need some help. Nobody can know where we are until I figure things out."

* * * * *

Three hours later, Blake sat slouched in a hard plastic chair at the almost-deserted Jiffy Wash Laundromat. Other than a bored teenager behind the counter and a white-haired woman dividing her attention between *People Magazine* and a grainy soap opera on the wall-mounted television set, he and Kelli had the place to themselves. Kelli sat at a computer terminal, alternating between clicking a mouse, writing notes and talking on one of her new cell phones. At least one call was to Stockbridge—and he'd overheard one conversation in the truck, but he'd been too out of it to pay much attention.

He thought of the way her eyes had lit up when she saw the laundromat offering half an hour free internet access with each load of wash. That was right after she'd given him The Shake when he'd asked her to make their second pit stop in as many hours. She'd dropped him off to take care of his needs and made a beeline for the Laundromat next to the gas station, telling him to meet her there with his laundry.

She still preferred to pretend they weren't traveling together, even after he'd tried to convince her that nobody from his own circles would recognize him. Hell,

Hollingsworth himself wouldn't recognize him. In his world, he wore Hugo Boss or Armani, not L.L.Bean or the Kmart work shirts Kelli had provided. He shaved twice a day. Kept his hair pulled back in a ponytail, not hanging in his now very scruffy face. He rubbed his whiskers. Another couple of days and it might not be scruffy. He could trim it—if he had another razor. Kelli had dulled his last blade when she'd shaved his chest around the bandage. He guessed she'd seen him trying not to scream when she'd pulled the tape off that morning. She'd told him to be glad his cuts weren't lower and mumbled something about a bikini wax.

For a moment, he was glad he felt like crap. Her hands on him had been cool and gentle and she smelled so clean, so fresh, so—feminine. The last thing he needed was to freak her out with a woody. Besides, she had no interest in him—not that kind. She'd been scared, he'd pulled a rapist off her. She felt gratitude, or maybe it was guilt that he'd been hurt rescuing her. Hell, most of the time she looked at him like he was her big brother. He laughed, but carefully. The way she gave orders, more like her little brother.

When he heard his dryer stop, he got up, glancing in Kelli's direction. She clicked something and the Jiffy Wash logo appeared on the monitor. He guessed they were done here.

He did a rudimentary job of folding and got his clean clothes back in his duffel. Kelli had insisted on two loads each. "You don't mix lights and darks," she'd said. He knew that, but it got him another Shake. And got her two hours on the internet.

Somehow, even with her neat and meticulous folding, she was finished ahead of him and had her clothes in her small suitcase and was out the door without a glance in his direction. Okay, there had been one quick glance exchanged when she'd caught him looking while she folded her underwear, but that was normal for a guy and a woman in a laundromat, right? He probably should have tossed out some dumb pickup line to make it look more like they were total strangers.

He hefted his duffel into the back of the truck and climbed into the cab where Kelli waited.

"You all right?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. Took two ibuprofen half an hour ago, used the men's room." He held up a bottle of water. "But if you don't want to stop so often, maybe you shouldn't keep reminding me to drink."

"I'm more worried about dehydration than having to stop."

He raised his eyebrows. "You care."

"Shove it, Windsor. I don't want the complications of an emergency room visit if you pass out on me."

"You care." He grinned.

She put the truck in gear and barreled onto the highway.

He braced himself against the acceleration. "Are we going to discuss what you

found out back there?"

"Later. You said Hollingsworth gave you a file on me. You have it?"

He nodded. "Lockbox in back."

"Good. I'll need to see it." She turned to stare at him before she spoke. "How do you feel? Seriously. I know this truck's uncomfortable and I'm concerned there might be a lookout order on it, but there's no way to get anything else short of stealing—rentals will need to see a driver's license and that's probably way up on someone's search list if they're looking."

"You don't think the airline tickets will be enough?"

"You never know where they'll look first. It's a risk, but I don't think Stockbridge would give anyone the license of this truck and nobody else should know it."

"Except Scumbag." He saw from her expression she'd thought of that, too.

"I'm hoping his connections are the kind that can't call the cops and ask them to put a BOLO out on a vehicle."

"BOLO?" He put it together. "Be on the Lookout, right?"

"Very good, Windsor. When you finish reading Sherlock Holmes, you can start on some modern-day detective stories and learn the jargon." From the way she fixed herself behind the wheel, she had a destination in mind, and she wanted to get there fast. Yet she stayed with traffic, passing occasionally, but doing nothing to call attention to them.

"Where are we going?"

"Eugene."

He noticed the bucolic countryside passing by. "Shouldn't we be on the interstate?"

"I'm sticking to the path less traveled. It'll take a little longer, but pickup trucks on these secondary roads are a dime a dozen and we blend in." She glanced his way.

"You all right?"

"I'll be fine."

"Seriously—we've got some ground to cover. If you start hurting, take a pill."

"I said I'd be fine."

"They're in your kit. Behind the seat."

He took great pride in waiting nearly an hour before taking one, careful not to look at Kelli, who seemed equally careful not to look at him.

* * * * *

With the absence of the steady hum of traffic noise, Blake drifted up from sleep. The smell of car exhaust filled his nostrils. Kelli was at his side, brushing his hair out of his face. He snapped alert. "I'm up." Or that's what he thought he was saying. His mouth was dry and his head was filled with oatmeal again. He squinted into the lights of

a parking garage. "Where are we?"

"Eugene Airport."

"You've got to keep things simple for me. I thought we weren't flying anywhere."

He swore he'd never take another one of those damn pills no matter how much he hurt. He found his watch in his travel kit and blinked until the dial came into focus. Almost midnight. They'd been driving since ten that morning. Aside from vague recollections of a couple of stops, he guessed she'd driven straight through. She was pale, her eyes puffed and red. Everything about her screamed exhaustion.

"We're not," she said. "Get out. Put on the watch cap."

He yanked the itchy wool over his head, then slid out of the cab, giving the arm she offered a quick squeeze. "I'm okay. Just zoned from the pill. Tell me what to do."

"Grab a luggage cart." She tilted her head toward his right.

He complied, helped load all their gear and started pushing the cart.

"Wait." Kelli grabbed his arm. "Those papers—about me."

The lockbox. "I'll get them." He climbed into the bed of the pickup with a lot less pain than he'd expected and unlocked the box. Scumbag's knife sat on top, along with the uniform pants he'd been wearing when he attacked Kelli. Blake left them. He dug to the bottom of the box to extract the envelope, and hurried back to Kelli, who leaned against the handle of the luggage cart as if it were the only thing keeping her upright.

He took over pushing on the walk to the terminal. "Are you going to tell me what we're doing? Might make it easier for me to play along, Ms. Bond."

"Cranford. Mrs. William Cranford. You're William Bill."

His head didn't feel full of oatmeal anymore. It felt more like a frozen Margarita in the blender. Slowly, everything came together. Kelli had set up some cover for them during all her internet fiddling. Okay, he'd go along. "What do I call you?"

"Emily."

"You don't look like an Emily. I'm going to call you Sweetheart."

She glowered.

"Hey, less chance of me blowing our cover." He grinned when he got another Shake.

By now, they had arrived inside the terminal. He read the signs and turned the cart toward the one that said "Departures".

"No. This way." Kelli maneuvered their luggage toward baggage claim. "Wait over there." She pointed to a row of padded chairs and moved to a Eugene Tourist Information board. He watched her pick up a handset, nodding as she spoke, then come back to him. In a while, he'd wake up and he'd be in the pickup, or in another fleabag motel. He told himself to go along with the flow.

"Almost done," she said. "Outside."

She started walking and he followed. That's about all he'd been doing for the last three days, but it beat thinking. They sat on a bench near a sign that said "Hotel Shuttles".

"I get it," he said, feeling as proud as he had when he'd solved his first quadratic equation. "When the shuttle gets here, we look like a couple of weary travelers who just flew in."

"Elementary," Kelli said. "There's our ride."

She pointed to a black van with "Plaza Hotel" painted on its side. The door opened and a man who appeared to be in his late sixties approached them. Dressed in black slacks and polo with a Plaza logo on the breast, he gave them a friendly smile.

"You two get inside. Leave the luggage to me. We'll have you at the hotel in no time."

The driver set a small step by the side door of the van and helped Kelli in. Blake followed. She'd put her backpack on the seat beside her and he moved it out of the way and slid closer. If he was dreaming, he might as well enjoy it.

"We're married, aren't we?" When she didn't protest, he looked at her more closely. Exhausted didn't come close to describing her. Walking zombie, maybe.

Half an hour later, they were at the glass doors of the hotel lobby. The driver opened the side door of the van. "Don't worry about your bags. I'll have them sent to your room."

Blake nudged Kelli. She'd fallen asleep and he took a moment to enjoy the first glimpse of her looking relaxed and at peace. He nuzzled her neck. "Sweetheart, we're here." She still smelled fresh. How women did that was beyond him. Her eyes flashed open. Confusion first, then panic. "It's okay," he said. "We're here."

She rubbed her eyes. He exited the van and held his hand out for her. She accepted it and even held it while they strolled to the registration desk. Her left hand stayed in her pocket.

The night clerk, a young blonde who appeared to be a trainee from the way she struggled with the computer registration, kept up a stream of chatter. Considering the lobby was empty, it was probably to quell the boredom. "Yes, here it is. You're guests of EnviroCon. Welcome. Everything is covered." She clicked some more keys, frowned, clicked again, muttered something and gave them another big smile. "Sorry. Mr. and Mrs. Cranford. Here you are. Will you need one or two keys?"

"Two," Blake said.

She put two plastic cards in a folder and tapped it with her pen. "This is your room number. The elevators are to your left. There's a complimentary Continental breakfast in the Executive Lounge on the twenty-third floor from six to ten."

Blake took the folder, gave her a smile, and guided Kelli to the elevator. She was almost asleep on her feet. Maybe not almost. Her eyes were open, but she'd flat run out of gas.

When he opened the door to their room, he let out a low whistle. He'd stayed at nice hotels on the job, but never in a Presidential Suite. He looked around, noting a huge bowl of fruit and a bottle of wine on the counter of a kitchenette. Across the room was an alcove with desk, printer, and fax machine. Their boxes were in a living area, suitcases in the bedroom. The bed was turned down. Singular. King-sized, but still one. Blake half-carried Kelli to the bed, sat her down and took her shoes off. He unzipped her sweatshirt and worked it off her shoulders and down her arms. She was helping, but he'd bet a week's pay she'd have no recollection of this in the morning. He settled her down, covered her and kissed her forehead. "You sleep. I'm on the couch."

He turned off the light and found extra blankets and pillows in the closet. A glance told him the couch in the living room made into a bed, but he didn't bother. He put the "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door and stretched out on the couch. If this was all a dream, he'd kick himself in the morning for not sharing the bed.

Chapter Ten

Kelli smelled coffee, a familiar spicy cologne, and sensed a hovering presence. She squinted one eye open. Bright sun. She winced. Then the hovering presence shifted, standing between her eye and the glare. Logy with sleep, she closed the eye anyway. The coffee aroma grew stronger and she felt the side of the bed sink.

"Mornin', Sweetheart. I hate to wake you, but the hotel delivered some stuff. I thought you'd want to see it."

She rose to as much consciousness as she could muster. Only after she scooted up against the headboard did she think to make sure she was decent. The last she remembered, she and Blake had been in the elevator. She checked the other side of the bed. Pristine. A perfect gentleman. She accepted the coffee and took a sip. Her thank you was a grunt. Good coffee. Better than good. Heavenly coffee. She inhaled and closed her eyes. When she opened them, Blake was gone and a FedEx packet and carton sat at the foot of the bed. Jack had come through fast.

She looked at the clock. Shit, it was after ten. With a long sigh, she carried her coffee into the bathroom. She needed to get to work, but she wanted a shower first. A long, hot one.

In the bathroom, she woke up enough to savor the expanse. A far cry from the dingy stained bathrooms of their previous accommodations, this one was bigger than her room at Camp Getaway, filled with rich, textured marble, glistening brass, a sparkling glass-enclosed shower stall. And a Jacuzzi. Tempted to soak the morning away, she eyed the cavernous tub with a promise to visit later and turned on the water in the shower instead. Fatigue disappeared under the needle-sharp spray.

Wrapped in the hotel's plush white terrycloth robe, she carried the FedEx packet out to the living room of the suite. Blake sat on the couch, barefoot, dressed in khakis

and one of the blue chambray work shirts she'd bought him, playing with the remote. His eyes had lost their fevered glaze. When he looked at her, it was as if he'd struck her in the belly. No. A little lower.

Stop it. She was playing a part, that was all, one she had been rehearsing on the endless drive last night. Her reactions were simply the manifestations of convincing herself she could handle acting like Blake's wife. Bill's wife. She'd rehearsed that in her head, too, for all the good it had done. He's Bill. Bill. Bill.

He'd kept the beard, but had trimmed it. His hair hung nearly to his shoulders, still damp. Had he showered? She'd seen no evidence in the bathroom. Pulling her gaze from his, she studied the room more carefully and noticed a small bathroom off the living room. Good enough.

"I ordered from room service," he said. "I thought you'd be hungry and I didn't know if we're still hiding or if we're allowed to be seen in public." He gestured to the conference table at the far side of the room. She glanced at the office workspace, then back at the table with the room service tray. Hunger won, hands down. She tossed the packet aside.

Uncovering the plates, she found pancakes, eggs, sausage, and a huge bowl of fruit. A basket of muffins sat on the table next to a pitcher of juice. She unrolled the napkin to get at the silverware and was eating before she hit the chair.

"I didn't know what you liked," Blake said, "so I ordered a little of everything. I already ate mine—hope you don't mind that I didn't wait."

She noticed the tray of dirty dishes on the kitchen counter next to a huge welcome basket, still untouched. "No. Fine. Good." Good grief, she was babbling.

Blake sat across the table, poured himself a glass of juice and snagged a muffin from the basket. "You're looking more rested this morning. You feeling all right?"

She polished off the eggs and half the pancakes before she spoke again. Blake—Bill—hadn't said anything more, but she saw the questions almost bursting from his lips. "Better," she said. "Thanks. You look ... better, too."

"I feel better." He reached across the table, took her hand and leaned forward, pressing her fingers to his brow. "See? No fever. And the slice is healing, but I think you should check it out."

Her pulse jumped and she jerked her hand away. "Is it red? Hot? Look infected? Oozing?"

"No, just tender."

"You're a big boy. Keep using the Neosporin. Keep it bandaged. Try not to stress the incision."

"Yes, ma'am." The smile dropped away. "Seriously," he continued, "I feel pretty good and I owe you. A lot."

"I think we're more than even. Let me get dressed and we can get organized."

In the bedroom, she stopped to rumple the entire bed. Separate bathrooms

seemed normal enough, but no need to give housekeeping anything to wonder about. She was ninety-nine percent sure nobody could have picked up their trail, but she wasn't going to spend the rest of her life in prison on the one percent chance she'd missed something. And there was still a nagging twitch inside that said she had.

Time to be Emily Cranford. She opened the carton and pulled out her new persona. Nice slacks, silk blouses, clingy sweaters with scooped necklines. No more bulky turtlenecks. Even makeup and perfume. Stockbridge must have sent his wife shopping—everything was elegant, yet casual and spoke of Margaret's taste. Almost everything. Margaret had gone a tad overboard on the lingerie. A thong? Who in her right mind would pay good money for a wedgie? The month's supply of green-tinted contacts was more important. What did people do before overnight delivery?

While she unpacked the clothes, she immersed herself in becoming Emily. Emily wouldn't accompany her husband on many of his jobs for EnviroCon, but when she did, she'd be a schmoozer while he did the outdoor work. She selected a pair of black slacks and green ribbed sweater. After applying foundation, shadow, mascara and a touch of lipstick—Emily would wear makeup—she felt ready to practice her new role.

Not quite—she went to her suitcase and found the small jewelry pouch buried in its depths. Sitting on the edge of the bed, she withdrew her wedding band and engagement ring. Determined not to think of them as anything other than props, she slid them onto her finger. Her breath caught when she pulled Charles' ring from the tissue she'd wrapped it in all those years before. Would it fit? Blake's hands were much larger than Charles', but while Charles had small hands, his fingers were thick and powerful. Blake's were long and slender, although she doubted they were any less strong.

She slipped the ring onto her thumb and walked around the bedroom, holding her head high, shortening her normal stride as she adjusted to the low-heeled leather pumps. Would Emily's hips sway a little? Probably. Would she defer to her husband? Hell, no. Well, maybe at a cocktail party. Look up at him and smile. She'd done that enough as Casey, although there was no deference, only pride, when she'd done so. Maybe a little Casey, a little Mrs. Swensen, the story lady from the library when she was a kid. She was kind, but nobody messed around when she was reading. With a satisfied nod, she went out to the living room.

"What did you do with Hollingsworth's research?" she asked.

Blake retrieved the envelope and dropped it alongside the one from Stockbridge. His eyebrows lifted and his gaze moved up and down her body, but he didn't say anything.

"There are a few things in the box for you, too," she said, trying to ignore the tingle his obvious appraisal sent through her. "Stockbridge sent some dress slacks and a few shirts in case you need more than jeans."

Blake nodded. "What's in there?"

"More of our cover." She upended Stockbridge's packet and dumped the contents on the table. A couple of file folders, two letter-sized envelopes and a fat manila one. She opened the first envelope and gave a nod of approval. Stockbridge was good and he was fast. A set of car keys and a note saying a car would be parked at the airport in the slot where the truck had been.

The reminders of the roles they were playing settled her. "We've got wheels at the airport. I've applied for temporary driver's licenses—poor Bill and Emily managed to lose theirs—but it'll take another day to get them." She opened the second envelope.

Blake leaned forward and rested his hands on the table. "Stockbridge seems to be going a lot more than the extra mile here. Am I allowed to know why?"

She glanced up from the things scattered on the polished wooden expanse. Did she see jealousy in Blake's face? And why did it please her? "He thinks he owes me. His kid was having problems when we first met. I kind of helped out."

She handed Blake a corporate Visa card. "Here. Charges go to EnviroCon. Sign it William Cranford." She caught herself before she looked him in the eye. "Don't abuse it." She tucked the second one in the pocket of her slacks.

"Are you ready to talk to me yet?" Blake sat down across the table again, his eyes narrowed. There was an edginess to his tone, one she hadn't heard before.

"About what?"

"Don't play games. Start anywhere. Maybe with who we are, how I'm supposed to act, where all this cloak and dagger stuff is coming from. I figure pretty soon you'll be telling me EnviroCon is a front for one of the government alphabet agencies."

"No. It's exactly what it claims to be. Stockbridge is CEO and he has a few connections, but he's not doing anything shady. Bill Cranford works for him, pretty much the same way I do. I've never met him, but according to Stockbridge, at the moment he and Emily are on vacation, sailing all over the Caribbean. The main thing is they've never been on a project in Oregon before. EnviroCon has three possible new ones coming up and it's normal for them to bring in potential consultants for site visits, discussing the scope of work, meetings with brass, should anyone wonder what Bill and Emily are doing here. But the biggie is we now have credit cards. And ID—more or less."

She showed him an EnviroCon ID card with his name on it. "I've got one, too, even though Emily doesn't work for EnviroCon. Let's hope nobody checks that deep. We'll need to add photos—laminating would be good, too. Why don't you find a phone book and see if there's someplace nearby that does passport photos." She pulled open the big manila envelope and dumped stacks of bills on the table. "Four thousand cash advance. I believe I owe you about three hundred, plus whatever you think you'll need."

When Blake's hand reached for the money, she raised her gaze. He took several hundred dollars, stuck it in his wallet and went to the couch. "Your eyes are green.

Too much," he muttered. "I'm in a fucking James Bond movie. Too fucking much."

"Enough is all I'm asking." She opened the file folders and stared at EnviroCon's Camp Getaway records. There had to be an answer in there.

* * * * *

Blake turned away from the television and watched Kelli at the computer, amazed at how she could focus on the screen for so long. Watching her gave him eyestrain. She'd been at it for hours. Even from his vantage point across the room, he saw the fatigue and frustration. She clicked, took notes, referred to her files. Every once in a while the printer would whirr and she'd pull pages out, make more notes and stack them in piles. He stepped behind her chair and rubbed her neck. Her scent wafted up to him and he longed to bury his face into her hair. He pushed the thought away, accepting it as progress when she didn't jump at his touch.

"Time for a break," he whispered in her ear. "You're burning out."

She lowered her head, giving him clearer access to her shoulders. "You're probably right. I'm missing something."

When she ran her fingers through her hair, he saw the rings on her left hand and another one on her thumb. He touched it and she spun around, as though he'd given her an electric shock. She yanked it off her hand and thrust it at him.

"I forgot. I'm not sure it'll fit, but if it does ... well, we're supposed to be married."

He accepted the simple gold band. When it fit over his knuckle, he saw her eyes tear up. "Stockbridge didn't send this, did he? It was ... your husband's."

She wiped her eyes, but couldn't wipe away the blush. "I need to work. I'm good for a while longer."

"I'm not, and the passport photo place closes in an hour. Let's get that done, and we can have a drink at the bar in the hotel. Dinner, too, unless you're afraid to be out in public too long. I'm going stir-crazy in here."

"I guess so."

He took her hand and touched her rings. Then his. "I know this is tough." She looked so vulnerable, so lost, he'd pulled her against his chest before he realized what he'd done.

She stayed there for a long moment and he felt their heartbeats pulsing in rhythm. When she broke away, he gave her hands one last squeeze.

He had to clear his throat before he could speak. "We'd better get going."

"Tell me what you found," Blake said over drinks at the hotel bar. He let himself enjoy Kelli as Emily. She dressed—well, none of those overalls, baggy sweats and

flannel shirts. Thinking of the utilitarian cotton undergarments he'd seen in her dresser at Camp Getaway, he wondered if her new image extended below the surface. He chided himself for being so crude, but he'd caught her looking at him every once in a while and there was something in her eyes. Or should he chalk it up to the rush of surviving a life-or-death situation?

"Not nearly enough." She crumpled a cocktail napkin. "Camp Getaway's been planned for years. Thornton's a philanthropist—he's backed half a dozen projects geared toward inner city kids. But he's got connections to all sorts of companies, corporations, foundations, you name it—it's going to take a lot longer to see if there's any way to connect him to Robert. So far, he's exactly what he seems to be."

She was having white wine, but spent more time spinning her glass than drinking. Kelli seemed totally in control of everything except taking care of her own personal needs. A blind man could see the headache behind her eyes.

"You want to order something to eat?" When she shrugged, he motioned to the bartender for a menu. What would Bill Cranford like? Or, more appropriately, what would Emily Cranford eat? "An order of crab rangoon, please."

He swiveled his stool to face her. "Okay, Sweetheart. I forgot to ask you before. How long have we been married? Do we have kids?"

Her eyes twinkled and The Shake came back. "Eleven years. Two girls. Amanda and Angela."

He raised his eyebrows. "For real?" When she didn't answer, he followed her gaze to the television above the bar. Although the sound was muted, the caption said, *Murder in the National Forest* and there was a formal photograph of Park Ranger Doug Peterson in uniform, smiling. Kelli's face lost its color.

Shit. He'd figured Peterson was dead from the way Scumbag had talked, but he hadn't mentioned it to Kelli. He gripped her elbow to steady her, but she squirmed away and bolted.

Chapter Eleven

Kelli's hands shook as she fumbled with the key card for their suite. When the green light flashed, she shoved the heavy door open and raced for the TV remote. Stopping at Headline News, she paced, waiting for the story to cycle back. Doug Peterson was dead. She remembered Scumbag wearing the soiled uniform. The uniform she'd crammed into Blake's lockbox. Blood, not mud. She remembered the baseball cap in the Park Service truck. Decker must have killed Doug Peterson.

The door opened. Blake didn't speak, simply took her hand and led her to the couch. He dropped a small Styrofoam box on the coffee table. Smells of grease and seafood brought a wave of nausea and she pushed the box away. "Can't."

He got up and took it to the small refrigerator. When he came back, he handed

her a tumbler. "Some brandy might help."

Her hands shook, but she managed to get the glass to her lips and take a swallow. It burned all the way down and her eyes watered, but she felt a little calmer. Together, they waited out a blur of news stories until Doug Peterson's face stared at her again. She strained to listen, to make the words penetrate the buzzing in her head.

Doug's body—his naked body—had been discovered this afternoon by a group of hikers who had been clearing debris left by Saturday's storm. The medical examiner estimated he'd been dead since then. The exact cause of death had yet to be determined. Animals had interfered with the integrity of the body. Kelli swallowed.

"Easy," Blake whispered.

Scumbag's picture flashed on the screen, with a booking photo identifying him as Sanford "Sandman" McGregor. The newscaster's dispassionate voice said McGregor was suspected of Doug Peterson's murder and an assault on a local merchant.

She gasped when Hank's wizened face appeared, with a *General Store Owner Henry Digby* caption below it, tape footage dated the day Scumbag had attacked her. Hank was standing in front of his store with a bandage on his forehead.

A newscaster's arm held a microphone to Hank's face. "He came in wanting to find that new kids' camp they're building near the park. When I asked why, he got mad. It takes more than a whack with a stick to get past my hard head, though."

Hank's voice faded and a man identified as a deputy sheriff came on screen. "There appeared to be signs of a struggle at Camp Getaway, a joint effort of philanthropist Phillip Thornton and Spokane-based EnviroCon. Two employees working on the project are missing. We are continuing to explore all avenues in our investigation."

A phone number to call with any information was superimposed on McGregor's picture and the news moved on to the next story.

"They're not likely to release much to the public at this point," Blake said.

Cold sweat trickled down her back. "He ... he must have killed Doug right before he came for me."

The idea he was cold-blooded enough to murder someone and carry on a friendly conversation kicked her in the gut. Her head swam and her stomach roiled. Was she responsible for Doug Peterson's death? She'd accepted the burden of Robert—he'd died by her own hand. But Doug had been a dedicated ranger, committed to nothing more than protecting what he considered his land. Anger overpowered her nausea. She pushed away from Blake and went to her computer.

Blake followed and stood behind her. "What are you doing?"

"I've got a name for Scumbag. I'm going to find out everything there is to know about him and see why he was looking for me—you—us."

"Can you do that? Isn't that information all classified, or secure, or whatever?"

She turned and gave him a long, hard stare. "You're Blake Allan Windsor. Your

thirty-sixth birthday was April seventh. You own a sixty-one Corvette. You graduated from Central High twenty-fifth in a class of two hundred. Excellent credit rating, don't carry balances on your cards. Payments on your Chicago apartment are deducted from your checking account on the fourth of every month and for that kind of money, it's probably a very nice place."

"Condo, to be technical, but go on."

She shrugged. "You've never been married. One brother. Your father died eight years ago. You went to your junior prom with someone named Bambi." She grimaced. "Bambi. Sheesh, Windsor—and I'll bet you scored, too. Your choice in condoms is ___"

"Enough." He ran his fingers through his hair. "I don't suppose you Googled all that?"

"Only the high school yearbook stuff. You were cute. Had to hack for the rest."

"Don't tell me you could find out what brand of—"

She had to laugh. "No, I saw them in your bathroom kit."

"Of course you did."

Was it annoyance she saw in his face? She pressed forward. "Seriously, Windsor. I looked at the so-called dossier Hollingsworth gave you. If he paid anyone to dig that out, he was robbed. All it said about me as Casey was that I worked with computers. Ever hear of CompSecure?"

"No. Some computer security company? You worked for them?"

She shook her head in amusement. Blake smiled back.

"Windsor, I *was* CompSecure. I designed security systems for a lot of the big players out there. I'd tell you who, but I'd have to kill you." She felt her face get hot, then cold.

Little black specks swam in her peripheral vision like gnats. "Oh, God, I didn't mean that—how could I say something like that after what just happened?"

Blake took her ice-cold hands in his warm ones. "Hey, it's okay. Those clichés pop out and I know you didn't mean to belittle Peterson's death." He rubbed her hands between his. "I'm thinking it's going to be room service for dinner."

"Not hungry."

"That's not the issue. You'll eat. The only question is, do you order or leave it to me?"

* * * * *

Blake set the tray of dishes in the hall outside the door and returned to the couch. Kelli had eaten a bowl of soup and half a portion of salmon while some computer program ran. Swallowing his frustration at not being able to help, he deferred to her request that he stay out of sight and alternated his attention between her and the

television set. Most of the time she stared at the monitor, sometimes chiding, chastising, or praising the readouts as screens blinked in and out while he tried to watch television. She'd looked at him and smiled once or twice, but he felt about as useful as one of the throw pillows. He yawned. Kelli'd gotten her second—or was it her third?—wind and was muttering to the computer again.

"Oh, no you don't. Don't mess with me, baby. That's better. Right."

He stretched out. After giving up on *Celebrity Poker*, he went back to a *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* marathon, always good for a laugh. Thom and Carson were trying to make over some poor slob when he heard a choking noise from the desk and Kelli dashed past him to the bathroom. The door slammed, but he could hear her being wretchedly ill. He looked toward the closed door, then crossed to the desk to see what had upset her. He was fairly certain it hadn't been the salmon.

When he saw the display his own stomach churned. Rape. Assault. Manslaughter. More rape. Murder two. Scumbag liked to take his time with his victims. Cut them. He'd been arrested numerous times, in and out of prison on lesser charges. Apparently he had some damn good lawyers. A block of ice settled in his belly when he pictured what could have happened to Kelli.

He'd thought the guy was a two-bit punk. He cursed his stupidity. He should never have left the SOB. They should have tossed him in the back of the pickup and dropped him in front of a police station. He heard the bathroom door open and a white and shaky Kelli emerged. She met his gaze, then straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"Sorry. I freaked." She headed back to the computer and pulled the chair out.

He put his hand on hers. "Do what you have to do to shut this machine off. You're going to bed."

He saw her glance at her watch and checked his own. After eleven. Defiance sparked in her eyes, followed by resignation.

"You might try asking once in a while, instead of commanding." She clicked the mouse a few times and he watched the screen fade, then go black.

"Commanding? Me? Wait an effing minute. I've taken your pills, flooded myself with your fluids, sat around like an idiot while you tell me who I am, where I can and can't go, what I can and can't say. Your turn to listen to me."

She rubbed her temples. "You're right. I'm sorry. I'm not used to having anyone around."

He rested his hands on her shoulders. "Like white on rice."

She nodded and gave him a feeble imitation of The Shake.

"You ought to watch that," he said.

"What?"

"You do this—thing—with your head. You shake it, roll your eyes. It's cute, but it's very Kelli. Not that anyone would notice, but it was probably Casey, too."

She raised her eyebrows. "Thanks. I'll be more careful."

"I'll miss it." He ran his finger along her jaw. "Go to bed. Get some sleep."

She got to the bedroom door before she turned around. "Blake?" He barely heard her.

"Hmm?"

"The couch ... You don't need to ... I don't think I want to be alone."

His heart did a stutter step. "Are you sure?"

She nodded. "We're married, remember?" She gave him a crooked smile. "And I was married long enough to know two people can share a bed and not do anything but sleep."

He pushed back his disappointment. "Sleep it is, then. Give me a couple of minutes." He headed to his bathroom. While he brushed his teeth, he stared at the condoms in his kit. He picked one up. After all, Kelli knew all about them. She may have said all she wanted was sleep, but something more might give both of them release from the mess they were in.

He rinsed his mouth and tiptoed into the bedroom. Kelli was curled into a tight ball at the edge of one side. If it were possible to take up any less room in a bed, he couldn't imagine it. She'd left the lamp on his side on. He pulled back the covers and slid the condom into the nightstand drawer. No need to appear too obvious. He turned off the lamp and got into bed.

Kelli tossed and turned, making tiny whimpering noises. He worked his way across the king-sized bed and touched her shoulder. "It's okay. You're dreaming."

"Hold me?" Her voice quavered. "He was going to kill me. I can't make the pictures go away."

He drew her against him. "I know, I know. It's all right. I'm here."

"Like white on rice?"

"You got it." He nuzzled her hair, inhaling her scent. He told himself to take it easy. She'd been reliving two sexual traumas. She needed to feel safe with him. He planted gentle kisses on the back of her neck and caressed her back with lazy strokes.

His fingers moved along her shoulder, down the back of her arm. She sighed and snuggled closer, pressing her body against his. He followed the contour of her body to the curve at her waist. Her shirt had crept up and he ventured over her hip, down the side of her thigh, still keeping his touch light. Her breathing steadied and he let her relax, enjoying the feel of her skin, smooth and warm beneath his hand.

He was about to move his hands to her front when he felt her go dead weight. He didn't know whether to be glad she was able to relax so completely in his presence, or crushed she was immune to his seductive prowess. He decided to go with the former, staring at the ceiling, waiting for things to settle so he could sleep.

Dawn was thinning the shadows in the room when Blake discovered the erotic

dream he was having wasn't completely a dream. Kelli's arm was draped across his chest and her leg was nestled between his thighs. His brain lectured him about her vulnerability, but it wasn't his brain responding. When he tried to move away, she grabbed him tighter. Soft, warm, still smelling like soap and shampoo. Her hands wandered down his chest. He sucked in his belly. Her hair, feather light, brushed his neck. She nestled tighter against him.

Relax and enjoy the moment? No, idiot. Use the brain above your neck. She's dreaming. Probably of her late husband. Wake her. Sure. In a minute. Wouldn't want to startle her.

Her fingers, moving lower, grazed the edge of the bandage on his midsection. Paused. Jerked away. Her leg disappeared from between his. Her eyes opened.

"Shit." She flopped over onto her back.

"Not the word a guy likes to hear under the circumstances."

"God, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it. I must have been dreaming."

Didn't mean it. Of course not. He turned onto his back, realizing too late that her eyes were fixed on the tenting of the sheet at his groin.

Her eyes met his, then looked away. "Well, I guess you're not gay."

He sat bolt upright. "What made you think—? Hey, lots of straights watch *Queer Eye*. It's funny."

Kelli buried her face in her hands. "I think I'd like to wait until my brain catches up to my mouth."

God, she was cute when she was embarrassed. Which did nothing for his reaction. He found the blanket and covered himself further. "No way. Tell me what you were thinking. You're my wife, after all. No secrets."

With a deep sigh, she turned on one side, propped up on her elbow. "When Stockbridge told me you were coming, he said you were a perfect gentleman. And then I saw you and you were gorgeous, so I assumed ... because of what happened with Robert ... It was easier to deal with a man so close if I didn't think he'd ... you know."

"I understand."

"I guess when you were hurt, maternal instinct kicked in and then ... I don't know. You rescued me, somewhere we became a team and I felt comfortable—or something."

"Or something." He leaned a fraction closer. She didn't back away, but she didn't move in, either. He waited. She stared at him and he saw the half-awake dreaminess fade as she came more fully awake. He swallowed his frustration when her features turned to all business.

She pulled back the covers. "It's six-thirty. I don't know about you, but I'm not going to get back to sleep." She climbed out of bed and headed for the bathroom. At

the doorway, she looked over her shoulder. "Want to go downstairs and try to have breakfast like two ordinary people?"

Chapter Twelve

Kelli felt anything but ordinary during breakfast. Half asleep or not, she had come on to Blake. Now, they sat across the table from each other in the hotel coffee shop. Whenever he looked up from his eggs, she knew his eyes could see right into her thoughts and he'd know she'd been dreaming—of him. Then they both got busy eating for a while, until one looked up and it started all over again.

She spread an English muffin with strawberry jam and knew her face must be the same color.

"It was a normal, human reaction," Blake said to his plate. "Nothing either of us needs to be ashamed of."

"Right. Didn't mean anything. We were asleep." The trouble was, although the embarrassment was fading, there was another feeling building, one low in her belly. A tingling she hadn't felt in a long time. One she wasn't sure she wanted to be feeling.

Stop. He'd saved her life and she was grateful. Like falling in love with your doctor. Shit, what was she thinking? This was not falling in love. Falling in love was not an option. This was two people thrust together with a problem to solve. Just because one of them was drop-dead gorgeous didn't make a difference. And, speaking of problems, it was time to get back to work. She waved to the waiter for the check.

"All right," Kelli said when they were back in the room. She'd spread her files and notes along the conference table. "We need to start from scratch. Look at everything. See what fits where. I can't get over the feeling I'm missing something important. That I've made a huge leap based on a false assumption."

"So, what do we have?" Blake sat at the opposite end of the table, picking up papers, glancing at them and putting them back down.

"Hollingsworth sent you to see if I was Casey Wallace. But he didn't tell you why?"

"No. And even his assistant didn't know where I was, which is unheard of. She's never out of the loop."

She chewed on her pen. "So, we can assume this is personal. Only trouble with that hypothesis is I don't know Dwight Hollingsworth. But he seems to think he knows Casey."

She started making a chart, putting Casey in the center. "Then there's Thornton. He's the money behind the project. According to Stockbridge, Thornton pushed up the schedule and had you hired. But your cover story came from Hollingsworth, right?"

"Yes. Dwight's in Chicago and I was working in Seattle at the time, convenient enough to Spokane and EnviroCon. I figured he either had a thing for Casey Wallace,

or she had something he wanted."

"Wait." She went to the desk, picked up her cell phone and punched in Jack's number.

"Hey, Kiddo," Stockbridge said. "Are you all right? I saw the news. I was going to come down—discuss the project, you know."

"I think it's better if you don't. Not that I think someone's watching you, but if they are, they might follow and recognize us."

"You let me know what I can do."

"You said Thornton called and recommended Windsor—gave you the references. Did you speak to him personally?"

After a moment, Stockbridge spoke. "No, now that you mention it, the call came from his assistant."

"Thanks. I think. Do you know the assistant's name?"

"Sorry. My secretary took care of it. I checked Windsor's references myself, but no, I never spoke directly to Thornton."

"Thanks. I'll keep you posted." She ended the call and wandered to the window, trying to sort through the new information.

Blake gave her a questioning look when she came to the table again. "Good? Bad? Helpful?"

"Well, since Stockbridge never spoke to Thornton, it weakens Thornton's connection to Hollingsworth. It's possible Hollingsworth was pretending to be working for Thornton." She wrote "Thornton" on her chart with a big question mark next to it.

"Who's next?"

"Scumbag, I suppose. He was going to kill us, right?"

Blake's eyes grabbed her again, but she kept her gaze on his when he answered. "I think so."

"Why? Hollingsworth didn't send you to kill me, did he?"

"Of course not. Dwight told me to see if I could connect you to Casey. Period."

"Which you didn't—at least as far as Hollingsworth knows, right?"

"Right."

"So you think Hollingsworth got tired of waiting for you to answer and sent McGregor—Scumbag—to eliminate the problem, right or wrong? Or maybe he got his answer from another source? And then sent Scumbag?"

Blake rubbed his eyes and massaged his temples. "You're asking the wrong person. I'm no detective. I only read three Sherlock Holmes stories."

"Well, do you think Scumbag was going to go after you, too?"

"Sweetheart, I'm clueless. I know I've pissed off some people, but I was always representing Hollingsworth. I don't think anyone would be coming after me personally."

She wrote Blake's name on the chart, but in smaller letters and off in a corner. "Okay. Robert's turn. All I can think of is someone tied Casey to Robert and Kelli to

Casey." She looked at Blake, who was pacing now. "Does that make sense to you?"

"You mean Hollingsworth has been trying to avenge Robert's death?"

"If not him, who? He's the one who put Casey and Kelli together."

"I need coffee."

"Stop changing the subject. Where's the file from Hollingsworth?"

"To your right."

Her hand touched the envelope, then stopped. "Blast it, I'm still not thinking straight." She looked at Blake. "Scumbag's knife and clothes. I left them the lockbox. Did you move them?"

"No—I figured they were safe there. At the time, I wasn't thinking straight myself, but it seemed smarter not to be carrying evidence."

Kelli grabbed the cell phone and punched Stockbridge's number. "Where's the truck?" she asked as soon as he answered.

"Some people say hello first, you know."

"Sorry. Hello."

Stockbridge chuckled. "Had someone pick it up. It's where it belongs, here, in the fleet. Left you a car in its place."

"Did you open the lockbox?"

"No. Windsor still has the key. What's the problem?"

"The park ranger who was killed—I think the murder weapon is in there."

Blake grabbed the phone from Kelli. "Mr. Stockbridge? Blake Windsor. About that knife—"

Chapter Thirteen

Blake hung up the phone and looked at Kelli. "I know you said you trusted Stockbridge with your life. I think I just put a little of mine into his hands. My prints will be on that knife, too."

"Jack went along with it? He's not going to turn the stuff over to the cops?"

"He said as far as he was concerned, this conversation never took place and he has no reason to open the lockbox until someone else needs it."

Kelli looked at him, and her green eyes still caught him by surprise.

"But the knife could help convict Scumbag," she said. Her voice hadn't changed, but he wouldn't be surprised to wake up one morning and hear a new accent. "Without the weapon, and after all that rain, there's not going to be much forensic evidence to tie him to Peterson's murder. You could put that creep back in prison."

"I'm not ready to trust the legal system. For now, the cops will have to be looking for a knife they're not going to find. Let's deal with one complication at a time."

"Did they say Peterson's body had been . . . mutilated? Scumbag's signature?"

Blake considered the new reports. "I don't think so, but they might be withholding

that piece of information."

Kelli turned back to the computer. She worked with a single-minded efficiency, yet from the way her fingers pounded the keys and clenched into fists while she waited for the computer to do something, there was frustration and pain underneath. He didn't know which bothered him more—the ache in his chest or the pull in his loins. What was it about her that made him want her? Need her? This wasn't lust. What he felt was new.

He had to get out before he either trashed the room or tried to take her on that shiny conference table. The thought of taking advantage of her disgusted him. He wasn't in the habit of forcing himself on women. He wasn't in the habit of wanting women like Kelli, and that thought confused him. "Enough. I can't stay here any longer. I'm going to the airport to bring back whatever car Stockbridge left for us."

The clicking stopped, but she didn't turn around. He knew she was considering all the options. Would he come back? Did she care? She was busy trying to save her own skin. How much was she doing to save his, or was she only making sure he wasn't creating a new threat? He saw her shoulders rise, then fall. Heard a deep breath exhaled.

"Keys and parking location are in the envelope on the table. I've got the confirmation e-mail saying you—Bill Cranford—reported your license lost and a temporary is on the way. Hang on." She picked up the mouse, clicked some more and the printer on the desk hummed. "Memorize the address."

He pocketed the envelope and grabbed the page that came out of the printer. "This says I'm five-ten and have brown hair."

"Then don't get stopped. If you do, don't stand up. Keep your cap on. Otherwise, I guess you dyed your hair since the license was issued, right?"

"Yeah. Right." He made a mental note to follow every traffic rule on the drive. Kelli might be able to slip in and out of identities like she changed her underwear, but his repertoire was limited to handyman or corporate negotiator. He grabbed his windbreaker, checked to make sure the watch cap was still in the pocket and left her, still immersed in her work.

He clenched his fists in his pockets while he rode the elevator to the lobby and asked the bellman to call a cab. On the drive, the pain in his stomach wasn't due to a knife wound. Watching Kelli transfixed by her computer monitor, visiting websites, checking databases he was damn sure you couldn't Google, made him feel utterly helpless. And he sure as hell wanted to help her.

At the airport, he paid the cabbie and walked into the terminal, not that the cabbie, or anyone else would notice—or care—where he went. But, to maintain his cover, he mingled with the crowd. Airport protocol was something familiar. Here, he could walk the walk. After a minute or two, with a purposeful stride, he exited the terminal and made his way to the parking place Stockbridge had written down. Where

the truck had been sat a dark green Bonneville. He swallowed his disappointment. Nice grandfather car. Blend in. But good God, he missed his 'Vette.

He pointed the Bonneville out of the airport and toward the hotel. He kept an eye on the rearview mirror, not sure how to tell if he was being followed. Almost all the cars leaving the airport hit the interstate. Half would go one way, half the other, but there were always packs of cars on the highway. Positions would shift, but it wasn't unusual to have the same car behind you for miles. His heart rate picked up a little when the car behind him exited when he did, but shit, this was the downtown exit. A glance in the mirror told him five cars had exited. He turned left two blocks before the hotel. Nobody followed. Caution, yes, but enough of this paranoia. Kelli was in charge of that department.

He drove around the block and into the rear entrance to the hotel parking lot. As soon as he locked the car and looked toward the hotel entrance, the tension returned. Kelli was undoubtedly still in the room clicking away, probably had barely noticed his absence. Could he spend the rest of the afternoon sitting there, watching her work, without going crazy? He turned around. Across the parking lot was a mall. Maybe if he had a book to read or a movie to watch, he'd feel less like a useless appendage. He strode across the asphalt and wandered into the shopping center.

Not far from the entrance, the aroma of pizza sucker-punched him. He strolled into the small restaurant and slid into a booth at the back. When the waitress handed him a menu, he barely glanced at it. No doubt Kelli would have forgotten about eating. All of a sudden, useless or not, he wanted nothing more than to be sitting on the couch while she worked, even if she didn't know he was there. He ordered a large-with-everything, to go.

When his pizza was ready, he picked up the box, restraining himself from eating a slice before he got back to the room. At the hotel, waiting for the elevator, he glanced toward the registration desk where a man in a business suit was leaning on the counter, talking to one of the clerks. Her face showed something between amusement and contempt, and Blake couldn't help trying to eavesdrop. Good lord, had the guy actually said, "What's a good-looking gal like you doing working here?" He cringed in embarrassment for the entire male population. If the man said, "What's your sign?" Blake swore he'd go over and slug the idiot.

He drummed his fingers on the pizza box and looked up at the elevator display. Three of the cars were going up and the fourth was on the nineteenth floor. He kept his back to the desk, but listened to see if the man had made any progress with the clerk.

"I'm sorry, sir. We don't give out room numbers, but I'll be happy to ring the room if you'll give me the guest's name."

"That's my problem," the man said, his voice a slow drawl. "I forgot to write it down. I know EnviroCon booked the room, and I have to deliver something in person. My job's on the line, if you get my drift."

Blake froze. Barely turning, he studied the man at the counter. The moustache was gone, the hair was a buzz-cut, but it was definitely Scumbag. Blake grabbed his phone. He fumbled through his pockets. Crap. Where was the damn paper with all those new cell phone numbers? He scanned the lobby.

Nearby, on a small table, sat a house phone. Keeping his stride casual, Blake ambled over. He set down the pizza, grabbed the receiver and punched the number for their room. From his vantage point, he saw Scumbag walk across the lobby, then lodge himself into an easy chair near the elevator. Scumbag lifted a newspaper in front of his face, but Blake doubted the man was reading.

The phone rang for the fourth time, then kicked into the hotel's automatic voicemail system. Crap. The phone had to be right beside her. Kelli never left the desk. Maybe she was in the john. He clicked off. Scumbag had put down the paper and was talking to a different desk clerk. Blake thought he recognized her as the blonde on duty when they'd checked in. He gripped the phone and dialed again.

Shit, Kelli. Pick up the effing phone.

* * * * *

Kelli paced the hotel room, heart beating double-time, even with the hospital's mellow hold music playing through her cell phone. Her pulse had skyrocketed when a police detective answered the phone in Stockbridge's office, and it hadn't slowed.

Where was Windsor? She looked at the other two cell phones. Which number had he taken? The room phone rang. She was about to pick up when the music in her ear stopped and a female voice came on the line.

The nurse barely had a chance to say hello before Kelli interrupted. "What happened to Jack Stockbridge? I need to speak to him."

"I'm sorry, but until he's assigned a room, he can't get calls."

"How is he? Is he hurt? What happened?"

"I'm not at liberty to say. You can call back once he's in a room."

"Yes, I heard you the first time. When will that be?"

"I can't say, ma'am. Maybe an hour. Maybe two."

She managed a curt thank you and mashed her thumb on the button to disconnect. Jack's wife might know. She went to the bedroom for her own cell phone and sank onto the bed while she searched for Margaret's number. The room phone rang again and she leaned over to the nightstand to answer.

As soon as she heard Blake's voice, she cut him off. "Where the hell have you been? Someone broke into Stockbridge's office and attacked him. He's in the hospital. We have to—"

"Stop. Listen. Get out. Now. Take the stairs. Scumbag's here. I'll meet you."

Without thinking, she grabbed her gym bag and hoisted it over her shoulder. She eased the door open, checking to make sure the hallway was clear. Lighted red exit signs led her to the stairwell and she shoved open the heavy door.

Fingertips skimming the handrail, the bag thumping against her back, she allowed a brief curse at being on the twentieth floor and another at being Emily in leather pumps, not Kelli in hiking boots or sneakers. After that, there was nothing but thoughts of *down* and *don't slip*. Her breathing turned ragged. Her thighs ached. After seven flights, she stopped to switch the bag to her other shoulder and gasped for air. Her vision blurred and she wiped her eyes, surprised to find they were wet with tears. She took one shaky breath and resumed her frantic descent.

Three flights later, the sound of footfalls bounding up the stairwell set her heart racing even faster. Dry-mouthed, she zipped open the gym bag and searched for the revolver. Before her fingers found it, a man's form rounded the landing.

"Easy, Sweetheart. It's me. Come on."

Her brain said she could relax, but her body was still pumping adrenaline like a geyser. Blake eased the bag from her shoulder and gave her hands a squeeze. The shadowy stairwell couldn't disguise the relief she saw spread over his face. Her eyes met his and she allowed herself to be dragged in.

"Wait," she whispered. Using his arms for support, she pulled off her shoes. "Okay."

She focused on his back, on the bag bouncing with each step. His breathing was labored. This couldn't be good for him, but she matched his pace, barely noticing the floor numbers as they passed each landing.

When he stopped midway down a flight, she almost ran into him. "What?" she asked.

"Nearly at the lobby." He took a few deep breaths. "Car. Green Bonneville. Other side of the hotel. Second or third row, I think. Near a planter." He fished a set of keys out of his pocket.

A tendril of fear snaked through her insides. "Aren't you coming?"

"I'll follow. Meet me around back, by the convention center loading docks."

"But—"

"He's looking for two people. He's not expecting a short-haired redhead. A classy-looking, short-haired redhead." He smiled, but there was worry in his eyes. "You can do it. You've been on top of everything so far."

Right now, she didn't think she could take another step. She wanted to stand in the lobby and scream she was Casey Wallace, she'd killed a man and beg the police to take her away. Put an end to all this running. Instead, she squeezed her feet back into the Emily shoes and mustered a smile. "Sure."

When she took the keys, he didn't release his hold on them and they walked down the last flight of stairs with his warm hand gripping her icy one. His touch

centered her, and some of her despair slid away.

They stopped at the door to the lobby level. Blake said, "I'll be there." He leaned down and brushed his lips against her forehead. "Like white on rice."

She lifted her face to his. His eyes reflected confidence and she stood on tiptoe, taking strength from him. She pressed her lips against his mouth. "For luck." She fluffed her hair, straightened her blouse, and put what she hoped was an expression of confident nonchalance on her face.

He held the door open for her. "If I'm not out in five minutes, don't wait."

She peered around the doorway. The stairwell was across the lobby from the elevators, flanked by two large potted plants. She stepped between them and swept her eyes around the seating areas, afraid to let her gaze linger for more than a second. She could do this. Never mind the sweaty palms or a mouth that couldn't work up the spit to swallow.

With the warmth of Blake's lips lingering on hers, she summoned Emily's confidence, lifted her chin and moved into the lobby. She braved another look around. No Scumbag. With a pretense of indifference, despite the thudding of her heart against her rib cage, she strolled toward the side entrance, past the small business center and a shop window displaying golf and fishing equipment. Using the glass's reflection, she checked behind her. Still no sign of him. Much as her brain screamed, "Run," she managed to control her pace for the last yards to the door.

Once outside, she strode into the parking area, using vans and SUVs for cover. Planters marked the center of each row. She followed them until she found the Bonneville.

Her heartbeat had steadied. She started the car and drove around the lot once before pulling up to the convention entrance. No bellmen waited here. Blake stepped out from behind a dumpster. She unlocked the doors and he tossed the gym bag on the backseat. "I think we made it."

He leaned into the car. "I'll drive."

"No. Get in." She waited long enough for him to close his door and then sped away. She saw him grab his cell phone and make a call, his face turned away and his voice low.

"Who did you call?"

"Hotel Security. An anonymous tip that a felon was in the hotel."

"You think they'll catch him?"

"I sure as hell hope so."

She tried to remain confident but after about ten minutes, when they'd reached the outskirts of town, she felt her control falling away like a discarded winter coat. She searched for a place to pull over and spotted a city park. The parking lot was almost empty, and she stopped the Bonneville under a large oak tree.

"I can't do this anymore." She lifted her hands from the wheel and stared at them.

The trembling flowed downward until her feet tapped uncontrollably on the floor.

She stared out the windshield. Two young children played on a swing set and her world shrank to the hypnotic back-and-forth of the swings. Some of her quaking stopped and she became aware Blake was standing beside the car on her side. He opened the door.

"You're all right," he said. "Come with me."

She allowed him to ease her from the car, to put his arm around her waist and guide her to a picnic table under a sprawling oak tree. He sat down and she leaned into his chest. "Sorry," she said. "I lost it for a minute."

"I can't believe you're as together as you are. Look." He held out his arms and his hands twitched. "You're not the only one."

"I can't think anymore. My brain's going a mile a minute, but it's just spinning. Nothing's connecting."

Blake rested his forearms on his thighs, his hands clasped between his knees.

She lowered herself to the bench. They sat, hip to hip, legs touching and her shivering stopped, steadied by his presence. "Jack is in the hospital," she said. "I should call."

Without looking, she sensed his nod of approval. Scrolling through her list of called numbers, she found the hospital's entry and dialed. Blake's arm was around her shoulder, and she could smell his scent intermingled with the woodsy aroma of the park while she waited for Jack to answer.

"I'm fine, Kiddo." Jack's voice put some of her fears to rest. "The doctor insists I hang around for a bit, but I'm out of here tomorrow."

"What happened?"

"I don't know much. My secretary was on a break, I was working on my computer, so my back was to the door. You know, you really do see stars when someone hits you on the head. I always thought it was only a cartoon image. Anyway, it was lights out, and when I came to, the office was a mess and he was gone."

"He found us," she said softly, "but I think we're safe. Blake called the authorities."

"You any closer to solving your problem?"

She heard the hesitation between his words and envisioned the pain. Because of her. Knots formed in her stomach. Blake must have felt her tighten, because his hand kneaded her shoulder. She couldn't meet his eyes. She focused on a jay perched in the tree above them. "If they've got him in custody, I might have time to figure out who sent him and why."

"Call anytime. Keep me posted."

"How's Stockbridge?" Blake asked after she disconnected.

"Says he's fine, but they're keeping him overnight." Nothing she could do kept her anger in check. "They don't keep you overnight for a bump on the head. Something

more happened, but he wouldn't say. He's on meds—I could hear it in his voice."

"He doesn't want to worry you, I'm sure."

"Yeah, well that was a major failure, because now I'm more worried not knowing." Unable to contain the emotional overload, she got up and started walking. Her speed increased until she was running blindly down a path behind the picnic area.

Chapter Fourteen

Blake waited a moment, then jogged after Kelli, giving her time to work off some of her pent-up frenzy. The sun-dappled path twisted through a stand of oak and pines, and he hoped the natural environment would comfort her. His own breathing was rough, far more than the pace warranted. He had some pent-up emotions of his own to work off.

When she slowed to a walk, he fell in step beside her. Neither spoke. Occasional birdsong rang over the crunching of leaves and fallen twigs beneath their feet, but otherwise their breathing, slowing with their pace, made the only sound. At a wide spot in the path, Kelli stopped and leaned against a pine tree, her arms crossed over her chest.

He jammed his fists into his windbreaker's pockets. Their eyes met, averted, caught again. Hers moved down his body, then up, then locked on his. The tension between them wasn't fear anymore, and he knew she knew it. Her hands dropped to her sides.

"Umm . . ." was all he could get past his throat.

"You got that right," she said. Her voice had a raw huskiness to it and then her hands were behind his neck. She drew him toward her, pulling on his head until he bent enough for their lips to meet. Her kiss was hot, needy, to the point of desperation. Tongues probed, tasted, sought comfort. In a swift move, he reversed their positions. With the tree behind him for support, he pulled Kelli's legs up and around his hips.

Her hands fisted in his hair, her breasts pressed against his chest, her legs gripped him as if she needed to be inside his skin. He pulled her closer, his hands cupping her bottom. She slid her hands inside his windbreaker, embracing him with a heat that shot to his toes. In the gaps between kisses, she moaned. Or did he? When her body writhed against his erection, she nearly sent him over the edge.

Digging for restraint, he leaned away and gently lowered Kelli to the ground. Pressed his finger to her lips, swollen with their kisses. Waited for his breathing to slow.

When it did, he cradled her face so she had to look at him. "This isn't real, Kelli. I can't take advantage. I can't deal with hurting you, and no matter what you think now, you'll regret this later. I can't . . ." He choked out the last words, kissed her forehead and turned away. "I'll wait for you in the car."

He kept his eyes fixed on the ground in front of him as he retraced his steps along the path, wishing he could will the pain of his arousal away. No, that he understood. That he could deal with. The ache in his chest was far more debilitating. Would he have stopped if they'd not been on a public pathway in broad daylight? What if they'd been in their hotel room?

He knew the answer. He was no stranger to mindless sex. He could stay detached. He always stayed detached. No relationships. None of that awkward "morning after" nonsense—women never came to his apartment and he never stayed at theirs. Up and gone before daylight. Always.

The playground was deserted when he reached the car. He leaned against the hood, trying to find the words for when Kelli returned. When he slept with her, it wasn't going to be mindless, and he was going to wake up beside her the next morning. He caught himself. Holy crap. He'd said when, not if. It couldn't happen. The woman had enough baggage to fill the cargo hold of a C-130 transport plane and he didn't think he was the one to deal with it.

Then Kelli appeared at the edge of the woods, and all he could think of was the complete and utter panic he'd felt when he saw Scumbag in the lobby. How it had carried him up flight after flight of stairs until he saw Kelli. And the relief he'd felt when she was all right. More than relief. He knew he'd be there as long as she'd let him.

Before she reached the car, he slid into the driver's seat, fumbled with key, fiddled with the mirrors. She climbed in and adjusted her seat belt.

"Well, that was ... interesting." Her cheeks were flushed and she poked her fingers through her hair, fluffing it into place.

"No kidding." He backed out of the parking slot. His stomach rumbled and he remembered the pizza he'd left on the hotel table. Well, someone might enjoy it.

Meanwhile, he scanned the roadside for a place to eat. On the opposite corner, a small brick-and-wood building proclaimed itself to be a genuine Irish pub. He hung a quick left, found a small parking lot behind the restaurant, and parked. Kelli hadn't looked at him yet. The air hung heavy between them, but there was no retracting what had happened and nowhere to go but forward. He crossed around the car and opened her door. Her green eyes flashed up at him, then back to her lap. With an extended hand, he said, "Emily. Let's have lunch."

He watched, amazed and impressed, as Emily's skin slipped over Kelli. There was nothing specific he could pinpoint. One minute she was a frightened Kelli. Then her entire demeanor changed and she was the confident Emily. Emily gave him a quick smile and accepted his hand.

Inside the pub, a vacant podium stood behind a sign asking guests to wait to be seated. A bar ran the length of the room, fronted by stools topped with black leather. True to form, television sets hung on the walls. A basketball game played on one, soccer on another and a local news broadcast on the third. There was a scattering of

tables in the center of the space and booths flanked the walls. When the bartender nodded them in and told them to sit anywhere, Blake found a booth with a clear view of the news. Bill Cranford might sit at the bar if he were alone, but Emily was definitely a booth person.

"You want a drink?" Blake asked. "They have Guinness on tap. Or does Emily drink Chardonnay?" In this setting, with her red hair and green eyes, he wouldn't have been surprised to hear her answer in an Irish brogue.

"To be honest," she said in plain old American, "I've never had a Guinness. I'd love to try one." Her smile was genuine this time and he floated six inches above his seat.

A waitress came by and put two menus and a bowl of something pinkish-gray and creamy on the table.

"O'Flannery's special seafood spread," she said and placed a basket of crackers beside it. "Enjoy."

He ordered their drinks and glanced at the television, which was giving the weather forecast. He knifed up a bit of dip and spread it on a cracker. "I figured there's not much we can do until we find out if they caught Scumbag."

"I guess so." She picked up the menu and then looked at her watch. He followed suit, surprised to find it was after three.

"Well, Emily. We can have some appetizers, or go whole hog and call it an early dinner. What do you think?" He figured they'd be on the road again, but wanted to keep Kelli's mind away from that for the moment. "I vote for food."

"Fine."

Emily was fading and he needed her back. He fixed her a cracker. "Try the spread. It's good."

She accepted it, but he noticed her fingers touched only the edge of the cracker, carefully avoiding his.

Their Guinnesses came and he watched Kelli take a tentative sip. She rolled it around her mouth, then studied the ceiling.

"What do you think?" he asked. "It's an acquired taste, I guess."

"No. It's ... almost chewy. Kind of chocolaty, too." She took another sip. "Good."

He put down his menu. "Have you decided what you want?"

Without looking up from her glass, she said, "Well, it's an Irish pub. I'll have the Irish stew."

* * * * *

Kelli picked up the laminated list of beers from its holder behind the salt, pepper

and vinegar. She pretended to study it while she watched Blake, who seemed focused on the television sets above the bar. Things felt all right when they were playing Bill and Emily, but Blake and Kelli kept intruding. Blake and Kelli had shared something under that pine tree, something neither was ready for. Bill and Emily could enjoy lunch. But even across the table, she felt his heat. Blake's.

She'd seen it on the stairwell. Fear first, then relief. Even though he was hurt, he'd come up ten flights for her. He could have told her to get out and made his own escape.

Or waited at the bottom of the stairs. Had he felt guilt? Obligation? She thought of him, hurt and sick, in those motel rooms. Thought about why she'd stuck with him instead of dumping him at an emergency room. It wasn't guilt. Not obligation, either—maybe it had started that way, but no more. And what she'd seen on the stairwell—what she'd felt under that tree—that wasn't guilt—or obligation.

Later, she told herself. Much, much later. "This isn't real," he'd said. Nothing was real when your life might depend on someone else. It was normal to forge a bond.

She'd given her heart away twice and suffered the pain. Never again. Banking the arousal that welled insider her, she set down the beer list and gazed at the television screens.

"You think I should get a haircut after all?" Blake's voice cut through her contemplation.

"What?"

"A haircut." He lifted a tendril of his hair. "I'm sick of the cap."

"Not to mention you forgot it."

"Guess I had something else on my mind."

The look he gave her was pure Blake and it was a moment before she could breathe.

"Besides," he went on. "I don't think Bill's a watch cap sort."

She shrugged. "I don't know—he works in the field. But yeah, the hair's probably the first thing someone would latch onto, and at a second look—well, we don't need anyone taking second looks."

The waitress showed up with salads and a basket of hot soda bread. Blake pushed the basket toward Kelli.

"No, thanks." She picked up her fork, watching Blake rip off a slice of bread, slather it with butter and take a huge bite. Very little seemed to interfere with the man's appetite. She took a tentative bite of lettuce, chewing slowly. Her stomach was still undecided about food. Pushing the cucumbers and tomatoes aside, she picked at the greens.

Blake had finished his salad and two more slices of bread when the waitress returned with their entrees.

Blake poked his fork through the browned layer of mashed potatoes topping his

dish. Raising an eyebrow, he looked at her, then her plate. "Eat."

She sampled her stew. Rich, comforting. She chewed on a piece of lamb, savoring its flavor. It was the first time she'd actually tasted anything since she'd cooked for Blake. She scooped up some of the vegetables, enjoying the mix of textures against the meat.

"How do you do that?" Blake asked.

"Do what?"

"You're even eating like Emily."

"What do you mean?"

"Kelli ate because she had to. Now, you're—I don't know—classy." He wiped his mouth. "Wait. That didn't come out right. It's that your mannerisms, the way you walk—everything changed. It's not that one is better. Just different."

"Emily isn't Kelli." She took another bite, then picked up a slice of bread and broke off a small chunk. "I have no clue what triggered someone connecting Kelli with Casey. It could have been anything—like you said, a distinctive head gesture. Or a speech pattern. If Kelli's going to have to disappear, she has to disappear completely."

"Sweetheart, you scare me. But you're not Emily. You're borrowing her, right?"

"Don't you like her?" She grinned. His normal cockiness had vanished. He was off balance. She pondered the quick jolt of power it gave her.

"Sure. I guess. Yeah." He locked his gaze on her and she knew he was under the pine tree. With Kelli.

He shook his head, as if to clear it. "I think the best I can do is a haircut. I don't think I'd pass muster as a field biologist."

"Let's hope you don't have to."

"Well, field biologists eat, right?" He dug into his shepherd's pie.

"Yeah, they do. And so do their wives."

They lingered over their meals and coffee. Blake seemed to have grown comfortable with her being Emily and she laughed when he tried out various Bills.

"Not a Boston accent. Please. Besides, they live in Florida."

"Okay, Sweetheart. But I say Bill was born in ... Texas." His drawl was perfect. "Or maybe Canada, eh?"

More people had trickled in, the after-work crowd filling the bar. When one man urged the bartender to turn up the volume on one of the televisions, she realized they hadn't so much as glanced at the screens since they'd started eating.

Blake reached across the table and gripped her hand. There was an exterior shot of the Plaza, with police cars and flashing lights. Someone, his face electronically blurred, was being put into a police car.

"Is that an ambulance?" she asked, trying to get a better view.

"Can't tell for sure. Guess I'll put off the haircut."

Chapter Fifteen

Blake opened the Bonneville's passenger door for Kelli, surprised she didn't give him an argument. "Where to?"

"Back to the hotel. Where else?"

He paused. What happened to the woman who was one step ahead of everything? "Sweetheart, are you sure? We're not positive they caught Scumbag."

"You think the cops showing up at the hotel and taking someone away right after you reported a wanted felon is a coincidence? That it wasn't Scumbag?"

"No, I'm saying maybe someone told him where to find us. And maybe that someone is coming, or is sending someone else."

She twisted in her seat and looked at him like he was crazy. Maybe he was. Or she'd lost the paranoia bug and he'd caught it. Then he saw her following his thought process.

Her eyebrows lifted. "You sure you only read three Sherlock Holmes stories? That was pretty good."

He allowed himself a quick bask in the glow of her approval. "So—where to?"

"Back to the hotel."

He searched her face to see if she was joking, but she was dead serious.

"Weren't you listening? We can't."

"We have to. Everything I have is up there. My computer was in the middle of another search when you called, plus all the papers, files, everything."

"Then what's in the gym bag?"

She looked at him like she didn't know what he was talking about. He pointed to the backseat.

"Oh," she said. "Yeah. Reflex. That's got my barest survival essentials. Emergency ID, some cash, my thirty-eight, a change of clothes. Enough to get me one step down the road if I have to start over. But we can't start over. There's too much up in the room Drive."

"No. It's too risky."

"Fine. I'll get a cab." She leaned over the seat, grabbed her bag and opened the passenger door.

"Damn it, get back in here. We'll go to the hotel. Together. But in and out. Grab our stuff."

The door slammed shut. She clutched the gym bag to her lap. "Go."

* * * * *

Blake swung the Bonneville through the hotel parking lot, choosing a slot by the side entrance. "In and out, remember?"

Kelli nodded. They got out of the car and entered the hotel. A crowd of people milled through the lobby area and he saw Kelli tense and freeze. He put a hand at her elbow. "It's all right. Some convention cocktail party. They're all too busy drinking to notice us. Let's go."

They made their way through clusters of bodies to the elevators. Groups of hotel staff stood, heads together, hands gesturing. Undoubtedly talking about Scumbag's arrest. He tried to listen, but couldn't make out more than a general buzz before a ping announced the arrival of the elevator.

Inside, Kelli's eyes were glued to the floor numbers as the car rose. He took her hand, laced his fingers with hers. "You're probably right," he said, as much to reassure himself as her. "If they caught Scumbag, we should be okay. Nobody else could be here. At least not right away. And we'll be gone by then."

She shrugged. He took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. "We're fine. Bill and Emily, right? Back from dinner." He used his best Texas drawl. "Well, it sure wasn't chicken-fried steak, but the Irish grub wasn't half bad, now was it?"

When she smiled and gave him The Shake, he tousled her hair and grinned. "Glad you're feeling better, but you've got to be Emily again. Watch it."

Hand in hand, they strode down the hall to their suite. He inserted the key card. When the light turned red, he tried again. And a third time.

"What?" Kelli asked.

"My key won't work. You got yours?"

He sensed the presence of someone behind him and snapped his head around. Kelli gripped his arm.

Two men approached, one in an expensive suit wearing a hotel nametag, too far away to read.

"Ah, Mr. and Mrs. Cranford. I'm glad you've returned. Allow me to explain." A touch of the South in his speech, Blake noted. The words dripped out slowly, with extra syllables.

Blake studied the other man. Dark-skinned, his shaved head reflected the light from the hallway. Shorter than Blake by several inches, his posture somehow managed to exude height. Blake took in the gun holstered at his waist and the gold badge held up at shoulder level.

"I'm Detective Gunther, Eugene Police Department."

"Let me," the hotel man said. He reached past Blake and inserted a key in the lock. The light flashed green and he pushed the door open. "Can we go inside? I'd like to apologize on behalf of the Plaza. If you'll gather your things and call the bell captain, we'll have you in another suite right away."

"What do you mean?" Kelli asked. "Did something happen to our room?"

"Oh, no, ma'am. He never got inside, but—"

"Excuse me. Would somebody please explain what's going on?" Blake's heart

pounded, but he kept his face neutral.

By now, the foursome was inside the room. Blake glanced around, but nothing seemed any different from what he'd come to accept as Kelli's working style of strewn piles of papers on any flat surface.

"I'm Rhett Newberry, hotel manager," Expensive Suit said. He gave Blake his card. "We never give out room numbers. I want to assure you the employee in question has been reprimanded and something like this will never happen again."

Blake stuck the card in his pants pocket. Bill. He was Bill. "Maybe if you'd start at the beginning, Mr. Newberry? My wife and I just returned from some sightseeing and an early supper. She's tired and was looking forward to lying down for a while."

He glanced at Kelli, who was staring at the conference table covered with papers. He drew her closer to him and she wrested herself free and hurried to the table.

"Bill, you know what I've told you about leaving your papers all over the place. These fine people will think we're such slobs." She piled them into one neat stack and sequestered them inside a desk drawer. "There. That's better. Maybe we can sit down?" she said, gesturing toward the conference table.

"I'm sure we'd be more comfortable over here, Emily." Blake walked to the couch and settled down. Kelli—now the consummate Emily—strolled to the couch and sat beside him, resting her hand on his thigh. He took it and held it. Cold but steady.

"I'm sure Detective Gunther can explain," Newberry said. "I'll let him finish his questions—he's assured me they're routine—and you call when you're ready to move. Oh and your stay is on the house, of course, and if you'd like to eat at one of our hotel restaurants, you call me and I'll arrange it." He nodded at everyone, gave an apologetic smile and slid out of the room.

The door clunked shut and Gunther gave Blake a crooked smile. He reached into his inside jacket pocket and retrieved a small notebook and pen.

"What did he mean?" Kelli asked. "Why are we moving?" Blake heard the faint wobble in her voice and wondered how much was put on.

"Merely a precaution, Mrs. Cranford." The detective's voice seemed to start at his toes and resonate up to his mouth, where it exited a deep bass. "We apprehended someone trying to break into this room."

"An employee? Is that what Mr. Newberry meant when he said someone had been reprimanded?"

"Not exactly." Gunther's eyes darted back and forth between Blake and Kelli. "The suspect managed to bribe a clerk in reservations into revealing your room number. I believe Mr. Newberry has taken care of her."

Gunther pulled out what looked like a police booking photo of Scumbag. "Do you recognize this man?" he asked.

Blake took the picture, held it so he and Kelli could examine it. She took the photo from him, running a fingertip over it and shook her head. "I don't think so."

"No. Should I?" He put his arm around Kelli in a gesture of protection. She rested her head on his shoulder. Okay, he knew this scenario. He'd used it before, working with a partner to close a tough deal. The corporate version of good cop, bad cop. Only now it was Emily playing the innocent wife and he'd be playing the cooperative but indignant husband.

"Someone called in a tip this afternoon," Gunther said. "We apprehended the suspect trying to break into your room."

Kelli leaned forward. "So you caught him, right?"

"Yes, ma'am," Gunther replied. "We did."

Blake let a little indignation through when he spoke. He patted Kelli's hand. "Detective, if you have your man in custody and he was trying to break into our hotel room, shouldn't you be talking to him, not us?"

"Oh, we are. But he has a lawyer—a very expensive lawyer—and he's not doing much talking. I thought you might give us something to work with."

"He's going to be in jail, though, isn't he?" Kelli sounded frightened. Blake didn't think she was digging very deep to show the fear.

"For now. We're trying to tie him to another crime—a murder that took place near an EnviroCon property."

Kelli gasped. "Murder?"

Blake let his voice rise. "Officer Gunther, you're frightening my wife. Is there any reason for us to think we're in danger here?"

"No, not at all." He looked at Kelli. "I'm sorry ma'am. One of our officers was wounded while we were arresting Mr. McGregor, so this is a priority."

"Is he all right?" Kelli asked. "The officer?"

"Yes, ma'am, thank you. McGregor had a knife. Our officer's being stitched up. He'll be fine."

"Thank goodness," Kelli whispered. "Bill, I ... I think I need to lie down."

He started at the genuine shakiness in her voice. She was chalk-white and looked imploringly at Gunther.

"Of course, ma'am. Do you want me to call a doctor?"

"No, I'll be fine if I lie down for a few minutes. Sorry, I get this way sometimes." She gave a weak laugh. "No stomach for blood—even thinking about it."

"Will you excuse me, Detective?" Blake said. "I need to see to my wife." He didn't wait for an answer, but rose and started walking Kelli to the bedroom.

Gunther half stood. "No problem. I have a few more questions and I'll be on my way."

Blake helped Kelli to the bed. "Sweetheart, you look like a ghost." He kept his

lips close to her ear. "Don't tell me you can pass out at will, too?"

"No. I'm sorry. But how many more people are going to get hurt because of me?"

"Quiet. It's not because of you. Now, you've got about thirty seconds to brief me."

She struggled to sit up. "I'll be okay. I can go back."

"No, you can't. We've got the upper hand here for a minute. He thinks he's upset you—and he has, but not for the reason he thinks. I can probably get him to fill me in on what they know. But I need to know some more about my job, and Bill."

She closed her eyes, took a breath and by the time she exhaled and opened her eyes, some color had returned to her face.

"You're here to meet with someone from EnviroCon—Yoshi Obayashi is the normal coordinator. Three possible land donations—you don't know the particulars. And you've never worked with Kelli, but you probably saw her at an EnviroCon fundraiser or some other function. You've heard of her, though—she's top-notch."

"She is." He kissed her flat on the lips and got an exaggerated Shake for his trouble.

He composed himself, put a worried expression on his face, and returned to Gunther. The detective was taking notes, still sitting where Blake had left him, but Blake had a feeling he'd looked around. Nothing to see, though. Kelli had it all in her bag.

"Sorry, sir." Blake walked over to the bar. "I could use a drink. Could I get you something? There are soft drinks."

"I'm fine."

Blake took a mini-bottle of Scotch from the bar and unscrewed the top. He kept his back to Gunther while he poured the drink into a glass, making sure his hands no longer shook.

"How's Mrs. Cranford?" Gunther asked.

"She'll be all right. The talk of a murderer hit her hard—that it might have been us, if we'd been here, and that this McGregor is responsible for the murder at the other property." He walked over to the couch and sat down. "I've been out of touch for a while on my last project. Emily wouldn't normally have come along here, but I guess she missed me." He gave Gunther a knowing smile. "We came out a few days early—tacking some vacation to this trip. Now, she'll probably want to go straight back to Florida."

"No call for that. We've got this guy locked up. And he'll be extradited once they decide which crime takes priority."

"Who did he murder? Not someone from EnviroCon or I'm sure I'd have heard."

"No, it was a park ranger in Washington State. We'll have to see if all the knife wounds point to the same weapon."

"All?"

"The ranger, Mr. Stockbridge and our officer."

"Jack Stockbridge was stabbed?" Blake didn't have to feign shock. He caught himself before his hand went to his own healing belly.

"Not badly, but he never saw who hit him." He picked up the photo from the coffee table where Blake had dropped it. "Are you sure you've never seen this guy? Either in the hotel, or at one of your job sites?"

Blake took the photo. "No. I think I'd remember him."

"He's cut his hair and shaved the mustache. Does that help?"

Blake made the pretense of studying the photo again. "No. Sorry."

"According to the hotel staff, he was looking for you."

"Me?" Blake said. "I do environmental surveys. What could he want with me?"

"I don't know, sir. That's what I'm trying to figure out." He glanced toward the bedroom door and lowered his voice. "Or maybe he wanted your wife."

"Emily? But she's not connected to EnviroCon, except by being married to me. You said there was an EnviroCon connection."

"That's our best guess now, sir. But if someone was looking for your wife, they might use you to find her."

Blake shook his head. "I can't believe someone is out to do me harm, although there are some land developers who aren't pleased with my survey results. But Emily? No way."

Gunther picked up his notebook and pen again. "Land developers, you say. Can you give me any names?"

Of course not. He took a slow sip of his Scotch, composing himself. Bill might be a field biologist, but Blake was a crack negotiator, used to keeping his thoughts well away from his face. Now, if he could only merge the two.

Okay, Gunther isn't a cop, he's some CEO sitting across a boardroom table. You're holding a pair of deuces, but he doesn't know that. You know the drill. Bluff.

He ran his fingers through his hair while he dredged up the after-dinner conversation with Kelli from a lifetime ago at Camp Getaway. "No, sorry. I don't get involved with that end of things—I don't even know if EnviroCon does. We don't take land away from developers, we try to get it before they do. So I'd have no way of knowing who might have wanted the properties I survey. I set my traps, take my pictures and fill out my reports. Lots of reports." He tilted his head toward the desk.

"I noticed." Gunther stood and Blake got up to walk him to the door. "Oh, one more question. There was a Kelly Carpenter working at the project where the Ranger was killed. Do you know him?"

Not going to get me with that one, Blake thought. "Sure, mostly by reputation. But it's her, not him. Kelli's a woman. Top-notch researcher, although we've never worked together. I've seen her at an occasional meeting." He counted to three. "You don't think she's in danger, do you?"

"Apparently she left the site and we haven't found another body. The Park

Service and Washington police are looking into it."

"Well, I'm certainly glad you have your man in custody. And I hope your officer has a speedy recovery."

"I'll pass it on." He extended a hand.

"Any time." Blake shook his hand and closed the door behind him. He waited several long minutes to make sure the guy didn't pull a Columbo and come back with one more question.

Chapter Sixteen

Kelli waited on the bed until she heard the door close. From what she'd been able to hear, Blake had done well. She'd get to her laptop, make a few tweaks to EnviroCon's personnel files and they should be safe enough.

She looked up and saw Blake leaning against the doorjamb, a smug look on his face.

"He's gone and I don't think he'll be back. I was a perfect Bill Cranford."

"Jury's still out on that one. It would have been better if I could have seen Gunther's reactions."

"Sweetheart, I make my living reading people. He was satisfied."

"For now." She sat cross-legged on the bed. "Fill me in on everything. Did he take your fingerprints?"

"No, why would he do that? He said he matched the ones on the door to Scumbag."

"If he thinks there's a connection to EnviroCon, he might dig. I don't know how thorough he is. What did you touch?"

He raised an eyebrow and his sobered expression said he'd seen she was serious. "The picture of Scumbag. I poured a drink, but he never picked up the glass."

"Okay, I think I managed to smudge the prints on the photo."

He grimaced.

"What? Tell me," she demanded.

"He gave it back. Wanted me to take another look. I didn't think about prints. I'm sure I left lots of them."

She should have warned him. Too late. "Have you ever been arrested?"

"What?"

"Answer the question. Picked up for questioning? Involved in a police investigation?"

"I thought you searched my sordid past."

"I skimmed the surface—enough to know you weren't a handyman and a little bit

more. It's much faster if you tell me."

"Hate to disappoint, but no, I've never been arrested." He sat down on the bed and squinted at her. "I was fingerprinted when I went to work for Hollingsworth. You think he's going to find out I'm not Bill?"

"If that's all, then your prints shouldn't be on file with AFIS."

"And that would be?"

"Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Where the cops send prints to see if they match up with anything picked up on a crime scene. Routine employment prints aren't part of the system."

"You think Gunther would be checking my prints?"

"I have no clue. But I feel a lot better knowing if he does, he's not going to get any hits on Blake Windsor." She stared over his head. "We're going to have to hope he's not investigating you as Bill, and that Bill's prints aren't on file. It's one thing for him to check prints against knowns, but if he digs out Bill's prints and compares them to yours, he's not going to get a match."

"Are Bill's prints at EnviroCon?"

"Shouldn't be. They didn't print me. But if they are, the cops would need a warrant to get them."

"Well, before you get all engrossed in your laptop again, let's get moved into the new room. I'll call for the bellman."

"In a minute. I need to make sure he doesn't get any conflicting information if he checks with EnviroCon. With Stockbridge out of the office, I don't know if anyone will cover for us."

"No, Kelli. Now. We both know once you start clicking that damn keyboard, you're not going to stop."

His eyes were narrow slits of dark chocolate.

"Fine." She sprang off the bed and started opening drawers, stuffing her things into her suitcase and gym bag, then went into the bathroom to pack her personal things. Without caring how childish it was, she slammed the door behind her. So, he'd held his own with the cop. What the hell did he know about making sure nobody found them?

Twenty minutes later, two floors up and in another wing of the hotel, they unpacked essentials into their new suite. She itched to get at the computer, but she made a point of arranging her toiletries just so and folding her clothes neatly before putting them in the drawers. She finished and went to the living area and found Blake standing at the bar. Hands on her hips, she blinked at him in feigned contrition. "Is it all right with you if I work on the computer a while? I'd like to establish Bill's cover a little more firmly."

Blake poured a whisky. "Suit yourself."

She logged onto EnviroCon's database and worked through the files. "I think

Kelli's going to be on an assignment in—" She swiveled to face Blake. "Where? Got any ideas?"

"Antarctica. Nobody'd look for her there." His voice oozed sarcasm. "I think I've reached my limit. When I think I've finally done something right, you find something I've screwed up—like those fingerprints. I want to know what's going on. I'm tired of pretending to be someone else, running, hiding, playing games with cops, worried one minute, scared shitless the next. I used to think it was a rush when I got some schnook to sign a contract for Hollingsworth. I've pumped more adrenaline this week than I have in the last ten years of my life. Hell, maybe twenty."

He gulped down what was left in his glass. "I'll be in the Executive Lounge."

Confused, she watched him storm from the room. Blake had assured her Gunther accepted their story. Scumbag was in custody. Things were starting to turn around. Why had he stomped off like that? An hour ago, he'd been compassionate and concerned for her welfare. Tucked her into bed and faced Gunther alone, strong enough to keep an unfamiliar cover story intact. A few computer tweaks on her part and they should be in the clear and she could get back to trying to find out how her cover had been blown.

She shrugged. Maybe getting plastered was his way of coping with the letdown of the adrenaline leaving his system.

She'd worry about that later. First, she needed to send Kelli somewhere.

Antarctica was a little bit over the top, but she gave Kelli Carpenter an assignment in the remote wetlands of Louisiana. She was pleased to see Stockbridge had Bill well established as a potential consultant for the Oregon jobs. Thankfully, there was no conflicting sign of his real Caribbean vacation—she was sure Stockbridge would fix it with payroll later.

Stockbridge. Although she hadn't heard what Gunther said, Blake's response had carried well into the bedroom. Scumbag had used a knife on him, too. She needed to put that all out of her mind. She couldn't undo it and Scumbag was in jail.

Unable to relax, she eyed the door and contemplated joining Blake. No. They'd been in close quarters too long. Maybe he was turning into the Blake Windsor she'd never really met. First he'd played a handyman role at Camp Getaway, then he'd been injured and dependent. Maybe now she was seeing the man's real personality. A corporate negotiator used to getting his own way. Demanding his own way. Once she figured out who was after her, they could resume their own lives.

She called the hospital. Jack was stable, but they wouldn't ring his room after visiting hours. For distraction, she turned to her laptop and started shooting Snoods. Two hours later, when Blake hadn't returned, she climbed into bed. Tomorrow, her head would be clear and she'd see if she could find more to connect Scumbag to Robert, Thornton, or Hollingsworth.

Awakened by the door opening, Kelli glanced at the clock. One-thirty. She

waited, but Blake didn't join her. After sounds of shuffling and water running, the crack of light under the door disappeared.

Memories of the kiss in the park welled up and she tamped them down. Blake had walked away then, too. She pounded her pillow into a more comfortable shape and closed her eyes. The image of his face when he'd found her on the stairwell refused to leave, as if imprinted on the inside of her eyelids.

* * * * *

Blake knocked on the bedroom door the next morning. Despite what Kelli must have thought, he'd done a lot of thinking and very little drinking. He'd left her because what he wanted didn't seem to match what she wanted, and there was no way he could have spent the night in her company. He hated the need she created in him. When she didn't answer, he knocked louder. No way she'd left the room without his knowing. He'd dozed more than slept.

"Kelli?" He put his ear to the door. Silence.

Then, finally, a mumbled, "Goway."

"We need to talk." He waited out another long silence.

"I need to shower." Hoarse with sleep, her voice lacked any emotion. "There better be coffee out there when I'm done."

He took the stairs to the Executive Lounge, poured two cups of coffee to go and filled a plate with fresh fruit from the buffet table.

"I can get you a tray," the attendant said. "You can leave it outside your door."

Blake thanked him and added a bagel and a couple of muffins. When he got back, Kelli was still in the bedroom. He set the food on the conference table, took his coffee and a muffin to the couch and turned on the television, trying to find a local news broadcast. Surely the arrest of a wanted felon would warrant some coverage.

When Kelli wandered out, wearing the hotel robe and towel drying her hair, she made a beeline for the coffee. She looked as if she'd slept less than he had, yet she still sent a catch to his chest. He busied himself with his muffin, the coffee, and the remote. After she worked at the coffee, some of the tension seemed to leave her shoulders. She nibbled on a strawberry and paced the room.

When he judged she'd drunk at least half her coffee, he took a deep breath and spoke. "I have to get back to Chicago."

She froze mid-step. Did a slow pivot. He could feel her gaze, like two green lasers shooting through him. "Like hell you do."

"I have a job. My time at Camp Getaway was up yesterday and Hollingsworth is expecting me back." At least he hoped so.

"So, tell him you're delayed." Her chin was lifted, her jaw clenched. She set the

coffee down and jammed her hands into the pockets of the robe and resumed pacing.

He stepped in front of her. "Will you listen? Let me finish and then we can decide?" He hoped she would calm her.

"Talk."

"I thought this through most of the night. Hollingsworth sent me on a simple expedition—find out if Kelli Carpenter and Casey Wallace are the same person. But he did it very hush-hush. You said the information he gave me was rank amateur, so he probably did it himself. I don't think he wanted anyone to know he was looking. Hollingsworth doesn't do much himself anymore—he makes decisions, but lets his underlings carry out the work."

"One of those underlings being you," she muttered.

He ignored the implication and nodded. "First, I thought I'd call him and say you weren't Casey and that would be that. But Scumbag kind of complicated things. If Hollingsworth, for whatever reason, is behind Scumbag there's a good chance Hollingsworth thinks he succeeded in getting rid of you." He stopped and said what they'd both been wondering. "And me. After all, I haven't checked in."

Kelli stopped pacing and sat in a chair across from him. "I'm still not clear here." She took another strawberry, drank some more coffee. "Let's go over it again. Hollingsworth sends you, says you're just supposed to look. Then why would he send someone to do me bodily harm?"

"I thought about that. What if, after I left, he got whatever evidence he needed from somewhere else and decided to finish the job?"

"While you were still there? Why not wait for you to get back with your report, then send someone? If he knew about the project, he'd know I'd be there for a while longer. Doesn't it make more sense that someone else sent Scumbag?"

"I'd like to think that."

"But you don't?"

"How can I? The creep attacked me, too. Hard as it is to believe, much as I don't want to believe it, there's the possibility Hollingsworth decided I shouldn't come back."

"That makes no sense." She looked pensive for a moment. "Besides, didn't you say Hollingsworth didn't do stuff like hire hit men?"

"I did. But even though I hate to admit it, I could be wrong. I work for him, but I don't deal with him on a personal level very much anymore. I didn't even see him face-to-face for this job—I was in Seattle and he e-mailed me the information."

"You didn't ask why he wanted me?"

"Not my place." She glared at him. "Don't look at me like that. He gave me a simple job. To be honest, I figured you were probably a long-lost love child and he either wanted to pay you off to keep things quiet, or do a big reunion thing. That one would make a great publicity move with his gubernatorial bid."

Kelli squeezed the bridge of her nose. "Tell me why you can't call him and say

he's got the wrong person."

"If he thinks I'm dead, if he had anything to do with Scumbag, I want to march into his office and read it on his face." He got up and crouched in front of Kelli. Relieved when she didn't back off, he grasped her hand. "I read people for a living." Everyone but her. "I can read him—but not over the phone. Plus, if there's anything hinky going on, I don't want him sending anyone else."

"There are holes in there somewhere."

"Sweetheart, everything we've done has been Swiss cheese. Why don't you get dressed and think about it? If you can come up with another plan, I promise to listen."

"Give me a little computer time. If Hollingsworth hooked me to Robert, I need to know how he connects." She flashed a wry grin. "Maybe Robert was his love child and he wants vengeance."

"Speaking of Robert, what have you found out? Anything new?"

She shook her head and broke her gaze. Her expression changed. Shame? Embarrassment? There was more.

He pressed. "What happened after he ... died? You must have followed the reports."

"No." Barely whispered.

He laughed. "Oh, don't tell me the computer queen couldn't find out what the police—even the Mexican police—made of a dead body in the middle of nowhere."

"I never looked."

"What?" He thought he was used to surprises by now, but this one floored him. "Why not?" And then he saw the tears glistening on her lashes and he felt like he'd been stabbed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to joke about it. I thought—the way you've been digging at everything else—you'd have been on top of that one."

She pushed up from the chair, nearly knocking him over. "Well, I wasn't. I'd just killed a man with my own hands. I didn't exactly want to think about it. Ever."

She crossed the room and leaned her hands on the desk, talking to its polished wooden surface. "I'd killed a man and no matter how many times I told myself I had no choice, the pain wouldn't go away. I told you, I ran. Stopped being Karen Abbott. Took over Kelli Carpenter's identity."

When he touched her shoulder, she tensed, but let his fingers stay. He felt her take a long, deep breath. Then another. Four. Five. He waited.

She went on. "Until that night in the motel with you, I don't think I spoke his name. Not when I was awake, anyway. I can't even type his name into the computer without a major panic attack."

He turned her around to face him. Ran his finger down her nose. "Do you think you could do it now? Since I already know, maybe it won't be so hard. I'll be right with you. Or you could tell me what to do and I'll do the typing."

"Maybe." When she looked at him, he saw trust, not anger or fear.

Her eyes closed and she tilted her head up a fraction. The phone on the desk rang and Blake's heart jumped another notch.

"Go ahead. Answer it. Bill."

Once again, she'd cloaked her vulnerability with her strength, disappearing into Emily. Bill. Right. Back in character. "Hello?" he said.

"Mr. Cranford, there's a package at the front desk. Would you like me to send someone up?"

And who might be carrying that package? "What kind of package?"

"FedEx. I can have a bellman deliver it."

"Umm . . . no, no that's not necessary. I'll be down shortly."

"FedEx," he said to Kelli. "I'll go. Are we expecting anything?"

"Our temporary Florida driver's licenses. Maybe that's a sign we should go to Chicago. I'll see about scoring some plane reservations."

"You're ahead of me again. Driver's license? You just said we were flying."

When she gave him The Shake, he didn't mention it. Instead, he tried not to hug her.

"You can't get on an airplane without government-issued ID," she said. "That, plus our EnviroCon photo IDs should get us through security."

"Right. I knew that." With all his travel, of course he did. There was something about being around Kelli that left his brain two steps behind.

She nudged him toward the door. He saw her glance around the room until her eyes caught the duffel sitting at the edge of the couch. "You were going to go no matter what I said, weren't you?"

Chapter Seventeen

Kelli buckled her seat belt and focused on the safety video, wondering if the flight attendants would be so smiling and collected in a genuine emergency. The only last-minute seats available were in first class, not that she objected. To be honest, even more than the larger seats and extra legroom, she was thankful for the oversized stationary console between the seats, putting a physical barrier between her and Blake.

For the first time since Blake had dropped the news he was going to confront Hollingsworth, she allowed herself to relax. When she'd suggested she might be able to pick up some more information closer to the source, he hadn't argued. Besides—maybe the attack on Jack was supposed to lure her back to Spokane, where someone would be waiting. Better not to take the bait.

They'd spent the morning packing, getting everything but her essentials shipped to EnviroCon for storage. She'd miss the security of her thirty-eight, but if they were flying, it wasn't an option. She hadn't heard from Jack, which had done nothing to ease her anxiety. Afraid to call for fear the cops might be monitoring his phones, she tried to

reassure herself he was all right. He'd call if he had news. Until then, she'd have to wait.

She twisted in her seat and cast a sidelong glance at Blake. His beard had filled out and with his long hair, he had an unnerving sexy charm, something not lost on the flight attendant, judging from the solicitous way she'd made sure he had everything he needed. Blake seemed oblivious—he was as tired as she was and had to be planning his upcoming confrontation with Hollingsworth.

Moments later, they were airborne. She reached under the seat for the bag containing her computer and notes, but when she pulled out the envelope, Blake touched her hand.

"Take a break," he said. "You've been going almost nonstop for days."

Maybe he was right. Sometimes things came together when you didn't think about them. Let the mind float. She put the envelope back.

"Get some rest," he said and reclined his seat and closed his eyes.

She fished the airline's earphones out of the seat pocket and found a classical music station on the dial. Exhausted or not, sleep did not come easily for her on airplanes, and her mind refused to slow down. She stared out the window into the late-afternoon sun, watching the plane's shadow drift over the clouds below, until she slipped into that nebulous realm on the outskirts of sleep. Images whirled, people danced in juxtaposition with little regard to time. She was back at Berkeley, but Jack was there, too. Blake and Robert faced off in a duel, using ball peen hammers that shot fire. Karen Abbott floated in wearing a big red clown nose, laughing, holding a broken wine bottle.

She struggled against the dream, telling herself to wake up and it would go away. Yet the images wouldn't fade and she could no longer be certain she was dreaming. Scumbag was there, dangling her over a cliff. She battled, but he gave a wicked laugh and dropped her. Her stomach flew to her throat as she fell—down, down, into a circle of flames.

"Due to turbulence, the captain has illuminated the seat belt sign and all passengers should return to their seats. Please make sure your seat belts are securely fastened," rang out from the heavens.

Kelli broke out of the dream with an audible gasp. Heart racing, she fumbled with her seat belt to make sure it was snug. She located the bottle of water she'd put in the seat pocket and unscrewed the cap, downing half the contents in one pull. Blake stirred, repositioned himself in his seat, but didn't open his eyes. His face was relaxed and a tiny smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. Dreaming, no doubt. Something pleasant. No nightmares.

She picked up the in-flight magazine and tried to lose herself in the best places to ski in France while she cursed those who could drop into a peaceful sleep, seemingly at will. Charles had hated flying. He was always good for distracting conversation.

First class had the additional perk of meal service, but after two bites, she poked at her chicken and moved the rice and vegetables around the plate. Blake grunted and shook his head when the flight attendant came by, but Kelli doubted he had awakened.

When the captain announced their final descent, Blake's eyes popped open and she watched him become aware of his surroundings. He worked his mouth back and forth and she offered him what was left in her water bottle.

He took a drink, stretched his legs and torso as much as the seat permitted and rubbed his eyes. He looked at his watch. Shook his head. "Guess I was out, huh?"

"Like the proverbial light."

"You?"

"Fine."

He raised his eyebrows, then gave her a scrutinizing look. She couldn't lie to those eyes. "Okay, so I don't sleep much on planes. I rested. Some." And thought and thought and tried not to think anymore.

"Sometimes it seems I get half my sleep on planes." He reached over, laced his fingers through hers. "I'm glad you're here. Did you eat? I'm starved."

"Not my fault you wouldn't wake up."

"There are some decent all-night spots. We can grab a bite on the way to my place."

His place. That was something else she'd tried not to think about. Staying with him in his condo shouldn't be any different from sharing hotel rooms, but somehow, it seemed more ... intimate, somehow. Ridiculous. Hell, for the money he paid, he had to have plenty of room. Maybe an entire guest suite. Probably more privacy than she'd had in days. She pulled her fingers from his and stared out the window, watching the city lights grow brighter.

Even at ten-thirty, O'Hare was filled with people. She followed Blake's confident stride until they were ensconced in a taxi. The cab made its way out of the airport, passing cranes, scaffolding, and heavy machinery.

"Do you think there's a law requiring airports to be under construction at all times?" she asked.

Blake chortled. "Come to think of it, I can't recall being in one that wasn't. Maybe you're right."

She watched the lights fly by for a while and then Blake was shaking her awake.

"Guess not sleeping in airplanes doesn't carry over to taxis," he said. "Let's get you into bed."

She tried to shrug off her grogginess, but her thought processes were dragging at least two feet behind her. "Did we stop to eat?"

"I didn't have the heart to wake you. I'll find something in the freezer."

"Sorry."

"Don't be."

Blake paid the driver, hoisted his duffel and her gym bag over his shoulder. He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her to the glass door of a towering high-rise. A uniformed doorman held the door open and greeted him by name. She wasn't too tired to notice the look of surprise, quickly covered, on the man's face when Blake escorted her through the doorway.

"Guess he doesn't approve of me," she said once they were in the elevator. "I'm sure I don't look like the women he's used to seeing with you."

Blake let the bags slip onto the floor of the empty car. He pressed a button, then turned toward her and cradled her face in his hands. "Sweetheart, he's never seen me bring a woman here."

Still pondering Blake's statement, she followed him to a door at the far end of the carpeted corridor. He worked through a ring of keys, selected one, and unlocked the door.

"Here we are. Make yourself at home." He pushed the door open and stepped aside so she could enter first.

She tried to remember that Blake was, in fact, a corporate executive. Still, the vast expanse of chrome, glass and leather made her stop. A cross between a loft and a studio apartment. Masculine, yes, but there was no personality here. Sterile.

Sleek gray tiles with a couple of area rugs on the floor. Living space to her left. There was a glass-enclosed fireplace which she surmised, from the lack of any wood stacked nearby, was gas. In front of it forming a U was a black leather couch and two matching chairs. A glass coffee table sat in the center of the U, bare except for a colored glass bowl. Not even a magazine. Framed abstract prints on the walls.

The drapes were closed, but she imagined a view of the city lights below—they'd come up to the sixteenth floor. She took a few tentative steps into the apartment. Blake had dropped the bags next to the couch and gone straight into the open kitchen on the right. Steel appliances, a tall bar-height counter with chrome and leather stools. No dishes by the sink, nothing on the counter.

A six-foot-high L-shaped glass block wall divided the overall space, affording privacy to what she assumed were bed and bathroom areas.

"Not much here," he said from behind the freezer door. "I've been on the road a lot."

She watched him rip open a carton and stick a pizza in the microwave, then come back to join her. "Bathroom and bedroom are around the corner." She nodded and headed in that direction.

An elevated platform held a king-sized bed covered in black satin, a lacquered armoire and chest of drawers. A louvered door led to what she assumed was the bathroom. And that was it. No fancy guest quarters. No separate guestroom. Sensing his presence behind her, she turned.

"You want some pizza?" he asked. "I've got some beer, too. Not a lot else, but there are some bagels in the freezer for tomorrow." He looked at his watch. "Well, for breakfast, since it's already tomorrow."

"I don't think I'm hungry anymore," she said.

"Fine. If you didn't sleep on the plane, you must be exhausted—the ride from the airport wasn't long enough for a decent nap. Why don't you crash? I'll take the couch."

"No, that's all right. I'm smaller—I'll be fine out there."

"Don't be silly. I slept on the plane and I'm going to have some pizza and a beer while I plan my strategy for tomorrow. I'll be up early—I want Hollingsworth to find me at the office when he arrives. You can sleep in."

"I want to see him—hear his voice. I could pretend to be—I don't know—a delivery person? A temp from another department? Maybe I'll recognize him. And if I do, I'll ... I'll—"

"Sweetheart, no." His hands crossed his chest, his full lips thinned to almost nothing.

For an instant, his eyes darkened and she felt what it would be like to sit across a boardroom when he was closing a deal. He'd made a simple statement, but there was no disputing it. Furious with him, she stood there, head bowed, too tired to argue. About anything. Bed, couch, confrontations with men who might have hired someone to kill her.

Let him go. She should never have come to Chicago in the first place. Should have been strong enough to leave him, go somewhere new.

She raised her gaze. He hadn't moved. He just stood there, being so—there.

Her breathing accelerated, and she told herself she was exhausted, confused, and angry at his stubbornness, knowing perfectly well it wasn't anger she was feeling. Except maybe at herself for getting into this situation. She started to push past him, to get her bag. He stood his ground and she stopped, feeling his heat feed hers.

"There's something here. We both know it." Blake's voice came from deep in his throat. He pulled her into his chest and ran his fingers down her back.

"But what's the something?" She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to the thudding of his heart. "We've been relying on each other for survival. That's not normal."

"I want to wake up beside you, Kelli. I want to know you're there next to me. If you have a nightmare, I want to be there for you. But not until you're ready. Give me a couple of minutes and I'll take the couch."

"Blake, I—"

"Get some sleep."

Chapter Eighteen

Well before eight the next morning, Blake sat in his office, trying to busy himself going through accumulated e-mails while he awaited Hollingsworth's arrival. Earlier, Blake had taken the stairs up two flights to Hollingsworth's office, but as always, it was locked. Mrs. Madison would have placed a neatly printed schedule for the day on his desk before she'd left yesterday. He'd looked at her desk, but true to form, she'd cleared it of all but a bud vase with a single rose.

At eight-thirty, she'd arrive and replace the rose with a fresh one, hang her suit jacket on a padded hanger from the coat tree in the corner of her office, and turn on her computer. While it booted, she'd make a short trip to the break room down the hall for coffee and then she'd be back at her desk, ready for the day by eight-forty-five.

He thought of Kelli. Even in that short window, he'd bet she could have logged into Mrs. Madison's computer and found Hollingsworth's schedule. But he wasn't taking any chances by letting Kelli be here. He'd left her a note telling her to reach him via his cell. He gave it a gentle pat through the fabric of his trousers. The thought of her activating that buzz at his thigh made him smile. After a restless night on the couch, he'd left her, sound asleep in his bed. She'd not even stirred when he'd showered and gotten his clothes from the dressing room closet.

He ran a finger around his collar. Aside from the confines of a tie, he luxuriated in the touch of expensive fabrics next to his skin, especially the silk boxers instead of cotton briefs, enjoying the feeling of power, of control he gleaned from a black Armani suit perfectly tailored to his body. He'd dressed with extra care this morning—a black silk shirt, a black tie with an underlying silver sheen. The butter-soft leather of his Italian loafers felt like bedroom slippers compared with the work boots he'd been wearing. After careful consideration, he'd kept the beard, neatly trimmed. Maybe some of Kelli's identity shifting had rubbed off on him.

At eight-fifteen, he heard the ding of an incoming intra-office e-mail. Puzzled that someone knew he was here, he checked his computer. From Human Resources. He opened the file.

Morning. Need anything? Emily.

He laughed, then choked it back. People were arriving who might hear him.

Morning yourself. Don't suppose you can give me Dwight Hollingsworth's schedule?

Ten minutes later he knew Hollingsworth had a nine-forty-five with Vance Griffith, apparently in Hollingsworth's office, since there was no other location given. Blake searched his memory for the familiar name. Dwight's campaign manager.

You sure nobody knows what you're doing? he typed.

Excuse me? This from Accounting.

Of course not. She should be able to cover her tracks. She must have logged into his home computer and figured out how to access his office system.

Gotta run. Make yourself at home, he answered.

He spent the better part of the next hour catching up on Hollingsworth's new buyout project, Whittaker Candies. A small, family-owned company that manufactured specialty confections, it was struggling to make ends meet. He found the files in his inbox and started reviewing the financials, looking into the key players. At nine, unable to concentrate, he headed back up the stairs and ducked into an empty meeting room. At nine-fifteen, he heard Hollingsworth's voice from down the hall bidding Mrs. Madison a good morning.

Nothing beat a good offense. He adjusted his tie, shot his cuffs and marched down the corridor, giving a polite nod to Mrs. Madison, whose mouth opened for an instant when he strode past her desk into Hollingsworth's inner sanctum. He wished he'd had more time to enjoy the fleeting look of shock as he bypassed her sentry duty. Nobody saw Hollingsworth unannounced.

"Good morning, Dwight." He gave a friendly smile, his eyes fixed on Hollingsworth's face. Some of the surprise would be from his barging in, but he studied the man's expression.

The man leaped to his feet from behind his desk. "Blake. My God, man, where the hell have you been? And what's with the—" His fingers stroked his jaw. "Never mind. I've been trying to reach you. I've called your cell a dozen times. I heard about the murder on the news and I was afraid you'd been caught in it."

He leaned his hands on the desk and peered at Blake. "You didn't get caught in it, did you? I mean, you were there incognito. It might have been ... awkward."

Right. For whom? You or me?

"No. Nobody knew I was anything but a handyman." Except Kelli and some hired killer, but what did they matter?

"I'm glad. Glad you're all right, of course."

The man seemed sincerely upset. But was he channeling his surprise that Blake was alive into this display of concern? Blake tried to imagine this at a takeover meeting. He'd lay the odds at sixty-forty Hollingsworth was sincere. Not good enough. He hadn't brought up Kelli yet.

Blake said, "Sorry I didn't call sooner. There's no cell reception in the woods. And, by the time I got into range, I realized I'd forgotten the charger."

Hollingsworth lowered himself into his chair and motioned for Blake to take a seat. "You were due back yesterday." His face was deadpan now. All business.

"Yes, sir. Sorry, but we were delayed. There was a storm, power went out, roads closed."

"We? You found her? Did you bring her back?" No more deadpan. Hollingsworth leaned forward, an expression of eager curiosity on his face.

Shit. He'd almost blown it. Blake waited a moment to gather himself. "She's not the woman you were looking for. But I did give her a lift out of there. She's on her way

to her next project."

"You're sure?"

"Short of a lie detector test or a DNA sample, which you didn't ask for, yes, I'm sure. You sent me because you trust my judgment, don't you?"

"Of course. It was—never mind. It's over and I appreciate your efforts. I hope roughing it wasn't too much of a strain."

"No, sir." He fingered his midsection, where he was still wearing butterfly strips.

"May I ask why I was looking for this woman?"

"Consider it an old man's dream. Nothing more. I'll have your payment this afternoon." A slight narrowing of the eyes, a glance away from Blake, and then the neutral expression of an executive were the only indications Hollingsworth might be keeping something to himself.

"How's the Whittaker account coming?" Dwight asked.

Back to business as usual. "I've been reviewing the files. I'll be ready for the meeting next Thursday."

"Excellent." The intercom buzzed and Dwight gave Blake a dismissive look. Blake nodded and left the office, not quite closing the door behind him, hearing Mrs. Madison tell Hollingsworth that Mr. Griffith had arrived and Dwight asking her for five minutes.

Blake stopped by the door. Mrs. Madison's back was to him. A man who had to be Vance Griffith was resting a hip on Mrs. Madison's desk, his attention on her, oblivious to Blake's presence. And was the imperturbable Mrs. Madison blushing? He saw the faint trace of pink rise to her neck below her upswept silver hair.

"Now, Rebecca, you know I've told you to call me Vance."

She giggled.

Rebecca? Blake didn't think he'd ever heard anyone use Mrs. Madison's first name. Almost as if she didn't have one. And giggling? Who was this man, and what had he done with the unflappable, staid Mrs. Madison? Fascinated, he paused.

"All right ... Vance." She toyed with a pen. "Mr. Hollingsworth asked if you'd give him five minutes."

"I heard. No problem, as long as I can spend them with you."

"Stop it." Blake saw the pink brighten to red and spread from her neck to her ears.

"Rebecca, I've told you. When Dwight's governor, you're going to be right there with him. I'm going to insist you stick with him as his personal aide. You'll love it in Springfield."

"I think Mr. Hollingsworth is the one to make that decision."

"He's going to—and you don't have any ties to Chicago now, do you?" Blake watched Vance Griffith move even closer to Mrs. Madison, so his face was inches from hers. "Seriously, Rebecca. Your husband's been gone for years. You're an

attractive, vibrant woman. Don't hide behind this desk."

Good Lord, was he going to kiss her? Right here? Still reeling a bit from what he'd seen and heard, Blake examined the man more closely. Early fifties, he guessed. Probably a little younger than Mrs. Madison. Sorry, but he'd never be able to think of her as Rebecca. Griffith wore an expensive dark suit, monochrome blue shirt and tie combination. A long, angular face and prominent forehead gave him a look of intelligence. Tawny hair with a touch of gray at the temples. Strong chin, clean-shaven. Camera-ready.

Mrs. Madison's intercom buzzed and Blake jerked to attention. He straightened his tie, pulled the door shut with an audible click and strode forward.

"Good morning," he said to Griffith. He extended his hand. "Blake Windsor."

"Vance Griffith. Nice to meet you. Dwight's spoken of you."

"Nothing too terrible, I trust?" The man's handshake was firm, but without warmth. The practiced touch of a flesh-presser, but the way he studied Blake's face was more than he expected from a casual meet.

"Not at all." Griffith smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. "I'd like to touch base later. I might have a position for you." He stepped past Blake, knocked once on Hollingsworth's door, and went into the man's office.

Blake took a moment to compose himself before approaching Mrs. Madison. "Good morning," he said. He tilted his head toward Hollingsworth's door in a question.

Mrs. Madison put the pen down and picked up the computer mouse, obviously wondering how much he'd heard. "They're busy tying up loose ends before he officially files his candidacy."

"He looks more like the politician himself, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe so, but he seems content to direct the action. Did you enjoy your vacation?"

"Very much, thanks. But I'm behind, of course. I'd better get back to work. You have a good day."

"You, too."

He had gotten to the door when she called after him.

He turned. "Yes?"

She gave him a smile, genuine and friendly. "I—I like the beard, Mr. Windsor."

Holy shit. He'd gone away for a while and come back to an alternate universe. What the hell. He grinned and winked at her, then walked toward the elevator, resisting the urge to whistle.

* * * * *

Kelli sat at Blake's computer, a cup of instant coffee at her elbow. You'd think a man would at least have a real coffee maker. She'd downed a reheated slice of pizza

and found a box of not-totally-dried-out raisins. A decent night's sleep had left her relaxed and clearheaded.

Trusting Blake would call her once he'd confronted Hollingsworth, she sucked in a huge breath and plunged into a search engine. Although her palms sweated, she wasn't hyperventilating. Maybe it was simply the right time. Maybe after five years, the scars were thick enough, so she could deal with what she'd done. Or maybe it was because she was wearing one of Blake's shirts.

An hour later, she pushed the chair away from the desk and stretched. She'd gone back five years, starting with the Ensenada newspapers, and had found absolutely nothing indicating anyone had found Robert's body in Mexico. True, her Spanish wasn't particularly good, but she knew enough to recognize any articles on the discovery of a body. Short of revisiting the burial site, which she would never do, she'd go on the assumption they'd never discovered him.

Maybe she could trace his family. They must have done something when he didn't reappear. She sighed and called up the San Francisco newspaper sites. Still nothing.

Good for her, but how had Dwight Hollingsworth found out? She fixed another cup of instant coffee and typed "Robert Kilian" into another search engine.

Frustration built as she plowed into one dead end after another. She'd been in such need of friendship it had never occurred to her to dig into his personal life while they'd dated. He'd been warm, charming, full of surprises, and she'd accepted him at face value. Who asked a date for ID or proof of employment? But her searches either gave her thousands of generic hits, or none when she tried to narrow things down.

When the phone on the desk rang, she jumped. Two rings later, her heart was back in her chest where it belonged and she saw Blake's name on the caller ID.

"Lunch?" he said.

She breathed a sigh of relief. His note had said he'd call and say, "Airport" if things went sour. He hadn't left a translation for "lunch" so she assumed it meant the usual.

"Sure."

The connection closed. He must be coming to pick her up. Probably didn't want to talk in case he'd be overheard.

In Blake's spacious bathroom, she stood at the sink, peering into the mirror. She'd changed into an Emily outfit she'd brought with her—dress slacks, a thin silk turtleneck and a wool blazer. Her complexion still reflected the week's stress, but the bags under her eyes were faded to the point where a little concealer would disguise them. Mascara, some shadow, a little blush. She lifted her lipstick and twisted up the creamy cylinder of coral.

It wasn't simply being Emily, she realized. A week ago she'd thought nothing of appearing in front of Blake in sweats, no makeup, unkempt hair. Somewhere, he'd

changed from the handyman to a man. A man she wanted to show herself to as something other than a frump. Her hand shook as she applied a thin coating of lipstick, then blotted most of it away, leaving a layer of tint which she covered with lip balm for a little sheen. She was here in Chicago because she was tired of being alone.

The glint of gold next to the soap dish caught her eye. Charles' wedding band. Of course. Blake wasn't Bill anymore. She tugged hers off and waited until the pang of sadness in her chest went away.

Slow down. They were having lunch. Forget that Blake was drop-dead gorgeous. Like hell she could forget. Not even if they ate in total darkness. But somehow, somewhere in the last week, he'd rearranged something inside her. It was as if he'd locked Robert away so deep that she could look at Blake the way a woman looks at a man, without all the terrifying memories.

Unable to sit and wait, she paced the apartment, her Emily shoes clicking on the tiles, then going silent on the carpeting. Annoyed at herself for being so nervous, she tried to resume her internet and database searches. That turned into an exercise in futility. Maybe she should download Snoods onto Blake's computer. He might enjoy blasting them, too.

When the door opened, she felt that rush of anticipation. Then Blake stepped inside and he took her breath away. Literally. She'd seen his closet full of designer clothes, but there was no comparison with the way they looked on his body instead of on hangers. Dressed all in black, he stood just inside the doorway. He reached behind his head and his hair tumbled free. She stood, reminding herself to breathe. Moving would have to wait. So would speaking. Breathless. Speechless. Rooted to the spot. Any more clichés?

"Wow," was all she could say.

"Cab's waiting," he said. He dropped his briefcase inside the door.

"Yeah. Right." Her brain finally figured out how to make her feet move and she stepped toward him, tugging on the blazer to hide her stiffened nipples.

He took her hand. "Or, we could cancel it?"

She shook her head. "I think I want to see you dressed like that for a while."

With a finger crooked under her chin, he lifted her face so their eyes met. "You're pretty wow yourself."

While they strolled to the elevator, she said, "So, Hollingsworth's not out to kill us?"

"I don't think so."

"Don't think so? You mean you're not sure?"

"Let's talk over lunch. You have any preference?"

"Anything but pizza's fine." She fell into step beside him as they walked to the waiting cab. Blake opened the door for her, then walked around and got in on the other side. Even across the distance between them, there was an almost tangible

connection.

"Middle Eastern?" Blake asked.

"Sounds good."

"Phoenician Garden," Blake said to the cabbie. He put his hand, palm up, on the seat between them. She dovetailed her fingers with his and they rode the rest of the way in self-conscious silence.

When Blake opened the restaurant door, the aroma of exotic spices dominated. There was a sizeable lunch crowd, their voices a low rumble underneath the drum, bouzouki, and cymbal rhythms resonating from overhead speakers. They waited inside the entry. A hostess dressed in a flowing silk dress approached with a wide smile. A little wider than an ordinary customer might expect, Kelli thought.

"Mr. Windsor. So good to see you again. It has been a long time." She took his hands and Blake planted a kiss on her cheek. "The two of you?" She gazed at Kelli with curiosity. "I have a booth in the back, if you'd like."

"That'll be perfect," Blake said.

The hostess picked up two menus and swiveled, weaving her way through the maze of tables to the rear of the restaurant. She moved with a fluid grace and Kelli suddenly felt clunky and awkward. She imagined herself and the hostess standing in line at the grocery store. There was no doubt in her mind which of them Blake would approach—assuming he even knew what a grocery store was.

Glad for the reality check, she followed the hostess and slid across the banquette. After they were seated, the hostess flashed Blake another bright smile and swayed her hips to the front of the restaurant.

Kelli picked up the menu, staring at the choices without comprehension. And a lot less appetite than she'd had a few minutes ago. A dark-haired waiter appeared with a small platter of carrots, celery and assorted olives and a basket of fragrant, hot pita. "You would like hummus?" he said.

"Please," Blake said. "And some baba ganoush." He winged his eyebrows at her. "That okay with you? Not too much garlic?" He grinned.

"Don't see a problem if we're sharing."

The waiter came back with plates of their spreads. "Would you like the house lunch special? Portions of tabbouleh, grape leaves, falafel and lamb korma?"

"That sounds like a lot," she said.

Blake grinned again. "That's the idea. Leftovers for tomorrow."

"Fine."

Blake offered the pita basket to her. She broke off a piece and dipped it in the hummus. Blake followed suit.

"Good, isn't it?" he said. "It's got a nutty flavor."

"That's the tahini," she said. "Middle Eastern peanut butter to you—made with sesame seeds instead of peanuts."

"Guess that's why I like it, then." He cocked his head. "Is something wrong?"

"No, of course not." Carrying on with gorgeous women was his lifestyle. She shoved her feelings back where they belonged and asked what he'd discovered.

"I'd say Hollingsworth was surprised to see me, but not because he thought I was dead. I believe he was truly worried something had happened. I told him you weren't Casey and he accepted it, no questions asked. I got a hint there was something more, but nothing like guilt that he'd sent someone to kill us."

"Did he say why he thought I was Casey?"

"Nope. He said it was an old man's dream and sent me back to work. You sure he doesn't have some other reason to want to find you? Long-lost relative?"

She'd been running through every possibility for days. "No. I can't imagine anyone wanting me, except about Robert. He didn't mention him, did he?"

"Not at all. He went right to his meeting with Vance Griffith, his campaign manager."

"That's a good sign, I guess. So he's moving forward on the political front. But it doesn't answer the Scumbag question, does it?"

"I guess not. But he's in jail, so that should be the end of it."

She sipped her water. "Maybe. But like the detective said, he has expensive lawyers. He could get out on bail." The thought of that sent a shudder through her.

"Hey, even if he is, he's not stupid enough to come after us again."

"What if they send someone else?"

"I think by now they know someone's investigating and they're going to lie low. Three attacks in three cities would ring a lot of alarm bells."

"I hope you're right."

Blake lifted a finger in a gesture of silence when the waiter brought their lunch. When he'd left, and they'd filled their plates with portions of the assorted dishes, he continued. "What did you find out? I gather it wasn't difficult to get into Hollingsworth Industries' system."

"Piece of cake, since you log on from home. Once I was in, I poked around a little."

"Find anything interesting?"

"Hollingsworth is doing very well. In my previous life, I'd have pitched my services—he could use a lot more security in his computer system, but that's fine with me right now."

"You've been using my computer to poke around. Am I going to get in trouble?"

"Are you insinuating I don't know how to cover my tracks?"

Blake's eyes widened and he gave her a warning glance.

"What?" Her heart thumped. A man, older than Blake, approached their table.

"Blake Windsor? I thought I saw you. Small world, isn't it?" The man extended a hand and Blake half stood to shake it. The man then turned to her. "I'm sorry. I didn't

mean to interrupt. I ran into Blake at Dwight Hollingsworth's office this morning and was surprised to see him again so soon. But that's how life works sometimes, isn't it? I'm Vance Griffith."

"Emily Cranford," Kelli said.

"Do you work with Blake?" He stared at her, from her face to chest to her left hand, long enough to make her uncomfortable.

"No, we're cousins," she said. "I'm in town for a few days and I thought we'd catch up."

"Right. Well, I won't keep you." He turned to Blake. "But I'd like to talk with you about working on the campaign with us. From what I've heard, your powers of persuasion would be an asset to the Hollingsworth team." He smiled at her. "And he's got the looks, doesn't he, Ms. Cranford? Can't hurt for the candidate to be surrounded by beautiful people."

Griffith pulled out a business card and handed it to Blake. "Give me a call. We'll talk." He gave them each one more white-toothed smile and went to a table near the front of the restaurant.

"Is he gone?" Kelli asked, not turning around.

"He's not gone, but he's sitting with two other men. Suits. They're looking at papers he's passing around. My guess is he's fund-raising, or vote collecting, or doing something to help Dwight."

"So, you going to join in?"

"Sweetheart, I met the man for thirty seconds this morning. I'm not about to ditch my job on a whim—his whim, at that."

"Do you think it's strange he showed up here now?" she asked.

He shrugged. "The food is good and the prices are reasonable." He glanced at the card in his hand. "And his office isn't far from here."

"I didn't like the way he looked at me."

"For that matter, neither did I. But I can understand it." He wiggled his eyebrows. "You look very good."

"Sheesh, Windsor." But she felt a warm glow building inside. It had been a long time since she'd thought of herself as a woman.

Blake swallowed some tabbouleh. "Back to where we left off. Did you find anything interesting?"

She looked up and felt the pull of his gaze. "I looked for Robert."

"You did?" he said. "Did you find him?"

"No. I didn't know much about him. I mean, I took whatever he told me at face value. No reason not to."

"You think he was using a fake name?"

Stunned, her mouth dropped open. "You'd think it would have occurred to me, wouldn't you? I told you, I blocked everything after ... But why would he do that?"

Blake's eyebrows lifted. "There's the usual reason."

Slowly, gears meshed in her head. "You think he was married?"

"It's a common enough occurrence." He shrugged.

She replayed those happier times with Robert. "No. I don't think so. He never seemed to mind when I called him. No woman ever answered. And he'd show up at random times—not like only Tuesday nights when a wife would be at a meeting or something like that."

But she started running the possibility through her mind. She'd only had his cell phone number. He'd show up at her place, never invited her to his. Had she simply ignored the evidence because she wanted to believe he was as good as the image he projected? Knew what movies she liked, was always surprising her with little gifts, or spontaneous trips to the zoo, or long walks on the beach.

"Hey, only an idea," Blake said.

"And a reasonable one, but you might be right about him using another name.

And if he was, I can't see any way to trace him after all these years. Not without knowing more about him."

He wiped his mouth and hands on his napkin, then reached across the table for her hand. A tingle that was becoming too familiar shot through her. His voice dropped to a whisper. "I'm glad you got over the fear, even if you didn't find what you were looking for."

She felt the warmth of his touch shoot through to her face. "You helped."

"Me?"

She spoke to her plate. "I wore one of your shirts."

Why couldn't she keep her mouth shut? It was as if his eyes had the power over her tongue. If he laughed at her, she'd die.

When their eyes met, she saw no laughter in his. He waved to the hostess.

"Melina, can you have someone box this please? And bring the check?" His voice was husky.

"Of course." She left in another swirl of silk.

The tension was palpable as they waited for the check.

Their waiter returned with a white paper bag, which he set on the table. He set the bill in front of Blake. "You can pay up front if you're in a hurry, sir."

Kelli stood beside Blake while Melina processed his credit card. She noticed Vance Griffith sat alone at his table, gathering papers and stuffing them into his briefcase. He caught her eye and she gave him a polite nod.

He snapped his briefcase shut and approached the front counter. "Nice meeting you, Emily. And Blake. I'm sure our paths will cross again." He extended a hand.

"Give me a call."

Blake's nod was only slightly more polite than hers had been, but he accepted the handshake. He signed the receipt and turned, his hand on the small of her back.

Guidance or possession? she wondered.

"Enjoy your afternoon," Griffith said. His eyes halted at her chest.

The way Blake's hand pressed tighter, drawing her closer against him, answered her question.

Waiting in the restaurant entry for their cab, she could still feel Griffith's eyes on them. She turned and he smiled, then reached into his pocket and pulled out a cell phone.

In the cab at last, she had a pretty good idea what Blake wanted. She had a damn good idea of what she wanted. But was it right? Yet when his hand found hers, she didn't let go.

"The hostess—Melina—seemed to know you. Are you—?"

"Am I what? Hollingsworth Industries owns the restaurant. I negotiated the deal. Dwight doesn't meddle—they had a good product but didn't know how to market it. They were proud but we convinced them it was to everyone's benefit to sell. A bank wasn't going to loan them any more money. So, they run the place, we offer guidance and Dwight takes a share of the profits."

"So—you and Melina—?"

He looked at her, confused, then understanding swept over his face. "You thought—? Melina? Sweetheart, she's married, has three kids. She belly dances there on Friday nights and I'll admit I enjoyed the show once or twice, but—"

She had to be blushing furiously now. Not soon enough, the cab pulled up to the front of Blake's building. With effort, she met his gaze. "If you'll give me the key, I'll take the food up and you can get back to the office."

"Is that what you want?"

"No," she whispered.

Chapter Nineteen

Blake handed the cabbie two twenties, which was as much tip as fare, but he didn't have anything smaller, and no way he was going to waste a second waiting for change. He wasn't sure if the cabbie's snaggle-toothed grin was a "thank you" or a "way to go".

Strategically holding the doggie bag in front of him with one hand, Blake held Kelli's with the other. Small, with slender fingers, it almost disappeared inside his larger one. He'd seen the way those fingers whirled over a keyboard and the thought of them touching him— Stop. If he thought of it any longer, this might be the shortest encounter of his life.

"Great day," Lamonte, the doorman said as they walked past the door he held for them. "Makes you want to be outside enjoying the sunshine."

Good grief, was there sarcasm in that comment? He gave a polite nod in agreement and hurried Kelli toward the elevators, which, of course, were both on the top floors. Hell and damn. Why didn't he live on three instead of sixteen so they could walk up? He heard the clacking of tiny toenails on the tile behind him and smelled a cloud of rosewater. Great. Mrs. Feldman and her poodle. Barely topping five feet and almost as wide, Mrs. Feldman wheezed into place beside him, her curly blue hair taking a moment longer to come to a halt. And she lived on twelve, so she'd be with them almost all the way.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Windsor." She made no pretenses about giving Kelli the once-over from behind her round spectacles.

"Hi, Mrs. Feldman. How's Skeeter?"

"Fine. She just got back from the groomer."

That would explain the pink toenails and matching ribbon on the dog's topknot.

Kelli let go of his hand and crouched by the dog, making kissing noises. "Hello, there, cutie." She looked at Mrs. Feldman. "I'm Emily, Blake's cousin."

"Pleasameetcha."

Skeeter, who had never regarded him with anything more than a bored sniff of his ankles, writhed with pleasure under Kelli's touch and flopped down on her back for a belly rub. He curbed the temptation to join the dog.

By the time the elevator arrived, so had four more tenants, including old Mr. Norris from eighteen. Although Blake's frustration level had escalated, his arousal hadn't diminished in the least. He pulled Kelli to the corner of the car and turned her so she stood in front of him, her backside against him. Fire surged through the fabric of his trousers. She leaned into his erection and he slipped a hand around her middle and pulled her tighter. He glued his eyes to the lighted floor indicator over the door.

The elevator stopped at five and the doors opened to let out a woman with a toddler. Kelli started to step aside and he tightened his grip to keep her in front of him. He had no doubt Mrs. Feldman suspected Kelli was hardly a cousin, but there was no need for him to stand on display at full attention. When the car stopped at eight, Kelli wriggled her hips and he almost dropped the doggie bag. "Stop that," he hissed in her ear.

She craned her neck around and grinned. "Stop what? This?" She ground her buttocks against him some more. He glanced at Mrs. Feldman and Mr. Norris, who quickly averted their eyes and stared at the floor display.

When they stopped at twelve, Mrs. Feldman, cradling Skeeter, gave a wink to Kelli as she exited the elevator. "Enjoy your visit, Emily."

"Thanks," Kelli said.

The doors closed before either could say anything else. Mr. Norris moved to the other corner of the car, Kelli resumed her grinding, and he thought he might die. "You have any idea what you're doing to me?" he whispered.

"Hmm. You mean this?" She pressed harder. "Maybe."

"Well, stop it, or there's not going to be anything else happening when we get home."

Finally, the car stopped and after what seemed like an hour, the doors separated at a snail's pace on his floor. He could swear he heard Mr. Norris choking with laughter as Kelli yanked on Blake's arm, pulling him out of the elevator and down the hall.

At the door, she had her hand in his pocket, fishing for his keys. Somehow, her fingers ignored the keys, finding something else to occupy them. He stopped breathing. Her touch was butterfly gentle, teasing and tormenting. He twisted her to face him and slanted his lips over hers, dropping the leftovers at their feet. With one hand, he caressed her face. With the other he took her wrist and removed her hand from his pocket. His keys were hooked around her finger and without breaking the kiss, he slipped them off and somehow got them into the lock.

One foot found the bag of food and slid it inside the door. She pushed it shut behind them and he leaned against it, cupping her buttocks and lifting her to his waist. Their tongues explored, danced, entwined. She tasted exotic, faint hints of garlic and spices.

He slid his hands under her blazer, seeking her waist where her sweater tucked into her slacks. "Too many clothes." He lowered her to the floor and worked her blazer off her shoulders while she did the same with his suit coat.

Her green eyes glistened, darkened by her enlarged pupils. Her tongue ran across her lips. Her chest rose and fell with her accelerated breathing. His fingers found her nipples, straining against her sweater through her bra. When he tried to pull her sweater out from her slacks, she stiffened. Pulled his hands away.

He gave himself a mental kick. He was a jerk. Slow down. How many days ago had Scumbag hovered over her? He tried not to think of Robert. Deep breath. Gently, he took her hand. "Let's go to the bedroom." Fingers locked, they strolled through his apartment, around the glass bricks to the space he always thought of as his bedroom, although it was more accurately a bedroom area.

That's right. Slow down. Keep thinking about mundane things. Don't think about what it's going to feel like to lie on that bed with her.

At the edge of the bed, Kelli kicked off her shoes. When the hell had she painted her toenails bright red? That was *not* slowing things down. He toed off his own shoes and stood beside her. Kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her nose, her cheeks. Her lips parted, and he accepted the invitation, brushing her lips, nibbling. Not until her tongue met his did he deepen the kiss.

He took her hands and placed them on his chest. Covering her hands with his, he could feel his own heart beating through them. She fingered his shirt buttons. He shifted his hands to her shoulders and watched her unfasten each one, toying with the hair on

his chest as she progressed from one to the next. Each hair sent its own electrical current coursing to his groin. She traced the red line on his chest where Scumbag's knife had done its damage. The butterfly strips she'd applied were still there. His breath hitched, but he resisted the urge to touch her. "I'm fine."

She kept her eyes on his as she tugged the shirt from his trousers and loosed the final buttons. He slipped the shirt off and it fluttered to the floor.

He touched her sweater. "May I?"

She nodded. He worked it over her head and she maneuvered her arms free.

"Not as sexy as buttons," she said.

There was no fear in her eyes. No hesitation. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra. Before she could shrug it off, he touched one thin strap. "Let me. Please?"

Another nod. He ran his finger along the satin strap from her shoulder to the lace trim that topped each of her warm, round breasts. He saw her nipples peak even harder beneath the satin, but he kept his fingers on the lace. Her eyes closed and her breathing quickened. With the pad of his thumb, he circled her areola, still avoiding that straining nubbin. She wiggled, trying to get herself positioned under his teasing thumb.

"You like that?" he whispered into her neck. She smelled delicious—a new scent that had arrived with Emily.

He reached for the straps, lifting them from her shoulders. She extended her arms, letting the garment slide down. He tossed it on top of his shirt and she took his hand and cupped it under her breast. With half a step they were against the bed and he sat down, pulling her across him onto his lap. One hand moved up and down her back, the other traced lazy circles around her nipples. Not the rosy pink he was used to. Darker, latte colored.

With a start, he remembered she'd had a child. Had been married. He wondered who he'd be with once they lay together. The cautious Kelli? A compassionate Casey? Or a refined Emily? Maybe a combination of all three.

He lowered his head to her breast and took one of those gorgeous nipples into his mouth. Laved it with his tongue. Felt her squirm on his lap. Her fingers tangled through his hair, pressing him tighter against her. He reached for her waistband. How did those damn pants open? He felt no button. Releasing his head, her hands pushed him away, fumbled with a side fastener. He heard a zipper release and his fingers felt the sleek satin of her panties. Her hips lifted enough for him to slide her slacks down her legs and she kicked them the rest of the way off. Somehow, she got her hands between them and worked at his belt buckle.

"Wait," he said. He lifted her from his lap and stood. "Better?"

She reached forward, unfastened his belt, unbuttoned his trousers and had his zipper lowered before he'd taken two breaths. And then she stopped. He held his breath, waiting. Slowly, she inched his trousers down his legs, kisses following them

past his knees, to his ankles. Struggling to keep his balance, he lifted each foot and kicked his pants away. She smiled.

"What?"

"Nothing. It's—well, guys look funny wearing socks without pants."

"I can fix that." He sat down again and tugged them off.

"I like the silk boxers. Sexy. So's your friend. But he seems to want to get out."

"Why don't you take care of it?"

"Eventually."

"Sweetheart, I have to be honest with you. I haven't had sex in over six weeks and I've wanted you since my fever broke. Eventually might be a little optimistic on your part."

"More like six years for me. I'll keep up." She reached for him, got a finger under the elastic of his shorts and released him. Kissed him.

"Wait." At least that's what he thought he said. He sped to the bathroom and dug a handful of condoms from his leather kit. Hurrying back, he dropped them on the night table. Kelli had pulled the bedcovers down and she waited for him in the center of the bed.

They knelt facing each other, and he nuzzled her breasts again, fingers circling one nipple, teeth scraping the other. She moaned with pleasure and reached between his thighs, fondling him with a touch so light he thought he'd scream. He cupped her through her panties, feeling the heat and dampness through the thin fabric. She lifted her hips, granting him more access. His finger teased the soft curls, then slipped inside. She rubbed herself along his finger, and he stroked deeper. Her breath came in shallow pants—he wasn't sure he was breathing at all, except he could hear it intermixed with gasps and groans. He reached behind him, his fingers desperately seeking one of the foil packets he'd set out. Found it, ripped it open with his teeth and covered himself.

She'd removed her panties. He shifted Kelli to her back and straddled her. Her eyes squinted shut and he felt her tense, despite her obvious desire. Crap. Of course. He flipped to his back and pulled her atop him.

"Open your eyes. Look at me. It's Blake. Say my name." He took his hands and clasped them on the pillow above his head. "You're in charge."

"Blake." Her eyes stared into his. "I want this. Really." Her voice was tremulous.

"I know. Take your time."

She leaned forward, pressing her breasts to his mouth. He suckled, nipped and teased. With a shaky exhale, she reached for him and guided him between her legs. Grasping for control, he resisted the need to thrust into her, letting her take him at her pace. Hot, wet, but so tight. Almost too tight. Afraid?

He was torn. If he stopped, would she feel like a failure? Never be able to let herself love or be loved? Or if he didn't stop, was he making things worse? Crap. This

was way too much thinking for someone with no blood supply to the brain. Right now, the closest things to coherent thoughts were, *God, yes!* and *Not yet, not yet, please, not yet.*

* * * * *

Kelli heard Blake's voice, calm and soothing. "Look at me. It's Blake. Say my name." Over and over, he repeated the words, lying beneath her, barely moving. Blake. She wanted him, had ached for him, knew he wasn't Robert, but when he'd positioned himself above her, so big, so powerful, the fear came crashing over her like a storm surge. Her mind wanted him, wanted this, but her body was rebelling.

"Look at me. It's Blake. Say my name."

Exhaling a shaky breath, she did as he asked. And when she gazed into his eyes, she saw him. Blake. Saw the unabashed desire in their molten chocolate depths. Knots loosened, tensions dissolved and she lowered herself onto him, took him easily inside her. She moved slowly, rediscovering sensations, exploring long-forgotten pleasures.

Golden afternoon sun streamed in through the window, bounced off the glass bricks, reflecting the sheen of sweat on Blake's face. She rocked, moving faster, her gaze intent on his. Knowing he was struggling for control heightened her arousal. That she could wield power over him, could be in control, sent waves of desire through her. Yet she slowed the pace. Watched his hands flex, aware he wanted to touch her, but respected her needs.

She reached for his hands. Brought them to her breasts. "Touch me," she whispered. And when his palms caressed her breasts, his thumbs rubbing circles over her nipples, pleasure shot through her, a pleasure she hoped would never end. Unbidden, her hips moved faster and Blake found her rhythm and matched it.

She leaned forward, brought her lips close to his ear. "Are we in a hurry?" she murmured, slowing the pace again, rising above him, almost breaking their bond, then taking him back, an inch at a time. She adjusted her strokes so his thickness rubbed against that part of her where all sensation centered, faster, until there was nothing else and oblivion beckoned from a hair's breadth away.

"Sweetheart, you're killing me." His words were labored, his expression almost pained. "I—I can't—Oh, God—" and his climax filled her. His spasms of pleasure triggered her own release and her cries joined his. She collapsed onto his chest and his arms wrapped around her until she felt they were one person.

Neither spoke. They lay together, still joined, until their breathing slowed to normal. When they separated, he rolled to his side and spooned her into him. She quivered as he nuzzled her neck.

"I'm not sure if I should say I'm sorry or thank you," he whispered. "I can usually last more than forty-five seconds."

"It was enough for me." She wondered why he didn't understand how much of a turn-on his lack of control was—the realization he was at her mercy was almost enough to send her over the edge by itself. "But we can try for a full minute next time, if you like."

"I'd like. Very much."

"Hold me for a while? Or do you have to get back to work?"

"Actually, I told them I was going to be working from home the rest of the day."

He put his arm over her waist and she clasped his hand in hers, snuggling it between her breasts.

"You had this whole thing planned?" She ran her thumb up and down his fingers.

"Mmph. Not planned. Just left my options open."

"Options? Well, that sounds romantic, Mr. Executive."

"How about I hoped, dreamed, longed for this moment?" He nuzzled her neck.

"Better." She relaxed, aware of his warmth, his steady breathing and the comfort of his heartbeat against her back. Right before she drifted into a sated doze, she realized she couldn't—or wouldn't—remember the last time she'd felt so secure, so safe. Memories of Charles had no place here, nor did they intrude. She was with Blake.

She didn't know what time it was, but the sun hadn't disappeared when she became aware of Blake's fingers stroking her breasts and his hardness pressing against her buttocks. She did know that this time, he lasted a lot longer than a minute.

At six p.m. they stood under the hot spray of the shower. Blake stood behind her, lathering her body. His hands, slick with sandalwood scented soap, caressed as they slid over her body.

"If you keep that up," she said, "I'll pass out and drown."

"Can't have that. And I think you've drained me." His hands disappeared for a moment. "Duck your head," he said.

"What?"

"Get your hair wet. I want to wash it."

Strong, nimble fingers lathered and massaged until she moaned with pleasure. He patted her buttocks. "Rinse."

"Remind me to leave you a big tip."

"The pleasure was all mine." He spun her around and pulled her against him while the water cascaded over them.

She laughed. "I can tell. I thought you were drained."

"What can I say? You bring me to life."

"Much as I hate to disappoint your friend, I don't think I can handle another round. Rain check?" She tilted her face up and he bent to kiss her. Before they both choked on the shower stream, he reached behind her and turned off the water.

"Fair enough. But I'm going to hold you to it. Hell, I want to hold you to me. For hours. Forever." He opened the glass door of the shower enclosure and reached for a towel. She let him wrap her in its oversize plushness, then watched him grab a second for himself. He started at his head, towel drying his hair, then worked his way down his body. His magnificent body. She'd forgotten about the cuts at his torso and she stopped him to inspect them.

"The bandages can probably come off," she said. "Does it hurt much?"

"Soap stings a little, that's all. I can handle it."

"I wish I knew how Jack is."

"Does he know where we are?"

"No. If someone asks, he doesn't have to lie." The towel fit twice around her body and she padded into the bedroom looking for her clothes. She found clean panties in her bag and when she stepped into them, Blake stood beside her, his towel hooked around his hips, holding a silk shirt—the one she'd left lying on a chair.

"I've been thinking about you in this."

She took the shirt from him and let the towel fall to her feet. The sleeves were still rolled up and she slipped into them, savoring the feel of the expensive fabric against her skin. Braless, she felt her nipples pressing against the silk. She watched Blake as she fastened each button, his lips parted and his face flushed.

"God, you're beautiful," he said.

"Don't. I'm not. It sounds like a line—like you're hitting on me."

He stepped forward and straightened her collar. "It's a little late for that, don't you think? And you are beautiful. I can't imagine anyone more appealing." He kissed her, his lips brushing against hers—a gossamer touch, yet she felt the passion.

"I'd like to dry my hair," she said, sidling past him into the bathroom. She concentrated on the drone of the hair dryer, wishing it could drown out her thoughts. Riding in the cab from the restaurant, she'd convinced herself she would succumb to her physical desires. That she needed to prove she could feel again. Nothing more. That being one in Blake's string of women was fine.

But she hadn't bargained for how deeply he'd make her feel. That he'd forged a bond with their lovemaking. Her breath caught. In the cab, she'd been thinking about having sex, not making love, with the man. She should have known she couldn't have sex unless there was something much deeper behind it. Casey hadn't. Why should Kelli?

She shut off the hair dryer, fluffed her hair and peeked out the bathroom door. Blake had left the bedroom. She found him standing behind the kitchen counter, pouring two glasses of straw-colored wine, still wearing nothing but a towel.

He extended a glass to her. "It's a Clos du Bois Sauvignon Blanc."

She remembered when they'd shared a bottle of wine at the cabin. How careful he'd been not to touch her. Definitely not hitting on her. But today, she'd certainly sent

enough signals. This was why she preferred her reclusive lifestyle. No questions, no confusing. Does he or doesn't he? Should I or shouldn't I? Get up every day, do the work, and take satisfaction in that. None of the anxiety. None of the pain.

Yet, she admitted, none of the exhilaration either. She accepted the glass, letting her fingers slide down his. And when she felt that spark pass between them, she realized the exhilaration might be worth some of the pain. Might. But she wasn't ready to decide and his rugged chest, with the red reminder of what he'd gone through for her was too unsettling. She had to break things off. One way or another, people she loved died.

"Umm . . . You can get dressed now. I'm done in there."

His expression was unreadable and he broke their gaze. She heard a drawer open and he dropped a stack of papers on the counter. "Pick something. Unless you want to go out. I'm afraid I kind of destroyed our leftovers when I kicked the bag inside the door."

She smiled, remembering their haste. She looked at the pile of menus. "No, this will be fine."

Chapter Twenty

Blake picked up the hair dryer and aimed its hot airflow across his chest before moving it up to his head. Once more, he remembered why he never brought women to his place. Why he never stayed the night at theirs. The "afterwards" was too damn awkward. Let 'em know up front it's not going any further than some mutual itch-scratching. Some very pleasant, hot, itch-scratching, but not the sort that ended up picking out china patterns.

He'd vowed never to end up like his father, who had lost his wife and never fully recovered. Saddled with two young boys, doing his best, but unable to let anyone else inside. Someone who might have cared about them. Always moving, always avoiding the chance to settle down where someone might make him remember what it had been like to love someone completely.

He flung the towel on the dressing room floor and dug a pair of plaid flannel drawstring pants from the bottom drawer of his built-in wardrobe. Stepping into them, he couldn't help but laugh. The last time he'd worn them, he'd had a whopping case of the flu—and right now, he didn't feel much different. Six-thirty p.m. might not be the "next morning" but that was a mere technicality.

Once she'd relaxed, Kelli had been wild with passion. He realized she'd made him give everything of himself. The part he'd never released before—the part he kept buried so he could walk away and not wake up next to a woman the next morning.

He pulled a black t-shirt over his head. Holy crap, he was falling in love with her. And suddenly his knees felt like mashed potatoes and he had to lean against the

wardrobe to catch his breath. Scratch falling. The fall was over. He'd hit ground zero like a sack of potatoes. Somewhere between being drugged, hit on the head, sliced with a knife, and pretending to be someone he'd never heard of, he'd dropped his defenses and Kelli had sneaked through. Worked her way inside through some unseen crack in the shell he kept between himself and his emotions—the shell that made him so effective in the boardroom.

As for being able to read people—Kelli was a chameleon. He never knew exactly what was her and what was the skin she put on for the rest of the world. Leave it to him to fall in love with the one person on the planet who could keep her thoughts and emotions from him.

When she'd come out of the bathroom, scrubbed and fresh-faced, wearing his shirt, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, hem hanging below her knees, she'd looked so pure and innocent and so scared of something. Not of being discovered. He'd bet his next paycheck on that. Of him?

After they'd bared their souls to each other all afternoon? And it hadn't been one-sided. She might have been hesitant at first, but she'd held nothing back after the first time. Was she regretting it? He remembered the look on her face when she'd climaxed. For that alone, he had no regrets. Putting on his best boardroom face, he stepped back to the living room.

Kelli sat on the couch, swirling the wine in her glass. She looked up at his approach, leaned over and picked a menu from the coffee table. He recognized it immediately as his favorite Chinese.

She extended it toward him. "Anything here seems fine. Maybe the cashew chicken?"

"Excellent choice. One of my favorites."

"Yeah, well the big red circle around it was kind of a giveaway. That and the Speed Dial 7 next to their phone number."

He almost sat down beside her, but it was as if she'd erected a force field around herself. Her own boardroom façade. Instead, he went into the kitchen and phoned in the order.

"Is Quan on delivery tonight?"

"Yes, sir, Mr. Windsor. I'll have him there within half an hour."

He thanked her and picked up the glass of wine he'd left on the counter. Kelli had moved the blanket and pillow he had used last night to the center of the couch and it sat between them like a barrier. Almost grateful for the distance it created, he sat at the opposite end.

"I need to review some papers for work," he said.

"No problem. I'm sorry I made you miss half a day at the office." She buried her nose in the wineglass.

He shoved the blanket and pillow to the floor. "Listen to me, Kelli. You did not

make me do anything. Everything that happened—I wanted it. And I'm sure you did, too. Look me in the eye and tell me if I'm wrong."

Her eyes flashed. "Yes, I wanted it. And it's been pretty obvious you wanted it. But that doesn't mean it was the right thing to do. I had something to prove. To myself. We had a great time."

"Kelli—"

"It's over, it's done. No regrets, okay?" Her chin was lifted, her gaze steady. "Since you said Hollingsworth wasn't behind Scumbag, and he bought your story that I wasn't Casey, I should leave. I can get a flight out tomorrow morning and go back to EnviroCon. I owe Stockbridge. Big-time."

His stomach dropped six stories, but he ignored it and kept his tone neutral. "Is that what you want?"

"It's what I have to do. I owe you a lot, too, Blake. Much bigger time. But I have to put my life back together. And you have your work. Go back and tell yourself you're doing good deeds while you put money in Dwight Hollingsworth's pocket."

Her sarcastic tone surprised him. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Not every deal is as happy-ever-after as Phoenician Garden is it? Or do all your deals end up with everyone winning? Nobody ever loses?"

"Sweetheart, you're not making sense."

She waved a file folder in his face. "Whittaker Candies. Your next project. Have you looked at it?"

"Some, yes. Why?"

"Are these your notes?" She pointed to some hand-written notations.

"Yes again."

"Reduce workforce by fifteen percent.' With—let's see—eighty-seven employees, that's thirteen people out of jobs. People with families—kids to put through school, elderly parents to provide for. It doesn't bother you to put people out of work? You think if you call it fifteen percent, they're not real?"

"Better thirteen people lose their jobs than all eighty-seven when the company goes belly-up."

He pushed away the faceless individuals who haunted his dreams sometimes. When the good of the many meant hurting the few. Of the people there was no room for under a Hollingsworth takeover. He knew they existed, but refused to let them into his thoughts. Only rarely were they the people he'd meet at the conference table. When he toured a facility, he never allowed himself to connect names and faces with the employees.

Kelli went on. "Hollingsworth seems to get a decent cut. And I imagine your take isn't too shabby, either. Supports your glitzy lifestyle where people bring food to your door. I wonder how many of those thirteen would have jobs if you did a little more compromising."

"I told you what I did for a living. You didn't seem to mind when I was saving your cute little ass."

"Maybe I'm thinking more clearly now that my cute little ass isn't on the line." Her voice quavered and she stormed past him and around the corner.

This couldn't be about thirteen people losing their jobs—maybe losing their jobs, because he'd barely had a chance to analyze the statistics. He heard the bathroom door slam and he sank to the couch. This was why he never stuck around. Sex made women crazy, analyzing everything afterwards. He thought about going after her and telling her how he felt about her. Right. He could hear her answer.

That's your dick talking, Windsor. Of course you love me. We just fucked our brains out and you liked it and you want more and you'll say what you think I need to hear to get it.

Well, she probably would say it more politely, but he'd know what she meant. He swallowed the glass of wine without tasting it. The doorbell buzzed. Quan had made good time with their dinner. His appetite had fled. He dragged himself to the door. Opening it without a thought, he stood face to face with a pumped-up African-American. Hardly the slight Asian Quan. The man smiled, revealing a gold-rimmed front tooth with a star imbedded in it. He wore black denims, a black polo and held a cardboard box with two brown paper bags inside.

"Your dinner, Mr. Windsor. One Kung Pao, one cashew chicken." The man took two steps into the apartment.

"Where's Quan?" Blake glanced at his watch. Floyd would be on duty in the lobby and he rarely paid attention to deliveries.

The man gave a half-smile and scanned the apartment. "Last minute mix-up—he was on another run, so they sent me."

If he'd learned anything lately, it was that trust wasn't something to be doled out in vast quantities.

"Wait there a second." Without turning, he called out, much louder than he needed to. "Emily! My wallet's in the bottom drawer of the night table, darling. Can you bring it out, please? Dinner's waiting."

* * * * *

Kelli stopped folding her clothes. Blake could get his own damn wallet, which, as he damn well knew, was in the damn pocket of his damn trousers—the ones she'd pulled down his damn legs a few hours ago.

Grumbling to herself, she took two steps toward his slacks and realization hit her like a bucket of ice. He knew where his wallet was. And he'd called her Emily. Emily darling. She hurried around the bed and opened the drawer. A Smith and Wesson. Something was wrong out there. She checked it, found it loaded.

"Coming!" she called.

Holding the gun in both hands, she walked slowly around the wall. Blake sat on the arm of the couch, watching a large African-American man just inside the door. The man held what looked like a delivery of their dinner. Yeah and Scumbag had looked like a park ranger.

"Keep your hands on the box," she said to the man.

"Hey, lady," the man said. "It's only dinner. You owe me eighteen-forty-seven, but I'm happy to hand it over. If you can't pay for it, no problem. Honest. I'll make it up to the restaurant."

"Check him out," she said to Blake without taking her eyes off the man. For someone with a gun pointed at him, Delivery Man didn't look particularly nervous.

She watched Blake step forward and pat him down. "No wallet. Why am I not surprised?" He slid his hands under the man's open jacket and reached behind him.

"Well, lookie here." Blake displayed an automatic, pointed it at Delivery Man.

"Hey, it's for self-defense," the man proclaimed. "You know, it's dangerous out there."

"Hell, it's dangerous in here," Blake said. "And what's this I feel under your shirt?" Blake's hands lifted the man's polo shirt, revealing a length of rope wrapped around his waist. "You're not going to tell me you carry this in case your belt breaks, are you?"

Blake removed the rope. "I've got him now, Sweetheart. I think there's some duct tape in the broom closet—beside the fridge. I'm not all that good with knots."

"Glad you watch MacGyver, too." She hurried to find the tape. Now that Blake had things under control, her hands shook and her knees threatened to give way.

She found the tape and brought it back to Blake. "What are we going to do with him?" She started taping the man's wrists behind his back. "We can't exactly call the cops."

"Not from here. I'll bet my phone is bugged and they intercepted the call to the restaurant. Or maybe someone bugged the whole effing apartment." He looked at the man. "I don't suppose there's really food in here?"

"You wouldn't eat it, if there was, would you?" she asked.

"Definitely not."

"Who knows how long there's been a bug in here. Someone could have done it easily enough while you were gone."

Blake shoved the man onto the couch and she started to tape his ankles.

Blake kept the coffee table between him and the man. "Why are you here?"

"To rob you. What else?"

"In that case, I suggest you have your gun more accessible before you knock on the door," Kelli said.

"And why don't I believe you?" Blake didn't lower the gun. "Who sent you?"

"Nobody."

"Try again."

"John Smith," Delivery Man said.

"He's being awfully cooperative, don't you think?" she asked. Her hands had stopped trembling so badly now that the man was secure.

"Oh, yeah. A picture of cooperation." Blake's voice was controlled fury. His eyes were slits. "Look, buster. I'm abso-fucking-lutely fed up with people coming after me. Or were you after her?" Blake stepped toward Delivery Man and placed the gun barrel against his forehead.

"Hey, take it easy. I don't know the guy. He says his name is John Smith and he transfers money into my bank account when I do a job."

"And, as I asked before, exactly what is the job you're doing?"

"Come in here, rough you two up a little, tie you up, make it look like a robbery. Call when I was done."

"You got the number?" Blake asked. "My finger gets tense when I get mad. I'd hate to have your brains all over my wall. I might lose my cleaning deposit."

The man recited the number and she wrote it on a slip of paper. She thought for a moment and wrote it on a second slip and shoved it in the man's pocket. "We need to put him somewhere, then call the cops. They'll find this number on him. I doubt he's going to tell them he was in this apartment." She glared at the man. "Are you?"

"No. No. I ain't saying nothing."

The doorbell rang.

"Crap," Blake said. "That's probably Quan with our real dinner."

"I'll get your wallet." She rushed back to the bedroom and found Blake's trousers, his wallet still in the pocket. Back in the living room, she stood guard over Delivery Man while Blake managed to pay Quan without opening the door far enough for him to see inside. Blake put the food on the kitchen counter, leaned his arms against it and lowered his head. When he looked up, he seemed in control.

"Okay," he said. "Let's figure this one out. We can't have him connected to us. We can't let anyone know he's succeeded or failed. I figure we have maybe an hour, tops, before someone tries to check up on him."

"What about the doorman?" she asked. "Will he help?"

"I don't think he'd be able to lie for us. I don't want him to. What about if we schlep this creep to the laundry room? Or the fitness center? Somewhere any tenant could find him and call the cops."

"For a quick plan, that sounds like it might work. But it would be better if he could be caught robbing someone else's apartment."

"I can't get a handle on that one." Blake straightened up and looked at Delivery Man. "You know anyone named McGregor?"

The man shook his head, but not before Kelli saw a flicker of recognition. She

looked at Blake. He'd seen it, too. "So much for the three-attacks-in-three-cities-is-too-much theory," she said to him.

Blake stormed over and grabbed Delivery Man's shirt. "Oh, so you and Scumbag are acquainted. How do you know him?"

"I didn't say I did."

Blake spoke between clenched jaws. "You didn't have to. I repeat. How do you know him?"

"Served some time together."

"Does McGregor know John Smith, too?" Blake asked.

"Hell, how would I know? Haven't seen the fucker since he got out. And that's the truth."

Blake went on. "I'm tired of this. I'm going to take him to the laundry room on ten. Get me a knife so I can cut his ankles loose. I'm sure he's going to walk nicely."

"Give me a minute to put my slacks on. I'm going with you," she said. "I can make sure there's nobody in there."

Blake flashed her a smile. "So, we're together again?"

She managed to return the smile. "Like white on rice."

Chapter Twenty-One

Blake sat in a molded plastic chair in the bus station. Kelli slouched three seats away and two rows in front of him, wearing sweats and a baseball cap. She had insisted on a circuitous route, buying a train ticket from Chicago to Spokane using Jack's EnviroCon credit card, but taking a bus to Madison instead. And then getting off and buying tickets to Champaign.

Incognito in his handyman clothes, he stared at the scuffed linoleum on the floor, playing a mental connect-the-dots with the gray spots of dried gum. The smell of burned coffee, sweat and urine carried him back. How many years had it been since he'd been in a bus terminal? He and his brother, sitting on chairs exactly like these, their feet too short to reach the ground. Their old man between them, delaying rather than preventing the inevitable sibling fights brought on by boredom, lack of sleep and frustration at picking up stakes one more time.

Their feet rested on the battered suitcases—one each—holding everything they owned, not that they'd have been allowed to own more than would fit in their suitcases, even if they could have afforded it.

Chins up, boys. Work's awaiting. And where there's work, there's hope. I've got a good feeling about this one.

Blake's stomach growled and he thought of the Chinese food he and Kelli had shoved in the refrigerator before they'd dashed away. He eyed the vending machines. Aside from the prices, they hadn't changed much since he'd been a kid. Oh, they

hadn't gone hungry, but he hardly remembered ever feeling full. The old man could stretch a dollar, but the vending machine fare in bus depots rarely matched his budget. Blake had been in his teens before it had dawned on him that on those occasions when they'd been allowed to buy a treat from the machine, or celebrate a birthday with more than a fast food burger, it had meant his dad had skipped a meal.

The familiar angst clenched his gut and he blinked tears back before they had a chance to form.

Can't change what happened, boys. All we can do is move forward and make things better.

A little over three hours ago, he and Kelli had dropped Delivery Man into a thankfully empty laundry room, tying him, spread-eagled, to the legs of the Formica folding and sorting counter. By now, he was sure, someone would have found him.

This was beginning to be a replay of their escape from Scumbag, although this time, instead of endless flights of stairs, they'd taken the elevator to the second floor and only walked the last one to avoid going out the front door where the doorman would see them.

Delivery Man didn't talk. Whoever was paying him—and probably Scumbag—commanded loyalty, in the form of bail bonds and high-priced legal representation, he'd bet.

Whoever was behind this had to be desperate to attack again, of that much Blake was certain. Despite their joking about it, three attacks in three cities was a flashing neon sign that someone wanted something. It had to be about more than Robert. Too bad he had no clue what.

He glanced up at Kelli. Even though her back was to him, he could tell she was checking the door regularly. He knew she was itching to get her fingers onto a keyboard, that the phone number for John Smith was burning a hole in her pocket, but after a rousing few minutes of heated discussion, they'd agreed to wait until they were out of Chicago.

"Hollingsworth," she'd insisted. "He knew you were here."

"Jack Stockbridge could have found us easily enough—we used his credit card for the flight."

"Maybe they're in it together."

"What about Thornton?"

Which was why they were taking the bus, paying cash, and sitting two rows apart in the Madison depot.

He saw Kelli's head jerk upward and followed her gaze to a television set flicking a static-filled, soundless newscast. Dwight Hollingsworth, his wife, and Vance Griffith stood together, their hands joined overhead. Things were getting underway for the next gubernatorial race.

A garbled mechanical announcement crackled from the loudspeaker and he

reached for his duffel. Kelli was already standing, her gym bag slung over one shoulder and a small rolling case she'd borrowed from him at her side. They boarded the bus in silence.

Barely half-full, the bus afforded a choice of seats. Kelli stopped by an empty row and accepted his help in wrestling the case into the overhead bin. The gym bag, which contained her precious laptop, she set on the seat beside her, one hand resting protectively on its top, as if to tell any other passengers she'd move it out of the way, but only if there weren't any other seats. He sighed and took the aisle seat across from her.

He saw her anger, her frustration, and her strength. Thankful for the last, he leaned back and closed his eyes. She'd put her trust in him this time, letting him call his brother.

How long since he and Brian had really spoken? Their relationship had degenerated to Christmas cards and birthday phone calls, but Brian hadn't hesitated to drop everything and help.

"I'll be at the station to meet you," he'd said. "Nobody's using the old place. It's yours."

Which, in fact, wasn't quite the truth anymore, but he didn't want to think of that. Too many memories. He hadn't told Brian he'd deeded the property to Torrie, Brian and Stacey's four-year-old daughter. He thought of his niece. She'd been five days old the last time he'd seen her. All red and wrinkled, but with a blue-eyed gaze that could melt a glacier. Would Brian have her along? No, it was too late for a little one to be out.

He sensed more passengers trickling onto the bus, spreading out among the empty seats. With the whoosh of the hydraulic doors closing, and the rumble of the engine kicking into gear, the bus pulled out of the station.

* * * * *

Kelli found her portable CD player and inserted a Natalie Merchant disc. Adjusting the earphones, she reclined the seat and closed her eyes. There was something itching at the back of her brain, and she'd find it. For now, she'd rest. Maybe even sleep. She'd hesitated about accepting help from Blake's brother, but Blake had sworn Hollingsworth didn't know anything about Brian. A risk, but for now, it was one they'd decided to take. It was a place that didn't require a hotel, airplane, or intervention from Jack Stockbridge.

Jack. Shit, he couldn't have set her up. He wouldn't. But what if someone had come back and forced him—hurt him again? She pushed the thought away. Blake had been right. Better not to call. Not while there was any doubt—even if all the doubt was his. Her fists clenched involuntarily and she forced a deep, relaxing breath. The only

thing traceable was a train ticket to Spokane and that was a good thing, since they were going the other way. Everything else had been done using a disposable cell phone and not from Blake's possibly bugged apartment. They'd paid cash for the bus tickets. Worrying wasn't going to answer any questions.

She let her mind float with Natalie's melodies and drifted into sleep. From time to time, she was aware of the bus stopping, taking on and disgorging passengers, but nobody intruded on her space.

A hand at her shoulder jerked her awake. She blinked and looked across the aisle.

"About ten more minutes," Blake said.

"Mmh. Thanks." She yawned and checked her watch. Right on schedule. She put her CD player away, put her bag on the floor and slid to the window seat. Gazing out the window, she saw—not much. The highway was almost deserted and there was little on the roadside.

"Where the heck are we? Middle of Nowhere, USA?"

Blake slid into the seat beside her and leaned over. She inhaled at the heat he brought with him. Their eyes caught for a moment and she was glad the interior of the bus was too dark to see their brown depths.

"Almost. We're outside of Champaign."

"What are those lights?"

"Harvest lights. Tractors. They're picking the crops. This area grows corn and soybeans. Lots of corn and soybeans."

"I thought you were a city boy. What do you know about corn and soybeans?"

"I spent a few years here. I'm sure you can dig out when and why in your magic computer."

She glared at him for the sarcasm in his tone. "I told you, I only dug as far as I needed to find out who you were. I trust you to tell me anything else I should know."

By now, the bus had wheezed into the Champaign station and Blake wriggled her carry-on from the overhead. He set it in the aisle and placed his hand on her shoulder. "Sorry."

The lights inside the bus came on and she saw strain in his eyes. Averting her gaze, she slipped the strap of her bag over her shoulder. "No sweat. Let's go."

Blake stepped behind her and she heard him inhale a deep breath. It seemed to take a long time for the exhale. She'd attributed his edgy mood to being on the run again, but there was more than worry etched on his face. For all his insistence that this was the quick solution to their predicament, he didn't want to be here.

An old man dressed in a baggy brown suit shuffled down the aisle ahead of them. She waited until he'd made it safely to the ground before following. As she stepped off the bus into the cool, crisp air, there was an earthy scent that worked its way over the bus fumes. Without turning to see that Blake was behind her, she dragged the carryon

over the rough asphalt toward the glass doors of the depot. The room, virtually identical to the one they'd departed from, was empty at first glance. She stopped and faced Blake, raising her eyebrows. He inclined his head toward the vending machines.

In the shadow of the coffee machine, a man dressed in jeans and a fleece sweatshirt, unzipped to reveal a plaid shirt underneath, gave a slight dip of his chin. A lock of chestnut brown hair dipped over his eyes and he brushed it aside as he stepped forward. His face was older, more rugged than Blake's, with intense blue eyes instead of brown, but there was no denying they were related.

He stopped two paces from Blake. Shorter than his brother by two or three inches, Brian had the build of someone who got his muscles doing physical labor, not in a gym. But he wore the same wary expression she'd seen on Blake in the bus. She took a step backward as they studied each other, like dogs defining their territory.

After a long moment, both men stepped forward. Blake's brother spoke first.

"Didn't think they let high-power suits grow whiskers. Thought the long hair was already pushing the envelope."

Blake's eyes crinkled. "You're looking good. Married life agrees with you. How's Stacey?"

"She and Torrie are visiting her mom. I'm swamped with work and Stacey's a little under the weather at the moment."

Concern flashed through Blake's eyes. "Sorry to hear it—nothing serious?"

Brian grinned. "Nah. She was the same way with Torrie—puking her guts out every morning, but it passed in a few months."

Blake clapped his brother on the shoulder, then grabbed him in a close embrace. "You never said anything."

"Like you call? Besides, it's still early. We've only been sure for a couple of weeks. Don't want to jinx it."

She heard the hesitation and wondered if there had been problems with another pregnancy. She glanced at Blake, who was grinning as wide as his brother.

"Congrats, Bri. And same goes for Stacey. How's Torrie taking it?"

"We haven't said anything—like I said, it's early and nine months is an eternity to a four year old."

She watched the worry disappear from Blake's face, quickly replaced by joy and then a hint of wistful envy.

Blake looked her way. "Hey, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to ignore you." Blake gestured to her. "Brian, this is—"

She stepped forward and extended her hand. "Emily."

Blake came out of the men's room and joined his brother while they waited for Kelli.

"You gonna tell me what this is about? I can't picture you in trouble." Brian cocked his head toward the restrooms. "Her? You got something going? Mister No Strings?"

Blake shook his head. "Long story and the less you know the better. As a matter of fact, if you forget we're here, it might be smart." The thought someone might find his brother sent a new fear through him. What about Stacey, Torrie and the one on the way? Had he made a terrible mistake?

"Stacey's going to hate that she missed you."

"Yeah—so she can take my head off for being too busy to be an uncle."

"You know her—forgive and forget." The look Brian gave him said things weren't going to be quite so easy between them.

Before he was forced into the territory he'd been avoiding for years, Kelli strode out of the restroom and joined them.

"Shall we go?" she said.

Brian's gaze broke away from his and he bent down for Kelli's bags. "I'm parked down the block at the coffee shop like you said." He took Kelli's bag.

Kelli looked at him with a crooked grin. "Sorry about the James Bond approach."

Blake picked up his duffel and followed Brian out the door. Kelli shouldered her gym bag and fell in behind him, dropping back enough so Brian couldn't hear her. "If you're right that nobody with Hollingsworth Industries knows about Brian, we should be fine, you know. Hollingsworth hasn't shown himself to be very good at digging."

"Nobody knows about Brian. Trust me. And we're not staying with him, anyway." He concentrated on the rhythmic clatter of the suitcase wheels as they approached Brian's '55 Chevy Nomad. Dad's station wagon. Keeping cars running had been a survival skill both boys had learned early on—one of the things that had held them together during their teens. He helped Brian load the luggage, then pulled the front door open for her.

"You can ride shotgun," he said to Kelli.

"No, you take the front. I'm sure you and Brian have things to talk about, and I'll crash in back."

Talk to Brian. He'd managed to avoid it for years. Still, his brother had dropped everything to help them, no questions asked. Blake nodded and got into the front seat. Without glancing his way, Brian turned on the ignition.

After driving in silence for twenty minutes, Blake glanced over into the rear seat. Kelli had tucked her legs under her, pillowed her head on her jacket and appeared to be asleep.

"Car's in great shape." Blake kept his voice low, telling himself it was to keep from waking her and not to disguise the emotion that tightened his throat and made his

voice quaver.

"She still takes top prizes in car shows."

"Everything else okay?"

He saw the muscle in Brian's jaw working before he answered. "Fine. Look, you're family. I don't know what's going on, or why you feel you have to stay away, but we're here. Always were, always will be."

"It wasn't you, Bri—never was. You've got to know that."

"All I know is you couldn't get away fast enough. You made the life you wanted and if you're happy, I'm glad for you."

Blake pinched the bridge of his nose and counted to ten. "I couldn't take it anymore. It didn't mean the same to me as it did to you and ... Dad. But I shouldn't have hurt you. Or him."

"You want forgiveness? Hell, I never blamed you. Envied you for a while, even. But you're going to have to work out the rest of it with yourself."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Kelli stir. He cleared his throat. "So, how's the old place? You using it much?"

Brian's eyes darted to the rearview mirror. He must have seen Kelli sit up, because he accepted the change of subject without skipping a beat. "Now and then. Stacey and Torrie were out there not long ago while I was away on a job. Stacey'd been working on a couple of new canvases, but now that she's pregnant, the smell of paint makes her sick. There should be some basic supplies. Flip the circuit breakers and you'll have light and heat. Clean sheets, towels, and we restock the pantry before we leave. Truck's in the garage."

"If all goes well, we should be out of here in a couple of days."

His heartbeat quickened as they drove through the town where he'd spent his last years at home. The old brick buildings that comprised the town square looked exactly the same, although the trees were taller. Library, Police Station, Fire Department and City Hall.

"My God, it's hardly changed. Same old Stanfield."

Brian chuckled. "Not exactly—there's an Osco Drugs instead of Stadler's. Grant's Grocers is an IGA now. There's even talk of a Kmart. If you're serious about lying low, you might want to avoid the hardware store. Old man Vogelsberg's still there. Deaf as a post and can't see much, but I wouldn't put it past him to recognize you—or Sammy will. He took over for his dad, but the old man's always hanging around. At least he was last time I was here."

"Shit, he was ancient when we lived here."

"I think he was one of those guys who looked old at forty and stayed there. Besides, everyone looked old to us then."

"Any other surprises?" Blake asked.

"Well, Fred Bozeman's police chief."

Blake snorted. "Bozo Bozeman? Voted 'Most Likely to Spend his Life in Prison' Bozeman? You're shitting me."

"No shit. He lost about a hundred pounds and the two hundred he still carries is pure muscle."

He shook his head in disbelief. Brian turned his head toward Kelli for a moment. "You all right back there?"

Chapter Twenty-Two

Kelli watched out the window as they drove into the night. After passing through a residential neighborhood, they left the streetlights behind. She rolled down the window and sniffed the air. A damp, earthy smell overlaid with manure wafted in. Trees, illuminated by the Nomad's headlights, lined sections of the road. An occasional porch light in the distance was the only indication there were houses out here.

She heard the click when Brian flicked on the blinker and had to grab the armrest as he made a sharp left turn.

Brian apologized. "It doesn't matter how many times I've been here, the driveway always sneaks up on me at night."

In the car's headlights, she saw a wide front porch, not much different from the house at Camp Getaway, down to two Adirondack chairs flanking the front door. The house itself was a simple one-story bungalow, with a large window on either side of the door. Brian left the headlights on while they gathered their bags and climbed the four steps up to the porch. From up close, she saw the door was carved oak with a leaded glass view pane.

Brian stepped forward and put a key in the lock. He pushed the door open and handed the key ring to Blake. "Here. I've got to get back."

In the shadows, she saw the strain on Blake's face. She'd caught scraps of conversation between the brothers and although there wasn't any obvious animosity between them, they spoke across an invisible barricade.

Blake took the key and clapped his brother on the shoulder. "Thanks. For everything."

"Call when this is over, okay?"

"I'll do that." Blake stood there, one hand on the door while Brian got in the station wagon and drove away.

She carried her bags inside, stopping beside an entryway table to let her eyes adjust to the darkness.

"Wait here," Blake said. He edged behind her and a flashlight beam appeared, shining a narrow shaft of light around the room. "I'll be right back."

Moments later, lights came on in another room. Blake reappeared and flipped a switch on the wall next to the front door and light filled the space.

His eyes roamed the room and she followed his gaze to the white fabric-draped ghosts of furniture. From their shapes, she surmised she was standing in an entry hall with a living room to her right, a dining room to her left. She strolled over to what must be the couch and reached for its cover. Gathering it up, she heard Blake's sharp intake of breath.

She snapped her head around. "What? Should I leave it covered?" Underneath the cloth was a plaid sofa, its arms and base made of oak. Simple, elegant lines. She ran her fingers down the smooth wood of the armrest.

After a moment of silence, Blake said, "It's late. Bedrooms are down the hall." His voice was hushed, almost reverent. "Take your pick. I'll be a couple of minutes."

When she went to retrieve her luggage, Blake sidestepped out of her way and lowered his head. She granted him the space he seemed to need and went in search of a bed.

Her carryon wheels echoed down the hallway. Her sneakers squeaked on the wood floor. Leaving her luggage, she opened the first door. This had to be Stacey's studio, with a lingering smell of oil and turpentine. An easel and a work table sat in the middle of the room. The windows were bare, to let in maximum light. A small bathroom adjoined the space and connected to another room.

That was probably an office, although it, like the living spaces, was filled with shrouded furniture. Bookshelves lined one wall. Blake had promised her internet access—he'd said Stacey used a computer to keep in touch when she retreated to this house. She peeked under one cloth and discovered a massive oak desk, with a computer monitor on top. She'd set up here tomorrow.

It was already tomorrow. Yawning, she went back into the hall and worked her way through the rooms on the other side. A large bedroom and bath. A queen-sized bed. She pulled the quilt down, relieved to find sheets already in place. But this should be Blake's room. After opening the window to air out the mustiness, she checked out the last room.

A playroom. Child-sized table and chairs. Toys on shelves. No bed? Kelli went to find Blake what he wanted to do about sleeping arrangements. Although they'd slept together, the tension that had arisen between them made her suspect they'd do better apart. She walked back to the living room and found it empty.

Muffled sounds came from the dining room. She crept to the doorway, then stopped. Blake had uncovered the furniture, unveiling a dining room set unlike anything she'd ever seen. A pedestal table, squared off at one end, rounded on the other, was inlaid with oak panels trimmed by a much darker wood. Teak? Mahogany? The base was the same dark, rich, wood, with gracefully curved legs. Blake circled the table, his feet shuffling along the polished wood floor. He moved from one chair to the next, his fingertips tracing a carving, or running along the edge of a back.

Each of the eight chairs was different, from the wood to the style. Some with

rounded backs, some square. Some with turned legs, others straight. Some simple, some ornate. She was about to enter the room, until she saw his hands clamp down on one of the chairs—a cherry wood, she thought—and scrape it along the floor away from the table. Such a disrespectful sound for such an elegant setting. She gasped when he picked it up, as if to throw it.

"Damn you," he said in a choked voice, then put the chair down, lowered himself into it and rested his elbows on the table. "Why?" Blake gazed upward, then dropped his head into his hands. She realized from the shaking of his shoulders that he was crying. She retreated half a step, then paused. No. He'd been there for her. She crept into the room and put her hand on his shoulder.

He flinched, but didn't pull away. He seemed lost in his misery, beyond being embarrassed at his show of emotion. She kneaded the taut muscles of his neck and shoulders until the tears had run their course.

Taking his hand, she urged him to his feet. "You need to sleep." With an arm around his waist, she walked with him to the bedroom. "You want to talk? I remember someone telling me it helped."

One corner of his mouth turned upward. "Maybe another time." He sank to the edge of the bed, head drooping. She stood in front of him and when he raised his head to look at her, she straddled his lap. His arms wrapped around her, as if he might collapse without her support.

She pulled his face down to meet hers. Their kisses were slow and gentle. Clothing came off one piece at a time. Hands explored. Comfort turned to warmth and then to quiet passion.

Later, much later, she lay beside him, her head in the crook of his shoulder. Her fingers toyed with the coarse hair on his chest, still damp with sweat. "You okay?"

His chest rose as he inhaled, then sank with his exhale. "Aside from fucking up my life, yeah."

* * * * *

Blake stared into the darkness, at shadows that drifted like smoke as the tree branches outside the window swayed with the breeze. In the distance, a train whistled. Kelli's breath was warm on his chest. He waited for her to ask more questions, but she remained silent. Somehow, he knew she wouldn't press. Only the gentle play of her fingers on his chest told him she was awake.

Their lovemaking had rocked him to his core. It had crept up on him as quietly as a kitten. She'd been there, offering comfort. He'd accepted it, taking from her and she gave and gave and gave all of herself. It had been so slow, so tender, he'd been sure it would last forever and then without warning he was at the point of no return, exploding into her, knowing she joined him.

He wasn't exactly sure when things had shifted from having sex to making love with Kelli, but there was no question in his mind she filled all his empty places.

As if under their own volition, his words sprang forth, flowing like lava from a volcano. "I hated him. Hated the life he dragged us around."

Her hand stopped moving and found his. Interlaced their fingers.

"If I knew anything, it was I couldn't live that life. As soon as I graduated from high school, I left. I didn't care if I was a third of their livelihood. All I could think about was making something more of myself than a lousy carpenter." His voice seemed to echo between them.

"I told myself it would be easier with one less mouth to feed. I never knew—never cared—how hard it was for just the two of them. I worked three crappy minimum-wage jobs—never mind I could have made more money in construction—but I refused to go there. I got my degree and bluffed myself into a step-above-entry-level position at Hollingsworth Industries."

Kelli remained silent, but her hand squeezed his tight as a vise.

"Dad's custom furniture started to sell. The old man was doing what he loved. But by then, his health was shot. He never let on. Brian knew, damn him. He never told me—didn't want his kid brother giving up his dream out of guilt."

He dragged himself to a sitting position, leaning against the headboard. "I never said goodbye. Never thanked him for sacrificing his entire goddamn life for us. Never told him I loved him. That I was proud of him." His throat burned and the tears threatened.

Kelli scooted up beside him. "He made the furniture—that dining room set."

"This place was his catalog. Yeah, he and Bri made almost everything here."

She squeezed his hand again. "Except for one chair. The one you were sitting on, right?"

Crap, she could see everything. He flung back the covers and stormed across the room, slammed his fist into the wall. "I did that one in high school. It's not up to his standards—definitely a learner's piece. And he left it there, with all the good ones."

"Is that why your Chicago place is so . . . different?"

He shook his hand against the pain in his knuckles. "I hired a decorator. Told her to rip out the walls, do whatever she wanted, as long as there wasn't a stick of wood in the place." He made a sound that might pass for a laugh as he remembered. "We did have a bit of a battle about the closet—she insisted on cedar and I relented."

"Come back to bed. Please."

He crawled back into bed and snuggled Kelli to him. "When Dad died, Brian got the business, I got the house. Maybe Dad thought I'd come back for good if he left me this place."

"Will you?"

"No. When Torrie was born, I put the property in her name. A trust company handles everything."

"What did Brian say?"

"Nothing. I haven't told him. I gave him free use of it, since I'm never here." He nuzzled her neck. "It's almost dawn. We should get some sleep."

Kelli wriggled against him, pulled his arm over her waist and sighed. He listened to her breathe, surprised when he relaxed, then drifted off to sleep himself.

When Blake awoke, the sheets were cold and empty beside him. He knuckled the grit from his eyes and stepped into his boxers. A blast of profanity from down the hall had him wide awake and on the run. Crap, nobody could have found them.

Kelli sat at the desk, pounding its oak surface with her fists. Otherwise, the room was empty. He took a few deep breaths and waited for his pulse to slow. "Shit, Kelli, you scared me half to death."

She never took her eyes from the screen. Her hands alternated between the keyboard and the mouse. Her cell phone sat next to the mouse pad. Blake stepped behind her, looking over her shoulder at the screen, which displayed what he assumed were someone's bank records.

"I can't believe I was so stupid. Dumb, dumb, dumb."

"Whoa." He put his hands on her shoulders and she jerked around.

"Geez—don't sneak up on someone like that."

"I think you were on another planet. I didn't sneak up on you." He noticed a mug of coffee on the desk and picked it up. Cold. "How long have you been up?"

"Couple of hours I think. All of a sudden, it came to me. I was looking in the wrong places."

He grabbed the back of the oversize leather desk chair and rolled it away from the desk enough so he could swivel it to make Kelli face him. "Let's slow down here. In words of one syllable, please. What did you find out?"

She ran her fingers through her hair. From the way it spiked up, she'd been doing that a lot. "It finally got through my thick skull you'd said Hollingsworth was looking for me on the sly. So I stopped looking at Hollingsworth Industries, the company and started looking into Dwight Hollingsworth, the man."

"Can you tell me this over breakfast? I'm starved." He pulled Kelli to her feet and wrapped her in an embrace. She squirmed away.

"But don't you see? If he—or anyone else—was looking for me in connection to Robert, or whatever his name was, they'd be looking for Karen Abbot, not Casey Wallace or Kelli Carpenter. When I was with Robert, that's the name I used. I didn't become Kelli until after Robert—"

Blake cut her off before she had to deal with the rest of that thought. "I think I see. If not breakfast, at least coffee? Please?" He ran his thumbs along her cheeks, noting the shadows under her eyes. How long had she slept? He glanced at the

computer monitor's clock. Nine. If she'd been up for hours like she said, she'd barely napped. He'd been totally out—hadn't noticed her leaving.

She looked over her shoulder at the computer. "In a bit."

She wouldn't stop, no matter how much it ran her down. "Whatever you're doing can wait awhile. After we eat something, I'll go into town and get some supplies and you can hack away to your heart's content."

"All right. Two minutes and the computer will be doing a search." She leaned into his chest and wrapped her arms around him. "But I'm going to make you a list. I don't like peanut butter."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Kelli rubbed her eyes. When she heard a car's engine shut down, she realized its approach must have awakened her. Twisting a kink out of her neck, she crept to the window and saw the green Chevy pickup parked by the service porch door.

After a breakfast of toaster waffles and coffee, Blake had gone armed with her list to buy some food. She'd soaked in a warm tub while her computer ran another program, then she'd settled down in the recliner in the office to rest her eyes for a minute. She looked at her watch. An hour ago. A glance told her the computer was still working, so she went to help Blake unload the bags.

She smiled as she laid things on the kitchen table for Blake to put away. Charles had always deviated from the list, too. Funny—she didn't get that ache in her chest anymore when she thought of Charles.

She put the milk and eggs in the refrigerator. "I don't remember putting chocolate chips on the list. Or brown sugar. Or baking powder. Did you have something in mind?"

"I felt like cookies." Blake stood behind her and buried his face in her neck. His beard tickled and a pleasant shiver ran down her back. He said, "I read the recipe on the bag of chips."

"And which of us did you think was going to bake? Don't tell me the store didn't have ready-mades."

When she turned to face him, he gave her a puppy-dog grin. "Please? I'll help."

"Lick the bowl is more like it. But I wouldn't mind some chocolate chip cookies myself." She furrowed her brow and tried to look stern. "You have to do the cleanup."

"Sold." He reached into another bag. "Vanilla ice cream, too."

"Sounds like a party. What are we celebrating?"

She saw a flash of something cross his face, then heard her computer signal it had finished its search. She squeezed his hand before dashing from the room. "Leave a stick of butter out," she said over her shoulder. "I'll be back in a minute." She hurried to her computer.

"It's about time," she muttered to the screen. "All, right, Dwight—let's see what you're made of." She put her hand on the mouse.

"Find anything? What about John Smith's phone number?"

She looked up to see Blake leaning against the doorjamb, thumbs through the belt loops of his jeans. She had to remind herself to breathe. Shit, he was one major distraction.

She stared at her monitor, avoiding Blake's gaze. "No luck with that—seems to be a disposable cell, like we've been using. But I got into Hollingsworth's banking records—I'll need some time to dig."

"I never said ... last night ... you ... " He pressed his fingers to the bridge of his nose and started again. "Thanks. You helped. A lot."

She looked up at Blake. His face wore the same expression she'd seen in the kitchen and this time she recognized it as sadness. His voice had held a somber edge as well, she realized. Not what she'd expect from someone eager to bake chocolate chip cookies. Abandoning thoughts of Dwight Hollingsworth, she released the mouse and pushed away from the desk.

"Memory lane's a rocky path, isn't it?" She crossed to him and stroked his beard. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I guess." He wrapped his arm around her waist and brought her to the recliner. Perched across his lap, she waited for him to go on. When he did, his voice was thick.

"It just hit me. Like someone jammed a two-by-four in my gut." His hands gripped the arms of the chair and she saw his knuckles whiten. "I had this memory ... of my mom."

She put her hand over one of his, gently massaging it. "You said she died when you were three. That's not too young to have memories."

"She used to bake chocolate chip cookies. Bri and I would help—but mostly I got to lick the bowl." He gave a quiet snort. "You were right about that."

Her own memories intruded—her and Luke in the kitchen together, laughing and making messes when he'd tried to help. She lowered her head into Blake's chest.

His voice resonated through her. "Once she let me stir. The dough was so stiff and I sent the whole bowl crashing to the floor. Smashed into bits. Bri pitched a fit, but Mom told me it didn't matter. She cleaned up, made another batch of dough and put the bowl in the sink for me, so it wouldn't go anywhere."

"Sounds like she loved you."

"I don't know why that came back. I opened the bag of chips and—wham."

"The sense of smell is a powerful trigger for memories. That and everything else you've been thinking about—family—you know."

"Guess so. But I think there's another problem."

"Hmm?" Thoughts of Dwight Hollingsworth and people trying to kill her were

fading away. She snuggled into Blake's lap and noticed he probably had something else on his mind. He adjusted her so their eyes met. Her breath quickened.

He touched his lips to her forehead. "I'm in love with you."

* * * * *

Blake held his breath, waiting for Kelli's response. All the possibilities swirled through his brain.

She'd laugh.

She'd run back to her computer.

She'd tell him she couldn't deal with his job.

Or the big one—she'd tell him she liked him, but as a friend.

When there was only silence, he tried to ignore the new ache inside. He shouldn't have said anything—not yet. Not while they were still trying to figure out why someone wanted to kill her—or him—or both of them. She'd think it was an emotional reaction to an even more emotional situation.

He was so busy running what she might say through his head that he almost missed what she did say. "I love you, too. I have since you ran up ten flights of stairs for me."

Relief and even more love swamped him. "I knew it by the second floor." His lips found hers and he kissed her with a passion that built as though nothing could consume it, only feed it.

Their tongues entwined, searching, tasting, hungering for more. Gasping for breath, he reached under Kelli's t-shirt, feeling nothing but bare skin. Hot skin, already filmed with the fire of passion. His fingers found her breasts, brushed her nipples to taut peaks.

She squirmed in his lap, fumbling for his zipper. Clutched him, already swollen with desire, through his shorts.

From somewhere, he found a thread of control. Took her hand from him. Broke the kiss. More than anything, he wanted this to be special for her. Last night, she'd given. Before, he'd let her take what she'd needed. It was his turn to give and he was going to make damn sure they were both making love to each other. As partners.

He scooped her up and walked down the hall, her arms around his neck, his face buried in her hair, inhaling the scent of shampoo and soap mixed with whatever made it smell like Kelli. Lowering her to the unmade bed, he took her hands. Looked into her eyes, grey now. No pretenses. He kissed her fingers. "I want you. All of you. I want to touch you. Smell you. Taste you." He pressed his lips to her neck. "Love you."

He unbuttoned his shirt, shrugged out of it and peeled her shirt over her head. "Lie back." Watching her eyes for any signs of apprehension, he settled down beside her. Her fingers reached for his belt buckle.

He placed his hand over hers. "Wait. There's time for that later. Let me enjoy you for a while."

Lips, tongue, fingers explored her. Gentle strokes. Gossamer touches. His own desire skyrocketed with each moan of her pleasure. His kisses found her belly and she squirmed with delight. He unbuttoned her jeans and she lifted her hips. He tugged the denim free.

"Tell me what you want," he whispered. "Where do you like to be touched?"

"Just keep doing what you're doing."

He kissed her thighs while he continued to lower her jeans. Kissed her knees, her ankles. Jeans on the floor, he moved back up her legs. She let one knee fall open. Squirmed when he kissed the soft flesh of her inner thighs. Kicking, she clutched at his hair. "Stop."

Like he'd been struck by an arrow, he jerked away. He searched her face and saw a smile, not fear.

"Tickles." Her eyes held only pleasure. "The beard." She grinned and pulled his face to hers and kissed him long and deep.

"Consider it gone." He propped himself up on an elbow. "Did you mean this minute?"

"Later is fine." She ran a fingertip across his lips. "I don't seem to be ticklish above the waist."

He lowered his head to her breast, swirling his tongue around an already taut nipple. Sucked. Scraped. Nipped.

With his hand, he reached between her thighs, working his fingers between sleek satin and her soft curls.

Her hands clutched at his, struggling to free herself from her panties. With an almost frantic desperation, she wriggled out of them, then grabbed at his belt once again. "I want you. Inside me."

"All in good time." His fingers caressed, circled and cajoled until he saw her eyes start to glaze.

Panting, she gripped his wrist. "Blake. Please. Together. I love you."

Her words destroyed his resolve. He yanked his belt open and unfastened his jeans. His erection popped free. Slow and easy went out the window. Shoving and kicking, he lowered his jeans down his legs and off. He exhaled a quivering breath and tore open a condom packet.

"Wait," she said, reaching for him. "Come to me."

She took him in her hands. Her warm fingers cupped him and she smiled as he tightened under her touch. She encircled his hardness. She ran her fingers up and down his shaft, thumbing the drop of moisture collecting at its tip until he thought he'd go mad.

"Oh, God, Sweetheart. Take it easy. This was supposed to be for you."

"For us." She took the condom from his fingers and rolled it over him. Settling back on the bed, she opened herself to him and guided him inside. Rocked him as they discovered their rhythm, tempo building until he couldn't wait any longer. Thunder pounded in his ears as he thrust, faster and faster into that final moment of oblivion-filled release.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Golden late-afternoon sunlight cast a glow over the office. Kelli took another cookie from the plate on the desk, got up and closed the curtains, getting rid of the glare on her monitor. If she eliminated Robert as the reason someone was after her, she had no place to start. Back to Dwight Hollingsworth, her only lead at the moment.

Blake sat sprawled sideways in the recliner, cell phone to his ear. When she heard his voice, she stopped to listen. From his tone, he was obviously leaving a message.

"Mrs. Madison, this is Blake Windsor. Please let Dwight know I'm out of town—a personal matter. Not exactly sure when I'll be back, but I can work on the Whittaker account from here, so things should remain on schedule. He can call me on my cell if he needs me."

Blake set the phone down and clicked the release on the recliner, stretching his legs along its length. He closed his eyes. "You want to join me?"

"I heard you—you have work to do and so do I." She glanced back at the screen. "Wait a—What's this?" She grabbed the mouse and highlighted one of Dwight Hollingsworth's bank records.

She asked Blake, "Do you remember Hollingsworth having plastic surgery a year or so ago?"

Blake sat up, his eyes wide open. "No, I don't. I think I'd remember. Why?"

"Because he paid some major bucks to Doctor Trevor Einsele—the same doctor who did my surgery before I started Berkeley."

"If he had anything done, it wasn't visible." Blake got up and crossed to the desk, leaning over Kelli's shoulder. He smelled clean and spicy. She reached up behind her and ran her fingers down his freshly shaven cheek.

"Guess I'll dig a little more." Kelli picked up the mouse.

"Can you get into a doctor's files?"

"This one, yes. I created his system for him—in exchange for my operation. One final job for CompSecure and my last appearance as Casey."

"I thought you made systems people couldn't get into."

"Back doors, Windsor. I always leave myself a way in." She turned her face to his, allowed herself one moment in the chocolate depths of his eyes. "Now, go. Let me

work. You're distracting me."

But she didn't stop him when he kissed the nape of her neck.

"I'll get my papers and work in the kitchen," he said.

She allowed herself a moment to enjoy the view as he left the room. Definitely a nice ass.

Stop it, she admonished. Someone was trying to kill her. She needed to forget about the way Blake made her feel and get back on task. Brushing cookie crumbs from her shirt, she turned to the keyboard.

She went back to the medical records. Georgette Hollingsworth had been the patient. Probably Dwight's wife. Face lift. Made sense. Disappear on a vacation, come back looking well rested. Really well rested. And Dr. Einsel was known for being one of the best. His client list included some heavy-duty VIPs.

All of a sudden, she was back in his waiting room, thumbing through book after book of before and after photographs. What would she bet she was in there? At the time of her own surgery, she hadn't given it a second thought. She wasn't creating a disguise then, only taking advantage of a needed surgery to help escape her past with a new image. No names with the photos, but if Hollingsworth had recognized Casey Wallace in a "before" photo, he'd know what she looked like now.

Shit. Why did everything happen on weekends? She couldn't call Dr. Einsel until Monday, unless—she started clicking through phone directories, drumming her fingers on the desk while she waited for each search to run. Office number. At least he was still practicing in the same place. No personal listing for him, but it wasn't unusual for a doctor to have an unlisted number.

Wait. She'd had dinner with him once while she was designing his computer system. His wife had come along. A walking ad for her husband's skill. Big into charity work. Kelli pounded the desk. What was her name? She stared at the ceiling, willing the answer to appear. Nancy? No. Natalie. She grabbed the mouse again and hoped Natalie had her own phone listing.

There was an entry for an N. Einsel. "Yes!" She gave a quick fist-pump and dialed the phone.

"Einsel residence," answered a cultured female voice.

She forced herself to relax her grip on the receiver. "May I speak to Dr. Einsel please?"

"May I tell him who's calling?"

Shit. She hadn't thought this one through. Would the doctor know CompSecure was defunct? She almost hung up the phone, but followed her gut feeling. "Mary Rogers with CompSecure. We worked for Dr. Einsel a number of years ago. I'd appreciate it if he'd have a few moments to talk with me about a security issue." Almost afraid to breathe, she waited.

"One moment."

She heard the phone clunk down and footsteps fading away. After what seemed like forever, Dr. Einsel's voice came through the line.

"Ms. Rogers. What can I do for you? If I recall correctly, I worked with Casey Wallace."

After taking a deep breath, she plunged into the story she'd created in the last half minute. "Casey's no longer with the company. But customer satisfaction remains one of our highest priorities. By coincidence, I overheard your name in conversation and it sounded like a prominent woman thought word of a procedure had been leaked to the press."

After a long pause that had her mouth turn dry, the doctor went on. "I've never had a complaint." His tone was guarded.

"I know how important patient confidentiality is. I was afraid someone might have compromised CompSecure's system in your office. If there were any problems with your computer security, I would certainly fix them—at no cost to you, of course."

After another moment, he spoke again. "No, no, I never received one of the alerts Ms. Wallace told me I'd see if someone had been in the system without authorization. And I assure you, my staff would never leak any information."

The way his voice drifted off had her wondering if he was hiding something or merely thinking. He continued, his voice both hesitant and defensive. "We did have one incident, but that was almost a year ago and couldn't possibly be related to any recent cases. And it wasn't a computer incident."

Her heart rate shifted gears. "What happened?"

"It was a case of an inexperienced file clerk who left file cabinets unlocked and was slovenly in her work. She was dismissed and we haven't had any other issues that would compromise our files. As I said, it was a minor incident, quickly rectified and had nothing to do with our computer system."

"You're right, Dr. Einsel. I shouldn't be listening to cocktail party gossip. I probably misheard, anyway. Since it appears your computer system wasn't compromised, I'll let you get back to your weekend."

She disconnected and paced the room. Calm down. Think.

Hollingsworth might have connected Casey to a nameless picture. But he hadn't given any Kelli pictures to Blake. How had he made the connection? Did he have anything to do with the filing mishap? And even so, what had Casey ever done to Dwight Hollingsworth?

* * * * *

Blake set aside his papers and stepped to the refrigerator. Kelli had been working for two hours now, and if dinner was going to be on the evening's schedule, he guessed he'd have to do something about it. He smiled when he set a package of

chicken breasts and a carton of orange juice on the counter, then found an onion and the Dijon mustard he'd bought.

Okay, but now what? He started rooting through cabinets and drawers, trying to remember what he'd seen in the kitchen at Camp Getaway.

"Need some help, Windsor?"

He spun around at the sound of Kelli's voice, cracking his head against an open cabinet door. "Crap!" Rubbing his head, he could tell she was trying not to laugh.

He saw her taking in his attempts to start cooking and when her expression softened, he had a sudden urge to use the kitchen counter for an entirely different course of action. "Umm ... I thought I'd start dinner. Unless—?" He cocked an eyebrow.

"I think dinner's the more sensible option." But her smile gave him hope for dessert.

She stepped closer, brushing her hip against him while she found a frying pan. "You've got the right idea, anyway." When she raised her eyes to meet his, she laughed. "About dinner. It's always a good idea to get all the ingredients out and ready before you start cooking. There's even a name for it. *Mis en place*."

"I think I love it when you talk cooking." He embraced her, making no effort to deny his arousal.

She lingered against him for a moment, then pulled away. "Down, boy. Hand me the garlic."

He watched in fascination as Kelli gave the garlic clove a resounding whack with the side of the knife blade, slipped off the skin, then chopped it fine.

"You know how to dice an onion?" she asked. She poured some olive oil into the pan and adjusted the burner.

"I think I can manage." He reached for the knife. "Dice means cut up into little bits, right?"

"Let me show you." Kelli cut the onion in half, made a series of horizontal cuts, then vertical ones. "Don't go all the way through the root, though, or it'll fall apart. Then, all you do is cut crosswise and ... *voilà* ... dice!" She handed him the knife. "You can do the other half."

He copied her moves and although his end product wasn't quite as uniform as Kelli's he thought he'd done a fine job. He blinked as the onion brought tears to his eyes.

"Not bad." Kelli scraped the onion into the hot pan. "Work on your speed and you'll be done before the fumes get to you."

While they cooked, Kelli brought him up to speed on her findings. "I think Robert was a false trail. I've been looking at Dwight Hollingsworth's personal records, but other than the doctor, I can't see anywhere he and Casey would have crossed paths. I want to get back to Hollingsworth Industries after dinner. Now that I'm not looking for

the Robert connection, something else might ring a bell."

He settled in alongside Kelli, following directions, studying her moves and to his amazement, found himself working with her as though he'd been cooking for years.

Before he knew it, dinner was ready. Kelli gave him a questioning look when he carried the plates to the dining room instead of the kitchen table, but she seemed to understand this was something he needed to do.

He put his plate on the massive table in front of the chair he'd begrudgingly built all those years ago. It rocked slightly when he sat down and he wondered why nobody had ever fixed it.

Kelli took a seat across from him. She gave him a quick glance, then picked up her knife and fork. They'd finished their meal without uttering a word when Kelli broke the silence.

"Did it help?"

"What?"

"Eating in here. At his table." She wiped her mouth on her napkin. "Don't bottle it up. Talk to me."

Her gray eyes caught his. In their depths was understanding. Encouragement. Strength. He pushed his plate aside.

His voice, when he found it, was thick. "I keep wondering why he kept this chair."

"Why wouldn't he? It's a fine chair."

"It's a piece of crap compared to what he could produce. While I was building it, nothing I did was good enough. Nothing was right. I didn't use the lathe right, my chisel was gouging, I didn't sand it smooth enough. To listen to him, it's a wonder he didn't use it for firewood."

Kelli's gaze went beyond him, glazed into nothingness and there were tears in her eyes, although he could tell she was trying to hide them. One tear escaped and trickled down her cheek. He longed to wipe it away.

She pushed away from the table and went toward the living room. He carried the plates to the sink, then found Kelli on the couch, head in her hands.

"What did I say?" He lowered himself beside her. "Please, don't cry."

"You don't see it, do you?"

He fisted his hands in his hair. This was uncharted woman territory. "See what?"

She scrubbed her cheeks with the heels of her hands. "My ... Lucas ... loved to draw. Paint. Make stuff out of Play-Doh. Do you think I'd throw it away because it wasn't perfect?"

He sat there stunned, as if she'd zapped him with a high-voltage cattle prod. "Are you saying—?"

"When you love something—or someone—you cherish it, flaws and all. Maybe you cherish it more because of the flaws."

"He never ... If he'd only said it ... one time ... that he—" He couldn't go on past the golf ball in his throat.

"He loved you, Blake. I'm not saying what he did was right, but from what I've seen, he raised two fine sons and there had to be a lot of love for him to do that. Maybe he couldn't say it. That's not right. Not fair to kids, but you have to know, now, he loved you. The chair is proof."

"Too goddamn late. For both of us. He thought I hated him. I thought he hated me."

She pulled his face toward hers, so he was forced to look at her. With her hands on his jaws, she stared into his eyes. "You don't believe that. You knew he didn't hate you and he knew you didn't hate him."

"Maybe." He took her hands and brought them to his lips.

"Promise me something." Her voice was low, but there was an earnest desperation in her tone.

"What?"

"You won't hide your feelings from me. You'll be honest with me."

Somehow he could have no secrets from Kelli. She read him and understood him, like no one he'd ever known. And when he realized that instead of making him wary, the power she held over him made him long to be closer to her, something grabbed his chest, like his heart was clamped in one of his father's vises.

"You undo me, Sweetheart." He sat beside her for several long moments, feeling the warmth where their thighs made contact. He slipped an arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. "I can't seem to get close enough to you."

"Like white on rice." With a deep exhalation, she patted his chest. "But there's work to be done."

He drifted back to reality. "Speaking of work, I've been running numbers on the Whitaker account, but if you could spare the computer for a while, it would be a lot faster."

She narrowed her eyes. "You going to decide which thirteen people lose their jobs?"

"Actually, I was looking for another solution. You made me think. I've gotten too complacent, solving problems the quick and easy way. Hollingsworth likes it, but he might have to give in a little more on this one."

When her eyes brightened, his mood lifted, along with something else. Oh, yeah. If her smile could do that to him, he had it bad.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Kelli followed Blake to the kitchen, where he picked up his papers from the table and she set up her laptop.

She touched his arm. "Do you think you can save those jobs at Whitaker?"

"I don't know. Probably not all of them."

In his eyes, she saw frustration. With her? Or his job? "But you'll try?"

"Sweetheart, the real world isn't like that. Whitaker made some stupid business decisions. He's overextended and can't support the staff he has now. That's not my fault and it's not Hollingsworth's fault. If Whitaker—and Hollingsworth—will listen to what I think I can propose, there might be a compromise."

His brow furrowed. "Hollingsworth doesn't do a lot of compromising, but maybe he'll ease up. His business dealings are bound to come under close scrutiny once he's on the campaign trail. He's not going to want to come across as a cold-blooded tyrant."

Something flickered in Kelli's brain. "Wait. Do you have a list of all of Hollingsworth's holdings?"

Blake's eyebrows arched. "A list? No. There are too many. He owns companies that own companies. Bits and pieces of other companies. Lots of fingers in lots of pies."

"Anything you can give me? Save me hours of computer searching. Maybe days."

"Sorry. Nothing that simple. Can you tell me why?"

"It's what you said. Hollingsworth is going to be put under a microscope. Maybe there's something going on he doesn't want discovered."

"And you know what this something is?"

She gave a wry laugh. "Not a clue. But if he thinks I know something, it must be big, or he wouldn't have sent goons after me—and you, apparently by association. Like he thought I might have told you something."

"But I told him you weren't Casey and he bought it."

"You *think* he bought it."

He rubbed his temples. "I'm getting another headache. Can I do anything? Whitaker can wait, I guess."

She got up and paced. "Let me mull this over for a while. Go count your beans, crunch your numbers, whatever. I'll let you know if something comes to me."

The kitchen grew too small to contain her impatient pacing. She expanded her path to include the dining room, then added the living room.

How had Hollingsworth connected her to Casey? Did it matter? Was it enough to assume he had? Did he consider her a threat to his gubernatorial campaign? Had he believed Blake? If not, was he desperate enough to send yet another thug after them?

She felt hand on her shoulders and bit back a scream. "Windsor. Didn't I tell you not to sneak up on me?"

"Sweetheart, I hardly think calling your name five times counts as sneaking." He held out a sheet of paper. "Here. I don't have your computer skills, but I can Google a

little and I played a hunch."

"What?" She snatched the paper from his hands and took it to the brightly lighted kitchen. "Jesus H. Christ. I never saw this. I would never have approved this. Shit, shit, double-shit on a stick."

"You think Jack Stockbridge set you up?"

Kelli sank to a chair, still staring at the printout of a publicity brochure for Camp Getaway. "No. All he knew was I didn't want to work with people—especially male people. I'm sure he suspected something had happened in my past, but he never pressed. He accepted my eccentricities and let me do my work." She tilted her head at Blake. "Kept an eye out for me."

Blake grimaced. "So he had no idea about Robert?"

"I'm sure he didn't. He's an honest man. If he knew I'd killed someone, I'm sure it would have come up." She looked at Blake. The concern in his eyes both warmed and unnerved her. "I don't even know if Stockbridge would have seen this brochure. Marketing and PR would have done it—they got a picture of me from some preliminary site visits." She stared at the photo again and read the caption.

Environmental Biologist Kelli Carpenter works to make sure no endangered species will be disturbed by Camp Getaway.

She was pictured crouched beside a rhododendron bush. The Sherman trap she'd tucked under the branches hadn't been captured by the camera, but her profile had. Like an "after" picture in a plastic surgeon's photo album.

Camp Getaway was Thornton's project.

She rubbed her eyes and Blake crouched down beside the chair. He laid a hand on her knee. "What can I do?"

Kelli shook off her exhaustion. "Let me know when it's my turn on the computer."

"It's all yours. I've downloaded everything I need. Files are printing now. I'll work from hard copies." He stood and twisted his back muscles. "If you don't need me, I'm going to work out for a while to clear my brain. Maybe I'll come up with some ideas."

"Wait." She reached for his hands and he helped her up. "It looks like whatever's going on is all because of me. I think you should go back to work and put as much distance between us as possible. I'll figure out what happened and see if I can fix it. You've been caught in the middle of something that can't possibly have anything to do with you."

Blake took her fingers and placed them against his midsection, where Scumbag's knife had done its damage. "I'm in this, Kelli. Whether or not it was part of someone's plan, I'm not leaving you."

She opened her mouth to protest, but he pressed his fingers to her lips. "Shh. I'm going outside. I'll be back in half an hour, forty-five minutes, tops."

She covered his hand with hers and kissed his fingers. When he traced her mouth with the pad of his forefinger, she shuddered at the pleasure of his touch. Refusing the

desire to forget everything except Blake for the next few hours, she gave his hands a final squeeze.

"Take an hour. I should know something by then."

Blake turned and walked away. At the door, he stopped and swiveled his head to give her a smile that melted her insides to jelly. She savored the feeling for several heartbeats, then picked up her laptop and took it to the office.

After setting up a program to search for Thornton on Stacey's computer, she carried her laptop to the recliner, plugged it in and started going through the Hollingsworth files she'd collected.

The sheer volume of data overwhelmed her. There had to be something to narrow down the useful from the meaningless. Maybe once she had something about Thornton's holdings, she could cross-reference them. That could take forever. Where to start? Phone records? Private or business? Bank records? Hunt for hidden bank accounts?

There had to be a connection between Thornton to Hollingsworth. All she had to do was find it. She scrolled through endless files.

Sometime later, she looked up to find Blake had returned. Shirtless and glistening with sweat, he was breathing heavily, but his face looked relaxed.

He crossed the room and leaned over her. "Got anything new?"

"Does a headache count?" She massaged her temples.

"I need a shower." He grinned. "Want to join me? I could use someone to wash my back."

What she wanted was a bed. An empty bed. Sleep. "I have to check the other computer."

He stepped away and she trudged to the desk. There was too much data to deal with. "Help me think, Windsor. What do we have?"

He took her hand and pulled her away from the desk. "We can talk in the shower as easily as out here."

Following him to the bedroom, where he stripped off his pants, she protested. "I had a bath while you were shopping. And I'm not in the mood for back-washing, if that's what you're calling it. It's like I've got a million bugs crawling all over me, inside and out. I'm one huge itch."

"I can probably figure out a way to scratch it." He gave her a crooked smile and went into the bathroom.

She heard sounds of water running and sat on the edge of the bed. "That's not what I mean." Her voice cracked. Frustration mounted and tears welled. Shit. Her throat tightened.

Blake returned to her side, but didn't touch her, as if he sensed she'd crumble. The caring in his eyes nearly drove her to the breaking point.

"Hey. I'm sorry. It's late and you've hardly slept for the last few days. You've got

to be exhausted. I'll shower and you try to get some sleep." He retreated to the bathroom.

Kelli flopped onto her back and stared at the ceiling. She knew how to get information out of computers, but not what to do with it once she had it. She was a programmer, not a detective. And a pretty rusty programmer at that. Her mind whirled, trying to figure the easiest way to correlate the thousands of pieces of information she had about Hollingsworth with what she was gleaning about Thornton.

The glare of light when the bathroom door opened washed over the bed. Blake stood there in silk boxers, leaning against the doorjamb, staring in her direction.

"What?" she snapped. "What are you looking at?"

"A beautiful woman."

"Windsor, I told you, I'm—"

He cut her off with a raised hand, turned off the light and crossed to the bedside. "You need help getting undressed?"

Indignation filled her and she lifted herself to her elbows. "I said, 'no'. What part of that don't you understand?"

"And I said you need to sleep. You'll be more comfortable out of those clothes. Tell me where to find whatever you sleep in and I'll bring it to you."

Mollified, she sat up and started undressing. "Shirt on the bathroom hook."

He returned with the oversize cotton shirt she'd worn in place of a robe earlier. Holding it between thumb and forefinger, he waited for her to take it. "I thought I'd read for a while. If you want, I'll crash in Torrie's room so I won't bother you."

She shrugged into the shirt. "Where? There's no bed."

"Murphy bed in the wall. Used to be mine." He raised his eyebrows in question.

Looking at him stilled some of the quivering inside her. "I think I'd like having you closer." As if she was going to be able to sleep. Maybe she should find a book herself, but getting up was too much of an effort.

"Turn over," Blake said.

"Why?"

"Stop questioning everything I say. A little faith, Sweetheart, a little faith."

She complied and felt his warm hands kneading the muscles of her shoulders and neck. She groaned—almost cried—as tension left her. His fingers, nimble and strong, moved down her back, finding knots and releasing them. Then to her legs, her calves, even her feet. She and the mattress merged into a single entity.

* * * * *

Blake came out of the bathroom and stumbled back into bed. An empty, cold bed. Again. He looked at the clock. Three. Holy crap, would the woman never get a decent night's sleep? He could use one himself. Swearing under his breath, he trudged

down the hall, following a shaft of yellow light coming from under the office door.

He caught himself before flinging the door open. Took a deep breath, counted to ten, tapped, then entered the room. Kelli looked up from the monitor. Even from across the room, he could see shadows like tea bags under her eyes. She gave him an apologetic smile.

"I woke up—I was dreaming about matching all kinds of files and suddenly it came to me. I was making things too hard—doing it all bassackward."

He scratched his head. "It's three o'clock in the morning. I need it simple. What did you figure out?"

"There was too much data to go through." She picked up a sheet of paper. "Instead of looking at Hollingsworth Industries, or Thornton's corporate files, I went back to CompSecure."

"Your company?" He sank onto the edge of the recliner, leaned forward and clasped his hands between his knees.

"Yeah. I was an idiot to miss it. If Hollingsworth was looking for Casey, he had to be looking for something I did for CompSecure. So instead of trying to look at thousands of his files, I can look at something closer to fifty."

"I got it. Look at your files, see if they match his, instead of looking at his to see if they match yours."

"Simple, isn't it? What an idiot I've been. I never went back to the jobs I did before Charles died."

He noticed the lack of hesitation when she mentioned her husband's death. Had the pain been buried a little deeper? He hoped so and dared to hope it might be because she was opening her heart to him.

"I don't have all the details of my jobs here—I'm not sure I remember every single company I worked for. I have to go back to Spokane, to EnviroCon. I can reconstruct a lot from memory, but the details might help."

He sat up with a start. He wasn't letting her out of his sight. "What's there? I thought you wanted to stay away."

"My personal stuff. CompSecure's business records. Computer files. I always made copies."

"Now that you have a plan of action, can't it wait until morning? Or can I help so you're done faster? Sweetheart, you're going to collapse if you don't get some uninterrupted sleep."

"I'm too fired up to sleep."

Not surprised, he went to the desk, picked up some files and rested a hip on the cleared surface. "Let me look. I'm familiar with a lot of Hollingsworth's holdings. Maybe some of the companies you worked for will ring a bell with me." Now that she'd laid it out, it did seem much simpler and he gave himself a mental kick for not thinking of it himself.

She looked up, her gray eyes, rimmed with red, showed a single-minded determination that burned straight into his heart. "I guess. But do you know how to work Brian's coffeemaker? I could use a cup."

"This is going to be an all-nighter, isn't it?"

"Depends. Maybe we'll get lucky and make a connection right away."

"How long have you been at it?"

"Not long—maybe half an hour. I've been trying to recreate my client list from memory. I'm sure I'm missing some."

He shivered and realized he was wearing only his boxers. Kelli had on the t-shirt she'd slept in. He touched her arms and they were ice cold. He gave them a brisk rub. "Go put something warmer on. I'll make the coffee."

Only the rich coffee aroma kept Blake from dozing to the lulling gurgles of the coffeemaker. His cell phone, plugged into its charger, sat on the counter. He reached for it, turned it on and saw he'd missed a call while the phone had been charging. A glance told him the coffee hadn't finished dripping into the carafe, so he punched the button to listen.

A man's voice, vaguely familiar. "Blake? Vance Griffith. Look, I know it's Saturday, but I'd like to talk to you about joining us. Dwight agrees you'd be great. Maybe dinner? And feel free to bring your cousin. Call me."

He ignored the number Griffith had left the day before. He wasn't going to return the call. He might be having doubts about his job, but giving it up for politics—that was the greater of two evils, as far as he was concerned. Maybe the greatest of all evils.

He deleted the message and put the phone back on the counter. While he waited for the coffee to finish, he wondered what it was about Kelli that had made him cross the line from the casual relationships into this unfamiliar territory of love.

Not her looks, although she was more than pretty. Not the way she kept him in a state of arousal—sex with her was nothing like anything he'd experienced before and she was so much more than a way to scratch his itches. He wanted to protect her, but that wasn't it. She didn't need his protection.

That must be it. Her strength. He couldn't imagine any of the women he'd dated doing what Kelli had done to survive. He could see them fighting off someone for a taxi, maybe. Or snagging theater seats. Looking good at a cocktail party.

At last the coffee was done and he poured two mugs. After adding milk and sugar to his, he took a sip. Maybe he'd wake up a little and stop trying to make sense out of something that needed no explanation. He loved Kelli. Period. What difference did it make why? He picked up the mugs and shuffled down the hall.

He set one mug on the desk by Kelli's hand. "Hot and black."

"Thanks," she said without looking up.

"I take it you haven't found anything." He picked up the papers. "You want me to read these off and you cross-reference them? Or do you want me to take half? With

your laptop, we might be able to go twice as fast."

She picked up her coffee and inhaled, then sipped. He watched her eyes close, then open in surprised pleasure. "Good."

"Hey, don't look so shocked. I admit I have a limited repertoire in the kitchen, but I know how to make coffee."

"But you don't own a coffeemaker."

"Actually, I do, but it's behind a door on the counter. Something the decorator called an appliance garage. Besides, even though I'm good, Starbucks is better. And there's one in the office building lobby, so why bother?" He sipped from his own mug, feeling the caffeine sweep away more cobwebs. "Let's get to work. You have a job for me?"

She looked almost embarrassed when she raised her gaze to his. "I don't know why I never asked you to help before ... I guess I thought—"

He cut her off. "That I couldn't possibly have your skills?"

Her face reddened and she lowered her eyes. "Not exactly—it's that I've always done everything on my own. Charles had his work, I had mine. Our professional lives didn't cross." Her eyes misted and he knew she was thinking of the non-professional side of her late husband.

He jumped in, trying to ignore the hollow feeling that he'd been cast aside for a memory. "Well, it appears my ass is on the line here along with yours, so whatever skills I have are at your disposal."

Kelli swiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "You had the right idea about splitting the work. You can take my list and compare it to Hollingsworth's holdings. Mark the ones that might match. I'll do the same for Thornton. You can use the laptop. There's a folder called H.I. on the desktop. I'm still doing searches on Mr. Thornton's philanthropic ventures. There are a lot of them"

He crossed the room to the table by the recliner where Kelli had left the laptop. He raised the cover and found a picture of a bowl of chocolates as her desktop wallpaper. He smiled and made a mental note to get her a box of Godiva truffles as soon as things calmed down. He clicked open the H.I. folder and picked up the list of companies Kelli had given him.

He gave a low whistle as he glanced down the list. In addition to an assortment of corporations, she'd worked for local government agencies and some major financial institutions. For some reason, he'd expected to find her working for small businesses, not so many heavy hitters.

"You must have been on the road a lot," he said, immediately wishing he could suck back the words. Her road trips had triggered the chain of events leading up to the convenience store shooting, and he kicked himself for not thinking before opening his mouth.

"Not really." Without looking, he knew she hadn't taken her eyes off her monitor.

"I had the occasional meeting and one or two jobs where they wanted me on site, but most of the time I had access to their computer systems from home. That way I could be with Lucas."

Her voice softened at the mention of her son's name. There was still pain there. He cleared his throat. "I think I need to work at a table. Whoever decided to call these things laptops obviously never tried to work with one on his lap."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Kelli sniffed the air. A hint of smoke wafted through the room. Great. Wonder Chef must be trying to toast a bagel. She rubbed her eyes and glanced at the clock on the monitor. Seven-thirty. Breakfast might not be a bad idea. She'd accumulated copious data on Thornton's endeavors, but without more details, she was stuck. Remembering the companies she'd worked for wasn't enough. Her files would give her access to employee lists, company bank accounts and phone records—a smaller pool of things to compare than trying to look at everything and everyone Thornton dealt with.

With a sigh of frustration, she pushed away from the desk, picked up her empty coffee mug and padded toward the kitchen. Sunday morning. She'd bet this town had a place where you could get homemade waffles, fresh eggs fried in real butter and sausage that hadn't come wrapped in plastic. Probably called Mom's. And she'd bet it wouldn't take much persuading for Blake to take her there.

God, what a domestic thought. She must be exhausted. She rounded the corner into the kitchen. Blake was slumped over the laptop, soft snoring sounds coming from his mouth.

"Geez, Windsor—wake up. You'd better not be drooling on my laptop."

His head jerked and she bit her cheek trying not to laugh at the confused expression on his face as he tried to get his bearings. And then—she knew exactly when—he knew where he was and he saw her and the expression on his face had an entirely different feeling building inside her belly.

"I smelled smoke—thought you might be cooking." When he gave her a perfect imitation of her head shake, she laughed out loud.

Blake got up, stretched, sniffed and poked his head outside the kitchen door. "Looks like someone's burning leaves up the road."

She stepped toward him and rested a hand on his shoulder. "Does this town do Sunday morning breakfast?"

"Mmph." He placed his hand on top of hers. "Lucille's."

Well, not too far off. Lucille was probably someone's mom. "As long as you're not cooking, maybe we could grab a bite?"

Blake's eyes widened. "You're hungry? You want to go out? In public? With me? Give me five minutes." He started toward the bedroom.

"Take fifteen. I need a shower."

Sitting in a vinyl and formica booth an hour and a half later, Kelli pushed her plate away and refilled her white ceramic coffee mug from the thermal carafe on the table. A cross between a Denny's and a diner, Lucille's had met all her expectations, down to the waitresses wearing frilly aprons over their black skirts. And little white caps, too.

Blake extended his mug and she topped it off. He added cream from the metal pitcher, tipped in sugar from the glass container, his spoon clicking against the mug as he stirred. Then he set the mug down, rested his elbows on the table and leaned his chin on his fists. His brown eyes held a relaxed, almost dreamy quality and she felt—normal.

Her cell phone vibrated. So much for normal.

She fished the phone out of her jeans pocket and glanced at the display. Jack Stockbridge. Her heart rate skyrocketed and a clammy trickle of sweat dripped down her back.

She pressed the button. Blake was already motioning for the check.

"God, Jack, are you all right?"

"Fine, Kiddo. I can't talk long. The cops showed up with a warrant for the office."

"What? Why?"

"I don't know. They got me out of bed and I'm going with them as soon as I'm dressed. Something about a lead on the guy who assaulted me."

She heard a knocking sound and a muffled voice telling Jack to hurry it up. Phone to her ear, she slid out of the booth and strode toward the door. "Call me when you know more. I'm on my way." She disconnected before Jack could reply.

Before she reached the café's glass door, Blake had caught up and pushed it open. "Where are we going?"

Without breaking stride, she said, "You're going back to Chicago. Or staying here. I'm going to EnviroCon." Blake grabbed the arm of her parka, but she slipped out of his grasp. "I told you I might have to go back, and things have escalated. It's time to for me to stop running and confront this mess. And for you to get on with your life."

"I'm in this, too."

"Maybe so, but I see no reason for you to get involved until the cops ask you to."

By now, they were in the pickup and driving toward the house. Blake's jaw muscles were working, his hands were clenched on the wheel, but he wasn't talking. She tried not to look at him, but even in anger, his features compelled her attention. His gaze would slide over to her, then break, his lips pressed together so tightly they almost disappeared. Then he'd look like he was going to say something, but inhale

audibly instead.

What could she say? Words whirled through her head. It's been fun? An adventure? Something we'll remember, but it isn't meant to be? Two people thrown together, fighting for survival? It wasn't love.

She knew it was. But it was a love they'd both have to get past. She felt the ache building around her heart. Blake was sitting less than two feet from her and she was already lonely.

She turned her face toward the window, opening it a crack to admit the cool, crisp air. They'd left the more populated residential section behind, and she concentrated on the passing landscape with its fields and patches of trees, their leaves painted with shades of red and gold. Smoke billowed from the occasional chimney. Fall had definitely arrived.

A short while later, the truck wheeled down the driveway toward the garage behind the house. She saw Blake's hand reach up toward the sun visor to press the remote, and then a quick flash of light.

She was flat on her belly with Blake pressed on top of her. Leaves and sticks dug into her abdomen and dirt filled her nose. Once she managed to turn her head and breathe, she tried to squirm free. "Get off of me."

"Don't move." Blake's mouth was beside her ear.

And then she was surrounded by heat, by smoke and by explosions that left her ears ringing. The weight lifted from her back and she rolled over. Eyes closed, still tearing from the smoke, she heard Blake coughing. She pushed herself to a sitting position, knees up, with her head resting on them.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said between coughs. "Fine. The garage is toast, though."

A handkerchief appeared in her hand and she daubed at her eyes. Through the blur, she saw the worry in Blake's eyes. "I'm all right." When the look of concern didn't disappear, she stood up. She wobbled for a moment and he supported her with an arm around her waist.

She removed his arm and squeezed his hand. "A little shaky is all. I'm fine, honest. What happened?"

"I'm not sure. Something caught fire and there are a lot of flammables in the garage, but—" The look in his eyes wasn't concern anymore.

"But you're not sure it was an accident, right?"

"Dad was always a stickler for safety and Brian knows the rules. I might buy an accident except—"

"Except we seem to be having a little too much—excitement—lately?" She chewed on her lip, trying to decide what to do. Her first instincts said to get the hell out of there, but even while she thought about packing up everything, she could hear the sirens in the distance.

Blake pulled her farther from the garage, away from the house, toward the street. She tugged Blake toward the service porch door. "Wait. I want my laptop." "Slow down, Sweetheart. I don't think you should go inside."

Despite the heat from the fire, she shivered when the meaning behind his words registered. "You think the garage was a bomb? That there's one in the house, too?"

"I have no clue. If I've learned anything this past week, it's you can't be too careful, and nothing is what it seems. But tell me. Before we meet anyone, who the hell are you going to be?"

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Blake stood by the road and watched the fire engines drive away. There was an emptiness inside him despite the full breakfast. Kelli was inside the house making travel plans and packing up anything and everything that might betray her identity. The Fire Marshal had deemed the fire an accident caused by spontaneous combustion of some of Stacey's paint rags. No bomb, no arson and nothing in the house. Fred Bozeman had shown up—an exploding garage must be big-time around here to get the police chief out on a Sunday.

Blake had asked him to keep things quiet—no information one way or the other if anyone had been hurt in the explosion. If, like Kelli suspected, it hadn't been an accident, he saw no reason to make it easy for someone to know if he'd succeeded. Given that the local paper was a weekly, he thought they'd be safe enough.

Had it been an accident? Stacey should know better, but it wasn't that big a stretch for her to have left the rags in a closed container. The fumes bothered her, the pregnancy could be weighing on her mind, Torrie could have been a distraction—any number of logical, reasonable explanations. The fact that there hadn't been a single rag in Stacey's studio lent credence to the theory she'd taken the container to the garage and left it where she shouldn't have. And he hadn't noticed. He'd checked the truck and hadn't given a thought to the rest of the space. No matter how caught up in thoughts of Kelli, he should have given the garage a thorough once-over, not assumed everything was fine.

He turned and took in the smoldering garage. In silent apology, he raised his eyes to the clear, blue sky. Sorry, Dad. I messed up. Again.

You can't uncut a board, son. When things don't go right, you put them behind you and move on to the next.

Move on. To what? The kitchen door banged shut, and he jerked around to see Kelli walking toward him, her steps hesitant, as if she sensed she was intruding. Seeing her filled him with a hopelessly tangled combination of longing and loss.

Five feet from him, she halted. Wearing jeans and one of his sweatshirts, she wasn't dressed for travel. He looked more closely. Her eyes were their natural gray.

Afraid to get his hopes up that she'd changed her mind, he waited for her to speak. When she didn't, he took a tentative step forward.

"They're gone," he said, tilting his head down the road. "You okay?"

She nodded. "I can't get a flight out of Champaign until tomorrow morning. Guess you're stuck with me for one more night."

One more night. He reached for her hand and she stepped back.

Why the hell didn't his old man have any words of wisdom for situations like this one? Like, grab her in your arms and kiss her until she can't bear to leave. Or tell her you love her and can't live without her. Or just get down on your knees and beg. None of that came out. Instead, he heard himself say, "I should get busy." Brilliant.

She held his gaze for a moment and he, Blake Windsor, the quintessential people-reader, had no clue what was going on in her mind. One corner of her mouth twitched and she pivoted and wandered toward the house. He followed, three paces behind, watching the way her butt moved in her jeans. Wondering if he'd ever forget the way her butt moved in her jeans.

And tomorrow, he'd drive her to the airport and she'd get on the plane and he'd come back here and he and Brian—

Crap, he'd have to call Brian. He trudged into the house, trying to decide how to break the news.

He sat at the kitchen table, staring at the phone. *Sorry, Bri, but your wife burned down the garage. But that's okay, because we caught it before it spread to the house.* Yeah, right. No way would he lay any guilt on Stacey. The arson investigator had sworn spontaneous combustion didn't work like a bomb—no way to rig anything to go off at a specific time. It was an accident.

Tethered to the telephone cord, he paced a small semicircle in the kitchen. "No, Brian. I'm not filing an insurance claim. The garage needed to be redone anyway and I'm not giving them an excuse to raise the premiums."

"I'll take care of it. I can put in some nights and weekends. You go back to your big city job." Brian's voice took on the tone he had always hated—the one that said Brian was the big brother and he knew what to do, and besides, he could do it right, unlike little Blake.

Blake spoke through clenched teeth. "No. And that's final. Save your nights and weekends for your family. They need you. I've got some things to wrap up in Chicago, but I'm going to handle this."

"You could hire it out, you know."

"Some of it, yeah. But I'll still have to supervise. Do it yourself and you'll know it's done right."

A pause. "Amazing. You sound like Dad. I never knew you listened."

Blake snorted. "Like we could avoid it?" His jaw relaxed. "If you'd feel better, I can leave the pickup at your place until I get back. There's nothing left in the garage to

steal."

"What about Emily?"

"Emily?" He stumbled for a minute. "Right. She has to go back to work tomorrow." His mind whirled through the logistics. "We'll leave the truck at your place and take a cab from there to the airport."

Plans were forming and they started with a knock-down, drag-em-out confrontation with Hollingsworth. He wondered if there would be a seat on the commuter flight. If not, he'd take the bus.

He realized he'd missed half of what Brian was saying. "And besides, Stacey and Torrie would love time with you. I'll be clear in a couple of weeks and we'll all come over. Have an old-fashioned garage raising. I'll get a crew and their families. Make it a party. Stacey's a great cook—when she's not throwing up."

"All the more reason to leave things to me, Bri. She doesn't need to be around the noise, mess and smells when she's not feeling well, much less be cooking for everyone."

"We'll discuss it later," Brian said and the conversation was over. They said their goodbyes and he lowered the receiver with a soft click and a vague sense of pride. Not that long ago, he'd have slammed it down—maybe thrown it against the wall. Or he'd simply have said, "Have it your way, then." Such progress.

A while later, Blake sprawled on the couch, trying to ignore the sounds of Kelli's incessant keyboard clattering from down the hall. He'd tried not to picture her packing everything that would say she'd actually been here—in this house, in his life—before she disappeared. It hadn't worked. He heard every footstep, every drawer opening. Every sound brought an image. He saw her folding her clothes, everything smooth and symmetrical before she packed them in the suitcase—the one he'd insisted she keep. She'd have something of his, at least.

He sank his head into his hands. Until two weeks ago, the biggest challenge in his life was to remove the human factor from the job he did. Sure, his conscience twinged from time to time and there were the occasional sleepless nights, but as he always told himself, if he didn't do the job someone else would and he took pride in doing the best job possible.

Best job for whom? Himself? Hollingsworth? The companies Hollingsworth took over? But no matter how tough a takeover was, nobody pointed a gun at him, nobody stabbed him with a knife, nobody tried to rape someone he cared about.

Now the Washington cops would find his blood and prints on a murder weapon and the Whittaker account wasn't going away. Afraid to follow that train of thought, he segued back to Kelli, who *was* going away.

He dug his fingertips into his temples. Maybe Kelli was right, and he should forget her and get on with his life. Back to the casual relationships that came without the

strings that wrapped around your heart and tightened until you couldn't breathe. If she could walk away this easily, what could she have felt? Gratitude, for one. Lust—the need to proclaim you're alive after a trauma. Neither lent itself to the "until death do us part" scenario.

A ball of ice hit his stomach when he realized Kelli had already lived that one. No wonder she'd backed away.

He'd given her his best, but sometimes a deal wouldn't close the way you wanted it to. When that happened, you swallowed your pride, stood up, shook hands and walked away from the table.

He rose and twisted the kinks out of his back. A workout might help.

An hour later, he was drenched in sweat and the aches in his muscles couldn't overpower the ones that grabbed his chest. He came into the house, heading for the shower, shedding his shirt as he dragged down the hall.

Kelli approached, several manila file folders in her hand.

"These were mixed in with mine." Her gaze was on his chest, not his eyes. Her fingers never touched his when she handed him the folders. In fact, she nearly dropped them in her obvious haste to release them.

He gripped the papers, willing her to look at him. "Thanks. I need a shower." *Join me?*

"I was going to do a load of laundry. If you leave your stuff, I'll take care of it." She paused, then dropped her gaze to the floor. "Are you staying here? The sheets ... If you are, then ..."

God, he didn't want to think of her in bed with him, giving the sheets a good reason to need washing. "Don't sweat it. I'll do it. What time's your flight?" *Look at me, damn it. Or did you notice the fucking hard-on you gave me?*

"Nine-forty-five."

"I need to get back to Chicago tomorrow, too. What flight are you on? Maybe we can ... I mean, if you're flying out of Chicago ... If there's another seat."

God, he was stammering like a teenager. Damned if he'd beg. "I'll take my clothes to the washer."

* * * * *

Kelli lifted her eyes, admiring the view as Blake strode away. The man did have some great assets. An ache filled her chest as she thought of how she would miss so much more than his physicality. Although her heart longed for him, her brain said it would never work. Clean breaks were best.

A scrap of paper fell from one of his files and she almost called after him. Instead, she waited until he was out of sight, then went and picked it up. A business card. She ran her fingers over the embossed surface as she walked back to the office. Vance

Griffith, Esq. of Little, Franklin, & Moser. Vance Griffith. The man who wanted Blake to be on Hollingsworth's campaign team. She dropped the card on the desk, making a mental note to tell Blake where she'd left it.

Swiveling the desk chair, she let her gaze shift between computer monitor and the stacks of printouts on the desk. If only there were two of her. Should she recruit Blake? She'd lean over his shoulder, inhaling his scent as she showed him how to run some basic searches. Her cheek would brush against his—

Stop. He's a corporate negotiator who steals jobs from people. He's only interested in the bottom line. His bank account. She dragged those images to the front replacing the ones of a gentle caring Blake. There had to be another solution.

When the light bulb over her head flashed, she pushed aside the flicker of guilt and sent Justin Stockbridge an e-mail asking him to run some searches.

Nothing but legitimate search engines or I'm going straight to your dad.

She still felt like she was giving a shot of whisky to an alcoholic, but she convinced herself it was fine—she hadn't given him any reasons why he was doing the research, so he wouldn't know what to dig for. It showed him she trusted him, right?

And for the umpteenth time, she checked her cell phone to see if Jack had called. He'd had nothing to tell her when she'd given him her travel plans two hours ago. Cops had come and gone and they'd be in touch.

What had the cops found and what were they going to do about it? Would Jack tell them about Blake's little identity switch? His real job? Or would he play it as the unsuspecting CEO of a reputable company, trusting information from another equally reliable source?

What was the point? Until her brain could let go of the Blake Windsor invasion that had blockaded all other thought pathways, she wasn't good for anything. And it wasn't only her brain Blake was setting on fire. She had one more night. Forgetting about doing laundry, not bothering to turn off the computers, she hurried down the hall, toward the sound of running water, shedding her clothes along the way.

The bathroom door was half open. She hesitated at the doorway. Could she do this and still walk away in the morning? Two consenting adults, no strings? Oh, there would be strings, all right—but they were already knotted so tight only a sword could sever them.

She watched his shadowy form through the translucent shower curtain. His hands moved from one shoulder to the other, under his arms, then began traveling down his torso. Her own nipples tightened as she watched Blake wash his chest.

His hands continued downward, moving in circles. When they reached his groin, she bit back a gasp at the power of her own response. She took two steps into the room, poised at the back of the tub when she realized his hands were still moving, but no longer downward. One arm reached up to the tile, supporting his body. She heard his breathing over the sound of the shower.

Carefully, she drew the curtain aside just enough to admit her to the tub. She stepped inside and slid her hand under his, moving with him. "Want some help with that?"

He groaned. "Tell me I'm not dreaming." He turned around and pressed their bodies together. "Or if I am, please don't let me wake up."

"Maybe it should be a dream—because it'll be over in the morning. I meant what I said. I have to leave. Are you okay with that?"

He didn't answer, simply pressed his lips against hers and she opened her mouth to a kiss that reached the depths of her soul. In a frenzy, he suckled her breasts, slid a finger inside her, stroking her, driving her up, up, until she clung to the wire-thin boundary between control and release, unable to breathe. He cupped her buttocks and she hooked a leg around his waist, her arms around his neck. They shifted so she was braced against the wall, the chill of the tiles turning hot against her back in seconds. He entered her in a single thrust, then froze. He tried to withdraw, but she wrapped her other leg around him and held him fast.

His words came out in pants. "Kelli—stop. I don't have anything. And if you move, it's going to be all over."

"You're not HIV positive are you?"

"No, but what about—?"

"I'm safe and I need you. Now." She squirmed so he rubbed against that part of her that demanded release, pleasure rising to the brink of ecstasy.

* * * * *

Blake tried to fight back to a point of control, but it was a losing battle. He was now inside a woman, unprotected, for the first time in his life and oh, God, did it feel good.

Once Kelli's assurances had registered, he let go of any reservations and slanted his lips against hers, plundering with his tongue. He rubbed his hand, slick with soap, against her breasts and when she moaned with pleasure and began rocking her hips, he succumbed. Nothing could stop the pressure building within.

He pulled back slightly, then thrust and her tight heat clamped around him. The shower sounds escalated to Niagara Falls. He slammed into her and exploded, his ears ringing with their mingled cries.

They stood there, joined, for several long moments, neither speaking. When he could take a normal breath, he eased her off him, picked up the soap and caressed her as he washed her silken skin, her soft curves, her sculpted calves. She stood under the spray, eyes closed, a contented smile on her lips, letting him lather and rinse her.

He reached behind her to turn off the water, which had turned lukewarm. "I hope nobody had a stopwatch on that one," he whispered. "And please, no lies. I'm happy

to owe you one. Or ten. You already know how much I wanted you. And without a condom, it was—"

"Shut up," she said and pulled his face to hers. "Or do I have to do it for you?" She nibbled on his lower lip, then put her hands behind his head and kissed him with such passion he felt himself responding again.

Wrapped in towels, they made their way to the bed. He collapsed onto the sheets and pulled Kelli down alongside him. "I don't know what to say," he began.

"Then don't say anything."

She pulled the towel away from herself and he soaked in her body. She was fit, but definitely soft where a woman should be soft. He leaned over and nuzzled her breast, feeling the nipple stiffen under his tongue.

Her breath was warm on his ear. "I ... I saw you ... before I got into the tub."

He pulled away and stared at the ceiling. "I was thinking of you."

"I hoped so. It was ... quite a turn-on." She took his hand and placed it over her breast. "And for the record, you don't owe me anything. She tickled his ribs. "I guess it's a power trip—that I can do that to you."

"Sweetheart, you have no idea how powerful you are." He took her hand and showed her.

Afterward, when he could string two words together, he caressed her. "Stay with me a while."

She murmured something unintelligible and curled into him.

Blake ignored his rising hunger as he lay in bed. He savored the warmth of Kelli's body entwined with his. Throughout the afternoon, Kelli had dozed, but he'd been afraid if he slept she wouldn't be there when he awoke. There wasn't a single spot on her body he hadn't studied. Fingers, lips, tongue—he wanted to memorize her every atom. He shifted and she rolled away, coming to rest on her back alongside him. He let his gaze linger once more on her face, bathed in the final remnants of daylight, relaxed in sleep.

He thought he could count on the fingers of one hand the times he'd seen her relaxed. His eyes burned as he tried to file away the memories. During their lovemaking, much as he wanted to remember every sensation, passion made conscious thought impossible.

Her hunger had taken him places he had never imagined. She'd been insatiable, as if she, too, needed to fill her senses with him. With them. Because it hadn't been two entities in this bed. There had been no boundaries—no place where Kelli stopped and Blake started.

Her eyes opened and she smiled. Her forefinger traced the stubble along his jaw, then stopped at his mouth. "Hi."

His throat constricted and he couldn't speak. Besides, what was there to say? He kissed that finger, suckled it, explored it with his tongue.

She slid her finger from his mouth to his chest, let it toy with a nipple. "I think I owe you now."

For a fleeting moment, he wished he could hold her to that—make her stay. Some kind of orgasmic balance sheet. "I don't keep score." But he'd brought her to peak at least three times after the shower. And he'd lost count after that.

She'd said her period was due any day, that she was safe. He wondered if he cared, what it would be like to have his child with her. Would he ever be able to go back to the kind of relationship-free sex he was used to? Did he even want to? And then her fingers moved lower and he was beyond thought again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Kelli caught the readout on the bedside clock when she opened her eyes. Seven p.m. Blake was staring at her, like he'd been every time she'd awakened. She couldn't remember ever being this needy. Knowing this was her last time with Blake, she'd tried to saturate her system with him—his touch, his scent, his taste—the way his long hair felt like butterflies when he moved his kisses down her body. The way his eyes glazed right before he came. The sounds he murmured into her ear. As if she could store the way she felt when she was with him in some internal reservoir, to call on in times of drought. She kissed his neck, right below his ear.

He propped himself up on an elbow. "Sweetheart, I'm absolutely, totally, one hundred and ten percent drained. I'm not sure I'll ever get hard again."

"I'd be happy to dispute that with you, but not now. I'm kind of depleted myself." She trailed her fingers along his jaw. "I've got beard burn in places I didn't know I had places."

"Sorry."

She lowered her gaze from his eyes, bracing herself for the way he'd respond to her next statement. "I should check my e-mail. I had a hunch and put Justin Stockbridge on it."

The little muscle in his jaw clenched and she knew he was trying not to show his displeasure. Hell, he was probably raging mad. She sat on the edge of the bed so she didn't have to look at him anymore.

Blake flung the covers away, stormed around the bed and stood over her, his hands quivering on her shoulders. "Look at me."

There was no anger in his tone. Only hurt. When she finally met his gaze, she saw the pain and something twisted in her chest.

His lips pinched into a flat line and he took several deep breaths before he spoke. "You said this would be over in the morning. Even if I think you're wrong, that we have more between us than great sex, if you say you have to leave, I'll accept it. But I want every minute between now and you getting on that damn plane." His voice shook and

she saw him gathering control. "I want to know there's nothing in that computer that can't wait until morning. I want to go to sleep beside you and know you'll be there whenever I wake up."

He was right. Even if Justin's e-mail provided the key to her puzzle there would be nothing she could do with the information tonight.

She touched his cheek. "I'll bet you're starved. I can reheat the leftover chicken while you shave."

Kelli awoke before dawn, cradled in Blake's arms. They'd barely exchanged a dozen words after last night's dinner, escaping to a fantasy world where only the two of them existed and neither wanted to speak and break the spell. They'd made love once more, then spent the night being close. She rolled away and lay on her back.

Blake's grip on her tightened, but he barely stirred. She wondered how much he'd actually slept. She'd kept her promise, not even leaving his side to turn off the computers.

"Wake up." She pulled away and turned on the bedside lamp.

A muffled grunt, followed by a yawn. "What are you doing?" He rubbed his eyes.

"I have things to do and a plane to catch. And I promised to be here when you woke up."

"Then I'm going back to sleep."

She'd steeled herself for this moment. "Blake. Please. It's tomorrow. Time to get back to reality." She averted her eyes.

"Pumpkin time, Cinderella?" Despite his obvious attempt to keep things light, she heard the dull resignation in his tone. So, he'd finally realized what they had wasn't something to base a lifetime on. Their worlds had touched, but they would never interlock.

She crawled out of bed and stripped the blanket and top sheet off. She was working the bottom sheet out from under Blake when he threw his hands up in surrender.

"I'm up. I'm up." He climbed into a pair of drawstring flannel pants, bundled the sheets and started for the door. "I'll get these into the washing machine. Why don't you go play with your computer and I'll make coffee. And maybe I can handle toasting a bagel, too."

"Thanks." She found a discarded t-shirt of Blake's on the floor and wriggled into it, savoring his scent as she made her way down the hall to the office. Clean breaks healed best.

She leafed through the phone book and found a listing for an airport shuttle service. After arranging a pickup time, she hung up, fighting the feeling she'd betrayed Blake. He'd be mad, but she didn't want to deal with the awkwardness of that drive,

sitting in the confines of the truck's cab with him. She could already hear the stumbling attempts at conversation, then the awkward, painful goodbyes once they got there.

She saw the green arrow on her e-mail icon and clicked open her inbox. Bless you, Justin. She downloaded the attachment and sent it to the printer.

Scrolling through the documents on the screen while she waited for them to print, she saw bright yellow highlights. She looked back at his e-mail message.

Here you go, K. I took the liberty of cross-checking the lists against each other. Figured you thought they must be connected—if not, no big deal. Only took a few minutes.

Leave it to Justin to put two and two together and go one step further than she'd asked. A quick glance at the time told her she had about an hour left. She grabbed the pages from the printer, gathered all her files and set off for the dining room, where she could spread everything out.

* * * * *

Blake came into the kitchen from the service porch after starting the laundry. He studied the toaster oven, wondering why his brother couldn't have a plain, ordinary, stick-the-bread-in-the-slot-and-press-a-lever toaster instead of this box with dials, buttons, timers and temperature settings. He wanted a toasted bagel, for God's sake, not a gourmet meal. He adjusted the drawstring on his pants and toyed with the idea of asking Kelli to help, but there was no way in hell a kitchen appliance was going to defeat him.

When he heard movement in the dining room, he turned his attention away from the toaster oven, poured another mug of coffee—he knew how to handle that one—and stepped to the doorway. He paused to absorb Kelli's presence, watching her arrange file folders on the table and spread sheets of paper around.

He carried her coffee to the table, setting it well away from the papers. "Good news?"

She glanced up, barely looking at him. "I think so. Justin got his teeth into this one. I need to lay it out so I can see what he found."

"You're welcome."

"What?" She looked up, puzzled at the irritation in his tone.

"For the coffee. The bagels will be a bit longer."

"No problem. I can grab something later." She stopped and he saw her take a breath. "I'm sorry." She picked up the coffee and inhaled, then took a sip. "Thanks."

He crossed behind her, longing to close those final few inches and feel her body against his. "So, what do you have?"

"Justin was checking out donors to the projects similar to Camp Getaway that Thornton was behind and also to contributors to Hollingsworth's campaign fund. He

cross-referenced them and—"

"And Thornton gave money to Hollingsworth, or Hollingsworth to Thornton, right?"

"Both, actually."

"But why would Thornton donate money to Hollingsworth's campaign? He's running for governor of Illinois. Isn't Thornton's operation based out of Denver?"

She leafed through a few sheets of paper, selected one and pointed. "Here. When Justin gets going, he can be determined."

"Sounds like someone else I know," Blake mumbled.

Ignoring the comment, she went on. "Thornton is based in Denver, yes. But," she tapped her finger on the page, "he maintains a residence in Illinois."

He sat down, trying to piece it together. "Okay, so you've connected Thornton and Dwight. What does that give us?"

Apparently the use of "us" hadn't registered. Or if it had, it hadn't bothered her.

"I'm not sure, exactly. But for one thing, it shows Hollingsworth knew about Camp Getaway, which makes it possible he'd seen my picture in the brochure and hooked it up to the one he saw at Dr. Einsele's office. He must have connived something with Thornton—got him to recommend you to Stockbridge."

Kelli continued to leaf through printouts and Blake went back to battle the toaster oven. He found a dial that said, "light", "medium", and "dark", and gave a triumphant grunt. "Gotcha now." He put the bagels into the oven and searched for something that said, "on".

"Justin, I could kiss you," he heard Kelli say.

Biting back the urge to offer himself in Justin's place, he stepped into the dining room. "What?"

"Apparently Justin decided to do some deeper searches." She handed him five sheets of paper.

He scanned the pages. It was a list of names. A fraternity roster spanning ten years. Both Dwight's and Thornton's names were on it. "Okay, they've known each other a long time." He let his eyes peruse the rest of the list. "You see this?"

Kelli stepped beside him, her scent and body heat almost overwhelming his internal promise to accept the terms she'd laid down yesterday. He swallowed and pointed to a name. "James V. Griffith. You think he's related to campaign manager Vance?"

"Could be." She took the paper from him. "Or maybe the V is for Vance and he uses his middle name. This list doesn't have the years listed. Just names. Are they that far apart in age?"

"I've never thought about how old Dwight is." He could see the wheels turning in Kelli's brain. "You're going to check that, aren't you?"

"Getting their years of graduation shouldn't be hard."

Something dinged in the kitchen and he went to check on the bagels. He pulled them out of the small oven. "Ouch." He dropped the hot rolls onto the counter and blew on his fingers. He grabbed two paper towels. No point in dirtying dishes if they had to leave soon. He looked for a knife and sensed Kelli standing behind him.

"You know, most people slice them before they toast them."

Without turning, he said, "I guess I have other things on my mind."

"Hang on. I'll be right back."

Kelli rushed from the room and he tore a chunk off his bagel and spread some butter on it. When Kelli came back, her eyes held a look of fiery determination.

"This can't be a coincidence." She held a business card and was looking at the list again. "Paul Little, Edward Franklin, and Oliver Moser. Also members of the same fraternity."

"Who are they?" he said around another mouthful of bagel.

"Partners in Vance Griffith's law firm. They all go way back."

"And this means?"

She paused. "I'm not sure yet, but it's got to mean something. Too much of a coincidence not to."

He handed Kelli the second bagel and she took it, holding it in her hand and staring at it like it, too, might hold some answers. He washed down his bite of bagel with some coffee. "Is it so farfetched to think a group of fraternity brothers would stick together? Except for Dwight, they seem to have gone into the legal profession. Not unusual for them to keep in touch."

Kelli shifted her gaze from the bagel to the papers. "You might be right."

He heard a car coming down the drive. "Get dressed," he said to Kelli. "We've got company."

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Kelli glanced down, only then realizing she was still wearing Blake's t-shirt and nothing else. Her ride couldn't be this early, could it? Not likely. From Blake's reaction, he knew who was here and he wasn't happy about it. She watched him thrust open the door to the service porch, clearly on an intercept mission.

She waited until the porch door slammed, then tiptoed to the window. Blake and Brian were engaged in a heated discussion of some sort, arms gesticulating, Brian marching toward the garage with Blake scurrying behind him, barefoot, hip-hopping on the crushed rock driveway. She sighed. Whatever it was, they'd work it out.

After a quick shower, she dressed and finished packing. She crammed her papers and laptop into her gym bag. The carryon Blake had given her made a clattering sound on the hallway floor. She lingered a moment at the dining room, hoping Blake had come to peace with his father's memory. Dropping her quick note of

apology on the table, she heard a car peel down the driveway—maybe Blake and Brian still had a way to go before they worked things out. The kitchen door slammed and she hustled out the front door to wait by the road for her ride.

A few moments later, an old Ford Aerostar with Super Shuttle on the side slowed down and she waved it to a stop. The driver clambered out, opened the sliding passenger door and reached for her suitcase.

"Mornin', ma'am. I'm Isaac, but folks call me Ike. Let me get that. You get yourself comfortable." He wheezed when he spoke and looked like he might have founded the shuttle service with a horse and buggy. Rail-thin, with rheumy blue eyes behind black-rimmed eyeglasses, his white button-down shirt had a frayed collar. A chauffeur's cap balanced a little too far back on his head and she wondered if it would fall off if he moved too quickly.

"No problem. I've got it." She slung her computer bag onto the seat and lifted her carryon, afraid Ike might collapse under the weight of the small case. She heard her name being shouted from the house. She flashed a smile. "I'm kind of in a hurry. Can we get going, please?"

He tapped his fingers to the visor of his cap, slammed her door and got behind the wheel. "You betcha. Nobody's ever missed a plane with Ike." He gunned the engine and she was thrust against the seat as he drove off.

She braved a look back and saw Blake, wet from a shower and wearing nothing but a towel around his hips, her note in his hand, rushing out the front door onto the porch. For a moment, it looked like he was going to race down the driveway, but he grabbed one of the wooden porch columns and halted. She turned away before she could see the expression on his face.

Ike hunched over the steering wheel as they barreled down the highway to the airport in Champaign. "Guess you know the Windsors, then."

"Not really." *Only well enough for one of them to run out of the house almost naked.*

"Too bad about the garage. Reckon they'll get it fixed, though. That Brian's not around much anymore, but he's good with his hands."

So's his brother. Stop. Think about work.

Ike went on, ignoring her silence. "Made good with his daddy's business. Don't see the other one much. Moved to the big city."

Great. Did Ike think she was there with Brian? Nothing like a little mistaken identity to set the gossip mill grinding. "Actually, Blake is staying at the house for a while. I was ... working on a project with him."

She saw his head tilt up, probably checking her out in the mirror. She unzipped her computer tote and pulled out a file folder, leafing through pages, trying to look engrossed in something terribly important while the words swam on the page. Ike had the courtesy to stop making conversation and the rest of the drive passed in relative

silence.

"Here you go, ma'am," Ike said when he stopped the Aerostar at the Champaign terminal curb. "Have a safe flight. According to my elbow, it might storm."

She looked at the clear blue sky and raised an eyebrow. "Hope not. I've got tight connections."

He handed her a card. "If you're back this way, you call Ike. Give me a day's notice and I'll meet your flight."

She took the card and gave him a generous tip. "The project Blake and I were working on is kind of hush-hush. I'd appreciate it if you didn't say anything about my being here. Could ruin the deal, you know."

"I gotcha. All the bigshots trying to get something before the other one does." He winked. She wondered if he'd bought it.

She went through the security rituals and arrived at the gate as the plane was boarding. When she got to O'Hare, she looked at the departures board with a newfound respect for Ike's elbow. Weather had delayed her flight to Spokane. She approached the counter where an attendant with a smile molded to her face explained they couldn't give a departure time. But they'd be sure to keep everyone updated.

Settled into a seat, she fingered the card Ike had given her. Super Shuttle Service, Isaac Sinclair, Prop. She stared at it, trying to figure out why something was buzzing in the back of her mind. She'd never met the man before today, that was for sure. No way would anyone forget Ike.

As long as she had to wait, she might as well look at what Justin had sent. The fraternity list sat on top of the stack and on a whim, she scanned it for a Sinclair. Maybe that was why the name seemed familiar. And although it wasn't there, the memory slithered back. Trying not to elbow the overweight woman in the seat beside her, Kelli pulled out page after page until she found what she was looking for.

"Double shit on a stick."

The woman glared at her and sniffed in disgust.

Kelli stuffed everything back in her bag, and with a murmured apology to the woman, bolted for the exit.

* * * * *

Blake stood on the porch, his hand gripping the smooth wooden pillar until his fingers ached. Almost as much as the ache around his heart. Only when the Aerostar disappeared from sight did he feel the chill of the morning breeze on his damp skin. He clutched the note Kelli had left in his hand.

Clean breaks are best. No matter how it seems at the time, some things aren't meant to be. Get back to your life. K.C.

His life. He crumpled the paper in his hand and threw it into the wind. Transfixed,

he watched it flutter to the porch where the breeze sent it skittering along the boards until it caught against the leg of one of the Adirondack chairs. He trudged over and lowered himself into the wooden seat, leaning down to retrieve the note. Eventually the cold penetrated, sending him into the house.

He'd pissed off Brian—nothing new there—and now Kelli was gone. Brian had told him to get back to the city, spitting out the word like an epithet. Kelli said to get on with his life. He wandered aimlessly through the house, feeling nothing. One by one, he picked up the drop cloths, and piece by piece, he covered the furniture.

Two hours later he was sitting on his couch in Chicago clicking the television remote. He'd pushed the old truck to its limit. Probably a good thing his 'Vette was still in Washington, or he'd have been busted for speeding at least three times. He promised the truck a tune-up as soon as he had time.

The family house held too many memories, but he was finding no peace here, either. No doubt he'd insulted Lamonte, barely looking at the doorman when he'd tried to tell Blake all about the mysterious stranger in the laundry room. He'd rushed straight upstairs, not even picking up his mail.

Ghosts of Kelli floated through his once comfortable surroundings. He got up and stomped over to the window. The glare of the midafternoon sun reflecting off neighboring buildings made his eyes burn. Or so he told himself.

Fists clenched, he stared at his briefcase with the Whittaker files. Ignoring it, he changed into workout clothes and went down to the fitness center on the fifth floor. There wouldn't be any ghosts there.

An hour later, sucking air, dripping sweat, drained to the point of queasiness, Blake unlocked his door. He'd pushed himself to his limit and beyond, but the upside was he felt too exhausted to think about anything. He grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, turned on the stereo and switched the speakers to the bedroom and bath. With Queen shouting about wanting it all now, he lingered in a steamy shower until he felt purged of ghosts and ready to go to work.

He selected his Bernini pinstripe suit and a charcoal gray silk shirt. Blake the handyman was gone. No more Bill Cranford, field biologist, either. He adjusted his tie and checked the mirror. His reflection was definitely corporate executive. Sitting on the bed, he pulled on socks and stepped into his shoes. When he turned down the volume on the stereo, he stopped short.

Holy crap. He had to be imagining things, but he could swear he heard the all-too-familiar sounds of a keyboard clicking. His neck prickled and his heart thudded against his chest. He thought he was over that. He rounded the corner and stood still, not a hundred percent sure he wasn't projecting what he wanted to see, Kelli sitting at his desk, working at her laptop.

"Kelli?"

She didn't turn. But then, she rarely heard him when she was working. He stepped closer until he was sure she wasn't an illusion caused by wishful thinking and an overdone workout. Five paces away, he could smell her. His throat tightened. Had she come back to him? Fighting the urge to race over and embrace her, he stood his ground.

He found his voice. "What are you doing here? And how the hell did you get in?"

This time, she did turn. With a finger to her lips, she picked up the mouse and clicked something. Without speaking, she crossed the room and switched the speakers back to the living space. When she spoke, her voice was low and he had to step closer to hear her over the music. Was his place really bugged? Was someone listening? He nodded in understanding.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Lamonte let me in—I told him I'd left something vital in the apartment. Don't be mad at him—I laid it on kind of thick." A corner of her mouth twitched. "I think he liked the idea of me surprising you."

Lamonte's idea of payback for not taking a moment to chat? No matter. Kelli was in his apartment and maybe she'd changed her mind. Maybe Lamonte had done him a favor. "I thought you were on your way back to EnviroCon."

She got up from the chair and paced the room. "I was. But at O'Hare, there was one of those, 'we don't know how long we'll be delayed' things and I was looking at Ike's card and all of a sudden, something clicked and I needed to work and couldn't wait and I can't exactly do what I need to do from an internet café and this was the only place I knew and I didn't think you'd be back and I called Jack—"

"Whoa!" He ached to stop her mid-stride and put his arms around her, but he couldn't bear the hurt of a rejection. She'd told him to get back to his life and that's what he was doing. "Slow down and take it from the top." He bit off the Sweetheart.

She ran her fingers through her hair, steepled her fingers over her nose and took a deep breath before speaking. "I had Jack download and e-mail me some of the files I'd kept from my CompuServe jobs. Remember how we couldn't find anything that connected Hollingsworth or Thornton to me?"

He nodded. "You found one?"

"I think so. I remembered when I saw Ike's card. From the shuttle service. Isaac Sinclair."

"You're not telling me Ike has anything to do with this?"

"No, no, of course not. But his name rang the bell. Ever heard of Berlyno Manufacturing? Offices in Philadelphia, plants in five states?"

He thought for a moment. "No. Does Hollingsworth own it?"

"No, it doesn't show on any of his holdings." She moved back to the computer and hit a few keys. "But Dwight Hollingsworth worked there once, and the CEO was Stephen Sinclair."

"You're losing me."

"I need a little more time to see if my hunch was right."

For the first time, it seemed she'd actually seen him when she looked his way. Her gaze moved up and down his body and she blinked. "Oh—I guess you're going to work."

He tried without success to keep the sarcasm from his voice. "It seems someone told me to get on with my life. I thought I'd give it a shot." A flicker of pain darkened her gray eyes to storm clouds, but he refused to acknowledge the tightness in his chest. "You can stay here as long as you need to. There's a spare key in the kitchen—second drawer. Lock up when you go and leave the key with Lamonte. Or Floyd if it's his shift—they both know you've stayed here."

"Blake ..." Her jaw clenched and he could see her stop whatever she was going to say. "Thank you."

"No problem. I'll be at the office."

He went back into the bedroom for his wallet and keys, wishing he could get out of the apartment without having to walk past her. But when he did, she was already lost in her computer.

At his office, the buzz of his intercom provided momentary respite from the spreadsheets strewn over Blake's desk. Kelli had opened the door to doubts that his initial approach to the Whittaker account was the right one. But it was sure the easier one.

He pressed the button to see why the department secretary was interrupting him when he'd asked to be left alone. No interruptions. Hollingsworth wasn't in the building, so he had settled down to work. He'd spent the last few hours deep in concentration. That is, when he wasn't thinking about Kelli back at his apartment.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Windsor. Mr. Hollingsworth is on two."

He picked up the phone, scrambling through the papers on his desk to find his outline of his draft proposal. "Yes, sir?"

Dwight's voice was clipped. "I want you to talk to Vance Griffith. Hear him out. Then make your own decision. He'll meet you at Madeleine's at five." There was a click and the line went dead.

He stared at the receiver for a moment before hanging up. What the hell. Drinks, even with Vance, trumped spreadsheets hands down. He'd pretend to listen, say, "No, thanks," and be done with it. He glanced at his watch to find that time had gotten away from him and it was almost five. Gathering his papers into some semblance of order, he stacked them neatly on his desk and gazed out the window. Below, people huddled in coats, heads ducked as they scurried down the sidewalk. Wind whipped flags and awnings on nearby buildings. It was early for a cold snap, but not unheard of. He shrugged into the topcoat he left hanging in his office and headed for the elevator.

Kelli hadn't allowed Blake to see the tears in her eyes when he'd walked through the room, keys jingling in his hands. She'd been in a cab from the airport before she'd realized what she was doing, but there wasn't anyplace else that would give her the kind of computer access she needed. She wouldn't risk using Blake's, in case someone had remote access, but she could borrow his internet connection for her laptop and use his for off-line work. With luck, she'd be finished and out of here before he got back. She told herself he'd be working late to make up for the missed morning hours.

He hadn't touched her. Hadn't even come close enough. Thank goodness, because she wasn't sure she'd have been able to resist collapsing into his arms. Even from where he'd stood, she could smell his scent. His executive scent—the one that had enveloped them the first time they'd made love.

Clean break. She'd blown that one. Time to see if her hunch played out so she could start figuring out how to get past it and go home. Wherever that was. Through watery eyes, she stared at the spreadsheet on the screen.

Two hours later, she picked up her cell phone and punched in Blake's cell number. An answering ring came from the bedroom. Following the sound, she cursed when she saw his cell on the floor by his bed.

Moments later, she stood in the elevator, jabbing at the button for the ground floor, willing the car to move faster.

At the door, a gust of wind smelling of car exhaust blew through her slacks. The cab she'd asked Lamonte to call waited at the curb. Uttering a brisk thanks over her shoulder, she yanked open the cab's door and slid into the seat. "Hollingsworth Industries, please." She rubbed her hands together. While she'd worked, oblivious to the outside world, a cold wind had blown through, and she regretted not bringing a jacket. She tapped her foot while the cab worked its way through the downtown Chicago streets.

"Sixteen twenty-seven," the cabbie said when it pulled up to a skyscraper.

She handed him a twenty and dashed into the wind for the lobby. Glancing at the directory, she saw Hollingsworth Industries occupied six floors. Shit, where was Blake's office? She scanned the listings. Only departments, not individuals. No listing for Cutthroat Takeovers. She got into the elevator, punched the button for Reception.

When the doors swooshed open on fifty-five, she stepped out into an expanse of marble flooring, chairs and sofas upholstered in a tiny geometric print in shades of black and grays and a large, curved desk with a woman sitting behind it, talking into a telephone headset and working a plastic cover over her computer monitor. She peered up at Kelli's approach and gave a friendly, inquisitive smile.

Plump, with a well-padded bosom, the gray-haired woman looked more like someone's grandmother than a receptionist for a multimillionaire's company. Blue eyes

twinkled behind thick lenses. She raised a finger in a "just a minute" gesture and finished her call.

"What can I help you with?" the woman asked. Even her voice sounded grandmotherly. Like she'd be offering milk and cookies next.

"I have an appointment with Blake Windsor." Kelli gave a sheepish grin. "I'm a little late, I'm afraid and I didn't write down his office number. Some days I swear I'm lucky my shoes match."

The woman raised her eyebrows, but clicked some buttons on her phone and asked if Mr. Windsor was in. She listened, then nodded and gave Kelli an apologetic smile. "I'm sorry. You just missed him. He left about ten minutes ago."

Kelli made no attempt to hide her disappointment. "Would you know where he might be going? It's important I speak to him about the —she searched her brain—"the Whittaker account. My boss is convinced I'm a total flake, and I have to show him I can do this."

She could almost hear the woman going *tsk, tsk* while she removed the headset from her ear and slipped it into a drawer.

"Please?" The pleading in her voice was real, although she tried to get some of the "total flake" into her expression. Maybe a little lost puppy, too. "If I lose this job, I don't know what I'll do."

The woman shook her head and sighed. "You might try the bistro on the corner. I believe his secretary heard him mention it before he left. Madeleine's."

"Thank you, thank you so much." She pivoted and strode back to the elevator. When the doors opened, the car was full, and she squeezed in amid what appeared to be clerical staff. Men and women, professionally dressed, but with a slightly bored air about them. None carried briefcases or anything that looked like they'd be taking work home. Out at the stroke of five, most likely. As she watched the numbers count down the floors, she thought she got a faint whiff of a familiar aftershave.

No, Blake had already left, the receptionist had said. It's not like he was the only man on the planet who wore it. She was too sensitized. Wishful thinking, too. Yet when the doors opened on the ground floor, she stepped out and lingered to one side as the car disgorged its passengers.

A hand gripped her biceps. "Well, well, well. Look who saved me a trip."

Chapter Thirty

At Madeline's, Blake took a table near the door. Every time it opened another blast of frigid air chilled the room. He traced the red and white checks on the tablecloth with a forefinger while he nursed a Scotch. After he told Vance to forget about him as a part of Hollingsworth's campaign team, he'd go back to work, but in the meantime, his boss had practically ordered him to have drinks with the man.

The after-work crowd trickled in, murmuring things about wind chill and a new record low, and he nodded to familiar faces. One or two women smiled, paused, as though waiting for an invitation to join him. Little as he wanted to deal with Vance Griffith, the thought of a woman other than Kelli left him feeling hollow—like in the old days, right after his birthday, when everything went back to business as usual. He kept his face closed and they walked by.

He saw her at the door. His heart jumped to his throat and his groin tightened. Then he looked again and he saw the fear on Kelli's face. A man, overcoat slung over his arm, a scarf wrapped over the lower half of his face, wearing sunglasses and a brimmed hat pulled low on his head stood close beside her. Too close.

Even before the man nodded him out the door, Blake was on his feet, grabbing his wallet and dumping several bills on the table without a thought to their denominations. He'd settle any differences next time.

Saucer-wide, Kelli's eyes pleaded for him to stay back. He saw the man's hand, draped with his coat, pressed against Kelli's back. He covered the distance to them in three strides, recognition sending a trickle of sweat down his spine.

"Let's go," the man said. "Keep it natural. And no talking." He started walking toward a row of cabs. The three of them squeezed into the backseat of the first one, the man in the middle, his gun still pointed at Kelli. He barked an address to the cabbie and they merged into traffic.

Mouth dry, heart pounding, Blake tried to keep his voice pleasant. "Sorry I didn't return your call about dinner, Vance, but don't you think this is overkill? If you want to discuss Dwight's campaign, we can talk."

"Shut up," Griffith said. "I get nervous when people talk. Twitchy, even."

He weighed the odds. Not likely that Griffith would shoot either of them in the cab, but he wouldn't risk endangering Kelli. He'd play this one out.

Fifteen minutes later Griffith said, "This is fine," to the cabbie and the car stopped. Griffith fumbled in his pocket with his left hand and pulled out some bills, which he handed over the seat.

Blake looked out the window at some run-down buildings, most empty. A few storefronts with grimy windows, many boarded up with graffiti-covered plywood, lined the cracked sidewalks. The cab pulled away, hung a U-turn and was gone.

He glanced around. "River North. Charming neighborhood. You live here, Vance?" In this neighborhood, a gunshot would go unnoticed. Certainly unreported.

"I said, 'Shut up', Windsor. Walk, or your so-called cousin gets hurt."

"You need to get a better speech writer, you know. You're starting to sound like a bad movie."

"There's a construction site down there." Griffith cocked his head to his right. "We're going to cut between these two buildings, walk down this alley, and then you're going to have a little accident."

Wind howled between the buildings. Kelli walked beside him, hunched against the cold, her hands stuffed in her pockets.

He set his fury aside and kept his tone civil. "You could at least be a gentleman and give her your coat. Tell me what you want. I'm sure we can work out a deal."

"We're not negotiating here, Windsor." Vance's voice was low, muffled by his scarf. He moved the coat enough to confirm he held a gun to Kelli. "Walk."

Blake took a breath. Negotiate. That's what he did. Okay, so it wasn't usually someone's life on the line, but he'd been staring down gun barrels a lot lately. He'd almost built up an immunity. Right. Maybe to some of the panic. But definitely not to the bullets.

While they walked, Blake moved closer to Kelli, not sure if he was reassuring her or himself with the proximity. Her cheeks were ruddy from the wind and he thought he could hear her teeth chattering.

"If you're not going to be chivalrous, Vance, I hope you don't mind if I give her my coat." Without waiting for a reply, he began working his arms out of his topcoat.

"Doesn't matter to me." Vance said. "You're not going to be around much longer, anyway."

"Kill me if you have to, but leave Blake out of this." Kelli's voice rang out, high and shrill. He heard more anger than fear. "You can tell Mr. Hollingsworth he doesn't know anything."

Griffith made a choking sound. "Hollingsworth? That wimp? He may be cutthroat in business, but he has no clue about politics."

"This is about politics?" Blake stopped, turned to face Griffith and forced a smile. "Hell, he's got my vote, although I can't say I approve of your campaign methods." Slowly, he took his coat and laid it over Kelli's shoulders. She seemed so tiny under its bulk. He tried to insert himself between Kelli and Griffith, but she made no effort to move aside. Had she resigned herself to whatever Griffith had planned for them?

"So you sent those other thugs after us?" she said. "Scumbag McGregor and that delivery man."

"Too bad they botched it. Good help is so hard to find, isn't it?" Blake said.

"My mistake," Griffith said. "I've learned if you want a job done right, you gotta do it yourself. Don't you ... Casey?" He laughed, a low-pitched grating sound. "Dwight is such a trusting fool. Sending a total amateur to find out if it was really you out in the woods. And then taking you"—he glanced at Blake—"at your word. I mean, just because a man straps on a tool belt doesn't make him the right man for the job. You might have pulled off the carpenter bit, but Dwight never thought past phase one—finding out if Kelli Carpenter was Casey Wallace. I tried to get him to leave things to me, but no—the old geezer had to send you out there on a stupid fact-finding mission."

His eyes, cold as the winter sky, narrowed. "Which, I may add, you failed miserably. Enough talking. Start walking."

The gun to the small of his back was enough incentive. He moved a few paces apart from Kelli. It would be harder for Griffith to control them if they weren't so close together. He glanced back and forth, looking for someplace he could shove Kelli to safety and deal with Vance on his own. But the buildings crowded together, shoulder to shoulder, with not a gap between them. He tried to pick up the pace, maybe get to the end of the block and cut away, but Kelli trudged along. Delaying tactics? Or had she shut down? His coat dragged like a royal cloak behind her, threatening to fall off. When he tried to wrap it tighter, she shrugged it back and shook her head.

"I'm okay," she whispered.

He turned around again, fixing his gaze on Griffith. He needed to keep it personal, between the two of them. Get him to forget Kelli for the moment. "Why don't you put the gun down and we can work something out. Shooting us isn't going to look like an accident, is it?"

"I said keep walking." Griffith stepped forward and put the gun to Kelli's head. "Where you're going, nobody's going to be able to tell if you were shot or not. You'll be part of the foundation of a new low-income housing project. A little variation on the cement shoes. Chicago has such a rich history, doesn't it?"

Blake's heart lurched. He put his hands up and took three backward paces, maintaining eye contact, trying to keep the fear from showing in his face or voice. "No need for that. I'm walking. But exactly what am I supposed to know?"

"She didn't tell you?"

"I couldn't tell him what I didn't know, Mr. Griffith." She emphasized the name. Kelli's tone was even now, steady and clear.

"I think, under the circumstances, you can call me Vance."

"Very well, Vance," Kelli said with the same clear enunciation. A hint of sarcasm, perhaps?

She shouldn't be making the man mad. Blake interrupted. "Will someone tell me what the hell is going on? If you're going to shoot us, I'd like to know why."

"Now who sounds like a bad movie?" Griffith said. "Turn around and move it."

"I'd rather see the man who's trying to shoot me. Or do you prefer to shoot your victims in the back?"

"You talk too much, Windsor. Next word out of your mouth and the gun might go off. Too bad it's pointed at her."

Kelli turned to Blake, her eyes begging him to do what Griffith asked. He shrugged and fell into step beside her. Still walking, she looked over her shoulder.

"So Dwight Hollingsworth doesn't know you're here, does he, Vance? You're doing this on your own, right?" she said.

"Hollingsworth refused to understand you can't put your faith in the system. You

have to manipulate it if you want to go places, and believe me, I want him to go places. That's been the plan since college."

"The fraternity," Kelli said. "And are your law partners part of the scheme?"

Griffith transferred his eyes from Kelli to Blake and back. "Not exactly. Back in college, they thought we could work together, get one of us into politics and take him to the top with benefits for all. But they all got happy doing their legal stuff and pretty much forgot their little club. Except for Dwight, who wanted more. Making money hand-over-fist wasn't enough for him." He sniffed. "So I offered Hollingsworth my guidance."

"Mighty generous of you," Blake said.

Griffith shrugged. "Dwight will have the title, but I'll call the shots once he's governor. And after a while, president. He's got the charisma. I'll do the rest."

"And Kelli knows something that would keep him from being elected."

"Even if she didn't, there was no way I was going to risk it."

This time Kelli stopped. She gave Griffith a stare that made Blake shiver. He'd never seen her this icy.

"Berlyno Manufacturing in Philadelphia. A job I had for two days before they decided they didn't need my services after all. They paid me well for my trouble. I went back home to San Diego and a few days later, Charles and Lucas were killed. I never thought about Berlyno again. Until today."

She looked at him now, not Griffith, and her expression softened, although her voice was as clear as ever. "Years ago, Dwight Hollingsworth worked for Berlyno. He'd been embezzling. I didn't have a chance to get further than that this afternoon, but —"

Blake cut her off. He could negotiate, keep Vance talking. In familiar territory, the panic eased while his mind worked through the ramifications. "So Dwight realizes someone's going to be checking his past. The scrutiny of a political campaign could uncover his earlier misdeeds." He looked at Griffith. "And if that happened, no more behind the scenes power for Vance Griffith. How am I doing?"

"Not bad, Windsor," Griffith said.

"Wait," Kelli said. "By the time I was hired by Berlyno, Hollingsworth was long gone. I would never have noticed the discrepancies. That wasn't what I was hired to do."

"Not a chance he was willing to take," Griffith said. "When Dwight found out they were doing a complete system overhaul, he panicked. By then, he'd parlayed his earlier ... windfall, shall we say, into Hollingsworth Industries and moved to Chicago with his grand political aspirations. He convinced his old boss he knew a better systems analyst, someone local to Philly and Berlyno let you go. I guess the boss felt guilty, because they gave you a nice chunk of change for doing nothing."

Griffith didn't seem to notice they'd stopped walking. Anything to delay what

Blake hoped would not be the inevitable worked for him. He needed to keep the man's mind off their final destination.

"Okay, Vance. I'm confused. Indulge me. Let's take it from the top. Dwight embezzles money, but he thinks he's covered his tracks. He moves to Chicago and Hollingsworth Industries grows by leaps and bounds. He starts laying the groundwork for his political career.

"Then he finds out Kelli—as Casey—is going to look at Berlyno, and he's afraid she'll uncover the embezzlement. He gets her off the job and thinks he's okay. How am I doing so far?"

"Not bad, Windsor. Not bad." Griffith's gun hand dipped.

The tightness in Blake's gut eased a fraction. Keep talking. Keep him occupied with him, not Kelli. "Maybe he checks up on her from time to time—finds out her company closed and she left the country. Now he's feeling like he's really home free.

"But one day he sees her picture in a plastic surgeon's office and panics. He's seen Kelli Carpenter's picture in Thornton's brochures, and he realizes she's got a new appearance. Maybe she's still around. The picture doesn't tell him enough, so he sends me to Camp Getaway for the up close and personal reaction."

"You're close."

"The timing doesn't work," Kelli said. "You needed to make sure everything was taken care of or your dreams of controlling the governorship were gone. I'll bet you were doing a lot more than Dwight knew, weren't you? You were looking for Casey Wallace long before I surfaced at the Camp Getaway project."

Griffith gave a self-satisfied smirk. "Of course. I've been involved since the early days. Dwight was a jerk. He refused to consider a worst case scenario. So I had to do it for him. Besides, better if he didn't know. Made it easier for him to be honest." Sarcasm oozed with his final word.

Crap, now Griffith's focus was back on Kelli. Along with the gun. Blake watched Kelli's eyes widen.

"Didn't know what?" she said. "You didn't ... You couldn't have ... Tell me Charles and Lucas didn't die instead of me. You didn't kill them."

Blake gripped her elbow, pulled her closer to him. He felt her shaking. Cold? Fear? Or anger? He shifted his gaze to Griffith. Something in the man's eyes told him he might have killed them if he'd been in the loop at the time. He shuddered along with Kelli.

"No, nothing like that," Griffith said. "Before my time. A convenience store shooting in San Diego doesn't make the Philly papers, so Dwight never saw it."

Kelli lifted her chin. "So how did you find me? Through Dr. Einsel, right? Dwight saw the pictures and told you I might still be around."

Griffith shrugged. "More or less."

Blake saw the pause, the quick shift of Griffith's eyes. There was more than he

was saying. The pain of his own fingernails in his palms made him take a breath and unclench his fists. Did he hear sirens in the distance? Police cars were as common as drunks in this neighborhood, but would the cops look down this alley?

Afraid to turn toward the sound for fear Griffith would notice the approaching wail, he raised his voice. "There's more, Vance, isn't there? How did you put everything together?"

"It wasn't all that hard. You have to start with no assumptions. Find the beginning. I started with Casey Wallace's disappearance and backtracked her history. When I found the convenience store shooting, I wondered if she took back her maiden name." Griffith flicked a glance in Kelli's direction. "It's more common with divorced women, but it was worth a shot."

Kelli's mouth opened, then closed. "You knew I was Karen Abbott." Blake watched the wheels turn as she processed the information. "You found me at Berkeley. Even before Dwight found out about my surgery."

"Let's just say I knew you were there. I watched you. Thought everything was copasetic."

The sirens faded away and the shred of hope Blake allowed himself vanished. He set his gaze on Griffith, using his best boardroom stare. "So what made things un-copasetic?"

"The Camp Getaway brochure," Kelli said. "Combined with the before and after pictures in Dr. Einsele's office."

"She's pretty smart, Windsor. Too bad. In my line of work, smart people can be a problem."

"So you got Dr. Einsele's clerk to check the files," Kelli said. "You matched Karen Abbott's new face to the picture of Kelli Carpenter from the Camp Getaway brochure. And you knew where to find me."

"I'm still confused," Blake said. "After all this, what was Dwight going to do if I came back and said Kelli was Casey?"

Griffith gave a guttural laugh. "I told you, the man never thought that far ahead. Maybe he was going to bribe her," he pointed the gun at Kelli and Blake held his breath, "or just ask her nicely to keep her yap shut."

"Tell me," Kelli said. "Thornton. Is he in this with you?"

"Nope. Actually, Thornton would have been a better candidate than Dwight, but the man's got too many ethics to go into politics. He couldn't even stand being a lawyer. Now he makes money just so he can give it away."

"So you set up my cover with Construction Temps." Holy crap. Blake couldn't believe he was actually trying to get someone to point a gun at him, but Griffith's gun seemed to point at whoever was talking and Blake didn't like it pointed at Kelli.

Sure enough, Griffith swung the gun back toward him.

"Like I said, Dwight doesn't do a lot of thinking. I told him he couldn't send you

knocking on the door to ask Kelli if she was Casey. He insisted, but he agreed to a more subtle approach. I volunteered to handle it, made a couple of phone calls, faxed your phony references to EnviroCon. The beauty of working with the head men is they don't do much work themselves. Your people call their people and voilà! They think they're talking to Thornton's people. Of course, Dwight had no idea I'd followed up with a little plan of my own."

Blake kept his hands in his pockets where Griffith couldn't see them balled into fists. "Why are we here now? Why did Dwight send you after us?" Somehow, this didn't seem like something Dwight would do, not that it mattered at this point. But he couldn't—wouldn't—believe he'd worked closely with the man and hadn't seen the evil.

"Are you kidding? Dwight's running on a truth and honesty platform. He'd probably bust a gut if he knew I had you here. Might even withdraw from the campaign." He glanced at Blake and snorted. "Just my luck to hook up with someone who thinks he can be an honest politician."

Good. Griffith was watching him now. "One thing you haven't explained. If you were so worried about Kelli knowing something, why didn't you find her at UCLA?" He added a hint of derision to his tone. "Or maybe you weren't smart enough to look." Blake took another half step back, daring the man to approach. If Griffith came after him, maybe Kelli could dash for it.

Griffith shook his head as if he'd seen through Blake's ploy. "Like I said, Windsor. If you want something done right, you have to do it yourself." He gave a twisted smile. "I sent Robbie Kirkland to Berkeley and when he and your lady friend here disappeared, I figured it was all over. It wasn't until much later, when I saw the EnviroCon brochure that I realized I'd made a mistake."

"Wait," Kelli said. "Who's Robbie Kirkland?"

"Oh, yeah," Griffith said with a sardonic grin. "You would have known him as Robert Kilian."

* * * * *

Kelli's world tilted. She staggered. Blake's arm wrapped around her waist. Someone had sent Robert. All his charm, all his caring—everything had been a lie. Until he'd tried to rape her. Shit on a stick, he probably intended to kill her. Years of guilt floated from her shoulders.

"Looks like the little lady didn't know she was set up," Griffith said. "What happened to Kirkland, anyway?"

Kelli shrugged away from Blake and faced Griffith, drawing strength from her rage. "You can go to hell," she said. "I'm sure he'll enjoy your company."

"After you, my dear." Griffith waved the gun. "Enough chitchat. Let's walk."

Five paces from the edge of a foundation that gaped beneath them like the Grand Canyon, she heard the sirens coming back. Relief washed through her. A glance at Blake showed him gathering himself. Was he going to try something stupid? She had it all under control. Afraid if she so much as changed her expression, Griffith would panic and shoot, she kept her expression neutral when she spoke.

"Give it up, Vance. You'll never get away with it."

When Griffith turned toward her, Blake swung at his gun hand. Vance spun around. Blake kicked. Encumbered by the coat over his arm, Vance ducked, feinted and Kelli heard a gunshot.

"No!" she screamed, anger and fear coursing through her, chasing away the cold. Then she heard footsteps racing toward them, felt strong hands grasp her arms, securing them behind her back.

"Not me," she said. She pointed with her chin. "Him. Vance Griffith. He's trying to kill us."

"Wait right here, ma'am," a woman's voice said. "Let us do our job." She kept her hands on Kelli's wrists.

"Is Blake all right?" Kelli shook her head to clear it. Now that she could think, she saw the police officers who had seemed to materialize out of nowhere. A policewoman held her away from the three others, who were crouched on the ground over Blake and Griffith.

"Call the medics," she heard someone say.

Chapter Thirty-One

Hours later, Kelli sat in front of Blake's fireplace sipping a brandy. He sat across from her, pale-faced, lips white around the edges. Blake had been patched up by the paramedics and she'd been taken to the police station despite her protests to wait for him. She'd given her version of the events, been told Mr. Griffith was in custody and that Mr. Windsor was giving his statement.

Torn between running and waiting, she'd come back for her laptop to find Blake not home yet. Before she could decide if she dared wait to see him once more, he'd dragged through the door. He hadn't spoken, simply poured them each a drink and collapsed in a chair. Pain etched on his face, he set a small prescription vial on the nearby table.

She picked up the vial and read the label. "If you'd take one of these, you'd feel better."

"Later. Right now, I prefer this." He lifted the glass of Scotch he held in his left hand. "Besides, the bullet just grazed my arm. I'm not even sure it's bad enough to say, 'It's only a flesh wound.'"

She shook her head in exasperation, smiling when Blake lifted his eyebrows. No more need to control her automatic gestures. "Back to that bad movie dialogue, then?"

"It's all I can manage at the moment, I'm afraid. It's been quite a day." He stretched his legs out, leaned back and closed his eyes.

"I warned you to stay away from me. And the funny part is—if Griffith hadn't interfered, I'd never have given Berlyno Manufacturing or a gubernatorial race in Illinois a thought." She paused. "I wonder what I'd have done if I had known. I wasn't exactly without an ugly secret of my own."

"Things have changed, haven't they? Finding out about Robert."

Had finding out she'd been duped changed things for Blake, too? Did he think of her as a stupid female, someone blinded by charm and flattery, incapable of seeing the brutality below the surface? With Blake's eyes closed, she couldn't tell. At the moment, however, she would agree with him. "I'm going to need to get my head around that one."

Blake swayed, winced in obvious pain and the internal control she'd been clutching like a life rope snapped. She got up from the leather chair and stood over him.

"And what did you think you were doing, charging a man with a gun? I had everything covered. You could have gotten us both killed."

His eyes popped open. "Is that any way to talk to the man who took a bullet to save your life? And ruined a perfectly good suit, by the way."

"What happened to 'it just grazed me'? And I'm not done here, Windsor. The cops were on their way. I called them. It was a matter of stalling for time until they got there. There was no need for your heroics."

He pounded back his Scotch and slammed the glass on the end table. "Heroics? Is that what you thought? I was thinking more along the lines of survival. And what do you mean, you called the cops? When? How? And why didn't you call me?"

She saw the pain in his eyes, but more than that, the anger. Or had she injured his pride? Unconsciously, she took half a step back. "I tried. As soon as I discovered Hollingsworth had been skinning from Berlyno." She handed him his cell phone. "This was in your bedroom."

He winced. "Sorry. I guess you shook me up when you came back."

"I couldn't risk calling your office or e-mailing you in case someone was with you. While you were at work, I was going through the files Justin sent from the Berlyno job. I had backups on disc and hadn't bothered to return them when they let me go. I'd have tossed them, but after Charles ... things got ... complicated ... and I forgot about them until now."

Blake reached for his glass and grimaced. Kelli gave him another head shake, but went to the bar and brought the bottle over. He extended his hand, but she ignored it and poured a modest portion into his glass. He glared at her but didn't say anything.

merely took a swallow.

"I went to your office," she continued, "but you'd already left. I'd just gotten off the elevator when Vance grabbed me."

"So when did you call the cops? He had you the whole time."

"I called nine-one-one while the phone was in my pocket and left the line open. It took a while, but the cops used the GPS chip to trace the call. I was so glad when you said North River. I had no clue where we were and I wasn't sure they'd get a decent signal. I tried to relay enough information and to get Vance to talk—to say enough to show we were in danger. I was afraid the operators would hang up when things were quiet so long—"

"They never hang up on a nine-one-one call. So they got a fix on our location and sent the police to the rescue." He looked up at her and she was drawn in by those chocolate-colored eyes.

She sat on the arm of Blake's chair and stroked his hair. He closed his eyes and she massaged the creases out of his forehead. "I didn't mean to snap."

"I should have figured you had a plan. You were talking so loud and clear. I thought you were being brave."

"Brave? Hardly. Even though my brain said he wouldn't shoot while we were in such a public place, all that registered was a gun in my back. I was scared to death. And at the end, when I heard the gunshot, I was scared that you were dead. Then, when I knew you were alive, the cops wouldn't tell me anything, they just hauled me to the police station to answer their questions." She kissed his brow, afraid if she did anything more she wouldn't be able to leave. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

"Like white on rice." He sighed and finished his drink. "In a way, it's probably a good thing Vance tried to take matters into his own hands. He's a lawyer, a politician and a sleaze, but he didn't make a good murderer. If he'd gotten Scumbag, or someone like him to come back for us, we'd likely both be dead now."

"You're probably right." She took a deep breath. Facing Vance Griffith had been nothing compared with this. Get it out. Clean break.

"I'm going back to EnviroCon. I called Jack. I'll have to give a statement about Scumbag. I told the cops here Vance Griffith thought I had incriminating evidence against Dwight Hollingsworth. But that's all I said. I left a flash drive with everything I had from Berlyno on your desk. You can give it to the cops, the newspapers—or not. It's your choice. The cops should have the nine-one-one tape of the call."

Blake wiped a hand across his eyes. "It's complicated, isn't it? I told them pretty much the same thing—barely hinted at some prior unsubstantiated indiscretions. I'm sure the investigative reporters will sink their teeth into the story."

"Blake—I meant what I said before. Maybe even more now. Things between us—they're crazy. We need to step back and put things in perspective. Besides, we both have jobs that take us all over the place. We'd hardly ever be in the same place at the

same time. It wouldn't work."

He studied his drink for a long moment. "If that's what you want."

When he met her gaze, she knew he'd given up. Which was what she wanted, wasn't it? True, he'd saved her from Scumbag and had been ready to do whatever it took to save her from Vance Griffith. But saving someone's life didn't mean you wanted to spend the rest of your life together. All it meant was he probably didn't want to live with the guilt if he hadn't tried to save her. She'd convinced herself that leaving was the best thing for both of them. Why did it feel like she was the one being abandoned?

She stood. "I've got reservations on the red-eye. I've ordered a cab. I need to get going."

"You could stay here, you know. Take a morning flight. Get some rest. I'll take the couch."

The couch. After all they'd had in bed. Sex. That's all it had been, after all. Glorious, mind-blowing, toe-curling sex. Better to remember it that way.

"You know I can't." She struggled with the effort it took to meet his eyes. "I wouldn't even be here now, except I was worried about you. The cops said you were fine, but I had to see for myself." And say goodbye in person. She owed him that after the way she'd left him before.

Blake stood, a little unsteady on his feet and lifted her hand to his lips. "Godspeed, Kelli."

"Take care of yourself," she whispered. Tears blurred her vision. She gathered her computer bag and let herself out. She waited in the lobby for the cab, one eye on the elevator, but its doors remained closed. What had she expected? She'd gone to great pains to make him believe she didn't want him. Obviously, he didn't want her, either.

The cab honked. Lamonte, eyebrows raised, opened the door and she stepped into the chilly night air. "O'Hare," she said to the cab driver.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Three months later

"Drop me off here, please," Kelli said to Ike. "And can you wait?"

Ike turned and gave her a solemn stare. "Moment of truth is it, then, Miss?"

"I faced my truth weeks ago," she said. "Now it's time to see if his matches mine. I'll be right back." Either to return to the airport, or to retrieve the bags piled in the back of Ike's Aerostar. By the time she exhaled, Ike had scuttled around the shuttle and placed the footstool by the door. She took his gnarled hand and gave it a squeeze. "Wish me luck."

He tapped his fingers to the brim of his cap.

Much as she wanted to run, she kept her pace sedate. It had snowed yesterday and her boots crunched as she walked down the road where she'd asked Ike to wait, out of sight of the house. The smell of smoke from fireplaces filled the air. Christmas decorations had abounded along the drive, but nothing at this house indicated the holiday was days away.

She had made it a point to be as far away from Washington as possible when Blake had to give his statement. The forensics had borne out their stories about Scumbag, and Blake had been dismissed. She'd begged Jack for every single job he could throw at her, hopping around the country doing surveys, filing reports from dingy motel rooms—anything to keep busy. Nothing had worked. Thoughts of Blake consumed her until she couldn't tell a pack rat from a possum.

She peered down the driveway. A red Corvette and the old green pickup sat by the back porch. At the end of the driveway, the garage door was open. She leaned against the oak tree and caught her breath. Sounds of a power saw ignited old memories. She envisioned Blake at Camp Getaway, working shirtless, muscles gleaming. A lifetime ago.

When she crept closer, she saw the new structure wasn't a garage at all, but a workshop. Blake's back was to the door, moving a board through the table saw, placing it on a stack of similar boards nearby and picking up another. His hair was tied back and he wore a black, long-sleeved jersey. A tight-fitting one. She watched him cut half a dozen planks before she entered the space. Not sure of how to start, although she'd rehearsed this moment for weeks, she cleared her throat.

The saw noises stopped. Without turning, Blake straightened. The plank fell to the floor.

"Am I interrupting?" she asked. God, how lame. Of all the lines she'd practiced, that one hadn't come close.

* * * * *

He'd been half-aware of an approaching shadow, but too engrossed in his work to pay attention. Until he smelled it—her scent. Even above the sawdust. Emily. Kelli. He didn't dare turn around. His heart drummed against his sternum. She'd all but disappeared. Jack Stockbridge wouldn't tell him anything other than she was busy working and unavailable.

The shadow had stopped moving. He turned. "Kelli?" Or was she Casey? Or Karen? Or someone new?

Her short hair was blonde now, with thick bangs that drew his eyes down to hers. No glasses, no contacts. Solemn gray eyes, round with questions. She wore jeans, not slacks. Whether she had on an Emily sweater or a Kelli sweatshirt was disguised by a

bulky parka.

"Hi," she said. "You going to kick me out? I wouldn't blame you. But Ike's waiting with my bags and if you don't want me around, I'll go back and—"

Her words registered and he pushed past her at a dead run, toward the street and Ike's shuttle. He waved Ike forward, pacing the front porch for what seemed like the eternity it took Ike to get down the block and up the driveway. Without waiting, Blake yanked the Aerostar's side door open and grabbed a suitcase. And a second. Ike wrested the third one from the van.

"You can leave them here. I'll get them inside." He patted his hip pockets. His money was in the house. "Give me a second. I'll get my wallet."

Ike grinned, his eyes crinkling. "This one's on me, Mr. Windsor. Merry Christmas."

Ike disappeared down the block in a cloud of exhaust. Kelli appeared from the side of the house and picked up the last bag. Neither spoke. They carried the suitcases into the entry, dropped them and stood there, two feet apart.

He looked at the luggage, then at Kelli for the span of several heartbeats. "You took a big chance I'd be here. And alone. For all you knew, I could be married—or living with someone. Or on the road."

"You're right. But I was pretty sure you weren't."

"Right. The computer queen." He crossed the room and sat on the couch. She followed, but sat in a chair, not beside him. Memories of her at Camp Getaway, both avoiding and enticing him, sent his blood rushing south. "I'm sure you dug out everything about my life."

"I could have. What would I have found? A marriage license? Joint checking account? Other cars registered at this address? Other names listed with the phone company?" There was a hint of a smile behind her words.

"So, did you? Dig. I mean."

This time the smile came out in full force and lit up the room like a searchlight cutting through the darkness. "No."

He looked at her, willing her to sit next to him, so he could feel the warmth radiate from her body to his. She didn't move. He went on. "Then what made you decide to load up three huge suitcases and come out to Middle of Nowhere, USA?"

"I decided it was worth the risk."

He shook his head. "That's not the Kelli I know. Or are you done being Kelli?"

"No, I'm sticking with Kelli. We're a good fit."

"Well, the Kelli I remember plans everything down to the last detail. She knows what she's going to find before she gets there. So, answer my question. Why did you show up?"

She blushed and he savored her embarrassment.

"I called Brian."

Brian had talked to her? And hadn't said a word? He'd kill him. He tried not to shout. "And?"

"And, he told me if I was half as miserable as you were, I should drag my sorry ass back here from wherever it was."

Brian. His meddling big brother. God, he loved him. "So you came."

"I came. Me, almost everything I own, and my sorry ass. Forgive me?"

"Sweetheart, if there's anyone who needs forgiving, it's me, for letting you walk away. I should have been the one dragging your sorry ass back. I let my damn macho pride almost ruin my life."

She got up and walked toward the couch. Her hands clasped his and placed them on her buttocks. "You've got my sorry ass. You think we can make it work?"

Afraid to move, he left his hands where she'd put them and gazed into her eyes. "Well, I'm not on the road anymore. Griffith is awaiting trial, but he's got a team of expensive lawyers on his side. Dwight quit the political arena. Pled guilty to the embezzlement charges, made restitution and turned the company over to his V.P. The business community didn't blink. It's not like everyone else hasn't got something they'd rather sweep under the rug. He's not going to hurt for money."

She escaped his grasp and curled up on the couch beside him, resting her head on his shoulder. Much as he wanted to ravish her right there, he respected what appeared to be her need to go slowly. He stroked her hair. "What about you?"

"I spent a lot of time hating myself for being played the fool. And more time trying to figure out if it made a difference—if I felt any better about taking a life, knowing Robert was sent to take mine."

"And?"

"I'm dealing with it. I don't live in fear anymore. I sent an anonymous e-mail to the cops in Ensenada and gave them Robert's real name and where to look for him. If they find the remains of a wanted felon, I don't think they'll worry too much about how he got that way."

"Still working for EnviroCon?"

"For now. Camp Getaway is a huge success, and the world could use a lot more places like that. I'm moving toward independent contracting. Go where and when I want. Jack's okay with it—he'll still hire me." She sat up straighter and cocked her head. "So, why are you here and not in Chicago buying and selling everything in sight?"

He cocked his head right back. "Didn't Brian tell you?"

"No, only that you were here, single, and living in neutral. Besides, I want to hear it from you."

"Because the business community accepted Hollingsworth Industries with or without Dwight at the helm didn't mean I was comfortable working there. Someone made me take a long hard look at what I was doing, and I couldn't live that life

any more. I put the Chicago place on the market and moved here. I'm Brian's partner, although I still do more administrative stuff than the hands-on. I was a little rusty, but it's coming back. Bri's got Dad's gift and I'm happy to do the bread-and-butter construction chores to give him more time to be the artist he is."

"That's great. How's his wife doing? And Torrie?"

"Stacey's fine and the munchkin is excited about the new baby. I've been working on an addition for their house—a studio for Stacey, once she has time to get back to her painting. I was starting some storage cabinets when you showed up." He stopped. God, he was talking about everything except what was important. Enough. She'd left him once and there was no way it was going to happen again. He'd dreamed of her coming back and had sworn to get it right if he ever had another chance. He put his hands on her shoulders and held her gaze.

"You're welcome to stay here as long as you like, but you'll have to change your identity one more time."

A flash of uncertainty crossed her face. "Is there something I missed? I mean, Robert wasn't really Robert and—"

"It'll have to be done legally, though. No hacking. But when it's done, you're going to be Kelli Windsor." He held his breath.

She gave him The Shake and his hands itched with the need to embrace her.

"Not sure I like the sound of that," she said. He could barely hear her over the blood rushing in his ears.

"What? But—"

"You can do better. Legally? No hacking? Not exactly a romantic marriage proposal, Mr. Windsor."

His throat tightened. "Damn it, Kelli—I was stupid enough to let you walk away once. Not again. I love you. I need you. I want you. When you're with me, I'm not empty inside. Marry me. Please."

She wrapped her arms around his neck. "That's more like it. Now kiss me and let's see about filling those empty places."

(The End)

Terry Odell began writing by mistake, when her son mentioned a television show and she thought she'd be a good mom and watch it so they'd have common ground for discussions.

Little did she know she would enter the world of writing, first via fanfiction, then through Internet groups, and finally with groups with real, live partners. Her first publications were short stories, but she found more freedom in longer works and began what she thought was a mystery. Her daughters told her it was a romance so she began learning more about the genre and craft. She belongs to both the Romance

Writers of America and Mystery Writers of America.

Now a multi-published, award winning author, Terry resides with her husband in the mountains of Colorado. You can find her online at:

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