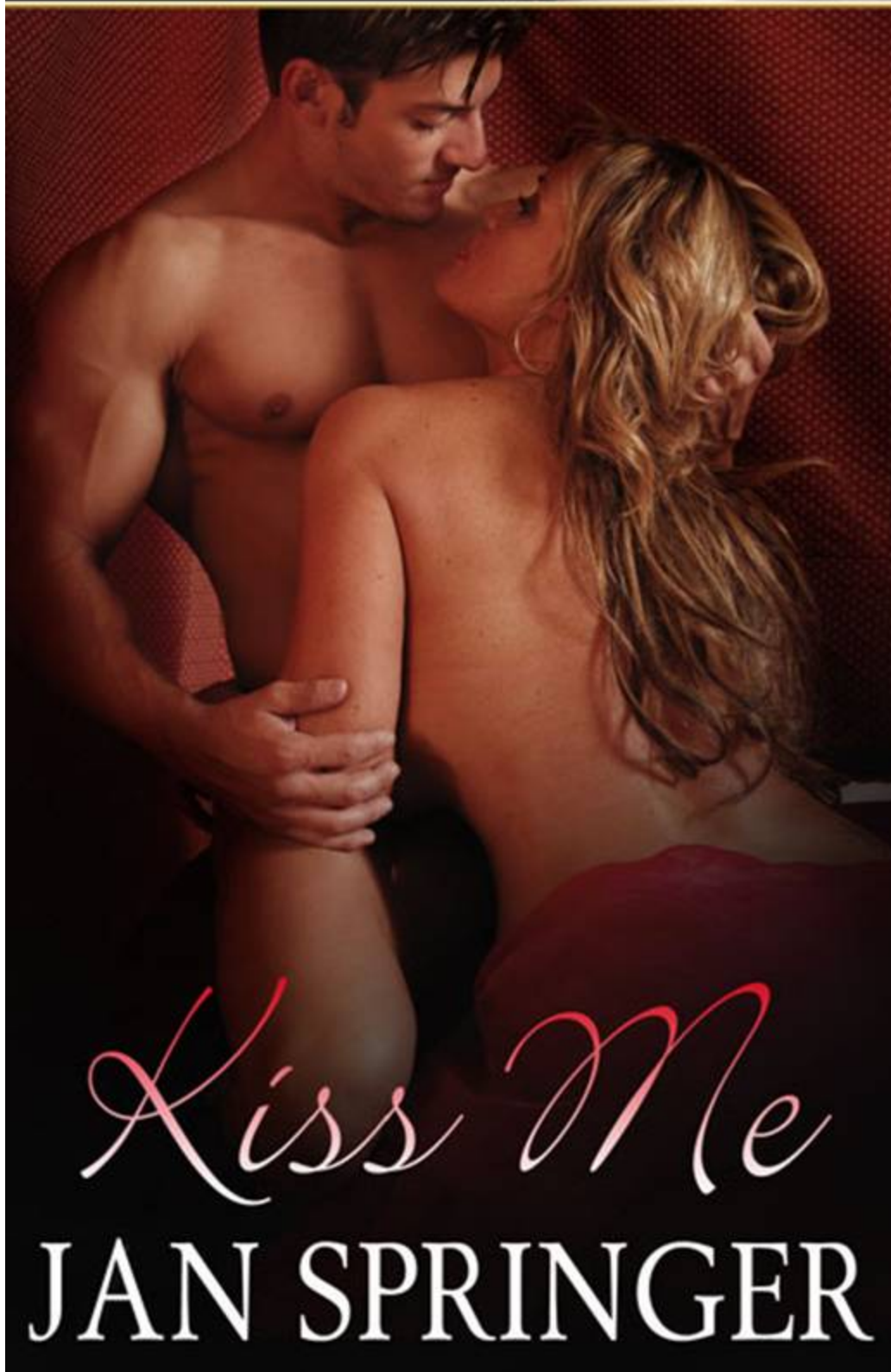


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Kiss Me

ISBN 9781419920257

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Edited by Mary Moran.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication March 2009

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KISS ME

Jan Springer

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Prologue

Five Years Earlier

He was tall. Violet Jocelyn Brady hadn't realized that when she'd picked him up in the bar. But she realized it now as they entered her motel room and she closed the door behind them. He didn't waste any time with small talk as he flipped on the light and moved in front of her, positioning both his muscular arms to each side of her body, trapping her. Pinning her to the door, his big, hard body melded against hers. His chest flattened her breasts and his blue eyes pierced into her with such hot lust she could scarcely breathe.

A nice rock-hard erection pressed like a brand against her pussy and she couldn't help the shiver of anticipation rolling through her like a storm ready to be unleashed.

God, he felt gorgeous against her and her brain yelled at her that if he wanted to fuck her, then she wanted to be fucked by him. It was as simple as that.

Tonight was all about instinct and survival. She knew if she didn't cut her mind and body loose in one form or another to escape from the grief she'd been experiencing since finding a client of hers dead in his home, she'd end up slitting her wrists to escape.

Heck, she was a train wreck waiting to happen. She'd rented a room at nearby motel knowing she wouldn't be driving anywhere tonight. She'd gone to the bar with full intentions of getting rip-roaring drunk and drowning her sorrows. However, plans changed when she saw him at the bar. She'd been on her second beer when something zinged to life inside her as she watched him lift his bottle and suck back a big gulp.

From the angle where she was sitting at a table, she could tell he was a good-looking man. Short brown hair. A nice dark five-o'clock shadow that gave him a sexy, dangerous air. He was fit. Nice wide shoulders. A very nice-looking butt from what she could see of it sitting on that stool. Suddenly she wanted him between her thighs. Wanted him thrusting into her so she could lose herself in pleasure.

As if sensing her needs, he'd looked up and caught her gaze. He must have read her mind as a moment later he got off the barstool and strolled across the room and stood on the other side of her table, glaring down at her with a nice smile that had her purring.

She thought he would ask her to dance to the sultry music playing in the background. Maybe engage in a little chatter before he asked if she wanted to spend the night with him. Instead, he came right to the point.

"My name's Daniel. Your place or mine?"

"I'm Violet and I have a room at a motel just up the street," she'd answered, and here they were. It had been as simple as that.

"All I'm interested in is a hot night of sex with a beautiful lady like yourself. Before we start I want to know if we're on the same wavelength."

Wow, he was a romantic one, wasn't he? Straightforward and very well hung if what she was feeling up against her body was an indication.

“I’m looking for the same. No strings. Just pleasure,” she admitted.

“If you don’t want me to do something, then you tell me right away. Is that clear?”

She nodded and held her breath as the stranger’s gaze lowered. She’d expected him to start kissing her, instead his arms dropped to the hem of her tank top. Hot fingers momentarily sparked against her tummy, followed by warm, muggy air rushing against her skin as he lifted her top.

She wasn’t wearing a bra and he wasted no time in cupping her breasts with his large hands, and she gasped as he sucked one of her nipples into his hot mouth. Warm lips tugged, teeth nipped and his wet tongue stroked so perfectly that electricity raced through her in raw, powerful shards, making her grab his broad shoulders in an effort to keep standing.

Damn, he wasn’t one for wasting time, was he? He felt good and he smelled good too. Sexy hot mixed with a tinge of beer. Very nice.

Digging her nails into his muscles, she held tight as he tended her other nipple. When he finished he was breathing hard but quickly set upon kissing the sensitive area around her nipples. His mouth moved lower and she realized he’d dropped to his knees. Gentle butterfly kisses drifted over her belly and the wonderful sensations of having his mouth upon her flesh sent arousal sizzling through her. In reaction, her pussy moistened and clenched.

The sound of her jeans zipper lowering ripped through the air and for a moment she wasn’t so sure this was a good idea. Sex with a complete stranger? Had she truly lost her mind? She’d never done this before. Hadn’t realized it would be so easy to pick up a man.

She chased away her fears as her jeans drifted past her wide hips and knees to puddle on the floor. Silently she thanked God she didn’t know this man as the heat of shyness flared through her cheeks at him seeing her chubbiness. Her shyness vanished when his hot hands moved between her thighs, prompting her to spread her legs.

She watched wide-eyed as his head moved forward. His hands came to grab her ass cheeks and he held with a gentle firmness she found quite erotic. Soft hair from his head combined with the sharp rasp of his beard shadow brushed like fire against her clenching belly and between her thighs.

“I love your scent,” he whispered. She cried out in surprise and arousal as his hot mouth sank over her pussy like a possessive brand and a firm, moist tongue hungrily swiped against her folds before he began a firm lick upon her engorged clit.

Oh man! This guy was experienced in the art of arousing a woman. What he was doing to her pussy sent shivers through her. It felt good. So good, she allowed herself to drown in the sensations.

In lightning speed her body tightened and a fantastic orgasm rushed over her so unexpectedly she couldn’t stop the loud moan of appreciation from escaping her lips.

He ate her. Quite literally. His mouth devoured every inch of her pussy. His lips sucked her labia, his tongue licked her clit and his teeth nipped at her slit.

Heat raged through her and she orgasmed a second time. It was such a powerful release she swore the only thing keeping her standing was his head lodged between her thighs and her palms on his back.

When his succulent mouth brought her to the edge of her third climax, he let go of her ass and backed off to undress. She couldn't stop her heart from thundering a mile a minute as the naughty ache deep inside her pussy called out to his cock to fill her.

As she helped off with his shirt, she admired the broadness of his chest and the width of his shoulders. Whimpered at the strength of his flexing muscles in his biceps as he unzipped his jeans and lowered them over his hips and down.

The washboard of muscles lacing his hard belly encouraged her to reach out and touch him. And when she did touch him, splaying her palms over the hard, velvety flesh of his tummy, he groaned his appreciation. But when he lowered his underwear and she saw his cock, all primed and swollen with arousal, thick veins interwoven along a long thick shaft topped by a succulent plum-shaped cock head she felt oddly faint at seeing his enormous size. A moment later the rip of foil split the air and he was sheathing protection over his erection.

And then his hands were on her hips, holding her tight, and he was pressing into her with his big cock, sending exotic pressure into her pussy. He withdrew and sank into her again.

Pleasure arched through her with fiery speed. She became unbearably hot. Unbearably wild.

As he came into her again, she surged her hips against him, desperate for more of his hardness inside her. He groaned and plunged harder. Filled with his juicy cock, she mewled her appreciation. Sensing she didn't want gentleness this first time around, he drove his lower body into her like a piston.

Sharp sparks of pleasure slashed through her mind and snapped through her like a storm. Exploding on a cry, she gave herself over to the vortex.

And then his mouth melted over hers in such an erotic kiss, she found exactly what she'd been looking for.

Escape.

Chapter One
Five Years Later
Private Transplant Research Hospital
Tampa, Florida

Brain dead.

The two words sliced through private investigator Jo Brady as she studied the medical chart she'd swiped from the nurses' station only moments before slipping into this room.

How could Daniel McCullen be brain dead?

She turned her attention to the man lying in the hospital bed. If he was brain dead, then why wasn't he hooked up to a bunch of machines? The only things this guy was wearing were leather restraints and a sheet.

She found herself smiling at the alias name written at the top of the file. Daniel Smith. Obviously, it was a ruse. A cover-up to make sure no one found him. According to the file, he'd been admitted almost four weeks ago, just about the time he'd gone missing. The records also revealed he'd been pumped full of drugs since then. Drugs to keep him calm. To keep him from escaping.

She ripped the med list from the chart and pocketed it into the nurse's uniform she'd borrowed from the staff locker room.

If this guy was brain dead, then she had some Florida swampland to sell these doctors. She'd been frantically looking for him for almost a month. After several false leads and receiving one anonymous phone call, she'd finally found him in this small, very private Florida hospital.

Brain dead, my ass.

She noticed how much more handsome he'd become in the more than five years since she'd last seen him first in the bedroom and then in the courtroom. Upon discovering that her sexy stranger was in fact the criminal defense lawyer defending the bastard who'd killed her friend, she'd been devastated. Up on the witness stand he'd destroyed her testimony, taken her self-esteem and killed her passion for her job as a social worker. He'd left her with nothing but revenge on her brain.

Back then McCullen's hair had been cut in a short, military style. He wore snappy suits and ties. Looked quite handsome strutting around naked with a fantastic hard-on that had almost melted her knees in the motel room they'd shared during that one hot night. But in the courtroom, he'd acted like a cock-sure arrogant peacock while he chewed her up and spit her out like yesterday's garbage in front of the judge and jury.

She'd been devastated by his rude behavior. Shocked at how easily he'd gotten Dr. Martin off the hook for murdering her friend Johnnie Garrett for his body parts.

She'd hated herself for sleeping with the enemy. Wondered if he'd known he'd been fucking a witness in his case. Or had it just been a fluke that they'd met? The bold erotic

way he'd looked at her that night, their gazes clashing in that bar, it couldn't be faked, could it?

Fate had been cruel, that's for sure. Her dream man had turned into her nightmare. She'd hated McCullen for years for defending the murdering doctor. Hated him until she'd been told the truth about him a little under a month ago. Now here she was trying to save his ass.

Stupid girl, a voice chided her. *Leave him here. Walk away and don't look back.*

But she couldn't leave him. He was expected at her sister Sara's wedding. On some horrible coincidence, Sara had fallen in love with Daniel's brother Mathew. Now Mathew wanted his brother as his best man at his wedding and they wanted her to find him.

And she had.

McCullen looked quite sexy with his dark chocolate brown bangs brushed messily over his wide forehead, and she noticed his hair was much longer now. Curling along the nape of his neck and over his ears. Long lashes framed his closed eyes and his chin and cheeks were shadowed lightly with a couple of days' growth of beard. He had a very dangerous bad-boy look. Yes, very sexy. Even hotter looking than in the past.

That look was a sharp contrast to the innocent boyish grin tilting his full lips while he slept. Lips that made her tummy do a funny little flip when she suddenly remembered his head going down between her thighs, the bristles of his shadowed cheeks brushing hotly against her inner legs as his tongue lapped wickedly at her aching clit. Stroking her there until her pussy spasmed with pleasure.

She blew out a tight breath while gazing at the broad shoulders and corded muscles in his arms. She remembered how those very powerful arms had trapped her against the wall of the motel room when they'd first entered. How tenderly he'd lifted her tank top over her breasts, his gorgeous eyes filled with appreciation as he'd looked at her nakedness before swiftly taking a nipple into his hot mouth. Man, he'd made her forget her troubles. Made her forget she was overweight at the time. Made her feel like a woman.

Jo focused on the thick mat of curly hair that decorated his chest. It angled down into a long furry line that traveled over his flat stomach. The hair arched beneath the lime green hospital linen and she swallowed at the sight of the thick bulge a little farther down.

From their night together she knew he had a big juicy cock and despite her hatred of him, she found herself shivering as she remembered how his thickness had intruded into her vagina. How eagerly she'd met his every thrust. She could still remember their sensual scents of arousal drifting through the muggy air as he'd fucked her. Remembered the way her ass slapped against the warm motel door every time he'd slammed into her.

He hadn't been able to get enough of her and she'd wanted the night to go on forever. He'd been gentle with her, rough and everything in between. He'd gone down on her several times, fucked her against the wall, in the bed and in the shower.

The biggest thing that continued to burn into her memory was how wonderfully she'd exploded every time he'd made her orgasm. How her body would tighten into a pleasure ball and then release all her hurt. He'd made her feel so good that night. So

fucking good. But afterward, when he hadn't shown up the next night at the bar as he said he would and then later when she'd found out the truth...

Jo shook her head, bringing her thoughts back to the present. Back to Daniel. She wondered if his attitude had improved over the years. She doubted it. Not if the stiff white plaster cast wrapped around his left wrist was any indication.

Straightening, she redirected her attention to his medical charts and a wicked chill zipped up her spine when she noticed he was scheduled for termination. At midnight! Tonight!

She glanced at her watch. 11:01 p.m. She had to move. And she had to move fast. Reaching down, she quickly undid the restraints.

* * * * *

"C'mon, wake up!"

Daniel roused to a woman's urgent voice. He wanted to open his eyes, but his eyelids drooped with an odd leaden heaviness.

For a moment he allowed himself to drift back to his dream of his childhood home in Montana. Back to his horse Blossom. He shouldn't have stayed out all night with her, now he'd slept in and would be late for school. But she'd needed him. The birth had been a breech. If he hadn't been there to help her, then she might have died.

A biting slap against his jaw snapped through his memory.

"Damn you. Wake up!"

The woman's voice sounded urgent, yet he still couldn't will his eyes to open. Tinges of alarm scrambled up his back. Why couldn't he wake up? What was wrong with him?

Another sharp slap jarred his entire head and suddenly everything washed over him in crushing waves. Endless days strapped to a bed. Nurses siphoning drugs into him, keeping him in this doped state. Dr. Colby Martin hovering in the background, taunting him, waiting and watching him.

For just a minute Daniel wanted to slink away from his anxiety and go back to the welcome childhood memories. But this time he couldn't. This time someone made the fatal mistake of undoing the restraints that kept him hostage.

"Open your eyes. C'mon, open them," the woman's voice urged him. She sounded familiar. Was she a nurse?

Managing to gather enough strength to reach out, his fingers wrapped around something. A warm elbow. He held on tight.

"Ow!" came her sweet gasp.

Finally he was able to force his eyelids open and jolted as a lovely pair of angry blue eyes stared down at him.

He recognized her instantly, yet his brain couldn't seem to believe it was the sexy one-night stand he'd had years ago. The same woman he'd betrayed when he'd crushed her testimony on the witness stand.

The woman he'd known as Violet.

No, it couldn't be her. That woman would hate his guts for what he'd done. Perhaps she was a hallucination? A hell of a pretty hallucination.

She was different than he remembered. Thinner? Yeah, that was it. She'd been so damn pretty back then. So full of pain and passion that night. When he'd seen her trying to get drunk in the bar full of leering men, his protective impulses and sexual instincts had merged. All he'd wanted to do was whisk her out of that place and give her the pleasure she craved.

He remembered her heart-shaped face. The cute way she whimpered when he'd fucked her all night.

Oh man, she'd been so hot.

"Let go of me!" she snapped, trying to break away, but he held fast.

She pulled harder and he felt his grip weaken.

Shit! He had to move on her now. Using her arm to lift himself into a seated position, he swiftly propelled his stiff legs over the edge of the bed.

Wrong move!

The room tilted awkwardly and he tumbled sideways right out of bed. Swearing bitterly, he landed with a bone-jarring, bare-assed bounce onto the cold floor. Reality rippled across his ribs, reminding him he forgot to let her go as she came crashing down right on top of him. Sweet lilac fragrance curled around him, instantly calming his anxiety, and turning it into something else. Something achy and hot and very pleasurable.

Visions of them together intertwined on the motel bed snapped into his brain. He could literally feel the warmth of her luscious lips as she'd eagerly kissed him. Could feel the searing burn of arousal as her hands had stroked his cock when they'd lain together in between their sex sessions. Remembered how she'd thrashed when his mouth covered her pussy and the tight velvety muscles of her vagina as he'd thrust into her. He hadn't been able to get enough of kissing her that night. Hadn't wanted to stop fucking her. Had loved going down on her.

Man, they hadn't been able to get enough of each other that night, fucking like a couple of bunnies, yet he hadn't been able to get her hurt look out of his head when she'd first seen him in that courtroom several months later. A piece of him had died that day. A huge piece.

Reality finally took over and he tried to clear his thoughts as she blinked at him, her face mere inches from his. In that split second he noticed her pretty nose with its sparse spattering of brown freckles that escaped onto her cheeks and realized that yes, she really was here. What the hell was she doing here? Was she in this whole thing with Martin? Getting revenge against him? That had to be it. She had to be the enemy.

Even as he thought of her as the enemy he felt her full, lush breasts push defiantly against his bare chest as she caught her breath. Felt the blood start to pump through his body at the memories of that night. Felt his cock go hard beneath her and he watched with amusement as her eyes widened. Obviously she noticed his reaction. Her cheeks flushed pink with anger, or was it embarrassment?

With lightning speed, she placed her hot palms against his chest and shoved off him, getting to her feet, backing warily away from him.

“If you aren’t the craziest son of—” Her eyes widened once again as she looked down at him and he realized he was as naked as a jaybird, his cock engorged.

“I can’t believe this,” she muttered softly, and quickly turned her gaze away.

“Hey, sue me. It’s been a while, okay?”

Cripes! How embarrassing. Taking advantage of her turned back, he gritted his teeth against his weakness, reached up and grabbed the metal bedframe with his good hand and forced himself to stand.

Thankfully the dizziness had disappeared, but he felt weak. Not weak enough that he couldn’t take her hostage in order to escape. Looking around, he spotted a hypodermic needle on the nearby bedside table. There was a bit of pinkish fluid in it. Maybe he could threaten her with that?

Before he could react, she pounced on it.

“I think we’ve had enough drugs, don’t you?” she replied, and tossed the needle on the bed and out of his reach.

“I’m not going down without a fight,” he warned her.

Her smile only widened.

He could think a little clearer now and he wondered why she wasn’t heading for the door to escape instead of just standing here beside him. Damned if he was going to stick around to find out. He made a move to start walking and the violent shaking came out of nowhere, instantly turning him into a quivering bowl of jelly. Suddenly all he wanted to do was lie down and sleep. And give up the fight for his life.

“C’mon, let me help you,” she whispered.

“Right into my grave,” he replied shakily, pushing her hands away as she tried to wrap her hands around his waist.

He noticed her bristle. Noted the anger slip into her voice. “There’s no more time to argue. You want to get out of here? Or don’t you?”

Confusion gripped him. Why did she want to help him? What was happening to him? He didn’t even have control over his own body. Obviously he needed someone’s help. There was no way in hell he could do this escape thing on his own. But could he trust her? She didn’t appear to care if he did or not. She grabbed a mint green hospital smock from the bed and threw it over his shoulder.

“Put this on.”

“Why are you helping me?”

She didn’t answer his question but her eyes sparkled with anger and that same hurt look that had haunted him over the years.

“Just hurry up. I’ll be back.”

When she disappeared into the hallway, he noticed she’d left the hypodermic needle on the bed. Had she forgotten it? Or did she trust him not to use it on her?

No time to ask. Time to get out of here. With a lot of awkwardness and almost falling over a couple of times due to his balance not being up to par, he managed to slip on the gown. Frustration gnawed at him as he tried to tie the silly strings to keep the gown from slipping off, but with his bulky cast on his wrist and his fingers not being as

flexible as they should be, it was an impossible task. He just hoped there wasn't any permanent damage to his body parts with all this lying around he'd been forced to do. Although, he did remember someone coming in every day and moving his arms and legs and also shoving a urinal over his cock or a bed pan under him. Maybe it wasn't as bad as he felt. And he felt pretty bad.

The woman whisked back into the room with a wheelchair in tow, her bright eyes alert and avoiding his gaze.

"C'mon. Let's get a move on. The coast is clear right now."

Without hesitation, he allowed her to help him into the wheelchair and relished the warm, silky feel of her hands as she swiftly tied the gown's awkward strings at his neck and down his back. Then she draped a thin mint green blanket over his chilled legs. To his surprise she thrust the hypo needle into his trembling hands.

"Hide this. If something happens to me, don't hesitate to use it. Okay?"

He frowned and uneasiness coiled through his gut. Maybe she wasn't going to help him? Maybe she was working for Colby Martin now and this was just a sick little game they were playing on him?

"Let's get out of here," she hissed.

Adrenaline pumped fire through his system and he thrust the dreaded hypo under the blanket, nestling it between his thighs, careful to keep the needle pointed away from his cock.

In a flash, she wheeled him to the door, opened it and peeked outside. Satisfied the coast was clear, she guided the chair expertly into the hallway.

Heart hammering violently in her ears, Jo took a deep breath and pushed McCullen past the nurses' station. Luckily, it was abandoned. She wheeled him at a brisk pace, marching confidently as if she meant business. As if she really belonged in this hospital.

Reaching the elevator, she quickly pushed the down button.

Daniel twisted in the wheelchair to look up at her. "You still haven't answered my question."

"What question?"

"Why are you helping me?"

"Now isn't the time," she snapped as she heard quick-paced footsteps approaching from behind them. Anxiety screamed through her and Jo held her breath. Apparently McCullen had also heard someone coming because he'd lurched halfway out of the wheelchair before she smacked her hand down against his shoulder and forced him back onto his cute derriere.

"Sit tight and play dead. Let me handle this. If we're lucky she'll just go by."

She breathed a small sigh of relief when he slumped his head backward and feigned sleep, his dark eyelashes dusting his pale skin.

"Excuse me!" a woman squealed. Jo's stomach sunk.

Trying hard to still her rapid heartbeat, she forced herself to smile and turned to find a nurse about sixty years of age with a sickly pale complexion hailing them.

“Where are you going with that patient?”

“He’s scheduled for surgery, nurse. I’m bringing him down.”

“This is highly unusual. You are not following standard procedure.” A suspicious glint entered the woman’s amber eyes and Jo felt herself tensing even more.

“Where is your name plate? What is your name? I don’t believe I’ve seen you here before?”

“Nurse Ellis, I transferred over from another private hospital.” Jo slipped her hand over her left breast where the nameplate should be and gasped in mock horror. “Oh my! I’m afraid I’ve lost the nametag. And on my first shift too! This is so embarrassing. It must have slipped off somewhere. I’ll be sure to pin another one on right away.”

“You do that.”

“Now if you’ll excuse me, Dr. Martin *is* waiting for this patient. He wishes to speak with him before his midnight surgery.”

“Oh? This is the first I’ve heard of this meeting between the two of them.”

Jo watched tensely as McCullen’s hand slipped slowly beneath the green blanket where he’d stored the hypodermic needle.

“Please check the last-minute orders he gave me. I’ve left them on the desk at the nurses’ station.”

Jo held her breath as the elevator bell rang and the door slid open. The older nurse glanced at the empty elevator and Jo resisted the overwhelming urge to push the wheelchair into the welcome opening.

The nurse frowned.

“Please go and check,” Jo urged taking full advantage of the nurse’s indecision. “I wouldn’t want you to get into any trouble. And I most certainly don’t want to get into trouble on my first shift as his new assistant nurse. We’ll wait here.”

The nurse didn’t move. She just kept staring at Jo as if debating whether she should believe her or not.

The elevator doors closed tight, eliminating their chance for a quick escape. Jo swallowed against her growing panic. Her mouth went dry and her palms began to sweat. She thought about going for her gun but decided against it, at least for now.

“We can catch the next elevator down,” she said, trying hard to talk around her cottonmouth as she kept a warm smile on her face. “It’s no big deal. Really. I’m sure Dr. Martin won’t mind waiting an extra minute while you go and check the papers. After all, he is a stickler for following procedure when it comes to these, well, shall we say...these delicate types of surgeries.”

“You’ll stay here?”

“Oh yes, ma’am. Like I said I don’t want to get into trouble.”

The nurse bit the bait.

“I’ll be but a minute.” The nurse spun around on her white shoes and hurried down the hall.

“We haven’t got a minute,” Jo whispered anxiously as she slammed her thumb against the elevator down button then gazed warily at the numbers above the door. The number six stayed lit.

Dammit! The elevator wasn’t coming back down!

McCullen moved uneasily in the wheelchair. His hand remained under the green blanket, his shoulders tense as steel. His eyes popped open and the hopeless despair she saw there made her gut twist.

“Call the cops for help,” he urged.

Was he serious? The local cops were probably on Martin’s payroll. She’d have to put Plan B into action. Quickly she wheeled the chair around and headed back down the hallway where the nurse had just gone.

Daniel twisted awkwardly in the chair to once again peer up at her. This time betrayal and pain sparkled in his furious gaze.

“Where the hell are you taking me?”

“Change in plans.”

She nodded at the set of beige doors mere feet away. He followed her gaze and she thought he’d relax. He didn’t.

Kicking the door open she began to push the wheelchair through when without warning his good arm reached out and slapped against the doorframe, stopping her cold.

“What are you doing?”

“I can’t go in there!”

His dark eyes darted anxiously to the sign on the door. She couldn’t help but smile and shake her head at his silly objection. With a quick push, she thrust Daniel McCullen through the “Birthing Suite” doorway.

* * * * *

“This is Head Nurse Williams on the fourth floor.”

Dr. Colby Martin’s hand tightened anxiously around his cell phone at his nurse’s tense voice. Usually she was so calm. Even under the tensest situations she was calm. He liked that in a nurse. He knew he could trust her. She was one of many people in the medical profession who believed in what he was doing regarding his transplant research. She was one of the few who followed him blindly as long as he kept her pockets full of hush money so she could pay for the cancer treatments that kept her ten-year-old granddaughter alive.

“Oh yes, Nurse, I’ll be over shortly to be admitted. I’m running behind.”

“That’s not the reason I’m calling, sir. It’s about Mr. Daniel Smith? In room 401?”

Of course, Daniel McCullen. She must be confirming the order for his termination.

“Go on.”

“There seems to be a problem, sir.”

“A problem?” He leaned forward in the overstuffed sofa chair and anxiously peered out the fourth-floor motel window. Silvery streaks of rain splattered quietly against the

glass pane, smearing his view of Daniel's well-lit fourth-floor hospital window across the street.

"I can't seem to find the paperwork, Doctor."

Colby sighed with relief. "That's not a problem, Nurse Williams. I'm sure you can locate it."

"Oh, I'm so relieved. The new nurse is bringing the patient downstairs as we speak, sir."

"What new nurse? I haven't hired a new nurse."

"Why, Nurse Ellis of course."

Colby's stomach knotted with anxiety and a warning shot of adrenaline screamed through his veins.

"Nurse Ellis? There's no Ellis on my staff."

He bolted out of his chair and almost dropped the cell phone as he tried to stifle the bubble of insanity seeping into his brain. God wouldn't be so cruel to take Danny Boy away. Not now. Not when he had such special plans for the boy.

"Don't let Danny, I mean Mr. Smith, go anywhere with that nurse." How could he have been so stupid! He should have posted a guard inside Danny's room. Should have known something like this might happen. That someone might come looking for him.

"I have her waiting near the elevators. I'll go get her."

"Call security. Do you hear me? Don't let them out of your sight. I'm on my way."

Colby slammed his phone shut. Grabbing his gun off the nearby night table, he could hardly unlatch the safety catch, his hands were so shaky. He could barely catch his breath as he stumbled across the room. He grabbed his jacket and shoved his weapon into his shoulder holster and rushed out the door. There was no way Danny was getting away from him. No bloody way.

Chapter Two

The painful moans of a woman giving birth slammed down the hallway and sliced into Daniel's brain, making him wish he were anywhere else but here. He longed to put his hands over his ears and block out the unwelcome sound, but he knew it wouldn't work. It was already too late.

Cold sweat blistered across his forehead and down his back as the black rush of memories washed around him. Memories of Beth. Of how she loved to joke, touch, kiss and make love.

But the night she'd been gunned down, something had been different. She seemed unusually tense. He'd shrugged it away by telling himself she was thinking of her grandfather and what she'd given up to marry Daniel.

But maybe it had been something else? Maybe if he'd just asked her. They would have talked and she would have stayed. She wouldn't have gone out the door and they would have had those babies they'd talked about having.

Shit! He should have made her stay. But she'd gone and her screams had mingled with the pouring rain, the squealing of car wheels as the shooter took off and then his screams.

"You aren't afraid of babies are you, McCullen? Don't worry, they don't bite." The teasing remark shot a hole straight through his heart and more memories rushed to the surface.

Beth had wanted tons of babies. A house full of them. But the bullets had stolen that dream from both of them. Now he was alone. No lover. No friend. No wife. And feeling like an idiot for suddenly feeling sorry for himself.

As if sensing his despair, the woman from his past fell silent and quickened the pace. He kept his eyes glued straight ahead as they passed the open door with the wailing new mother-to-be. No use in sneaking a peek at what would have been.

He bit back an angry groan and wiped his hand across his wet face, tasting the salty tears mixed with perspiration. He shook his head to clear the looming depression and forced himself to concentrate on his rescuer.

It seemed odd that he suddenly trusted her. She was virtually a stranger. A woman who hated him for doing what he'd done to her. From the research he'd done on her for the trial he knew she was a social worker not some nurse. Unless she'd switched professions?

A blast of cold air slapped against him, making him shiver uncontrollably and he realized she'd pushed him into a stairwell. A very cold stairwell.

"Can you walk?" she asked as she came around in front of the chair and whipped aside the green blanket covering him.

The cold sliced into his bare legs and he bit back a curse. He didn't remember ever being so icy cold. Not even when the rains had washed over him while he'd held Beth's lifeless body in his arms. God! He needed a hot shower to get him warm again.

"McCullen!"

He blinked as she snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"What?"

"Can you walk?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"I'll help you." She held out her hand, but he shook his head.

"I can make it out on my own."

"Well, any day now, McCullen. Let's get a move on."

He noted the brilliant sparkle of amusement flash in her face as he struggled free of the chair. His knees were shaking so hard he could barely stand. But he'd done it. He was standing. Now all he had to do was descend the endless-looking flight of stairs.

"Let's move it." Anxiety had slipped into her voice and it made him feel more uneasy.

She draped the blanket over his shoulders and he welcomed its warmth. Before he could say thanks, she grabbed his left hand and clamped it over the nearby railing.

"Use it."

Then she dug into her pocket and pulled out a chocolate bar. Unwrapping it, she tugged off a piece and shoved it into her mouth.

When she caught him staring at her, she explained quickly, "It helps me to think."

Then she hesitated and thrust the rest of it into his free hand. "Here. Eat this, it'll give you some energy."

Then she started down the stairs ahead of him.

Jesus. She moved fast.

He wasn't sure his stomach could handle chocolate, but the bitterness left in his mouth from puking earlier didn't taste good. Biting off a small piece, he almost groaned out loud at the sweetness bursting over his tongue.

Inhaling a shaky breath, he took a wobbly step then another and another. By the time he reached halfway down the flight, he felt surprised he was still standing. Maybe he was going to make it. Maybe this escape would be a cakewalk after all.

Jo tried to keep herself from literally flying down the stairs. Her gut instincts screamed at her to move faster but McCullen was in no shape for sprinting.

Cripes! If only that nurse hadn't screwed her elevator plans. She would have had him out of here by now.

When they reached the first-floor platform, he slumped wearily against the brick wall next to the staircase.

She noted he'd finished the chocolate bar, which was a good thing. What she didn't like was the way he was sweating, shaking, gasping for breath and how he looked like

death warmed over. She doubted he could take another step, but as long as he stayed on his feet there was a chance they could get out of here.

“You okay, McCullen?”

“I’m fine.” He waved her away, avoiding her gaze.

“You’re a bad liar.”

She noted his watery smile before she creaked open the lobby door to peer out.

The blood in her veins froze at the sight of Dr. Martin blasting through the hospital’s main entrance doors. Crooked and stooped over, he looked as gnarled as an old oak tree. Gunmetal gray hair and tons of wrinkles gave him a fragile, helpless appearance. But she knew the truth. This decrepit old doctor was far from helpless. If anything, he was one of the most ruthless and richest men in the United States.

Immediately she shut the door, her gaze dashing nervously over McCullen’s ragged appearance. She saw the shudder of fear course into his dark blue eyes and cursed herself for showing him she was scared.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, automatically tensing.

“We’ve still got a little ways to go. Can you handle it?”

He glanced longingly at the sign that said “To Lobby”. “As long as there’s no more stairs, I can.”

Shit!

“Sorry I asked. I’ll give you a minute to catch your breath.” As if they had a minute, she thought anxiously. But he looked like he’d drop if she didn’t give him some time to recuperate.

He nodded gratefully.

Leaning over the railing, she pointed down another flight of stairs. “Down there at the bottom of these stairs in the corner there’s a door. It’ll take you to the garage.”

Daniel tensed. “You’re not coming with me?”

“On the other side of these doors is our welcoming committee. I get the feeling they don’t want you or me to leave.”

He cursed beneath his breath. “Do you have a cell phone?”

Jo nodded.

“Call the cops. They can handle these guys.”

“Lots of cops are on his payroll. We’d luck out having one of them answering the call. I’m not willing to take that chance. Now let’s get out of here.”

She thrust the keys into his shaking hand.

“Black convertible in parking lot AB. On the left. Halfway down. I’ll watch your back until you hit the door. Then I’ll be right behind you.”

“I’m not leaving you here unprotected,” he argued.

Jo reached down, lifted her skirt high and unclasped the gun being held in her thigh holster. Palming the cool metal, she undid the safety and brought it out into the open to show McCullen.

The gun was one of her prized possessions. This particular one had been manufactured in Germany. It had a short grip perfect for a woman's palm and was a fully loaded three-hundred-eighty automatic with a three-and-a-quarter-inch barrel. She had custom-made little pouches in all the holsters she owned that held extra magazines of bullets. Her guns always did the job when she needed one and she sure needed this one now.

"It's small but it packs a punch," she replied.

He whistled softly, obviously impressed. "You are full of surprises, nurse. But I think it's best if you just leave me. I can find my own way out."

"Dammit, McCullen!" she snapped as quietly as she could between clenched teeth. "Get your ass in gear, will you? Right now you're a liability if you stay with me. Go!"

Disappointment flashed in his face. She'd insulted him with the word "liability" and before she could apologize, he turned and began stumbling down the stairs, giving her erotic peeks of his bare ass as the apron flapped open at his backside.

Nice ass. But she didn't have time to admire it right now. She had more important things to do.

Creaking the door open an inch, her stomach hollowed out when she discovered Martin not more than ten feet away and quickly issuing orders to a handful of men who all held varying types of guns.

Quietly she shut the door and swore softly beneath her breath. Things sure didn't look promising. All they had to do was come through the door and she was screwed.

Holding tight to her gun, she practically flew down the stairs and caught up to McCullen at the door that led to the garage.

Pushing the door open, she peeked into the underground garage and took a couple of precious moments to orient herself. Finally she spotted the car.

"This way!" she whispered, trying to ignore his taut, ashen face and the way he stumbled after her like a drunk.

She knew he was hurting, but she didn't have time to see to his immediate needs, which she guessed included a hot shower, a long sleep and a decent solid meal. Her best guess about his present state would be the start of withdrawal from all the drugs he'd been given. That would explain the shakes and the sweat literally drenching his ill-fitting hospital attire. But the tears she'd seen streaming down his face earlier in the birthing suite were another matter.

She had no time to figure out why he'd become so upset at her joking comment about biting babies. No time to show him any sympathy. The welcoming committee was fanning out and they would be seen sooner rather than later on the hospital's security cameras. In fact, if she had to venture a guess, they were already spotted.

Jo jolted as approaching from in front of them she saw an elderly couple.

Oh damn!

"Kiss me," she whispered as she grabbed McCullen's cast.

"What?" he blinked in disbelief.

"People," she whispered, and nodded at the approaching couple. "Kiss me."

Before she knew what was happening he grabbed her and quickly shoved her into a nearby dark alcove.

Her breath caught as his hands came up to cup her face. She saw the excitement in his stormy dilated eyes as his head lowered. The feel of his warm mouth slanting over hers jump-started her senses.

Oh my, he certainly tasted yummy! she thought as she savored the chocolate she'd given him earlier. His mouth moved firmly, desperately, the pleasure buzz he created had her moaning softly. Heat shot through her.

Adrenaline. That's all it was, she thought drunkenly, and melted into the kiss.

She barely heard the two sets of footsteps stop. Obviously the couple was watching.

"True love," the elderly man chuckled.

"Ted! It's none of our business," the woman snapped.

To Jo's surprise, Daniel's tongue pushed past her lips, invading her mouth. She tasted his urgency, felt the same intoxicating need she'd felt that night they'd spent together jolt through her like a bolt of lightning. His thumbs caressed the sides of her face as he held her. The gesture felt so erotic she couldn't believe it when her pussy flamed with wetness.

Good Lord! This was not the time to be getting aroused!

"Come along now, Ted. It's none of our business," the woman spoke again. This time louder, obviously hoping the two of them would notice and stop kissing, but Daniel's kiss only grew firmer and defiant. Jo found herself fighting the pleasure that threatened her senses. This was really bad timing but, boy, he sure did kiss good.

"I'm going to report that brazen hussy to the Ethics Committee, assaulting that poor young man in that way," the elderly woman continued.

"Now, now, Helena. You just said it's none of our business."

The footsteps started up again. They were leaving.

"Oh for heaven's sake. That is disgusting," the woman muttered, shock apparent in her voice.

"I wish my ass was as tight and firm as his," the elderly man chuckled, and Jo realized he must have seen Daniel's butt.

As the footsteps echoed away, Daniel pushed harder against her. Jo felt his thick erection press against her lower abdomen and remembered how very well hung he was. Very well hung indeed. She moaned as his mouth ate hers, his succulent lips driving her body into such a heated frenzy she couldn't think. His hands dropped from her face and a second later he cupped her breasts, his fingers easily finding her nipples as he tweaked them through the cloth of her nurse's uniform. She whimpered into the erotic sensations of pleasure-pain. A knee wedged between her thighs, widening her. His body braced closer against her and he moved into almost the exact position he'd been in when he'd taken her up against the motel door that night.

Oh boy, she thought numbly as she rode the swell of excitement racing through her. This guy was still dangerous to her senses.

She almost cried out in her frustration as Daniel abruptly stopped the kiss, his chocolate-scented breath whispering against her face.

“Good thing you gave me that chocolate bar, the energy came in handy,” he chuckled. Grinning wickedly, he dropped his hands from where he’d been cupping her face and pulled away from her.

Jo found herself licking her still-tingling lips, not quite believing the flare of sexual attraction that ignited so quickly between them. Her face felt warm too. Very warm.

She had to be mad! Insane to let down her guard like that! But he’d sure felt good.

Reality sliced into her, tossing a healthy dose of fear back into her system. They had to get the hell out of here before that couple ran into one of Martin’s goons and told them about the kissing nurse and patient in the underground garage.

“The car is right over there,” she whispered, and pointed down the garage, trying to ignore the shakiness still lingering from the kiss. “About ten cars up. Can you make it?”

He nodded. His eyes narrowed into slits as he scanned the shadowy surroundings. The man really didn’t look good. Hell, he was shaking more than she was.

Turning away, she started forward when something akin to a bulldozer crashed into her. She felt herself flying through the air and cried out as burning pain seared through her elbows and knees as she impacted against the hard concrete floor. Bullets nailed into the car she’d been rushing past, forcing her to hug the ground.

Shit! Someone was shooting at them! And Daniel McCullen had just saved her life!

Casting a quick glance to make sure the disheveled figure gasping on the ground beside her was okay, Jo scanned the gloomy garage. It took her only a moment to pin down the gray-haired culprit hidden in the open elevator.

Dr. Colby Martin had found them!

“McCullen, can you handle one of these?” She motioned her pistol back and forth in front of his dazed eyes.

He nodded dumbly.

She took the car keys from his wildly trembling hands and gave him the gun. Then quickly removed the extra ammo from her holster pouch and put it in his palm.

“You know how to change the ammunition?”

He nodded.

“Good. Then cover me!”

Ignoring his dazed look, she got up on all fours. Heart crashing like a tornado against her chest, she took off at lightning speed, keeping low, using the cars as her shield. Colby Martin opened fire and Jo cursed as she realized McCullen didn’t return fire.

Damn him! Why wasn’t he shooting back?

She ignored the impulse to peek over her shoulder and kept running. Finally she made it to the passenger side of her rental car, and pressing the button twice on her key chain, she heard the doors automatically unlock. Opening the door, she began to climb into the car.

Halfway inside, she cried out when an immense blow slammed into her upper shoulder, tearing the breath from her and making her fall precariously across the bucket seats. More bullets screamed against her car, plugging holes through the open car door and through the passenger windshield. Instinctively she curled into a fetal position,

protecting herself from the shower of glass sprinkling over her. Finally McCullen opened fire and she swore she'd never heard such a welcome sound.

She lay there gasping as pain lanced across the back of her shoulder and fanned up into her neck, making her wonder just how bad she'd been hit. Hot sticky blood seeped down her back and she stifled the panic threatening to shut her down.

"Only a nick," she mumbled to herself. *It had to be. Or else she would be down and out. Wouldn't she?*

Okay! She had to get her ass in gear. Had to get both of them out of here.

Moving sent more slices of pain through her, but she managed to crawl along the bucket seat. A quick glance out the car window assured her McCullen was still firing, and she slouched upright behind the steering wheel. Her fingers shook unbearably but she managed to jam the keys into the ignition, ram the gearshift into reverse and floored the accelerator.

Tires squealed as she swerved the car out of the parking spot. Screeching backward, she hoped the open passenger door wouldn't get ripped off the hinges as she headed toward the cement pillar where Daniel had taken refuge as he continued to shoot back at their assailant.

When he saw her coming, he smiled gratefully and dove awkwardly through the open passenger door screaming, "Go! Go! Go!"

Slamming the car into drive, she smashed her foot onto the accelerator. The underground parking lot swam in front of her as the car shot forward like a rocket. Her hands automatically clasped the steering wheel as if it were her life preserver.

Her body seemed to be on automatic. Her arms made all the right moves with the steering wheel as she guided the car along the narrow pathways, but her mind was slowing down, fogging up.

She felt cold. Oddly disconnected.

He swore loudly in her ear and she winced.

"You're hit!"

"I'll be fine. Just back off!" she snapped, not needing a conversation about her health at the moment.

His eyes narrowed angrily and she scanned the rearview mirror to check if they were being followed.

No one.

She sped the car up the exit ramp like a demon possessed. The moment they cleared the garage, rain plummeted against the windshield, both blinding her and throwing her back into alert mode at the same time.

"Are you hurt bad?"

She switched on the wipers.

"Are you listening to me?" he growled.

"Not now, I'm busy," Jo hissed, glancing again into the rearview mirror. Still no one following them.

Shit! Why wasn't someone tailing them?

Swerving the car onto the main street, Jo once again became aware of the throbbing pain in her shoulder. Thankfully though, her dizziness subsided and her thinking had cleared somewhat.

She peered into the rearview mirror again. Except for the silver shards of rain pummeling the windshield, nothing moved.

Jo squirmed anxiously in her seat.

Why wasn't anyone following them? Why were they letting them go so easily?

The escape had been too simple. And when things went too smoothly, Jo knew trouble always lurked right around the next corner.

Chapter Three

Daniel had no idea how long the woman had been driving because he'd dozed off.

He'd dreamed of his wife.

Unusual? No. Many times over the years he'd dreamt about her. Remembered Beth's agonized screams piercing the night air. The harsh squeal of tires as someone drove away in a hurry. She'd been wearing his raincoat that night. It didn't take a brain surgeon to figure out the bullets had been meant for him. If only she hadn't worn his coat. If only...

Pushing away the clenching memories, he forced his eyes open. It was hard to do. Remnants of the drugs they'd pumped into him kept his mind from becoming fully alert. Kept him tired. Godawful tired.

He must have slept an hour, maybe two hours tops, because it was still dark. Heavy gusts of wind slammed against the car, rocking it and he wondered how she could steer in this wicked wind. He gazed over at the woman who'd saved his life and jolted with concern.

She looked sick, her face pale in the darkness. While he'd slept she'd changed out of her snug nurse's uniform into a gray silk blouse and a pair of light gray track pants. There was no sign of blood in the area where she'd been shot which made him wonder if she'd gotten help while he'd been out of it.

Her eyebrows were knitted together in a frown of concentration as she struggled to see past the wildly wiping windshield blades.

Guilt washed over him. If he hadn't hesitated returning fire in the underground garage, his rescuer wouldn't be hurting. He'd spotted the doctor when the elevator opened. Had seen the gun in his hand and pushed her out of the line of fire.

When she thrust the gun into his hands, he froze. The sounds of those gunshots screaming through the underground garage had speared memories of his wedding night. Memories of Beth's warm blood spilling through his fingers as he'd tried to stop the gush of red from escaping the gunshot wound in her neck.

Finally, the clenching realization that the same thing would happen to this woman as what happened to his wife had snapped him from his trance and he'd finally opened fire. But because of his hesitation, his rescuer was practically draped over the steering wheel in pain.

"Let me take over," he volunteered, although he knew the last thing he should be doing was driving. He'd probably fall asleep behind the wheel. Just as she looked like she might do.

At the sound of his voice, she smiled. A beautiful smile of relief that made him catch his breath. Her fingers loosened on the steering wheel. But only for a second. Then her jaw set with determination and her smile vanished.

"Can't."

“Why not?”

“Because I said so.”

Man, she was irritating. “You need a good shaking. Knock some sense into you so you’ll accept some help when you need it.”

“You’re doing enough shaking for the both of us, McCullen.”

“A comedienne as well as a nurse who carries a gun on the job. Nice thighs by the way. Oh! But wait a minute, you aren’t a nurse, are you?”

She didn’t answer. As if he’d expected her to. So why did she rescue him? Why put her life in danger for a guy she didn’t like?

Before he could put the question to her, he spotted something from the corner of his eye. Something that made him stiffen with shock and disbelief. No bullet holes in the windows.

Shit!

“We switched cars!” he gasped.

“No kidding. Do you think I’d be stupid enough to drive around with bullet holes in my windows?”

He ignored her comment.

“How’d you get me in here?”

“Wasn’t easy. You weigh a ton when you pass out.”

“I didn’t pass out.” He fell asleep. Didn’t he?

He didn’t believe she could lift him by herself. She must have had someone waiting for her with a backup car.

“Why didn’t you wake me up to meet your helper?”

She remained silent. The mysterious, sexy type, was she?

“So who was he? A boyfriend?” he teased.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” she snarled. Obviously she’d returned to pissed-off mode again.

“Don’t you ever answer a question properly?”

“Why should I?”

“Well at least answer this one truthfully. Do you think the bullet is still in?”

“No, it’s a graze.”

He wondered if she was lying. There’d been a lot of blood on that nurse’s uniform. But he didn’t see any now on her new clothing, so she must have gone somewhere to get the wound patched.

She caught him studying her and rolled her eyes in annoyance.

“Will you stop looking at me like that?”

“Like what?”

“Like you think I’m going to drop dead at any second. The wound has already been taken care of.”

“By that boyfriend of yours?” he teased.

The sides of her mouth lifted into a touch of a smile. "Fishing, are you?"

"As if I'd be interested in you," he lied. At the moment he'd give anything to be back at that motel room pinning her up against that door and making love to her.

"Not your type, eh?" she chuckled.

"Now who's fishing?"

For a minute he thought she'd say something but she kept quiet. Her smile was gone.

Okay, so she'd gone mute on him again. He may as well try to relax, although it was hard to do when he didn't know what was going on. On top of the dashboard in between them he noticed four empty coffee cups stacked sideways. In the back on the seat, he spotted several crumpled bags from various well-known donut shops. The woman obviously had a fetish for coffee and doughnuts and it made him remember her comment in the stairwell about eating helped her think better. Obviously she'd been doing a lot of thinking while he was asleep.

In the eastern horizon he noticed a thick curtain of light. Dawn? His gaze flew to the digital clock. 6:30 a.m.!

She'd been driving for more than an hour or two.

"You've been driving all night?"

She dragged in a deep, shaky breath. "You got it."

Suddenly the car slowed and she turned into a creepy, deserted alleyway. Daniel found himself tensing as the car rolled to a stop.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Once I lift that garage door I want you to get out. We're switching cars again."

She was out the door before he could reply.

He watched as she walked casually through the blustery wind and downpour. The wind popped tangles of blonde hair from her ponytail and the rain plastered her blouse, highlighting luscious curves. He had no problem making out her pert nipples pressing against the material or the fact she had generous-sized breasts.

He cursed silently as he remembered the kiss in the underground garage. When she'd said, "Kiss me", he thought he was hallucinating. But, man, that kiss was anything but a hallucination.

The memory of her arousing scent, the sweet way her soft breasts melted against his chest, the perfect way he slanted his mouth over her full bottom lip made a waterfall of sensations spring to life through him. For the first time in years he was buzzing for a woman. After his wife's murder, he'd felt dead inside, but one brief kiss with this nurse and his male needs had sprung to life. It was an intoxicating feeling and he'd missed it.

Even now as he thought about how nicely she'd kissed him back, he could feel his shaft growing hard and pulsing with the need of wanting her beneath him. Hearing her moans of pleasure as he plunged into her tight, welcome pussy.

The sudden powerful burst of wanting her, stunned him. His attraction to her had nothing to do with her sparkling blue-violet eyes, nor her fantastic cupid-bow-shaped lips but everything to do with him being without a woman for a long time. Too damn long.

He liked the way she moved. Confident yet feminine. Sexy yet touch-me-not vibes. As he continued to study her, he tried to ignore the tightness in his balls as well as the sudden ache in his cock.

She was an odd one. Either she loved walking in the rain or she was in so much pain she didn't know she was getting wet. Squinting through the blurry water-streaked windshield, he watched her stop in front of a dented moss green garage door set in a large red brick windowless building. It seemed as if they were in a back alley of some factory or apartment building.

She fumbled with a set of keys and unlocked a heavy-duty padlock. With a tug on a handle, the door rolled up with ease, quickly disappearing inside the brick wall.

Daniel whistled with appreciation when he spotted the shiny cherry red Mustang inside. Wow! She had good taste in cars.

He reached for the car handle and slowly opened the door. The blast of cold rain stabbing his skin set his teeth chattering and his body shaking. The cold also livened his senses.

Quickly he wrapped the warm blanket around his shoulders, swung his legs outside the door and gasped as his bare feet plopped into a very deep and cold puddle.

Shit! As if he wasn't miserable enough!

"So, what was with that great kiss?" he asked as he sidled in beside her. His question sure got her attention. Her head came up sharply, and he winced as she cracked up against the low trunk. A string of unladylike curses followed.

"Get in the car!" she snapped harshly after she recovered. She dismissed him as if he were some naughty five-year-old boy by returning her attention to the trunk, but not before he caught sight of a pretty shade of pink dusting her high cheekbones.

He grinned. She sure embarrassed easily. Obviously she wasn't used to flattery. But he wasn't used to being ordered around either and she'd better figure that out fast.

"But first, put on the dry clothes I've laid out for you in the trunk and then get into the car so we can try to outrun this bad weather."

He bristled at her order. "If I get into a car with you, I want my questions answered."

She stared at him, defiance blazing in her eyes. Guilt shot through him again as he noticed her tired look and her unhealthy pallor. She'd saved his life and for thanks he was giving her a hard time. He needed to lighten up, but it was hard when she wouldn't answer his questions.

"I'll explain everything," she sighed.

"Good. Then I'll get into the car."

She nodded. He peeked into the open trunk and saw the clothes laid out there for him.

He lifted a pair of white jockey shorts for a closer look.

"After all this time, you still remember my size. I'm flattered," he teased.

"Just hurry up," she snapped, and he noticed the pinkness in her cheeks brighten even more as she quickly brushed past him and climbed into the driver's side of the Mustang.

He struggled into the jockey shorts and the stonewashed jeans she'd supplied. The pants were his size but a bit loose around his waist. It was quite understandable since he'd been on a liquid diet for who knew how long.

He managed to untie the couple of strings that hadn't already fallen open at the back of the hospital nightgown and tossed the damp garment into the trunk. It was clear she wasn't some happy-go-lucky social worker who happened along with a gun in an effort to rescue him. She had located him for a reason. All he had to do was find out why.

He did a mental calculation of any other enemies he might have lurking around out there. Being a criminal defense lawyer, he had lost several cases over his career, which had put some of his clients in jail, but he couldn't put a finger on anyone who might want to exact revenge on him, except Martin. Nor could he figure out who would put up the expense of hiring this woman to locate him, have her risk her life to get him out and then have all these cars ready for the switches.

She had to hate his guts, that's for sure. In general, people who hated didn't put their lives on the line so easily. Not unless they got paid big bucks, or she had some ulterior motive on her mind. Like revenge?

Throwing the thick sweatshirt over his head, he cursed as the cast around his wrist barely made it through the sleeve. Finally it did and he momentarily reveled in the snug, soft feel of the fleece as it cuddled warmly against his cold skin. Grabbing the white socks and black running shoes, he jolted when he spotted the familiar hypodermic needle lying inside. Evidently she'd decided to bring it along. Why? So she could squirt some more of those drugs into him?

Shivering at the thought this might all be some sort of sick twisted game Colby Martin was playing on him, and this pretty woman was involved, Daniel slammed the trunk shut and reluctantly slid into the passenger seat beside her. Immediately he sensed this vehicle was not a rental but her personal car. It had her soft lilac scent floating through the air, not to mention some feminine touches. Like the soft woolly sheep-style seat covers that embraced him and warmed his entire length. There were pale-pink-and-white-romance-quilted pillows strewn across the backseat. A small cinnamon-colored leather Indian dream catcher hung from the rearview mirror as well as an odd-looking braided bracelet dangling beside it.

A bracelet that looked as if it might be made out of a blond almost white shade of hair. Human hair? Had her boyfriend made it for her? A sort of token of love? Or maybe a gift from her husband?

His gaze flew to her ring finger. Empty. He shouldn't be surprised. She was probably too prickly for a guy to like her. Uptight. *A damn good kisser*, an inner voice reminded him.

He focused his attention on what she was studying. It was a map of northern Florida. He thought Colby Martin would have stashed him out of state in an effort to hide him from anyone who might come looking for him. Especially, since it was on a stretch of Florida highway where he'd crashed his motorcycle after visiting a friend who lived in the state. He'd been heading to Canada to deliver something to his late brother's wife Emily when he'd taken the spill on his bike.

He was about to demand answers when he realized she was in a lot more pain than she'd been letting on. The tiny pinched lines at the sides of her mouth and the way she

squinted as she read the map was a dead giveaway she was hurting. Sympathy slammed into him.

“Let me drive. You look beat.”

“Sorry, McCullen, you look worse.”

“Gee thanks.”

She was such a smart-ass, he thought wryly.

She stashed the map between herself and the car door, slammed the shifter into reverse and floored the gas pedal. A second later she parked the car, took the keys from the ignition and got out again. A minute later she had the other car in the garage and slipped back into the car beside him. He noticed she was shivering and cranked up the heat a few notches.

“Do you have any dry clothes for yourself?” he asked. He hadn’t seen anything else in the backseat or the trunk, but he hadn’t really paid that much attention so he could have missed a bag or something.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll give you my top.” He made a move to take his snug sweatshirt off but she slammed the car into drive.

“Keep your shirt on, McCullen. I said I’m fine.”

Okay, so much for her appreciating his being chivalrous. Obviously her snippy attitude was back in action.

“Why are we bringing our friend the hypo along?” he asked as he slipped on his socks and shoes, noting they were also a convenient fit.

“You wouldn’t want me to stash it where an innocent child might find it, would you?” she said dryly.

Bitchy. Bitchy.

Maybe he would be better off out on the streets. His hand nestled on the door handle.

“You better start answering my questions, Violet, or I’m jumping.”

She rolled her eyes with impatience. “You would be stupid enough.”

Daniel found himself clenching his fists in frustration. “Answer this one question or I jump. Why did you risk your life to get me out of that hospital?”

Her knuckles gripped tighter around the steering wheel and she bit her lower lip for a split second before answering.

“Your brother Matt hired me.”

“Matt?”

“You have any others?”

Shit. He owed his brother big time.

“Why would he hire you? I thought you were a social worker?”

“I’m a private investigator now. Apparently your late brother Steve’s wife Emily got in touch with Matt and said you’d phoned and left a message on her answering machine that you were in Florida and on the way to her place for her birthday with a present, but you never showed. She got worried.”

“Her birthday is on the first of October. It hasn’t even come...yet.” His words trailed off and his blood turned cold as reality struck hard.

“What’s today’s date?”

She swung a sympathetic glance at him. “Fifteenth of October.”

Holy shit!

“Fifteenth? The last I remember it was the just past the middle of September. Oh man! I knew I was in the hospital for a stretch, but not this long. The drugs screwed me up. I lost track of time. Big chunk of time.”

He closed his eyes and dropped his head back against the seat. Fuck! What the hell had they been doing to him in there?

“You okay, McCullen?” she asked softly, almost tenderly.

He nodded, suddenly feeling totally overwhelmed. It took him a few minutes to muddle out how many days he’d been in the hospital. Around twenty-seven days.

“Almost a month? I’ve been under his thumb almost a month?”

The woman nodded.

“Those drugs they were injecting me with. I don’t know what they were. I figured he wanted to—” He cut himself off. No use in telling her that Colby Martin had been tormenting him to exact some twisted kind of revenge because of what had happened to his granddaughter.

“I have the feeling you’re going to have some drug withdrawal,” she said. “But don’t worry about it. We can get through it. That’s the reason I’m in such a hurry. I think we’d both like to be as far away from the state of Florida and that hospital before the full of the withdrawal kicks in.”

We. For some strange reason he liked the sound of that and she was right about the hospital. He didn’t want to see another one, not to mention another hypodermic needle, for as long as he lived.

His head nestled deeper into the shaggy sheepskin seat covers. The rest of his questions were going to have to wait. He was just too tired to try to get any more information out of her. Too damn tired. He closed his eyes and gave in to the weariness hugging his body.

Chapter Four

Jo kept her ears tuned to the radio broadcasts. The hurricane had skirted ashore at the southern tip of Florida and now the northern part of the state was experiencing the tail end of it. The announcer's intense warnings of not traveling unless it was an emergency rattled her to the point where she finally shut off the radio.

She had enough to deal with as the rain continued to stream down her windshield in blurry sheets, not to mention the obstacles that flew across the road, sometimes hitting the sides of her car with a sharp smack. The sounds made her cringe as her imagination conjured up the enormous dents accumulating on her pretty red car.

All of this trouble due to Daniel McCullen, who was totally oblivious to the storm raging outside because he'd conveniently fallen asleep again.

In her business as a private eye she'd developed a solid support group and belonged to elite network of people who helped private eyes do their jobs. After extracting Daniel from the hospital, she'd met with a used car dealer whom the network had set her up with prior to her extracting McCullen. The dealer had been kind enough to do a quick patch up of her wound after she'd promised she would get a professional to look at it. Then he'd disposed of her bloody clothing and helped her transfer McCullen into the car he'd supplied her.

She'd paid a high price to make sure the car came with the guarantee that it wouldn't be traced to her real identity. She was glad she'd had the forethought of having untraceable backup vehicles in place. She knew Dr. Martin was a very dangerous man who wouldn't think twice to go after her family members in retaliation for taking McCullen.

Switching cars made her feel a little less uneasy, but the same question kept popping into her head. Why hadn't they been followed? Why did Martin let him leave so easily? He was keeping Daniel in that hospital for a reason, and when Daniel found out the explanation, he would be counting his lucky stars he was still alive.

She glanced in the rearview mirror for the millionth time. No headlights. Nothing. Why should she be surprised? Who would be stupid enough to venture outdoors in a hurricane anyway? Certainly not Dr. Colby Martin, especially if he had a backup plan.

Her instincts screamed at her to be very careful. To stay alert. It was kind of hard when she had a painful bullet wound burning through her shoulder and she was lugging around a "liability" as she'd so callously called McCullen.

The harsh word had been the first thing that popped into her mind when they'd been in the stairwell of the hospital. She'd seen the humiliation flash in his eyes at being called that. But it had worked. The man had climbed down the stairs as if possessed. Too bad he wasn't as fast with a gun.

She found herself sneaking peeks at his sleeping figure. At the sight of the sinfully kissable pout on his full lips, her breath backed up and she remembered their kiss in the garage. Sure, it started out as just a cover, but it certainly left an imprint on her senses.

There was a need growing deep inside her. A sexual hunger she hadn't felt since being with him that night five years ago. Not to mention the silly fantasies that kept invading her mind as she drove.

Her naked. Him naked. The two of them on her bed. Sheets twisted around their bodies. His eyes gleaming with lust. His huge cock sliding into her aching pussy.

Oh God! He had a big cock.

She'd forgotten exactly how big until she'd seen him naked in that hospital.

Visions of their passionate night swept through her again. There had been brief interludes of talk followed by long bouts of hot action.

"Violet is a very pretty name," he'd whispered as he rose over her on the bed. In the darkness she could hear his raspy, excited breathing. Could feel the heavy thickness of his condom-sheathed cock as he pushed gently against the opening of her vagina. She'd expected him to plunge into her, but he hadn't. At least not then. Instead, he'd taken her nipple into his mouth. Using his lips he plumped her tight flesh with demanding sucks that sent spirals of hot sensations into her pussy.

Gasping, she arched her hips, and tried to grab him. Tried to bring her hands down onto his shoulders, to dig her nails into his flesh and bring him onto her, but he'd tied her wrists to the bed posts. She knew she shouldn't have allowed herself to be tied in this way. Not by a complete stranger. But in her grief, she hadn't cared about anything. She'd been impulsive and naïve. Thankfully, he hadn't been a deranged killer. Quite the opposite in fact. He'd been a passionate lover and she'd given herself over to him completely.

She liked the way he made her feel. Liked the succulent pulls of his mouth on her nipples. Loved the way his powerful body braced over hers. He didn't seem to care that she was a size sixteen. Didn't seem to care that she wore black-rimmed glasses or her hair was bleach blonde and that she was a stranger.

All he wanted was hot sex. Just like she wanted.

"What do you do for a living, Daniel?" she asked as his mouth moved onto her other nipple. The soft tugs on her tight flesh made her moan at the erotic sensations once again rocking between her thighs.

"I'm in law," he whispered, stopping briefly to answer, and then taking her into his mouth again.

Oh God, he felt so good being at her breast this way.

"Like in a cop?"

He didn't answer and she moaned and pulled against the restraints as he began to sink his cock into her. He stretched her so much. But it was such a beautiful stretch and she was so wet from arousal that he came into her easily.

Fire raced through her and she moaned again as he began thrusting.

Oh yeah, he felt so perfect inside of her.

Jo squirmed on her seat and bit back a moan as she remembered how fantastic her orgasms had been with him. Gosh, she had to stop thinking about the sex. There were more important things to think about. Like getting him to his brother's wedding.

Over the next few hours, as McCullen continued to sleep, she stopped at numerous drive-thru coffee shops along the rain-drenched highways. She was glad to find an occasional friendly face to talk to in this dreary, dull weather. She ordered her coffee black and strong, just the way she despised it, in desperate hopes that the bitterness would keep her awake long enough to get them as far away from that private hospital as possible. Thankfully, the caffeine did the job and urged her onward.

But what about all the donuts she ordered? The sweet treats were a pleasant reminder of what she would be missing had Martin been a better shot and McCullen a wee bit slower in returning gunfire.

For what seemed like a horribly endless day finally began to draw to a close when she managed to outrun the storm. The air was replaced by an intense heat and an uncomfortable humidity. Darkness fell and Jo exhaled a heavy sigh of relief when they finally crossed the line into the state of Georgia.

By now her nerves were a jangled mess. Shot to be exact. She needed to get some sleep. If she kept pushing herself, she'd end up down the ditch or wrapped around a telephone pole. If that happened, there would be too many curious questions about her bullet wound. Questions that would put a crimp into her plans for Daniel McCullen.

Up ahead, a highway exit loomed and she gladly took it.

She located a secluded, quaint little motel perched on a small knoll that also shared a handful of small rundown stores. To Jo's immense delight she spotted a perky little donut shop right next door to the motel. *Too perfect!*

She cast a quick glance at Daniel, who continued to sleep fitfully, totally oblivious as to the real reason she'd rescued him.

The parking lot lamp shone a buttery glow of yellow into her car, enabling her to see the dark bristles of the five o'clock shadow on his face. He'd look sexy except for the sick paleness to his face. Reaching out, she gently pushed aside a wisp of dark, damp hair and felt his forehead.

A sizzle of uneasiness coursed down her spine. He was hot. Feverish.

She needed to get him medical attention and some for herself too.

Jo rubbed her sleepy, gritty eyes and found herself thinking about the escape. She would have paid a million dollars to see the expression on the old doctor's face when he saw Daniel McCullen dive into the safety of her car and get whisked out of the hospital parking lot.

He would hate her guts for helping Daniel escape right out from under his nose. She wondered if he'd recognized her. Probably not, complements of her wig, uniform and changed appearance.

Dr. Colby Martin was a criminal. At least in her book. Criminal types hurt people without flinching and then moved on to their next victim without looking back. Martin probably never gave a second thought to the destroyed lives he left behind. Just as her life had been destroyed after what he'd done to Johnnie Garrett.

Jo shook away the sadness flooding through her and reached into her back pocket to dig out her cell phone. Quickly she punched in the familiar numbers. She allowed it to ring once then hung up. After a few seconds she redialed. The phone on the other end rang again. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Pick up the phone,” she whispered anxiously.

On the fourth ring an alert man’s voice answered. She’d never been so happy to hear someone in her life.

“It’s me,” she said quickly.

“Sorry for taking so long. I was in the shower. Everything go as planned?” he asked.

“Slight hitch but I got him. Pass along the message, will you? I’ll be at your place in a day, two days tops.”

“You okay? You sound tired.”

“Yeah, I’m toast. I’ll be back in action after a good night’s sleep.”

“Okay, I’ll pass along the message. Take care, Jo.”

Jo quickly disconnected. Cell phone or no cell phone, in the private eye business one could never be too careful about who was listening in on phone conversations.

* * * * *

“Do you think he’s going to be all right, Smokey?” Jo asked as she watched her petite red-haired friend give Daniel an injection.

He’d been strung out for most of the night. Shaking, perspiring, vomiting, craving sweets, the list went on. She’d finally gotten him asleep early morning and called a friend she knew who was vacationing in the area, another reason for Jo’s urgency in getting to Georgia.

“He should be fine, given some good food and lots of rest,” Smokey replied as she placed another syringe filled with a pink fluid onto the nearby night table.

“It’s a good thing you found a list with all the drugs he’s been exposed to, Jo. From the looks of it, he’s been pumped full of blood thinners and heavily sedated with Valium and other addictive meds for quite some time. How long has he been missing?”

“Almost four weeks.”

Smokey let out a low whistle then said, “We can almost assume by the way he’s withdrawing, he’s been on the drugs for that long. But don’t take my advice seriously, I’m not a real medical doctor as you well know, just a lowly shrink.”

Jo frowned at her friend’s words. She’d known Smokey for almost three years, since the time Smokey had helped her sister Sara cope with a devastating depression following her husband’s brutal murder and their twins’ miscarriage. She liked Smokey’s easygoing manner and cheerful attitude. Her lack of self-esteem, however, worried Jo. She attributed it to Smokey’s overbearing and extremely jealous husband.

In front of other people he seemed pleasant and jovial, but Jo knew better. Once she’d caught Smokey’s husband casting disapproving looks at Smokey while she’d talked and laughed with a couple of eligible bachelors at the town cafe. When Jo had seen her the next day, her friend had a black eye. She’d casually shrugged it off, joking she’d walked into a door. Jo sensed the truth. Her husband had beaten her for speaking to another man.

“Lowly shrink, Smokey? My, you think so highly of yourself.”

“Don’t I?” Smokey replied somberly.

Her dove gray eyes darkened with concern and her voice softened as Daniel shifted uneasily in his sleep.

“Wait at least four hours before giving him the other shot.”

Jo nodded. “At least four hours. Got you.”

“Listen, Jo, he’s going to have a tough time of it. Drug withdrawal isn’t pretty. He’ll continue to experience shakes, sweating, irritability—”

“I’ve already been exposed to his better half. So what’s in that stuff you’ve been giving him?”

“A drug cocktail. A research friend of mine mixed it from the list of meds you gave me over the phone. Should ease some of his symptoms. I’ll hang around until it’s time for the next injection.”

“No need, Smoke. I’ve given them once or twice in my life.”

“I left a first-aid kit and other supplies in the bathroom. The abrasions on your knees and elbows will heal fast but make sure you change those bandages I put on your shoulder and keep the wound clean. You should have had it examined. It doesn’t look so good and neither do you. Are you sure you’re all right?”

“I’ll be fine, Smokey. Nothing that a little bed rest and no more coffee won’t cure.”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to come by later today or tomorrow? Bring some fresh clothes? Check on both of you?”

Jo shook her head. “We’ll be gone.”

“How about I get you something to eat?”

“You go and enjoy the Georgia sunshine, Mom,” Jo joked, and followed her petite friend to the door. “Thanks a million for taking the time out of your vacation and coming to help me out.”

“If you can call this a vacation. Actually, it’s a last-ditch effort to keep our marriage together.”

“His anger management and alcohol addiction counseling aren’t working?”

Smokey shrugged her shoulders. “He’s getting better but he still has a lot of issues to work through.”

“I’m sure it’ll work out. Just stay firm and let him know if he tries to hurt you, then you’ll walk.” Jo knew Smokey loved her husband, but she also knew that allowing her husband to use her as a punching bag whenever he had a few too many drinks was unacceptable behavior from a man who claimed to love her.

Smokey grimaced in answer and opened the door. “Take care of yourself, Jo. Call me if you need me. And please don’t go getting yourself shot again. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Her friend’s dove gray eyes suddenly sparkled with mischief. “And don’t do anything I wouldn’t do with that gorgeous hunk of yours.”

“Oh get on with you!” Jo laughed and shook her head at Smokey’s nonsense.

She hesitated. “You sure you’ll be okay?”

Jo nodded, not quite sure if she was telling her friend the truth. Her head ached and she felt feverish. But at least she was alive.

From the doorway, she watched Smokey walk to her car then wave goodbye as she pulled out of the parking lot. When the car disappeared from sight, the cheerful afternoon sounds of laughing teenagers crashed in around her.

She urged herself not to look. But her gaze immediately strayed to the motel swimming pool filled with laughing teenagers who danced with excitement as they splashed each other with the sparkling waters. She had no trouble imagining Johnnie playing amongst them.

Blond hair. Small skinny frame. Neglected. She could almost make out the unusual color of his eyes. Brilliant and blue. The color of deeply troubled ocean waters. Full of anger and resentment.

Over the past few years she watched children from afar and pretended Johnnie was there with them. Johnnie Garrett who should have been enjoying the fresh air and dazzling sunshine. Maybe gone off to college and found a nice girlfriend. He would have been, if Colby Martin hadn't gotten his hands on him.

She felt the tiniest prickle of bitter tears blossom in her eyes and angrily wiped at them. No use dwelling on it. She'd had plenty of time to deal with it.

She shut the door quietly and locked out the cheerful laughter. And once again she closed off her wounded heart.

* * * * *

Jo stared into the teenager's twinkling ocean blue eyes and felt his hand slide desperately around her fingers.

"I don't want to go back to the foster home. I want to go home with you. You're the only person who cares about what happens to me." His lower lip trembled into a pout and she knew he was struggling not to cry.

"It's going to be all right. I'm more than a social worker. Remember that, Johnnie. I'm also your friend and I will help you," Jo cooed softly.

His pout wavered. Before she knew what was happening, he'd wrapped his thin spindly arms tightly around her neck and was sobbing hysterically into her chest.

She pressed her lips against the satiny softness of his feathery blond hair and felt her heart break for him. He'd been through so much in his fifteen years of life. Beatings and torture from an alcoholic mother who'd also turned him onto the streets for male prostitution to pay for her drug habit. He was depressed and anxious and untrusting of everyone. She'd been the only one to get through to him. She was the only one he trusted. And Jo would move heaven and earth to keep him safe. He was so smart. With the right guidance he could do anything in his life. Maybe become a lawyer or even a doctor. All he needed was a chance. And she would find it for him.

"Everything is going to be all right, Johnnie. I promise I'll never let anything happen to you."

She eased her hand beneath his trembling tear-drenched chin and slowly tilted his head up so she could look into his beautiful blue eyes to reassure him that she would help him.

But when she gazed into his face, where his eyes should have been, there were bloody hollow sockets. She screamed. And screamed. And screamed...

Crackling terror sliced through Jo and she forced her eyes open. Blinking rapidly, she tried to figure out why she didn't recognize the dark unfamiliar surroundings. A car horn tooted above the clatter of the air conditioner, making her jump and the memories of what had happened over the past sixteen or so hours washed over her in gut-wrenching waves. She'd done the most foolish thing in her life by rescuing Daniel McCullen. It had brought all the bad memories screaming to the surface. Memories she hoped she'd buried forever.

Through one side of a drawn curtain, a thin streak of flashing green neon ripped into the dreary room, allowing her to see the shivering figure scrunched up beneath the tousled bed sheets beside her.

McCullen didn't look so good. A quick glance at the illuminated clock made her realize it was way over the time for that other shot of cocktail drugs Smokey had left for him.

"Beth?" His tortured whisper made her frown. McCullen was dreaming about that woman again. He'd been crying out her name off and on through his delirium.

Who was she? A figment of his drug-ravaged mind? Or someone he knew? A wife? Girlfriend?

He moaned again and Jo threw aside the thin motel sheet covering her. She made a move to reach for her clothing and winced at the soreness ripping across the back of her left shoulder blade. The cool air blasting at her from the air conditioner felt wonderful against her skin. There was no need to get dressed. McCullen wouldn't notice her attire. He was too busy dreaming about that Beth woman.

* * * * *

God, he loved her. More than anyone in the world, he loved her. He'd tried so hard to ignore her charming ways. Knew he should stay away from her but one look at her seductive smile and his cock had gone into hyperdrive. He'd known he wanted her in his bed for the rest of his life.

He watched Beth move gracefully in the darkness. Didn't know why she was being so shy and keeping the lights off. Tonight was their wedding night. It wasn't as if they hadn't made love before. They'd had hot, spanking sex all day long. He groaned at the tightness in his balls, the almost painful throbbing in his cock as he watched her.

She wore nothing but her bra and lacy white panty as she leaned over him. She wore too many clothes. He wanted her naked. Naked and under him. Moaning and whimpering as he sunk his engorged cock into her tiny slit. After she orgasmed, he'd roll her over on her tummy and tie her down to the bed. He'd spank her ass until it blushed bright and she was writhing against the restraints. Then he'd take her from behind.

He watched as she leisurely lifted the sheet off his chest and let it drop over his waist. Watched as she placed his arms up over his head.

Nice. Very nice. She wanted to be in control. He could allow that. But not for long. The sweet anticipation of fucking her was almost to the point of overwhelming as she rolled up his top and slipped it up and over his head and off.

She moved with a slow sexy grace. It was such sweet torture to watch her.

He wished she'd move a wee bit faster, though. He wanted to help her remove his clothes. Strangely enough, he couldn't move a muscle. A weird sensation slithered through him. The nearest he could figure it was fear. A fear of what?

Was it concern etched in her delicate blue eyes as she helped him undress? Funny, he could swear Beth's eyes were green not blue. He didn't remember her hair being this long. It looked different too. Not blonde. It cascaded over her shoulders in dark shimmering waves of chestnuts. Maybe it was the darkness of the room?

She draped his top onto the bedframe, and then her shy hands moved away into the darkness, leaving him so alone, so ready. So full of need.

One hand came back. Her touch felt incredibly gentle as she lightly brushed it across his forehead. Her touch sent both peace and need screaming through him. She withdrew her hand and pulled the sheet up over him. Then she disappeared through a nearby doorway.

He wanted to call out to her, to tell her to hurry back because he was so ready his cock just might explode. Unfortunately he couldn't get his mouth to move. The strange sensation he figured to be fear crept up a notch. He managed a godawful croak and suddenly she was there beside him again. Talking to him in sweet, hushed tones, telling him everything was going to be all right. He believed her and tried to relax under her gentle whispers.

Despite his hungry sexual needs, he felt his eyelids flutter sleepily. Felt his hold on control start to slip.

Then he saw the hypodermic needle in her hand.

Chapter Five

Jo guided Daniel's right arm away from his body, extending the inside of his elbow toward her. She grimaced as she led the pointed needle toward his vulnerable skin. She didn't know how people had the stomach to do this sort of stuff. Luckily, past experiences with a diabetic college roommate came in handy now. When first diagnosed, her friend hadn't liked self injecting, so she'd taught Jo how to use a needle on her.

Jo swallowed the dry lump choking her throat and reluctantly drew the needle closer to Daniel's skin. This had to be done. It would help ease his symptoms and allow McCullen to rest so they could get moving in the morning. The sooner they got out of the States and into Canada the better.

"Get the hell away from me!" Daniel shouted as he suddenly bolted upright.

Good lord! His unexpected shout scared the daylights out of her. She reached out in an attempt to comfort him, but he jumped away from her. The bed springs groaned beneath him as he scrambled like a mad crab up the lumpy mattress until his backside crashed into the headboard.

He was shaking again, sweat drenched his pale, tense face and raw panic sparkled bright in his eyes.

"Keep that away from me!" He pointed at the sharp needle in her hand.

Shit! She should have realized he'd developed a phobia to needles.

"Okay. Okay. Just calm down, for heaven's sake. I'm putting it away, Daniel. See!" She opened the night drawer, dropped the needle inside and shut it quickly. "It's only me. I'm trying to help you. Do you remember me?"

He blinked rapidly, trying to focus on her.

"You're working for him, aren't you? Working for Martin."

His insulting words ripped at her guts and for a moment she almost lost control and slapped him for his insult. She held herself back. It was hard. Very hard.

When she didn't answer, he licked his dry lips and watched her with complete suspicion. Tears shone brightly in his wild blue eyes.

"I thought you loved me, Beth?"

She wished he wouldn't call her that. It made her feel uncomfortable to think he thought of her as a loved one.

"I thought we agreed to let him go?" he continued. "We were going to walk away from him. I thought we were stronger than he is."

She didn't have a clue what he was talking about. Since the man was coming off drugs, it was best to humor him.

"We are stronger. As long as we trust each other," Jo replied in what she hoped was a soothing tone despite the hatred firing her blood at talking about Martin.

Daniel frowned. Clutching the bed sheet up over his chest, she watched the strong muscles in his arms ripple wonderfully and inhaled an involuntary breath at the sight. She never realized she was a muscles kind of gal, but she sure was aware now. She swallowed at the dryness suddenly constricting her throat.

“If you don’t want the medicine, that’s fine. It’s entirely up to you. You’re the boss.”

He took a deep shuddering breath and his dark eyes knotted with confusion. Then suddenly his eyes seemed to clear.

“Medicine? What medicine?”

“A friend of mine came by while you were sleeping. She brought something to help with the withdrawal. It won’t hurt you. If you don’t want it, we can do this together without it.”

“We? Together?”

God! He sounded so surprised. As if he never expected to have any help from her.

“That’s right.”

Muscles in his jaw jerked with wild spasms. “I hate needles.”

“I got that idea.” She reached out and he flinched as she touched his hot arm in reassurance. Thankfully he didn’t pull away.

“I don’t blame you for hating needles,” she soothed. “I’m sorry, I should have warned you.”

She felt him relax beneath her fingertips. His dark gaze swung to the night table where she’d dumped the needle and his weary face scrunched up with disgust.

“No more drugs! I’ll do this withdrawal thing on my own!”

“Okay.” A slither of happiness flowed through her at the sound of his defiant tone. Maybe he wasn’t as bad as he looked.

Slouching back against the headboard, he wrapped his arms around his midsection and began rocking back and forth.

“Don’t tell me to go back to sleep either. There’s only hell there.”

“Just try to relax, Daniel. Breathe deep. Stay focused on me. We’ll get through this.”

“She was here y’know.”

He was drifting again. She noticed the stoned look creep back into his eyes.

“Who are you talking about?”

“Beth. She was here. I saw her.”

“Beth?”

“I could hear her laughing. I love to hear her laugh.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

A pained expression crossed his face. It was the same tortured look she’d noticed when they scooted through the hospital birthing suite and she’d joked about him being afraid of babies.

He shook his head. She couldn’t tell if he meant Beth wasn’t his girlfriend or if he simply didn’t want to talk about her. By the way his hands bunched up with frustration, she knew this Beth woman had been or still was someone near and dear to his heart.

Curiosity burned through her but she didn't have the courage to question him further, especially when he was in such a weakened state.

"Beth was here," he said again.

"There's no one here but the two of us. Remember?"

His eyes narrowed and he studied her so intently it made her nervous.

"You're not a blonde." His words shook Jo and she realized he'd never seen her with her natural hair color. The one night they'd been together and during the courtroom proceedings she'd been an overweight bleached blonde, and then when she'd rescued him, she'd worn a blonde wig.

"It was a cover. So Martin wouldn't recognize me."

He nodded, understanding flashing in his gaze.

"What happened to your glasses? You looked really sexy in those glasses."

Oh great, he had a fetish for glasses. Well, he was shit out of luck since she'd ditched them along with her excess pounds.

"Laser surgery," she explained.

Suddenly he leaned closer and his sultry masculine scent slammed into her with such ferocity, Jo inhaled sharply.

She remained deathly still, all her senses primed to alert mode as his injured hand reached up. Curling a tendril of hair around his index finger, he gently pulled her head toward him.

"Your hair is so soft," he whispered thickly. His intimate closeness made her very aware of his maleness, and visions of their garage kiss had her leaning toward him, her gaze transfixed on the sexy pout on his gorgeous mouth.

"Kiss me." Although she swore she'd only thought it, the two words came out her mouth in a husky whisper. Heat raced through her as sexual intent flared in his eyes.

"Like the kiss in the garage? Or like the ones from that night?"

Oh God, his lips were warm and firm as they took her mouth quick and hard. He felt overpowering, taking all her resistance in one quick swoop, sending her senses sparking into overload, first with shock and then exquisite awareness. This was definitely a different kiss than the one in the garage, she found herself thinking numbly. This was a kiss from their past. Hot and passionate and full of the need for sex.

His bold tongue stroked past her lips and tangled with hers.

She heard him groan at the seductive impact. Heard herself answer, her moan primal and dark.

Oh boy, this kiss felt good. His mouth continued to move over hers until she felt her balance vanish and she was literally floating. Her hands held his shoulders, the strong velvety muscles moved powerfully beneath her fingers as he untangled his fingers from her hair.

She shuddered with want as his hands came up and cupped her breasts. His strong fingers immediately finding her nipples through the thin fabric of her bra. He squeezed, the pain bursting raw and sensual, making her feel wild and crazy for more. She found herself breaking the kiss, bringing her mouth down along his neck. She felt his frantic

pulse against her lips as she kissed him there then moved her mouth over his hard shoulder, down his firm chest to his left nipple amidst his chest hair. She had the urge to taste his nipple and easily took the warm, hard nub into her mouth, making him moan. Using her tongue she lapped his nipple then bit it with her teeth, loving the strong feel of his flesh between her teeth and the sound of his surprised cry and subsequent sharp inhalation of breath from the resulting pain she inflicted.

She could feel his hands on her breasts, cupping her, massaging her, tweaking her nipples until a driving ache erupted between her thighs. A driving ache she wanted filled.

Without warning, an uncontrollable tremble rippled through his hands. He cursed softly and the magical, seductive hold she was enjoying, vanished. He uncupped her, making her feel oddly disappointed.

With a slight grimace he leaned back against the headboard, closed his eyes and muttered softly, "Sorry, but the shakes came out of nowhere."

Thank goodness for the shakes, Jo thought as she frowned and stared at him in utter disbelief. Wow! She'd never lost it with a man before. Never taken his nipple into her mouth.

She had to be sick or on something. There must have been something in those pain pills Smokey had given her. Or she was more tired or more sexually wild than she thought. Even her pussy was pulsing to the point where her panty was damp.

"That was some kiss, Brady," he muttered between heavy breaths.

Suddenly she was very conscious of her near-naked appearance. She quickly grabbed the opposite corner of the sheet McCullen had been clutching earlier and covered herself. Crossing her legs impatiently beneath the sheet, she leaned back against the headboard beside him, careful to avoid brushing against him. His eyes were closed and his breathing had slowed down.

"How'd you find me, Brady?" he asked quietly after a few moments. She thought he had fallen asleep, apparently he hadn't.

"My contact got word someone fitting your description was being held down in a Florida hospital. I came to check it out. Looks like they were right."

He nodded, seemingly satisfied with her answer.

For a while they remained silent until her curiosity overrode her unwanted arousal.

"So what happened to you all those years ago? How come you didn't come back the next night like you said you would? I waited."

God, did she sound pathetic or what? Asking a virtual stranger why he'd stood her up.

"I had unexpected business to attend to. I need some water."

Well, so much for getting an answer. Despite her need to know why he'd rejected her she sure as hell wasn't going to beg for a reason. Reaching over, she lifted the ice-cold pitcher she'd filled with ice cubes earlier. She poured the liquid into a glass and handed it to him.

He took the glass, part of its contents spilling over his cast due to the shakiness of his hands. He could barely get it to his lips. When he did, he gulped the liquid down so fast he almost choked.

“God, I’m so thirsty,” he said then finished and wiped his mouth dry with the back of his cast.

“It’s from all the sweating. That’s a good thing. The more you sweat the more the drugs are flushed out of your system. Want more water?”

“Please.”

He drank two more glasses before being satisfied. As if the effort of drinking had drained him, he slid down onto the bed, allowed his head to sink into the pillow and held his injured arm over his forehead.

His eyelids fluttered.

The empty glass resting in his hand began to tilt and Jo made a mad grab for it. Catching it before it fell, she deposited it back on the table. When she turned around, Daniel McCullen had fallen asleep.

She watched him with a curious awareness. Watched as his bare chest rose and fell in a gentle rhythm. The soft-looking dark curls on his chest urged her to reach out and tangle her fingers within them. She wanted to lower her head. Taste his nipple again. Kiss that chest. Kiss her way along the hair that arched down the middle of his flat belly and abdomen to that nice big juicy cock that pressed so boldly against the sheets covering his lower torso.

Her fingers itched to lift the sheets and touch his erection. To explore its hardness and feel its thickness.

Inhaling deeply, she resisted the urge to do it. Instead, she closed her eyes, plopped her head back against the bed’s headboard and found herself thinking about what happened after McCullen had gotten Martin off the murder charges.

She’d stopped her career as a social worker and trained to be a private eye. Researching Colby Martin turned into her main goal in life. She wanted that man to pay for what he did to people. For what he had done to Johnnie. She’d also researched Daniel McCullen. He’d been in a prestigious partnership with other lawyers. He was making a fantastic income when he’d quit the firm he worked for and had been hired by Colby Martin. He’d worked for him for a couple of years and then after Johnnie Garrett’s trial Daniel had suddenly quit and disappeared. Matt and Emily told her he’d been working undercover at the time, trying to gain Martin’s trust so he could find out how he’d been involved in Daniel and Matt’s late brother’s death. It was only when she’d learned about him being undercover that she’d agreed to look for him.

And what about this Beth character who haunted his dreams? Obviously McCullen had some other woman in his life. Up until a few minutes ago Jo assumed the woman had been a mere figment of his drug-ravaged mind. But now she realized Beth had swept him off his feet. Why else would she be on his mind while he slept?

Curious questions and no answers.

Closing her eyes, she slumped down onto the bed beside McCullen, allowing her head to sink into the lumpy motel pillow. She found it difficult to ignore the heat wrapping around her as she lay beside him. Tried to forget the wetness and the ache between her thighs and the sexy way he’d cupped her breasts and pinched her nipples.

She tried to relax, but it was hard to tell herself to breathe slower when she could still feel her lips tingling from where his mouth had melted over hers. And boy was her pussy ever pulsing with the need to have sex.

Yet she was so tired and because of it her defenses were down. That's why she was reacting this way to him. She tried to tell herself this was a purely physical attraction. Once she got a decent sleep she would be back to normal. At least she hoped so.

* * * * *

Daniel awoke to find himself curled into a tight fetal position, the sheets snarled around his legs and a nasty little headache trying to form at the base of his head. At least he hurt. It was better than feeling nothing like he'd felt when he'd been strapped to that hospital bed and pumped full of sedatives and whatever else they were giving him.

Flopping onto his back, he stared in confusion at a creepy-looking bug crawling across the ceiling. If he had to venture a guess...a cockroach? He grimaced at the sight of the unwelcome creature and wondered where the hell he was.

Reaching over, he turned on the nearby lamp, shielding his eyes and cursing softly at the sudden glaring brightness. Above the irritating drone of the air conditioner he could faintly hear the gurgle of running water from an adjoining room and realized he needed to go to the bathroom.

His heart picked up speed when he remembered his gorgeous rescuer and the awful needle she'd tried to stick into him. He turned his head to see if she was still sleeping and jolted. The area of the bed beside him was empty. His gaze flew to the door at the far end of the room. The door was closed, but he could see light shining through the crack beneath.

She was in the bathroom.

His turned onto his side and his gaze dropped to the night table. A sharp pang of uneasiness slithered through him. She'd placed the needle in the drawer. Was it still there? Or had she given him another shot against his wishes?

Holding his breath, he guided the night table drawer open and his stomach flipped into a sickening knot when he spotted the syringe.

Still full.

He exhaled slowly, wondering why he'd blindly believed her when she'd reassured him she was only trying to help by giving him "medicine". Was it some kind of instinct that made him want to trust her? Or was it wishful thinking?

His cock hardened painfully when he remembered how nicely she kissed.

Shit. He needed to stop thinking about her or he'd start masturbating right here and now. Groaning, he threw aside the bed sheets and swung his leaden legs over the side of the bed, sitting up. He needed to go to the bathroom too. Then he'd get out of here. Get back on the road. Find his motorcycle. Someone must have picked it up after he'd crashed it.

He reached out for the phone. But first he needed to contact his sister-in-law Emily.

Chapter Six

Jo valiantly fought with the childproof cap on the bottle of pain reliever tablets, ignoring the jiggle of her breasts in the bathroom mirror. She stood naked from the waist up, having taken her bra off because of the strap pressure on her gunshot wound. The patch Smokey had put on her was damp and things were starting to get itchy and uncomfortable back there. And darn it, she couldn't reach to scratch!

Another nightmare about Johnnie had shot her from a deep slumber. She'd awoken to cold sweat clawing through her and the beginnings of a headache. Aspirin usually nipped her headaches in the bud, but she couldn't get this stupid bottle of pills open. Sighing, she slammed the bottle onto the bathroom countertop and almost toppled the cloudy glass of water she'd just filled.

Frig the pills!

She wanted that itchy bandage off her back! Just like she wanted the nightmares of Johnnie out of her head. The only reason she'd started having them again was because of Daniel McCullen. The only way to get rid of them was to ditch him. Unfortunately that wasn't part of the plan.

Jo let out a heavy sigh. She was trapped with him and it wasn't a good feeling. Although she had to admit his kisses were sizzling, she didn't like the out-of-control feeling she got when he looked or touched her. Well, actually that was a lie. The freefall feeling was nice, but she just shouldn't be feeling this way about a man who'd done what he'd done to her.

As she looked in the mirror and surveyed her pale face, she found the headache once again begged for her attention and Jo reached out to grab the bottle of pills for another try at the childproof cap when she caught movement in the mirror.

Her pulse quickened at Daniel's reflection there. He was standing in the doorway.

Studying her. Well, not her, her naked breasts.

She froze and watched him. *Oh my God*. If looks could fuck, he'd be doing her right now. His eyes were traveling over her breasts and nipples. She could feel the excitement stir deep inside her pussy.

Her face grew warm as he caught her watching him. He didn't smile as she quickly grabbed her blouse and pressed it over her breasts. He didn't say a word as he strolled into the bathroom with his nicely contoured bare chest that begged to be touched.

He wore nothing but the underwear she'd purchased for him. The flimsy white cloth did little to conceal the huge bulge very present between his legs. He came to stand behind her and she swallowed nervously as his body heat cascaded against her bare back. His breath sounded raspy and fast as it warmly caressed her neck.

He gazed down and frowned when he spied the medicine bottle on the countertop.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I...I have a headache."

A flicker of a smile danced across his lips. "I could have a remedy for both our headaches."

Her pulse pounded at his meaning. It was a well-known saying when a woman said she had a headache a man could use sex as a cure.

She'd laugh if she wasn't so intoxicated by how tall he appeared behind her. How wide his heavily muscled shoulders looked next to her trim figure and, boy, did that sexy dark stubble on his face make him look dangerously attractive.

"You look like hell," he grumbled, and his gaze drew to the patch on the back of her shoulder.

"You really know how to make a woman feel good, McCullen," she found herself grumbling, and immediately realized he'd misunderstood when an amused grin tilted his lips. He was probably thinking about his earlier kiss in bed and the way he held her breasts.

Her cheeks heated and she quickly tried to correct herself. "I meant—"

"I know what you meant, Brady," he replied dryly.

She inhaled sharply as he reached around her, his arm brushing her elbow as he picked up the bottle.

"The bandage needs to be changed," he said as he twisted the lid and opened it. "I'm going to contact the motel manager and see if there's a first-aid kit around for us."

"There's one in the paper bag on the floor over there. My friend brought it."

She nodded to the bag of supplies Smokey had left. When he bent over to pick it up, she caught sight of herself in the mirror again and jolted.

Have mercy! Her cheeks were flushed pink and her eyes literally sparkled. It was obvious his hungry looks made her hot and bothered.

He hoisted the bag with the first-aid supplies onto the bathroom counter and once again reached for the painkiller bottle.

"Here!" he said gruffly, and shoved two pills into her palm. Grabbing the glass of water from the countertop, he held it out to her.

For an instant she stared at those long, strong fingers wrapped around the glass and her full breasts tingled in memory at the intimate way his hands had cupped her earlier on the bed. She found herself wanting him to touch her again. To kiss her again. Take her nipples into his mouth. To feel that hard, promising erection press against and into her. She caught him once again watching her in the mirror. Good Lord! His gaze was literally fucking her again!

Shakily she held her blouse closer to her chest, making sure she was properly covered. Obviously he'd seen her movement because he said tightly, "Don't worry, Brady. You don't have anything I haven't seen before."

Asshole. She bit back a retort and felt her face burn hotter.

He peered into the bag he'd placed on the counter. "Your friend picked up a good part of the drugstore he went to."

She noticed he assumed her friend was a man. She didn't correct him.

“There’s first-aid cream in here. Tape, bandages, gauze, alcohol.” He stopped and chuckled. “And a couple of chocolate bars. I’m sure they’ll come in handy for energy.”

He looked up and winked then started taking out the supplies.

She swallowed tightly as she remembered the chocolate-scented kiss in the underground garage of the hospital.

“Want one?” he asked as he held the two chocolate bars up.

She shook her head, her lower belly fluttering as she watched him unwrap one of the bars with his fingers. Fingers that had massaged her breasts and pinched her nipples. Fingers that would feel very good massaging her clit.

Clearing her throat, she forced the hot thoughts away.

“McCullen, we should get some more sleep. It’ll be morning in a few hours. We’ll need to get moving then.”

He bit off a chunk of chocolate and started taking more items out of the bag. Jo noted he pulled out antiseptic soap as well as razors, two toothbrushes, toothpaste and mouthwash. Yes, her friend certainly had picked up more items than what Jo had asked for. Smokey was such a sweetheart and she’d have to get her friend a thank-you gift for being so thoughtful.

“We aren’t going anywhere until I take care of that wound.”

“McCullen, don’t worry about it.” She made a move to leave, but his next words stopped her cold.

“Either I look at it or some doctor does when it becomes infected. It might already be too late because the skin around your bandage is starting to look red.”

Shit! It had taken all her courage to walk into Colby Martin’s private hospital to get McCullen. She didn’t want to walk into another hospital any time soon.

“Fine,” she said between gritted teeth.

“Don’t worry, Brady. I’m sure it won’t hurt too much.”

With an unbelievable gentleness, he removed the tape holding the bulky pad in place over her wound. She flinched at the sudden spasm of fire his fingertips evoked as he prodded near the source of her pain.

“Sorry,” he muttered, obviously seeing her grimace in the mirror.

“When did you get this looked at?”

“Yesterday afternoon.”

His eyes narrowed into tiny slits as he took a closer look at her shoulder.

“You obviously didn’t go to a reputable hospital.”

“What makes you say that?”

“You’re taking pain medication instead of antibiotics. It’s a pretty deep gash. Bit more than a flesh wound. It should have stitches.”

His gaze left her shoulder and his anger-filled eyes caught hers in the mirror.

“Why didn’t you go to the hospital?”

“No insurance,” Jo lied. And doctors had to report gunshot wounds. She wasn’t in the mood to answer cops’ questions either.

Truth be known, she hated hospitals. Hated doctors more. She closed her eyes, trying to push aside the sudden rush of memories. Memories of Johnnie.

"I'm going to clean the wound. It's going to hurt." His voice softened as he brushed past her and turned on the hot water.

"I'm sorry you had to get involved in all this," he said as he grabbed a face cloth from a nearby shelf and generously soaped it beneath the running faucet.

"You're glad to be alive, aren't you?" she asked.

His eyebrows arched in wonder. "Yes."

"Then don't be sorry."

He smiled ever so slightly and she found herself answering his smile.

"Okay, here goes," he warned as he shut off the tap.

A moment later, his warm fingertips lightly brushed against her skin as he pushed aside her hair. When the steaming cloth touched her tattered wound, she couldn't help but cry out as pain sliced into her.

"Sorry, told you it would hurt," he scowled.

Despite the discomfort he caused cleaning the gash, she watched him closely in the mirror. His lips pursed and his eyes squinted in concentration, but it was the tiny lines dancing around those eyes that captured her full attention. They gave his face an air of gentleness, an appearance of him being a man who laughed a lot. It was a direct contrast to what she had believed him to be when he'd grilled her so heartlessly in that courtroom years ago, a monster with no morals. A cold-hearted man who thought of saving his boss's ass in court when she'd testified against him.

"There's an old saying among the Mexicans," Daniel said without taking his gaze from her shoulder. "Take your time and you'll travel down the road only once. Don't take your time and you'll be traveling down the same road again."

He was talking about cleaning her wound properly the first time so he wouldn't have to do it again. In addition, of course, he was preparing her for more pain. She wasn't disappointed. A hot blade sliced through her shoulder, traveling up the side of her neck as the pressure of the washcloth increased. This time she bit her tongue to prevent herself from crying out.

He grimaced as he cleaned the wound. "Ever hear of that saying before, Brady?"

"No."

"Wish more people would live by that rule," he said quietly.

Suddenly the washcloth left her wound. He rinsed the cloth over and over and then began cleansing the injury again.

She held her breath this time around, and when the gash throbbed so violently from his probing, she finally swore softly.

He pulled the cloth away. "There. Finished the worst part."

She blinked in surprise. "Already?"

"Wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Maybe not for you," she grumbled.

He grinned and those fine lines around his eyes lit up his face, making her catch her breath. Squirting some first-aid cream onto a giant gauze he'd ripped from its wrapper, he gently pressed it against her wound.

Oh yeah! The cool cream was just what she needed as it instantly soothed the burning fire of what was left of her tattered flesh.

"Almost done."

In quick unison, he ripped some strips of white tape then placed them over the gauze. With the lightest of touches, he pressed each strip of tape against her skin.

"Not too bad if I do say so myself." He cocked his head to one side, admiring his handiwork.

"Thanks, McCullen."

"I bet that hurt to say," he chuckled.

You don't know how much, she thought as she turned her back to him and slipped her good arm into the sleeve of her blouse. Struggling to bring the other sleeve around back to her left side, she felt the heat flush through her face as she caught him watching her again in the mirror. From this angle he was getting quite an eyeful of her breasts and she could feel the heat splashing into her cheeks again.

Shit! Why in hell did he have to look at her with so much lust? Couldn't he just look away? Ignore her like a gentleman?

Yeah, right. McCullen was anything but a gentleman.

Warm fingers brushed against her hand as he helped to slide the soft fabric of her blouse up her arm.

He was watching her in the mirror again. Watching her do up the blouse. Because of the thin material and the fact she wore no bra she could see the outline of her dark areolas and the turgid way her nipples poked against the material.

It was a dead giveaway that just having him looking at her turned her on. Suddenly she felt threatened. Not by him, but by herself. She found herself wanting to tell him everything. About who'd really hired her and why she finally decided to rescue him. Most of all, she wanted to remind him about Johnnie.

But she couldn't bring herself to utter a word because she found herself drowning in his sexy eyes. The memory of their most recent kiss sprang to mind, rearing up like an ugly sore of reality.

Why had she let him kiss her? She could have stopped him so easily. And why had she practically attacked him in the parking garage of the hospital? She could have gotten them out some other way. What was happening to her? Why was she losing her self-control around Daniel McCullen?

Jo blinked away her disturbing questions and started repacking the items into the first-aid kit.

"Where are you taking me next?" he asked and her tummy rolled with anxiety. He'd noticed something was up.

"What makes you think I'm taking you anywhere?"

"All these car switches, for one. And you're heading north, hugging the coastline."

“It has more to do with your safety, McCullen. What did you do to get on Martin’s bad side anyway?”

Although she already knew Martin had somehow discovered McCullen had been working undercover trying to gain his trust as his lawyer and that in order to save his life Daniel had escaped to Mexico to hide, she wanted to hear more about it.

“Long story, Brady.”

“I’ve got time,” she whipped back, noticing his tenseness.

“I don’t. Take your pills and let’s hit the sack. I’m bushed.”

He tore his gaze away and stumbled to the door. She winced when he cracked his cast against the doorframe as he tore out of the bathroom.

* * * * *

Daniel lay as stiff as a corpse until long after Brady had climbed under the sheets to join him. Thankfully, she’d quickly fallen asleep. When he figured the coast was clear and there wouldn’t be any more questions, he’d finally gone to the bathroom.

Even now, as the shakes once again screamed painfully through every inch of flesh, he was fully aware of his seductive rescuer lying beside him. The tingling warmth from her body had no problem leaping the two-foot span of space between them, slamming into him like fiery branding irons.

Dammit! She was bloody irresistible.

When he spied her generous breasts fully exposed in the bathroom mirror, he’d been bombarded of visions from their scorching one-night stand that his cock hardened so freaking fast he’d been stunned at the violence of his reaction. Her nipples were huge and a very nice color of wine red nestled in giant areolas that were a darker shade. Her breasts looked just as heavy and firm as they felt in his hands when he kissed her on the bed. Now he literally itched to cup them again. Wanted his mouth on her nipples, his fingers exploring her pussy and ass, sinking his cock into her over and over again until he felt her come apart with pleasure.

Thankfully while cleaning her wound he’d managed to keep a tight control on his lust, telling himself that grabbing her by the waist and twirling her around so he could kiss her again would only make him cave in to his wants.

If he weren’t so damn weak right now he’d be reaching out to her and taking her, satisfying his selfish needs. Needs he hadn’t felt in one heck of a long time.

Between her and the drug withdrawal, he didn’t know how much more of this excruciating torture he could take.

For the hundredth time his gaze strayed to the drawer that held the last dose of so-called medicine. He hated needles, but he hated this withdrawal stuff even worse.

The thought of plunging the needle into his vein sent the sickness in his belly into near overload. Squeezing his eyes shut, he heaved a heavy sigh of defeat as another round of painful shakes speared into his flesh.

Cold rivulets of sweat poured over his face and he wiped his wet skin with the motel sheet. When the shakes subsided to a dull tremble, he felt his thoughts return to being reasonably normal.

Earlier he'd phoned Emily and come up against her answering machine. He'd left a brief message indicating if she could let Matt know that he was alive and well and that Jo had rescued him, he would appreciate it, since he didn't know how to contact Matt at the moment.

He'd try again later.

He found himself grinning into the darkness. His brother was getting married? With all the suspense and drug withdrawal he hadn't had time to think about it. He wondered who'd caught his eye. It had to be some woman to drag his workaholic brother away from his undercover cop work.

The withdrawal pain began to spear through his limbs again and Daniel let his mind wander back to that night they'd had together. Hopefully he'd find some peace from this withdrawal. Ah shit, who was he kidding? Thinking about her all nice and naked, sitting on top of him, her breasts bouncing with every gyration of her wide hips and her pussy clenched tight around his cock was just going to send him into another kind of hell.

He groaned and hugged himself.

But unsatisfied arousal was a better hell than drug withdrawal.

Much better.

* * * * *

Late the next morning, Jocelyn didn't pay any particular attention to the sleek, shiny black car turning into the parking space directly in front of the motel office as she headed back to the motel from the donut shop next door. She didn't really care what such an expensive-looking vehicle was doing at this quaint inexpensive little motel. So she crossed behind the car and headed toward the alley that led to their motel room.

Today she had splurged. A large tea with double cream and triple sugar along with two chocolate-covered donuts. For McCullen she ordered a couple of giant banana nut muffins and a large tea. Most lawyers she knew drank their coffee black and bitter in hopes of keeping themselves awake as they researched precedents for their cases. She figured he was one of those coffee-drinking lawyers, so she'd gotten him tea just for the spite of it.

She felt better this morning. Perhaps it was because the humidity had gone and the cheerful sun peeked through the morning haze. Or maybe it was because she felt stronger and therefore better able to keep her chaotic emotions under control.

To help her keep herself in check, she retrieved the soft braided bracelet from her car and placed it around her wrist. A gentle reminder of Johnnie Garrett and what he'd made for her from his own luxurious blond hair. It was a cold dose of reality to remind her about Daniel McCullen's involvement with the murderer of the young teen.

From behind her, the door of a car slammed sharply. Curiosity overruled her etiquette and Jo casually looked over her shoulder to see what type of person would drive such an expensive car. Icy shivers slammed into her and the cardboard tray holding her donuts and refreshments tilted precariously in her hand when she saw a crooked stooped-over man with gunmetal gray hair.

Shuffling up the walkway toward the motel office mere feet away from her was Dr. Colby Martin.

Chapter Seven

Adrenaline seared through Jo, urging her to run. The desire to get Daniel out of danger's way almost overwhelmed her, but she reined herself in. The last thing she should do was draw unnecessary attention.

She jolted as another shiny black car pulled up alongside Martin's vehicle. Three men, all blond and smartly dressed in similar navy blue suits swiftly climbed out of their vehicle. They walked briskly and headed straight up the walk.

Toward her!

Oh shit!

Survival instincts automatically kicked in. With her free hand Jo reached up for her gun. While switching cars she'd also traded her thigh holster for the more convenient shoulder one. She wore it easily concealed under her pant suit jacket. Unfortunately her hand clamped onto empty air.

Dammit! She'd slacked off. Big time. She'd left her gun, holster and jacket in the motel room with Daniel. A sleeping and vulnerable Daniel.

She needed to warn him. But how?

She could run, but there were four of them. They'd snare her in an instant and find Daniel in no time flat.

Cold perspiration blossomed across her forehead and slicked her palms. Her heartbeat thundered so loud in her ears she couldn't hear anything else. She had no choice but to keep walking and hope they didn't recognize her.

To her surprise, the three clones brushed right past her without even a second glance. They caught up to the old man who now stood outside the motel office doors waiting for them. They began talking in low whispers.

Jo didn't hang around to find out what they were saying.

Walking briskly, she resisted the horrible impulse to throw away the donut tray and look over her shoulder. Before turning the corner, she finally allowed herself a glimpse. The men were gone!

Quickly, she slipped into the alleyway, dropped the tray containing their brunch, and sprinted into a mad dash. Within seconds she flew into their room only to discover Daniel wasn't there!

Panic shot through her. *My God!* Where was he? Had they taken him already?

No. There hadn't been enough time.

She heard water gushing from the bathroom.

"Daniel!" she hissed, quickly closing the door behind her.

In a second he appeared at the bathroom door, toothbrush in hand, a towel slung very low over his hips. He'd obviously taken a shower because his hair was damp.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his brow furrowed in concern.

“He’s here! He’s found us! Dammit! I don’t know how he did but Colby Martin is here.” Jo gasped for breath as she peeked out a crack in the curtains.

Thankfully she saw no one.

For someone who’d been so violently ill for the last twenty-four hours, Daniel reacted quickly. He ducked back into the bathroom and a moment later came out wearing his track pants. He dashed to the night table and reached out in a desperate effort to grab at the revolver and holster. She winced as he smashed his cast against the lamp, knocking it over. The lamp crashed onto the carpeted floor with such a horrid bang Jo was sure everyone within miles must have heard it. With unbelievable speed he swept the gun and holster into his hand, rushing over to where she stood.

“You’re not stupid, Brady,” he reassured. “Just tired. People make mistakes when they’re tired.”

“I don’t make mistakes, McCullen. People die from mistakes in this line of business,” Jo snapped angrily at his broad, naked back as he gently pushed her aside to peek through the slit in the curtains.

“We’ll have to make a run for it,” he said, and moved away from the window, grabbing his fleece top and struggling into it.

He tossed the holster into the garbage can and kept the gun firmly in his hand.

“You ready?” he asked as he cracked the door open an inch and peered out.

“Yes,” she lied, wondering why she was letting him take the gun and take charge so easily.

“Which way takes us to the back?”

“Turn right.”

Grabbing her hand, he pulled her outside. They headed down the opposite way she’d only seconds ago come from. In an effort to not attract attention they walked briskly instead of running as they went past the sparkling swimming pool that was thankfully empty of swimmers. The last thing she wanted was for anyone to get hurt when they saw the gun in Daniel’s hand, or if Martin saw them and opened fire like in the garage. They passed quickly through the white cast iron gate that stood conveniently ajar. As if they both sensed the same thing, they stopped.

“Is Martin alone?” he asked.

“No. There are four including him.”

“Do you think what I’m thinking?”

“He’s got all the exits of this plaza covered.”

Daniel nodded and frowned.

Jo brightened. “The donut store!”

She pulled him back down the direction they’d just come from then into another alleyway. An instant later, she spotted a sign on a door that indicated the donut shop private employees’ only entrance. She twisted the smooth metal door handle to the door and prayed it would open.

Sweet mercy, it did.

Stepping inside, they were accosted by hot, delicious air bursting with an array of aromatic pleasures. Jo's mouth instantly watered. From the appreciative smile on Daniel's face, she knew he was pleased too. Hopefully her stomach had saved them from a fate worse than death.

Clean, shiny, steel shelves on rollaway carts were filled with steaming pastries. There were all kinds of baked goods including bagels, donuts, muffins, biscuits and cookies. Evidently the baker had recently removed the goodies from the giant ovens and left them here to cool.

From the next room, a ring erupted from a cash register. A clatter of dishes sifted through the closed doorway. A man and woman spoke in hushed voices. Jo snuck over to the doorway and peeked into the donut shop.

Across the heads of the patrons, she had a perfect view of her car and the other vehicles. Martin and his goons were not in sight.

Suddenly from behind them a flurry of footsteps stopped right outside the back doorway and Jocelyn's heart almost burst with panic.

"Oh my God! They're—" she began, but Daniel silenced her by pressing a finger to her lips, gesturing her to remain quiet. Without the slightest sound he crossed the room toward the door they'd just entered. Jo inhaled sharply as the doorknob turned.

With gentle ease, Daniel slid the bolt into place.

"Locked!" Martin growled from the other side of the door. "Check the rest of the doors in the plaza."

There came an answering grunt and Jo and Daniel remained quiet while they anxiously waited for the two sets of footsteps to fade away. After a couple of minutes, Daniel returned to her side and once again grabbed her hand.

His warm fingers intertwined with hers and he squeezed gently with reassurance. The gesture lent Jo a marvelous aura of safety. She realized it felt really good to let him be in charge, wonderful in fact, to allow someone else to take over the heavy burden of self-protection.

"Out the front," Daniel hissed. He slid the gun against the small of his back and pulled his track top to cover the weapon.

She allowed him to pull her toward the entrance into the donut shop but a split second later Jo crashed into him. He cursed lightly and nodded toward the picture window. One of the transplant surgeon's henchmen had appeared out of nowhere and now stood behind her cherry red Mustang.

Her heart sunk when the man opened her trunk. He held up the wrinkled hospital blanket in one hand and Daniel's rumpled mint green hospital gown in the other. A few seconds later the old man joined him.

"Looks like we've been found out," Daniel said tightly.

Jo stiffened when another of Martin's goons joined them carrying the hypodermic needle stuffed with the medicine Smokey had given to help Daniel with the withdrawal.

"He's found the needle in the room and my wig!" Jo gasped.

"And your purse," Daniel said. He threw her a worried glance. "Anything important in there?"

She patted her pant pockets and felt the bulges. "I have my cell phone and the wallet with all my ID in my back pocket. I left the car keys in the purse."

"He's probably already discovered who you are by the plates on your car," he replied tightly.

"Can't be traced to me."

Daniel's eyebrows furrowed into a question.

"Not in my real name. But it is my favorite cover car," she explained, feeling a bit anxious at losing her mode of wheels.

A tiny smile tipped the corners of his lips and she got the feeling he was quite impressed. "Anything that can lead him to your identity? How'd you register us yesterday? Did you use your credit card?"

"No, I used a credit card with a fake name."

Daniel frowned. "Fake name?"

"I belong to an elite private eye group. They use fictional names and companies that can't be traced easily. They pay the bills I rack up. It's great for undercover work."

Daniel smiled approvingly. "You sure are good."

She'd never felt comfortable taking compliments, and this man really made her uncomfortable with his.

As if sensing her uneasiness, he chuckled and shook his head with amazement.

"C'mon, Brady, let's sneak out the back way," he said, and tugged on her hand.

They were about to turn around when an unfamiliar woman's voice stopped them.

"What are you doing in here?"

Jo jolted as the doorway filled with a plump middle-aged, gray-haired woman who had served her only minutes ago when she'd come in for the tea, donuts and muffins.

Recognition flared in the woman's dark brown eyes.

"I remember you. You were in earlier." The recognition quickly turned to fear when the woman spied Daniel.

"What's going on here?" the woman asked quickly as she started to back away.

Jo reacted quickly. Reaching into her back pocket she produced her black wallet, flipped it open and flashed her ID at the woman.

"Food Inspectors, ma'am." Jo stated professionally.

She ignored the grin Daniel fought to rip off his face. Before the woman could even catch a glimpse of her ID, Jo closed her wallet and slammed it back into her pocket. The poor woman's mouth dropped open in shock. Her hands automatically fell to nervously brush against her dirty apron. "Why didn't you tell me earlier when I served you? No one told me inspectors were coming."

"That's the idea, ma'am," Daniel replied curtly, picking up Jo's lead. He stepped over to the trays laden with the sweet-smelling baked goods.

"I need a bag," he ordered boldly.

The woman shook with apparent fright and quickly handed Daniel a large paper bag from a nearby shelf that was stacked full of them. He proceeded to grab around half a

dozen chocolate donuts then walked over to the bagel tray. “Which ones are the blueberry bagels, ma’am?”

“Um, how many do you need?” The woman seemed quite nervous as she began handing Daniel the blueberry bagels.

“Four should do it.”

He demanded muffins, doughnuts and butter croissants. Jo was utterly surprised and felt he’d gone too far when he asked for two cups of large tea, double, double, to go.

At his request for tea the woman threw him a suspicious glance then seemed relieved to get back out front.

“Let’s go,” Daniel urged the moment she left.

Before Jo could so much as move a muscle, a loud man’s voice boomed into the room.

“What’s going on here?”

Once again they stopped midstride to the back door. When Jo turned her eyes widened at the immense size of the beefy bald giant. She hadn’t seen him when she’d been ordering earlier. He must have been here in the back taking out the delicious items from the huge ovens. He stood six foot four or five, at least. A virtual giant of a man. By Daniel’s surprised look, Jo knew they’d bitten off more than they could chew.

“Investigators, sir,” Jo replied quickly, trying hard not to show her nervousness. She produced her ID in the same way she’d done previously with the woman. To her surprise the man didn’t even glance at it. Obviously he wouldn’t be bowled over as easily as the woman.

“How’d you two get in here?” he roared.

“Doesn’t matter how. This is a surprise inspection,” Jo replied in a serious tone. She grabbed a coconut-drenched donut from the nearest tray, one of her least favorites, and took a bite out of it. She scrunched up her face in disgust. She wasn’t kidding either.

“This stuff is awful.”

The man’s forehead wrinkled with utter shock.

“That’s the Carl special.” His loud voice was laced with hurt. Obviously he’d invented this particular delicacy. Yuck!

“Ah yes. I’ve heard about the Carl special,” she lied. “You must be the famous Carl.”

Carl’s bushy white eyebrows knitted together with apparent disgust. “How come I’ve never seen you two before?”

He looked over Jo’s head and fixed his offended gaze on Daniel. “You don’t look like no investigator. Not the way you’re dressed. You look more like a bum. Show me your ID.”

Daniel’s eyes widened at the demand.

“He left his in the car,” Jo said quickly.

“I want to see his ID or I call the cops.”

“Um... You don’t want to do that, sir,” Jo replied firmly.

The man’s bushy eyebrows narrowed with suspicion. “Why not?”

“Tell him, Inspector.” Jo cocked her head at Daniel. She stifled her smile when Daniel blinked wildly as he desperately searched for an answer. Scanning the clean surroundings of the bakery, he said quietly, “Mouse droppings.”

Jo literally jumped at the man’s loud bellow of disbelief.

“What?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Yes, you have mouse droppings.”

She tried hard not to laugh at Daniel’s answer.

“Where?”

Daniel patted the bag of donuts he was holding. “All the evidence is in here. Now please, sir, step aside or you will be interfering with a federal investigation.”

Carl scratched his shiny bald head in dismay and reluctantly stepped aside, allowing Jo and Daniel to squeeze by and out the doorway into the main donut shop. As they passed the coffee counter, the woman handed Jo the two large cups of tea Daniel had asked for.

“Thank you, ma’am,” she said quickly. “You’ll be hearing from us after we file our report.”

A swift glance out the donut shop window proved Martin’s cronies and cars were gone. She sighed with relief and turned to the older couple who stared after them with apparent anger. She threw them a friendly wave.

“Sorry to be so much trouble. We’ll be going now. Thank you so much for your excellent participation. It will be duly noted.”

Ignoring the curious glances of the handful of patrons sitting at the tables in the donut shop, she followed Daniel outside.

Both automatically turned to the right, not daring a glance at the motel. They walked as swiftly as possible without causing suspicion and passed several buildings before slipping into another deserted alleyway. Then they both burst out laughing at what they’d pulled off in the donut shop.

“What a couple of actors we are,” Daniel roared.

“You should have seen your face when I told you to tell them why they couldn’t call the cops.”

“I was sweating bullets for a minute there,” Daniel admitted. “My mind just went completely blank.”

“Could have fooled me. You were such a pro.”

Suddenly Daniel stopped smiling and looked over Jo’s shoulder.

“What is it?” Had he seen something?

“We need a cover and fast. Kiss me,” he said quickly.

Before she could follow his gaze to see what he’d been looking at, Daniel pushed her gently into a tiny alcove. Cement walls embraced them on both sides, hiding them from any prying eyes. Before she could blink, his warm, moist lips clamped over hers. She tried to ignore the fire breathing through her and break free to see who was coming, but he grabbed her chin and held her head still.

“False alarm,” he whispered against her mouth, his eyes glittering with lust. His mouth came down on top of hers again and he sucked her bottom lip into his mouth with a fierce intensity. The gesture felt intoxicating and erotic. A split second later his tongue slipped into her mouth, shocking her senses.

The cups of tea she carried in her hands, dropped. She barely heard the dull thud as full paper cups hit the concrete. She grabbed his strong waist to steady herself.

He pushed her harder against the wall, breathing roughly as he pressed against her. A flare of pain shot through her injured shoulder, but she shifted herself quickly. The pain dulled to a throb, allowing her to feel his swollen, hard cock burning against her clothed pussy, scalding her, pleasuring her sensitive clit.

His hands came away from her face and tangled in her hair, his cast brushing roughly against her cheek as he eased her head back, giving him easier access to her mouth.

Oh yes, this felt perfect. So fucking perfect.

She'd never been kissed this wickedly before. Had never had a man's tongue slide over her teeth, explore the insides of her cheeks, fuck her tongue. Mercy! Who was she kidding? She'd never had a man push her against a wall and simply have his way with her. And, boy, it felt good.

A need to submit flared through her. She wanted to relinquish all control and let him take her wherever he wanted to go.

From somewhere far off a low, intimate moan purred within her throat. The sound seemed to arouse him and he pressed his strong erection harder against her.

He said it had been a false alarm. That meant they were safe here in this tiny alcove. The walls protected them. Hid them from the evil following them.

Here she could be free if only for a few minutes. Free to enjoy these sensual feelings coursing through her. Open to take pleasure in the way her pussy quivered as he pressed his clothed cock hard against the juncture of her thighs.

He plundered her mouth as if she were something delicate. Something fragile. And she loved his tenderness.

He smelled so good, an excellent combo of delicate soap, clean shampoo and mint toothpaste. His scent seeped into her nostrils, made her insides melt. She gyrated her hips against the thick erection that promised her so many dark and delicious orgasms.

He answered by grinding his cock against her. The movement sent staggering sensations through her clit, making her whimper. Her pussy creamed, dampening her panties.

She wanted to pull down her pants and have him slip his engorged cock into her, making her simply forget everything that had happened over the past couple of days.

But suddenly he was pulling away and, to her horror, a cry of protest escaped her parted lips. She could hear him breathing hard. Really hard. And she was too. Boy! Was she ever breathing!

Her eyes snapped open to find his dark, sexy look drilling into her, making her shiver with anticipation.

“We'd better go,” he said huskily.

The urge to reach out, to curl her arms around his neck and pull his hard body against her again was so great she was about to do it when he turned away from her and moved out of the secluded alcove.

He started down the narrow corridor, acting as if nothing had just happened between them.

“Get a move on, Brady,” he said over his shoulder. She didn’t miss the amused smile that tilted his kiss-swelled lips.

Bastard, she cursed him silently. Obviously he’d been toying with her and she’d fallen for it hook, line and sinker.

Again.

She bit back a frustrated growl and hurried after him. She’d have to figure out a way to get back at him. And soon.

* * * * *

“McCullen! You’re going the wrong way!” Jo yelled as Daniel swerved out of the car rental parking lot and headed south instead of north as she’d instructed.

“We’re going back to the stretch of road where I was first kidnapped,” he replied between gritted teeth.

“Back? Have you totally flipped out? Don’t you know what he’ll do to you if he gets his hands on you again?”

He remained silent.

“No way,” Jo replied sternly. She had a schedule to keep! “Too far out of the way. There’s no need to go back. Turn the car around.”

“It’s not a request, Brady.”

The rough coldness in Daniel’s voice made Jo think twice about arguing, and to her utter disappointment, she felt her resolve begin to shatter.

Maybe they should investigate the scene. She’d never gotten the chance. When her contact had informed her about a man fitting Daniel’s description being held in a private hospital down in Florida, a hospital Colby Martin owned, she’d immediately headed there.

“Do you know where they kidnapped you?” she asked.

Daniel brightened. “Brady, I can pinpoint the exact spot.”

* * * * *

Three hours later, Daniel tried to hard to contain his excitement when he recognized the short, straight stretch of road between the two hairpin curves. It didn’t work.

He slammed on the brakes and barely heard Jo’s frantic curse as her newly purchased tea flew off the dashboard and shot like a missile through the opening between the tattered bucket seats, narrowly missing both of them.

“I seem to be having a run of bad luck with my tea,” she grumbled tartly when the entire contents spilled onto the floor in the back.

"I'll buy you another one," he promised as he scrambled out of the car. A moment later he spotted the skid marks engraved into the rough gray pavement.

"These are my skid marks here." He pointed to the long black streak running diagonally along the asphalt toward the gravel shoulder.

"I remember getting stung in the back of the neck by a bee. I hit the brakes and the bike began to swerve toward the gravel and—"

Daniel sucked in a sharp breath when he spotted a tiny golden glint in the dry grass over the embankment about ten feet from where they stood. Could it be what he'd come back for?

Keeping his eye on the glint, he ambled down the incline. Bending over, he sighed with relief when he felt the smooth, thin, round piece of tarnished gold metal slip into the palm of his hand. By God, he thought he'd never see his late brother Steve's Saint Christopher medallion again. Lying beside it in the grass was the accompanying necklace. A chain link had broken and that's how it had fallen off.

He cast a quick glance at Brady, who looked away. He hoped she hadn't seen what he'd picked up.

Suddenly she bent over to inspect something on the gravel shoulder. Should he tell her this necklace and medallion were the reason he'd wanted to return? That someone had anonymously sent it to him in Mexico a few days before he'd crashed the bike and been kidnapped by Martin? And he'd been on his way to give it to his brother's wife Emily? That he hadn't even been sure he'd lost the medallion here? Would she think he was crazy for wanting to find it? He clamped his hand tight around the jewelry.

Yes, she would think he was nuts, and she'd probably ask too many nosey questions. She'd think he was a sentimental fool. Daniel slipped the items into the safety of the pocket of his track pants and climbed the embankment to rejoin her.

"Here's your bee sting, McCullen," she said, and held up a tiny dart.

His mouth dropped open in surprise.

"It's a stun dart. It packs a powerful punch, doesn't it?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "They were following you, McCullen. They knew your route, probably hid in the clump of palms over there so no one could see them and when you came along—ouch—bee sting."

Daniel frowned and tried to ignore the sudden trembling tugging at his legs. The urge to leave the area dropped over him like a suffocating blanket.

All this time he'd assumed he'd lost control of his motorcycle because of a bee. That he'd hit his head while crashing and had been knocked out. And somehow Martin had gotten a hold of him and transferred him to that hospital where he'd been kept. Obviously his theory had been wrong.

"C'mon, Brady," he urged, "let's get the hell out of here."

Chapter Eight

Steve McCullen rubbed his hand across the sore spot on his left hip, a recent souvenir from the guards' beating and stared hard at the black iron bars keeping him from freedom.

How long had he been locked up in this eight-by-eight-foot prison cell, anyway?

He couldn't tell anymore. Every day melted together in here. Every day the same bland food, same boring questions, the same insults, the same anti-rejection medicine.

He didn't have a clue as to why he hadn't gone insane by now. He wanted to, if only to get away from this boredom of being on the inside, but pure revenge always held him from going over the brink. Held him from slipping into that peaceful, dark depression he'd lived in the first few months after he'd discovered his freedom had been stolen and realized he'd been incarcerated here under a false name, pegged as insane and delusional.

Since he'd erupted from those dark days, the guards had tried to break him. They wanted information from him but he wasn't sure what. They'd come close to driving him mad on several occasions. Thankfully, his hand always managed to curl around the thin metal Saint Christopher's necklace his wife had given him and he'd find a way to defy them.

Now the necklace was gone. Of his own doing. He'd given it to another inmate. Micheal, a man he trusted, said he'd help him get word to the outside world that he was still alive. He promised to smuggle the necklace and medallion with an accompanying letter out of prison and get it delivered to his brother Daniel. That had been weeks ago. Since then, he'd been thrown into solitary and had no contact with Michael. For all he knew, his friend was dead. This place was death row and no inmate made a move without some guard knowing about it.

Without the medallion he felt lost. A lost soul inside three bare concrete walls. Bright, buttery yellow walls. Maybe even bile yellow walls. Depended on his mood.

He smiled grimly. Did they think they could fool him into believing the yellow walls were a substitute for sunshine? The black metal bars, thin trees?

Nice touch.

What about the irritating antiseptic smell hanging in the air? Cheap imitation pollution?

He kept rubbing his aching hip and dropped his weary gaze to the shiny, freshly scrubbed floor. Light gray? Or was it a mint green? Grass? His gaze wandered upward to the steel blue sky. He winced and shook his head. No, not the sky. It as a ceiling. Just a goddamn ceiling.

He closed his eyes and allowed his mind to drift him off the cheap scratchy bedroll he lay on. He could literally feel himself float out the stinking room that held him captive.

He found himself lying in a lush, green meadow behind the rustic, rambling lighthouse they'd just inherited from Emily's uncle. Tall and confident, the lighthouse

was perched precariously close to the edge of the gnarled, red, rocky cliffs of Shipwreck Island. Tall, slender, delicate blades of grass tickled his bare feet. Moist, cool, salty ocean air nuzzled his wind-burned cheeks and the sky looked magnificent and as bright blue as he'd ever seen. So big. So free.

Lying in his arms was his beautiful wife Emily. Her eyes blazed with love fierce and passionate as she looked at him. She made him feel so lucky he could almost cry. So much love. All for him.

He wrapped his arms tighter around her soft, luscious body, pulled her closer and inhaled her wonderful outdoorsy scent. She smelled like heaven and her sandy blonde hair felt so light and silky as the strands blew against his face.

Her body felt wonderfully soft and willing as she lay in his arms. Her kisses were so powerful and desperate, her mouth fierce and demanding. He could feel his cock hardening in memory of how easily she exploded when he entered her.

He wondered what she was doing now? Was she still living in their lighthouse? Was she alone? Or was she with another man? His gut clenched at the thought she would have moved on without him. But how could she not? To her and everybody he'd been dead for years instead of being held captive on death row in a Texas prison.

How the hell could this be happening? Steve bit into his lower lip. Hard. On purpose. He kept biting until he tasted the metallic taste of blood and felt the painful crash of reality burn through him. It was reality he needed to face head-on, if he were ever going to find a way out of this prison nightmare.

* * * * *

"You put our lives into danger for a necklace?" Jo said tightly. She'd seen McCullen pick up the golden chain and medallion and had been waiting patiently for an explanation for most of the day. To her disgust, he hadn't even broached the subject.

A muscle twitched in his jaw but he didn't answer. He merely kept his gaze glued to the road as he drove.

"At first I couldn't figure out why you wanted to head back to Florida. Then when you said you had a motorcycle, I was convinced you wanted to find it. It's big. It's expensive. But after picking up the necklace, you wanted to go. You didn't even want to check the police impounds for your bike. Not that I would have let you because Martin would probably have enough crooked cops keeping an eye out for you if you were stupid enough to look for your bike. I figured I'd better let you go back there. Let you get it out of your system. A closure kind of thing. But a necklace, McCullen? It's not worth risking our lives for." She tried to keep the anger from creeping into her voice, but it didn't work. She was pissed off, and when she was pissed off, she always had a hard time hiding it.

"It doesn't belong to me," he replied tightly.

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me."

"What are you? Some kind of pack rat?"

"I didn't say it wasn't mine."

Jo blinked with confusion.

“Quit playing stupid games, McCullen,” Jo snapped. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. The man was irritating.

“I want to know why that medallion is so important that we risked our lives for it.”

“Don’t be so melodramatic.”

His words torpedoed into Jo and she unleashed the fury she’d been stifling all day.

“If you aren’t the stupidest asshole I’ve come up against in my life. A crazy doctor wants to get his hands on you. He’s gone so far as to track us down and I can’t figure out how, since I was careful. I’ve used credit cards that would take him months if not years to go through all the layers of people just to get to the core of information. Who knows where the guy is going to pop up next and you head right back into his territory. I am not being melodramatic. I’m being careful, very careful. That’s what you should be doing too!”

“Careful, huh?” he replied coldly. “If you’re being so goddamn careful then why didn’t you go to a reputable doctor to get your wound looked after? Or better yet why didn’t you go to the police and have them get me out? In my book that would be more careful, Brady.”

“You should know that the police need a good reason to go traipsing into a hospital. I didn’t have one to give them. I only had an anonymous tip to work on. Besides, I couldn’t take a chance and trust the cops. Not if it involved Colby Martin.”

“Oh?” His eyebrows shot up in wonder. “This is interesting. You don’t trust doctors and you don’t trust cops. You don’t trust anyone, do you, Brady? Why’s that?”

He probably had been so self-absorbed in his personal mission to find out how to put Martin behind bars for his brother’s death that he didn’t give a shit about anything or anybody except for his revenge. She could certainly understand why he wouldn’t think it was because of what he’d done to her on that witness stand that she distrusted virtually everyone in authority. Revenge was a thick, black cloud that had urged her to only one finish. To get the person she wanted to get and get him any way she could, no matter who got in the way.

Dr. Colby Martin had been that man, and she could fully understand why McCullen had done what he had to her just to gain the old doctor’s trust. Unfortunately his need for revenge had screwed her life.

“It’s none of your business,” she said coolly. She expected him to start an argument and when he didn’t she focused her attention back to the necklace she’d seen McCullen pick up after he’d climbed down the side of the road into a ditch. She’d seen the smile of relief splash over his face when he picked it up. She wondered if the necklace belonged to a woman. Maybe to this Beth person he mumbled about in his delirium.

“Why’s the necklace so important, McCullen?”

“I was on my way to give it to Emily.”

An uncomfortable feeling she couldn’t identify scrambled up her spine. So, he’d bought a trinket for Emily. Was he in love with his late brother’s wife?

“Forget it! You don’t have to tell me your personal business,” she said quickly. He obviously held a torch for his sister-in-law. The necklace was for her. A peace offer or something. Hell, he’d have to do better than that for Jo if she ever got mad at him.

Her cheeks flamed at her thoughts. There was no way she would ever let herself get into a relationship with him. No way. He was going to be a brother-in-law in a sense for God's sake. Family. She'd have to see him on family occasions.

Shit! She wasn't going to be able to get rid of him as easily as she'd thought.

He threw her an amused look. "Don't look so devastated, Brady. There's nothing going on between Emily and myself."

"I didn't say there was."

"No, but you thought it. It's written all over your face."

"Why are we having this discussion? As I said, it is none of my business." She reached over to turn on the radio and suddenly realized the old rust bucket of a car she rented didn't have one.

McCullen chuckled. "You're the one who asked. I may as well give you all the juicy details."

She closed her eyes and shook her head in disgust. "Please spare me, McCullen."

Another smooth chuckle from him made Jo bristle angrily. She threw him a scathing look and jolted at the gorgeous grin lifting his lips and the sparkling amusement shining in his blue eyes.

"Why are you laughing at me, McCullen?"

"Because you kill me, Brady."

"I just might," she said between clenched teeth.

"We've been traveling together for only two days and already we've shared some really hot kisses. You allowed me to cop a feel of your breasts and we've got an interesting bit of sexual attraction going on between us, so I guess it is understandable that you're jealous."

Jo's back shot straight up. "I am not jealous."

"I'm teasing you, Brady. You need to lighten up."

Fuck off! She would have said it too but he continued talking. "There's no torrid romance going on with Emily and myself. I consider her like my sister. End of story."

Strangely enough, those words pleased Jo. She said nothing and gazed out the window, acting as if it didn't make a bit of difference to her.

"And the necklace I found belonged to my brother Steve. Emily gave it to him the last time she saw him."

"I heard about what happened to him. He got caught with a large amount of drugs in his fishing boat a few years back? Then he died in jail right after he was arrested. Suicide, I heard."

Daniel winced. Instantly she was sorry for the rough way she'd put it.

"That's right." His voice sounded strained, obviously he didn't want to talk about it. She didn't blame him.

He continued. "The necklace and medallion were missing from his personal effects. A few weeks ago both items were delivered to me in Mexico. Here—" Daniel dug the necklace out of his pocket and handed it to Jo. "I figured Emily might want it back. Kind of like a keepsake."

Jo accepted the tiny item and examined the illustration of a man with a child sitting on his shoulders.

"This is a Saint Christopher medallion."

Daniel nodded. "It's for travelers. To keep them safe. Steve traveled a lot in his job as an investigative journalist. It was shortly after they moved into the lighthouse Emily inherited from her uncle, that she gave him the medallion as a good luck charm. She had a feeling something was going to happen to him that day. She wasn't wrong. He never came home."

Jo turned the tattered medal over to inspect the tiny inscription on the back. Deep scratches made it hard to read the initial inscription.

"*For Steve,*" she read, aloud. "*Your endearment always, Emily.* Something's scratched in over top."

"The letters C and D is what I got out of it. And the letters TXDR on the second line," Daniel said.

"TX could mean Texas. DR could be a street or a drive or a company name? What does C. D. mean?" Jo asked.

Daniel shrugged.

"You said this medallion showed up a few weeks ago? Who sent it to you? Your brother died years ago. Why is it popping up now, after all this time?"

"Don't know."

"Didn't you try to trace it?"

"Couldn't. It was delivered to me in Mexico on an archeological dig I was helping my dad with. The medallion came via a local Mexican boy. He said a '*gringo*', an American he'd never seen before, gave him lots of money to deliver it to me."

"Someone sure took a lot of trouble to get it to you way down in Mexico. Any ideas who?"

"Colby Martin."

"How would he know this belonged to your brother?"

"Steve was working on a story about transplants. Colby Martin is a head honcho of the transplant world and so Steve interviewed him a few times and watched numerous transplant surgeries. Maybe he lost the medallion and Colby found it. Maybe he's been hanging on to it for years, waiting for the right opportunity to use it. I know it sounds lame. But I can't come up with anything else. I figure when he finally tracked me down, why didn't he just kill me then? Why send me the medallion to flush me back to the U.S? Anyway, nothing makes sense about this. Why was he torturing me in a private transplant hospital for almost a month? I figured he was a sadist."

"I know why," Jo confessed. It was time McCullen knew the truth.

He sighed. "Why?"

"My sources tell me he's dying."

"Kind of figured that. He doesn't look too healthy."

"He needs a new pair of lungs. Apparently yours are a perfect match."

Jo watched in alarm as what little color Daniel had accumulated in his face faded into a pasty white.

"Maybe you should let me drive," she suggested.

He threw her a shaky smile. "No. I need something to distract me and since we don't have a radio to amuse us, I'll use the car. What else have you been keeping from me?"

"His name was put on an organ registry about three months ago and then a few weeks ago a set of lungs were delivered for him. Unfortunately they were damaged and the operation never took place. After that he must have taken the matter into his own hands and decided to go the underground route, flushing you out of Mexico so he could get your lungs. But why wait for almost a month?" she pondered.

"They were probably allowing time to make him stronger for the operation so he would have a better chance to survive the transplant. At the beginning of my captivity, he dragged around an oxygen tank and wore a mask all the time," Daniel replied.

"He would stare down at me for hours. His face was so gray and pinched. I'm surprised he could still walk around. But slowly he started to get better and he only brought the tank along sometimes."

Jo shivered. Daniel had been so close to death. If she'd shown up after midnight the night of the planned surgery, the two of them would never have met. Or if Colby Martin had been in better shape for the operation when they'd first taken Daniel several weeks ago, his lungs would be in Martin's body and Daniel would just be another missing person. A mere statistic.

When she really thought about it, people went missing every day. How many of them were victims of the lucrative illegal transplant industry? Kidnapped off the streets and their bodies sold to the highest bidder just as McCullen had almost ended up.

She frowned and returned her attention to the Saint Christopher medallion.

C. D. What did these initials stand for, if anything? And who scratched them into the tiny gold medallion?

She cast a quick glance at Daniel. He was concentrating on driving, saying nothing more. Obviously he was mulling over this newest tidbit of information about Martin wanting his lungs and his close call with death. Almost dying would certainly make one think twice about enjoying what time they had left in their life. Her brush with death in the underground garage had undoubtedly heightened her senses and made her heart soften toward the man who'd saved her life despite what he'd done to her in the past and not even remembering her.

Jo fingered the deep scratches in the medallion McCullen had given her to look at. Daniel's theory of Colby Martin sending the medallion might be plausible, but what if Martin hadn't sent it? Who had?

* * * * *

The heat of the prison yard hit Steve McCullen like a hot blast fresh from a furnace. For a split second he wanted to go back to his tiny cell with the bile yellow walls, but he straightened defiantly and limped over to the guard, the chains around his ankles clinking his arrival.

“Name?” the guard said in a bored tone without looking up.

“Chance Donovan.” He told them the name they’d beat into him to use. In here he was Chance Donovan not Steve McCullen. No one knew his real identity and that’s what someone in the outside world wanted. He just wished he knew for sure who wanted him alive and why he hadn’t been just killed outright instead of being housed in a Texas death row prison under a false name all these years.

As he stated the name, the guard’s head lifted and for a split second Chance noticed the man’s look of horror. Most men reacted with shock at his scarred face, complements of a really bad beating he’d taken the day he’d been arrested and thrown in jail.

He figured he’d get used to their reactions by now, unfortunately he hadn’t.

The guard checked off his name and nodded for Chance to move along to yard four. Chance flinched as the outside gate slammed shut behind him.

“You talk to no one out there. Is that clear?”

Chance nodded. The last thing he wanted was another beating or another three months in solitary confinement for trying to talk to another inmate.

“Turn around,” the guard instructed.

He did as he was told and held out his shackled hands. The guard reached through the slot in the gate, unlocked and removed the handcuffs. To his dismay, the guard didn’t make a move to remove the heavy leg irons.

Instead, he threw a nearby switch. The inner gate hummed open and Chance was free. If he could call the tiny exercise yard as being free.

Pretty much everyone snuck quick glances at him. No one said a word as he slowly shuffled into the packed, narrow yard he’d been assigned to. The clinking chains around his ankles totally humiliated him, branding him a troublemaker.

He shivered with revulsion when he spotted the shiny metal catwalk at the other end of the exercise yard. It was manned by guards in moss green uniforms who carried heavy-looking rifles.

Quickly, he averted his gaze from the disturbing sight, bowed his head, ambled to a spot in the shade of the giant cinder block wall and leaned heavily against it as a sudden wave of dizziness almost toppled him.

It was very hot out here. It stunk too. A harsh mixture of gas fumes from a nearby highway and body sweat from the other inmates. He watched with envy as a few burly men, their bodies drenched in sweat, played basketball nearby. He knew some of them.

Rolando Sanchez, a burly bald-headed Mexican with meat hooks for hands was a serial killer and rapist of small boys, condemned to death row.

Karl Phillips, a skinny African-American, very soft-spoken. The man had once confided in him he was innocent. An ex-wife and his three kids all under five killed as someone had opened fire on them in a plaza parking lot. Witnesses fingered Karl but he hadn’t done it.

Chance had believed him until Michael, the only man he’d allowed himself to trust lately in this place, informed him the slight dent in Karl’s forehead was due to a bullet hole. The man had tried to shoot himself after killing his family in a parking lot of a

plaza. The suicide attempt had failed when the bullet bounced off a steel plate in his head. A steel plate he'd acquired on a previously failed attempt to blow out his brains.

Chance's gaze wandered to the heat waves radiating from the concrete floor and dull gray cinder-block walls supported by thick steel beams. Suddenly he found the yard stifling.

Anxiety prickled through him as he imagined the solid walls begin to move in toward him. Surround him. Squeeze the breath out of him.

The piercing cry of a bird scattered his panicky thoughts. His head snapped up toward the bright blue sky. Virgin white seagulls surfed the slight breeze, hovering beyond the razor-sharp, silver barbed wire that rolled the entire length of the cinder-block walls.

The seagulls were laughing at him. Taunting him. Daring him to spread his wings and follow them to the woman he loved more than his own life.

His heart clenched painfully as he thought of Emily. She was so beautiful and caring. Her laughter always sounded like gentle music sailing amidst a light early morning ocean breeze. God, he missed her so much, sometimes he thought it would be better if he just went insane.

His gaze drifted to the solid wall he leaned against and he reached out with a slightly shaking hand to touch one of the many scarred holes littering the otherwise smooth cinder blocks. The holes were marks left by bullets when a trigger-happy guard had shot in an attempt to stop a fight. In this tension-filled place, fights were a frequent, almost daily occurrence.

Sometimes the guards shot at the steel support beams running vertically every several feet along the walls to see who would win the many bets in this place. Bets to see who got hit from one of the stray bullets as they splintered upon impact against the metal and then flew in different paths slamming into innocent bystanders. As if anyone on death row was innocent.

He clenched his fists in frustration. Dammit! He was innocent! He needed to stick to that truth or he'd lose what was left of his mind.

For a brief moment he toyed with the idea of rushing the wall, trying to climb over it and somehow get past the razor-sharp barbed wire. But he knew the heavy leg irons and his sore hip wouldn't let him get far before the guards would shoot him down like a dog and he'd finally be out of his misery. On the other hand, he would never get the chance to see his wife again and that's all he lived for.

Just one lousy last chance to see Emily again. Even if it was only a minute. That one thought kept him from rushing the wall and getting everything over with.

Now the only hope of his ever seeing Emily again lay with Michael and his ability in getting Steve's Saint Christopher medallion into Daniel's hands. He could only hope Daniel might get suspicious and start asking questions about where the medallion had come from. And maybe, just maybe, the initials he'd scratched into the back of the medallion would eventually make sense to someone and they would find him.

It was one hell of a crazy long shot but it was the only crazy long shot he had.

Chapter Nine

The stranger was waiting for her when she stepped out of the steamy-hot shower. He was nude, his engorged erection so swollen that she could do nothing but whimper in anticipation. His face looked flushed with expectation. His eyes were blazing with need as he locked his gaze onto her naked body.

"Violet, you sure are beautiful. I wanted to fuck you the instant I laid eyes on you in the bar."

"Me too," she admitted, and found herself breathing hard in anticipation as his hand reached down to stroke his engorged cock. She couldn't get over how long and thick and so beautifully shaped it was. Heavily veined, it literally grew as he touched himself.

"I'm going to take you again. Right here. Right up against the wall."

Oh God.

He let go of his stiff cock and walked toward her. In an instant he wrapped his hands around her wrists. They were like tight handcuffs, strong and unyielding, as he pushed her roughly against the smooth ceramic wall. His expression was tight and lusty as he lifted her arms over her head and kept them there with one hand, the other one came down to slide slowly up the inside of her thighs.

She moaned the instant his finger slipped into her vagina. Collecting her moisture, he began rubbing her clit in such a sensual manner she felt dazed at the intensity of arousal zipping through her.

"You're so wet and hot and bothered, I can feel it all around me. I want to kiss you, again."

Oh yes, kiss me. Kiss me!

He lowered his head and his mouth whispered sensations across her lips. She bucked as a finger once again slipped into her vagina and his mouth slanted over hers.

Oh God, she felt so hot!

His tongue plunged into her mouth, quickly fucking her tongue.

She was breathing erratically as his finger moved slowly and roughly over her swollen clit, then dipped into her again and out again. As he stroked her, her clit throbbed in a shock of arousal and warm wetness gushed from her, preparing for his entry.

I love it, I love it!

She grabbed him by his shoulders, digging her fingers into his hard, sinewy muscles. Holding him, she closed her eyes and loved the way her body ached and pulsed with the need for sex. He pressed his body against hers, his hard muscles claiming her soft curves and his cock nestled securely at the entrance to her pussy.

Keep going, stranger. Go all the way, she mentally urged as his mouth unrelentingly made love to hers.

His finger continued to tease her clit until her thighs were quivering and her legs were weak. Until she was begging him to fuck her right here up against the wall.

His enlarged shaft slid into her, the heat and fullness impaling her so hard and so fast, she couldn't help but cry out her appreciation.

* * * * *

A small erotic moan from Brady made McCullen tighten his hands on the steering wheel of the car. She'd been sleeping for hours and every once in awhile she made that hot little sound. The same one she'd made when they'd spent the night together. Every time he heard it, that sound turned him on so bad he wanted to pull over and start fucking her.

Whatever the hell she was dreaming it certainly had something to do with sex. He inhaled deeply and forced himself to focus his thoughts back to the road and to how their day had transpired.

After retrieving the necklace at the scene where he'd been kidnapped, he'd continued to drive throughout the rest of the day and into the night. It felt good to be in control again, even if it was just driving a car. The longer he drove, the better he felt. Thankfully, there were no more unexpected shakes and no unexpected surprises with Colby Martin. Hopefully the worst of both was finally over.

The last month had almost broken him mentally as well as physically. He was surprised he wasn't stiffer than he felt, with him lying around in the bed the way he had back at that hospital. He did remember a nurse or therapist who came in many times to move his legs and arms, but he'd been too doped-up to try an escape during those times. And she'd been too occupied to notice the fear rampaging through him as he mentally cried out for help. Not that she would have helped him anyway because she would have been on Colby Martin's payroll.

Daniel inhaled as his heart started a wild pounding at how he'd underestimated the power Dr. Colby Martin could wield. He was a renowned research transplant doctor and owned several private hospitals throughout the States. He'd also been accused several times of unscrupulous practices regarding illegally retrieving organs from his brain dead patients without getting permission from family members first. He'd always been able to prove it was improper paperwork. Most of the lawsuits had been settled out of court.

But Daniel had known he was an unscrupulous doctor going into his investigation of the man. He'd even gotten Martin off the hook several times in a courtroom despite his wanting to let the bastard pay for his crimes. Unfortunately he'd been too focused on gaining the man's trust to really see the truth at the time. Too focused on trying to find out how Colby Martin had been responsible for his brother's murder. He'd wanted to find evidence that he was Steve's killer and then prosecute him to the full extent of the law. He'd been selfish and full of revenge back then. Not to mention delirious with grief over his mother's death and just plain young and impulsive.

Daniel let out a slow calming breath, staring ahead into the light beams from the headlights that shot onto the dark lonely highway and allowed his thoughts to drift back to Brady.

Through the day he'd watched her polish off some of the bag of donuts and other baked goods he'd secured back at the donut shop. With all this excitement, her appetite certainly hadn't suffered, he mused. She made sure the both of them downed three healthy square meals that day. Not to mention snacks of fresh fruit and of course the donuts.

He also discovered that he enjoyed watching her eat. She savored every bite as if it were her last, sometimes making moaning sounds that sounded so sexy they turned him on.

He shook his head with amusement, resisting the urge to take a peek at her as she let out yet another sexy moan while she slept. If his eyes left the road and captured her sleeping form, he might not be able to keep driving. He just might give in to this overwhelming impulse to pull over, take her into his arms and start kissing her as if there were no tomorrow. He knew she'd respond. She had the other times he'd kissed her.

The last kiss in the alcove, after they'd hightailed it from the donut shop, had been a spur-of-the-moment crazy thing to do. Colby Martin had disappeared and he knew they should be counting their lucky stars that they hadn't been spotted. Knew they should be getting as far away and as fast as possible from the area, but his adrenaline was flying into overdrive and he'd just wanted to kiss her. Obviously the impulsive streak running through him was still alive and well.

Colby Martin finding them had been a close call. Too close for comfort. Brady said she was a careful woman. He believed her. Either it was a fluke Colby Martin found them so quickly, or Daniel had overlooked something. The only other alternative of being found could be this friend Brady had mentioned. The one who'd brought the drugs to their motel to help him with his withdrawal as well as bringing the first-aid items.

Perhaps her friend wasn't such a good friend after all. Everyone had a price. Perhaps her friend had contacted and tipped off Martin? When Daniel had posed that question to her earlier, Brady vehemently denied her friend would do anything like that. Afterward he'd received the silent treatment, except of course, her telling him which highways to follow and insisting they stop at a couple of stores to buy extra clothes, toiletries and more first-aid items to replace what they'd left behind at the motel in their haste to get away.

Now she was fast asleep on the seat beside him and it was nearing midnight. Since she'd been asleep, he had lots of time to think about his attraction to her.

Maybe his attraction to her was based on some Florence Nightingale syndrome or rescue by a hot heroine infatuation or something like that? How else could he explain this gut-wrenching need to protect her, to kiss her, make love to her, especially when he hardly even knew her?

He grinned with relief as a snug-looking motel loomed up ahead. The bungalow-style building beckoned an invitation he couldn't resist and he swung the car into the almost-full lot and parked. This seemed like a nice-enough place to settle in for the night.

When he turned off the car, he expected her to wake, but she didn't budge. Her eyes remained closed, her face seemed a bit flushed and her breathing somewhat erratic and fast.

Daniel slumped against the seat of the car and took this rare opportunity to check her out more closely. The outdoor motel lights splashed into the interior of the car, allowing him to see Brady's heart-shaped face and the dark half-crescent moons hanging beneath long, dark lashes. She looked tired. Probably hadn't anticipated so much work in keeping him alive.

Back at the other motel, he'd just stepped out of the shower, zipped off a quick shave and was brushing his teeth when he heard her call out for him. He'd heard the panic in her voice and realized something was wrong. When he rushed from the bathroom and saw her pale complexion as she explained Martin was outside, he also saw relief and genuine concern for his safety flash across her face.

Shit! She really seemed to care about him despite what he'd done to her. And it made him feel really good thinking she cared for him. He realized her skin looked virtually flawless, and even in her sleep she had a cute, defiant look. She looked different than the first time he'd seen her in the bar and the last time he'd seen her in the courtroom.

God, something wild and really fantastic had sparked inside him when he saw her hammering back the first beer and then the second. He'd spied a couple of the guys in the bar elbowing each other as they'd watched her with predator eyes. They were waiting until she was nice and drunk before making their move on her.

She'd been oblivious to their leering looks more interested in getting drunk. He could see pain in her eyes and didn't really want anything to do with it. He had enough pain of his own to deal with.

His mother passing away from cancer and then his brother Steve dying under mysterious circumstances in that jail shortly after had him reeling. He'd also just gone undercover complements of that secret government organization in an effort to gain Martin's confidence so he could see if Martin had something to do with his brother's death.

The last thing he needed was to rescue some hot, sexy damsel in distress. But the instant he'd caught her watching him, her pretty blue eyes glazing over with lust and alcohol, he knew what she wanted and he was suddenly willing to oblige.

He didn't have anything to lose by being straightforward with her. Coming right out in asking her if she wanted to go to his place or hers wasn't something he did on a continuous basis. And he was out of practice lately too with all the shit flying around.

It would just be one night with her, he promised himself. Hot and heavy sex so they could bury their respective troubles for a brief period of time. When she said her place, he couldn't believe how trusting she was to go with him, a complete stranger. And he was glad he'd hit on her first instead of the two creepy guys leering at her.

Man, she'd been hot and sexy and full of warm curves. An explosion ready to happen. She'd come apart so fast and so hard every time he aroused her that he'd just wanted to keep fucking her. And when they'd agreed to meet the next night, he'd had full intention of going back to that bar for her.

Unfortunately plans changed and he'd been fantasizing about their night together off and on over the years.

Back then she'd been chubby with saucy, spiky bleach blonde hair and the sexiest black glasses. She looked so hot and sweet while he fucked her he'd just wanted to protect her and love her and pleasure her.

But he noticed the years had changed her. She wasn't trusting as she'd once been. Wasn't the sweet girl he remembered.

Now she was sexier, bitchier and more worldly. Those glasses that made her look so alluring were gone. But his sexual attraction to her was still here and as strong as ever.

He smiled at the short bangs that came to just above nicely thinned dark eyebrows. Her nose was just the right size and her thick mane of chestnut-colored hair tumbled over her shoulders to just above the seductive swell of her gorgeous breasts, which pressed against her silky shirt.

The enticing memory of seeing her breasts bared in the bathroom mirror when he'd walked in on her back at the other motel had sent a shaft of hunger searing through his cock, just as it was doing now. He groaned involuntarily at how thick and swollen his cock suddenly felt.

She must have heard his groan for she shifted on the seat and her eyelids fluttered open. When she saw him, she bolted upright.

"Where are we?" she asked quickly as she looked out the window, a cute little frown marring her forehead.

"Just southwest of Bangor in Maine. Figured I better stop driving. We need some sleep. This place looks nice and peaceful."

"Good idea, McCullen. I'll get us a couple of rooms," she said, and slowly climbed out the car.

He watched her as she wearily strolled up a nearby walkway. Her tall and slender form looked absolutely stunning as she entered the motel lobby. Even in wrinkled clothing she looked hot.

Reluctantly his fingers drew back to the key in the ignition. He could leave her here. Turn on the car and take off. She wouldn't have to be in danger anymore and he could deliver the Saint Christopher to Emily, warn her and the rest of his family to be careful because Colby Martin was once again on the warpath, seeking revenge against him and probably his family for his granddaughter's death not to mention looking for a new set of lungs.

Then he could disappear back to Mexico again. Everyone would be safe with him out of the picture. Brady definitely would be safe from him and his overwhelming urges to kiss her and have sex with her again.

Leaving her here would be the most reasonable thing to do, but then again, he wasn't known for being the most reasonable man in the world. So why start now?

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, ma'am, I've only one room left," the male motel manager said as he peered down at her through a pair of black glasses with the thickest Coke-bottle-type lenses she'd ever seen. For some odd reason, the man looked a lot like the horror writer Stephen King. Black-rimmed glasses, dark hair and an intriguing piercing gaze as he

peered at her. She knew that her favorite writer lived in Maine, but he wasn't a motel manager, so she shook the thought aside as being ridiculous and smiled tightly.

"One room. Gee, why am I not surprised?"

"Pardon me, ma'am?"

"Nothing."

She noticed the motel manager's eyes suddenly twinkle as he peered over her shoulder. She didn't have to look behind her to sense the lover featured in the hot shower memory she'd just awakened from had entered the cramped lobby.

Gosh, she'd just about died when she'd woken to find McCullen looking at her while she'd slept. She certainly hoped she hadn't said anything while in sleep-fantasy mode to tip him off that she was dreaming about him.

Her body, already aroused from the naughty dream memories of the sexual encounters she'd had with Daniel, grew warmer as his distinctive masculine scent swarmed around her.

Shit. This was definitely not good, reacting so wickedly to him, not to mention dreaming about him too. She needed her own room, a hot shower and more of those memories so she could masturbate herself into some relief.

"It's the honeymoon suite." The manager dropped the words with a bit too much cheer for Jo's taste.

"Is there another motel nearby?" she asked quickly, ignoring the soft chuckle from McCullen.

The manager nodded. "Next motel's about fifteen miles up the road in the next town. But it's fully booked this weekend, ma'am. Everything is full around these parts. There's a lobster fishermen's conference going on over in Bangor and many of the towns are having harvest festivals. It seems to be drawing a larger crowd than usual this year as we're getting the overflow this far down."

"Lobster fishermen have conferences?" Daniel laughed.

"Sure do! They have 'em just like dentists and doctors. Did you want to take the room? Or do I give it to those folks who are just pulling in out there? It would be a shame to let such a lovely room go to some youngsters who won't appreciate it."

The manager nodded out the window and Jo followed his gaze to see several young laughing men spilling out of a car that was just shutting off its headlights at the far end of the parking lot.

"You take the room. I'll sleep in the car," McCullen said tenderly from behind her.

She frowned. Tonight was not a night she wanted McCullen sleeping in the car. She needed it to run an errand. An errand she didn't want Daniel to know about. That's the main reason she'd allowed herself to fall asleep earlier, so she could be well-rested. Although she felt anything but well-rested since awakening. She felt hot and horny and damn irritable.

The motel manager looked from Daniel to Jo then back to Daniel again. A knowing smile tilted his lips upward and Jo could tell the manager figured they'd had a lover's quarrel, but Jo was too tired to care.

She glanced at Daniel. He looked bone-tired. He had driven all day by himself and well into tonight with only a few short breaks. He would probably be asleep before his head hit the pillow. He definitely wouldn't be in the way tonight.

"We'll both take the room," Jo said reluctantly.

She heard Daniel's sigh of relief. Felt the relief sift through herself to finally be settled, if only for a few hours.

It took her a couple of minutes to take care of the paperwork, paying the man with one of her fake-named credit cards. This time she wasn't using the same one she'd used last night. She had no doubt that Martin would be flagging that name from here on out.

The manager handed her two electronic keys. "Thank you, Mrs. Snezinski. I also wanted to mention that we have a free continental breakfast available right here in the lobby. Fresh coffee, or tea if you prefer, lots of croissants and doughnuts. We start serving at 6 a.m. sharp. Help yourself to anything you wish in the machine in the room's bathroom too. An inspection will be made after you leave and your credit card charged for items you wish to take."

Bathroom? Machine? Items? Who cared what he was talking about? She just wanted McCullen asleep and out of her hair and that hot fantasy-laden shower.

"Your room is the last one at the end of the unit. Just turn right outside."

"Thank you," she said tightly, and brushed past McCullen without so much as looking at him. He was probably wearing a big smile on his face. Probably full of honeymoon jokes too, if she knew him. Cripes! Why the hell did these things happen to her?

Once they were outside the motel office, Daniel chuckled. "Mrs. Snezinski?"

Oh, here he goes.

"You have a better disguise?" she snapped.

"We could have humored him by at least pretending to be honeymooners."

"Don't push it, McCullen," Jo said sharply.

"Well, the least I can do is carry the bride over the threshold."

"Fuck off, McCullen," she said coolly, and ignored another round of chuckles. Then she suddenly remembered the toiletries and other supplies they'd purchased earlier.

"If you wouldn't mind getting our stuff out of the car, I'll grab the shower first." Hopefully when she got out of the shower, he'd be fast asleep and she could run her errand.

Daniel nodded and she handed him one of the electronic keys. As he headed to the car, Jo continued up the walkway. The sexual dreams she had were still so vivid in her mind that she could literally picture McCullen gorgeously naked taking her up against the bathroom wall over and over again. Once again she found herself hoping she hadn't done anything stupid to tip him off that she'd been dreaming about him in her sleep.

The last thing she wanted was for him to know she had the hots for him. Of course it was purely physical, but the hots, nonetheless. A good frantic session under cover of the shower water making noise would make her feel better. The cool sea aroma sifted against her warm body and she hurried to locate their room.

She found it with no problem. Inserting the electronic key, she slipped inside and switched on the lights. Her eyes widened with surprise and her breath caught in her throat at the beautiful room.

Dim lights in the shape of romantic candles flickered seductively from various points throughout the room. Elegant, snow-white lace curtains covered a back window. A huge king-sized bed, not surprisingly in the shape of a heart, dominated the middle of the cozy room.

On the bed lay the most exquisite homemade quilt she'd ever seen. A quilt designed totally with hearts. There were all sizes imaginable amidst splashes of bright-, pale- and dainty-contrasting colors of various textures of materials. The hearts were arranged in circles, giving the impression of giant daisies.

It looked so pretty and her eyes greedily roamed over the delicately stitched coverlet, examining the intricate design. She loved quilts. They were a passion of hers and she enjoyed buying them. Making them, unfortunately, was another matter. She wasn't any good at making such gorgeous feminine frills, but her sister was.

This quilt was by far the most precious one she'd ever seen. She committed the simple, elegant design to memory and vowed to ask her sister Sara to make her a quilt like this. But she'd wait until after Sara's wedding when Jo ditched Daniel McCullen.

Irritatingly enough, the idea of not seeing Daniel anymore didn't hold the appeal it once had. If anything, she felt saddened by the thought. After all, Daniel had saved her life. Twice.

In the hospital garage when Old Man Martin had opened fire on them, and then again by grabbing her hand and tugging her out of that motel room when she'd panicked after Martin's unexpected arrival.

McCullen was turning out to be not such a bad guy after all. Maybe he'd changed over the years. Mellowed out and matured. Maybe he wasn't the same aggressive nasty man he'd been in the past when he'd been Martin's personal criminal defense lawyer.

A low approving whistle from the open doorway captured Jo's attention.

"Romantic," Daniel whispered softly.

He dropped the shopping bags on the plush snow-white carpet, locked the door behind him and gazed in wide-eyed appreciation around the room.

Then his smoldering gaze settled on Jo and instantly visions of a naked McCullen taking her up against the wall made her heart pick up a wild pace.

"I'm going to take that shower," she said, and grabbed one of the bags McCullen had brought in. It contained the clothing she'd purchased for herself. Quickly, she made her way to the end of the unit and opened the bathroom door.

"Let me know when you need the dressing put on to your wound," he called before she closed the bathroom door. Her hand went to the lock and she discovered the thing was broken.

Shit! Why was the lock broken? Now? When she needed it working.

Okay, calm down. He didn't know it was broken. She'd be fine in here. Turning around, Jo jolted as she came face-to-face with herself in the mirrored walls.

Sweet Pete! Everything was mirrored, the four bathroom walls as well as the shower walls. The door was see-through glass.

And here was the “machine” the motel guy had mentioned. It hung conveniently on the wall just outside the shower stall.

Blowing out a tense breath, she deposited the bag on the floor and moved closer to inspect the piece of equipment. She’d spent a lot of nights in different motels when working on her cases. She’d seen a lot of things like condom machines, booze bars and personal breathalyzer machines, girl magazine vending machines and stuff like that in motel rooms. But this was certainly a unique experience.

It was a miniature vending machine, about a quarter the size of a soft drink machine. It was filled with cute little windows that displayed several shelves of sex toys wrapped in original packaging.

Oh. My. God!

This cannot be happening, she thought. If only McCullen wasn’t on the other side of this door. If only she’d gotten her own room. Oh man, she would have had a field day tonight.

Her frustration grew a notch when she noticed a couple of the miniature compartments were empty. Missing toys.

Great. Just great. McCullen would think she’d helped herself to some toys.

Huh. Maybe she should help herself. If he was going to think it, she might as well take advantage of this situation and take one. Right? It would be a neat payback for him kissing her and leaving her all hot and bothered down the street from the donut shop. He would wonder what toys were missing. Would imagine what toys she was using on herself.

She found herself smiling at the thought of payback and caught a glimpse in the mirror. She noticed her hair was a tumbled mess from sleeping on it and her cheeks were flushed. She always got flushed when she was horny. And soon she’d be taking care of her problem right inside the shower stall with a lovely little toy to help her along the way.

Reaching over, she turned on the tap and ran the water until it was nice and steamy. Keeping one eye on the door, she undressed. The unique angles of the mirrors allowed her to easily remove the bandage McCullen had placed on her shoulder last night and get a good look at the injury.

The wound looked red and ugly but felt surprisingly good. She’d experienced hardly any itching today and just flickers of pain when moving her arm. She’d need to give the wound a good wash under the spray of the shower and maybe even keep the bandage off tonight so the wound could breathe. Then she wouldn’t have to awaken McCullen when she finished. She had no doubt he’d be asleep when she got out. She would wait an hour or so until he was really into lullaby land and then she’d take the car to run her errand and be back by morning without him even knowing she was gone.

Ha! What McCullen didn’t know wouldn’t hurt him.

Easing up to the vending machine, Jo studied the toys in their clear packaging. There was a cute little yellow rubber ducky vibrator in there she wouldn’t mind trying out. Or she could try the vibe that looked like a computer mouse, or the vibrating eggs. In the end, she decided on a curvy pink glass dildo that looked almost as long and thick as

McCullen's cock. Yes this would be perfect, she thought as she slid open the little glass window and retrieved the treat. This pretty-in-pink dildo certainly would help to do the job.

Slowly ripping open the toy's wrapping, she cringed at the awful rattling noise the plastic made, and then she instantly relaxed. If McCullen heard it, he'd assume she was opening the packaging of the clothing she bought. She was in the clear.

This was good. He would be so out of her mind while she went about her masturbating. Well, actually he would be on her mind. He was the star attraction of tonight's shower scene. Holding in a laugh, Jo stepped into the hot shower with her glass dildo and closed the glass door.

Chapter Ten

The minute Daniel heard Brady turn on the shower, he headed for the phone. Now was a good opportunity to call Emily and inform her he was once again on his way but would be delayed for a bit.

On the other end it rang several times and he cursed softly as he came up against her answering machine yet again.

“Hi, Emily. It’s me. Just wanted to let you know I’m still on my way to your place. If you can return my call by say...nine in the morning, I’d appreciate it.”

He would have given Emily Brady’s cell number but he would need to ask Brady for it and she was in the shower, so he gave the name of the motel they were staying at as well as the phone number on the telephone. Then he hung up and slumped onto the bed.

Man, he was tired. But it was a good tired. And for the first time in a long time he felt happy despite all the crap he’d gone through in that transplant hospital.

His thoughts turned to Brady and he had to chuckle at the way she’d stiffened when the motel manager said the only room left was the honeymoon suite. He couldn’t have planned something better to tease her if he tried. And he did enjoy teasing her, if only to see her blush. Which she did so easily for a woman her age. He guessed she must be around thirty or somewhere around there. He wouldn’t ask her though. Past experience only led him into trouble when he asked a woman her age.

He gazed around the room. It looked quite nice. Fancy lace curtains. A nice quilt on the bed. Come to think of it, he’d never slept in a heart-shaped bed before. Sharing it with Brady would be a definite treat. He smiled as he remembered how cute she looked when she got pissed off at him mentioning carrying her over the threshold like his bride. If she hadn’t sent him back to the car, he probably would have done it too. Just to see the surprised look and embarrassed flush rip through her cheeks.

And of course, it would be an excuse to feel her luscious curves pressing against him. He would even have gone as far as to kiss her again. He truly wanted to feel her soft lips yielding beneath his.

Daniel sighed, remembering how easily she melted against him every time he kissed her and found himself staring at the bathroom door.

She was in there. In the shower. Naked. With only a locked door separating them.

He swallowed tightly. Felt his cock swell and watched as his growing erection tented his track pants.

She would be standing there with the spray of water beating down against her magnificent-looking breasts.

He’d surf into the room on a bead of water, sliding over her nipples. Then he would morph into himself and stand behind her. He’d ignore her gasp of surprise at finding him with her in the shower. He’d grab her by the waist. Feel his fingers dig into her soft flesh. Then he would instruct her to bend over.

He wouldn't even bother with foreplay. He'd just take her. Hard and fast. Impaling and thrusting his cock into her hot creamy pussy until she was bucking and gasping with arousal.

Or, he inhaled sharply, he could take her in the ass. Sink his shaft into that forbidden territory, her tight, sweet, cavern, and listen to her cries of pleasure-pain as he introduced her to the world of anal as he'd promised to do that night they'd been together. Had promised to bring her a butt-plug the next night, but he'd never shown.

He had no doubt her ass was still virgin territory. She didn't seem the type who would allow it. But he would show her, despite her initial objections. It had been a long time since he'd taken a woman in her ass. The last one being his wife Beth, who just happened to be Colby Martin's prized granddaughter.

Oddly enough, he found the usual heart pain that accompanied thoughts of Beth wasn't as sharp as before. He was pretty sure Beth would like Brady. The two of them were similar in some ways. They were both strong and independent. Sexy as hell. Both blushed easily.

But where Beth had been a petite, flirty blonde, going after what she wanted in the sex department, Brady was a tall, slender chestnut-haired woman with a snappy aura of command he ached to harness. If those kisses she gave were an indication, she'd be a fireball in bed. That is once she dropped the control she showed to people.

He wondered how hard he would need to push in order to get her to submit to him again in bed.

Since she seemed intent on sticking to him like glue, he would take this opportunity to explore the sexual attraction he felt for her.

Lying down on the bed, he snapped a pillow beneath his head. In the meantime he'd try to stay awake long enough to put that patch on Brady's bullet wound. Maybe he'd get another glimpse of her sexy breasts. Or steal another kiss.

He smiled and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Cupping her breasts, Jo inhaled softly as the hot water lashed against her sensitive nipples. With the chore of rinsing away all the soap from her highly aroused body and shampooing her hair, she could now focus on more important things.

Like reinventing that hot shower sexcapade she'd had with McCullen years ago. She'd start by pretending he was standing right here in the shower with her. If she imagined really hard, she could almost see his head there, lowering toward her breasts, the water splashing against his hair, flattening it to his scalp. Droplets of water cascading over his flushed face. His eyes dark with desire, his tongue darting erotically against her tight nipples. His hands cupping her breasts as she was doing now.

Jo moaned softly as she uncupped her breasts and plumped her nipples. The pinpricks of pain created by her fingers were soothed away by the gushing water. Keeping one hand busy with her nipples, she dropped the other hand and slowly massaged downward over her belly, her tightening abdomen, and into the triangle of dark curls between her thighs. Her fingers instantly found her tender clit, already wet from her earlier soaping and slick from her continued excitement.

She pressed between the folds, loving the way McCullen dropped to his knees in front of her, his head coming between her legs, his mouth melting over her pussy.

She gasped at the pleasure the memory created.

“Yes, eat me, McCullen,” she said softly. Massaging her clit faster, she pictured McCullen’s mouth melting over her pussy, his tongue plunging into her. His hot lips sucking, his hands holding her ass cheeks so she couldn’t move.

On a strangled sob, she quickly grabbed the pink glass dildo from the shelf she’d placed it on after soaping and cleaning it earlier. Positioning herself so the jets of water lashed her nipples, she imagined McCullen now standing up.

Blades of water dripped from his face, his eyes were lusty as he roughly grabbed her wrists and held them up over her head with one hand. His other hand slid between her thighs, his fingers stroking and circling her clit.

She was panting now. Her nipples felt raw with pleasure-pain from the spray lashing her. Her abdomen tightened as she aimed the glass dildo between her thighs. McCullen would be rough with her. Out of control with want as he drove his hard, swollen length into her.

On a moan, she slid the smooth dildo inside her pussy. Heat rushed through her as she continued to masturbate her clit and began a quick thrust with the dildo. McCullen would hold her steady, seize her arms while he fucked her. His cock impaling her, plunging frantically in and out until they were both groaning from the powerful arousal. Until the wonderful erotic sensations swept through her and left her heady.

At the memory of McCullen restraining her, being helplessly trapped between the wall and his hard body, his cock thrusting and plunging into her, she gasped as a strong orgasm tore into her. Pleasure arced and spiraled deep in her cunt. She continued to thrust fiercely and shuddered under the onslaught of the spasms.

All too soon the orgasm ebbed away, leaving Jo gulping at the steamy bathroom air and wishing she could collapse into bed and fall asleep. What a bummer that things couldn’t be different and she could have more hot sex-filled nights with McCullen.

But she couldn’t.

Heaving a sigh of regret, she washed her arousal away under the spray of the shower, withdrew the dildo, turned off the water tap and stepped out of the shower. Her legs felt weak and they trembled as she padded barefoot across the warm, moist tiled floor to grab a soft white towel off a nearby shelf.

That was some climax, she mused as she vigorously rubbed her wet hair with the towel and tried to ignore the satisfied throbbing of her vagina. The orgasm had been nice and strong enough to take the edge off. She’d have to make sure she packed the dildo before McCullen saw it. Thinking about him while masturbating had certainly sent her orgasm into a whole new level.

But that’s all it can be. Just memories, an inner voice cautioned. She needed to remember that McCullen had set a murderer free by discrediting her as an eyewitness. It didn’t matter what his motives were. His actions had hurt her deeply. Had made her distrustful of anyone in authority. One day she would tell him exactly how much pain he’d caused by his selfish actions. In the meantime, she had a job to do. Deliver McCullen to his brother’s wedding.

And speaking of the wedding, she needed to run that errand tonight. She'd been in here for a good while and he should be asleep by now. Just as she was thinking about him, she heard a strange little thump that at first didn't really register as she dipped into her bag and dragged out a cute little flannel pajama set she'd purchased today. It was perfect for the cold fall nights of Canada where they were heading but definitely not sexy enough to show McCullen. He'd think her some drab spinster or something. But she hadn't really expected to be stuck with him in the honeymoon suite.

She shook her head and caught herself. *Who cares what you wear to bed! The man is off limits! Remember that!*

She was just about to start cleaning the pink dildo when she heard that odd little thump again, but this time just a bit louder and it was definitely coming from their motel room. Her heart sunk. Was McCullen still awake?

Another thud echoed and she heard McCullen curse. A sliver of panic jammed into her.

Shit! Colby Martin? Had he found them again? After that close call today she'd made several phone calls to her contacts to put out feelers as to how Colby could have found them so quickly. No one had returned her calls yet. She'd even called her friend Smokey to thank her again, reassuring herself that McCullen's theory that Smokey could have tipped off Martin as to where they were staying last night was totally wrong. Her friend would never betray her like that. No way.

Nonetheless, Jo realized she should never have let her guard down. But since awakening from that scorching sex dream of McCullen taking her up against the shower wall, she hadn't given danger a second thought. She'd been too busy fantasizing about him!

Her gun! Where was her gun?

Her mind whirled as she quickly wrapped the towel around her and knotted it. She almost felt lightheaded. It was so hot and steamy in here, adrenaline screamed through her like a bullet.

Mentally she tried to remember where she'd put the weapon. McCullen had had it after the donut-shop encounter. When she'd secured the rental car, she'd retrieved the gun from him and put it in the glove compartment.

She'd been so tired and so busy dreaming about McCullen sexing her in the shower, she hadn't even thought about telling him to bring the gun into the motel room.

How could she be so damn stupid? He was probably fighting with Martin's henchmen on the other side of the door. She needed to find out how many of them she was up against. She knew self-defense, but there were only so many men she could take on at once.

With her breath slamming up against her chest, Jo switched off the light. Twisting the doorknob, she cracked open the bathroom door.

Her heart sunk.

McCullen was gone.

Rage, panic and guilt slammed into her all at once, leaving her so confused and her tummy knotting with sickness, she could barely think as she whipped open the bathroom door. She'd have to find the car keys! Where the hell had he put them?

God! Why was she making so many stupid mistakes? Since meeting him, she'd been making them left, right and center. She wasn't usually so preoccupied with sex that she couldn't remember to be careful.

"Brady? Where the hell are you going dressed like that?"

Jo stopped at the foot of the heart-shaped bed to find McCullen lying on his side.

"What are you doing down there on the floor?" she gasped. Had he fallen? Was he hurt?

"Trying to catch a mouse," he said simply.

Did he say a mouse?

"Oh my God!" she screamed.

She hated mice! Ever since being at a kid's camp when she was eleven and awoken to find a mouse scrambling over her face, she'd been uncontrollably terrified of them.

"Do something!" she shrieked, and jumped onto the bed. When she looked down at him, he blinked up at her with obvious surprise.

"I was trying to persuade it to head toward the door by throwing magazines and the telephone book at it, but it ran beneath the bed. I guess I'll have to take more drastic measures," he replied casually. He got into a seated position and started taking off one of his shoes.

Horried, Jo scrambled to the top of the bed, grabbed a pillow and whipped it at him. It hit him smack against the side of his face, emitting a loud surprised curse from him. He threw her a withering look.

"What the hell was that for?"

"Don't kill it!"

"I'm not," he said between gritted teeth.

She watched helplessly as he took off his sock, turned over onto his hands and knees and lifted the side of the quilt.

"Oh God!" Her mouth went dry. Her hands clutched over her heart at the idea that a mouse sat mere inches beneath her.

Jo scrambled onto the night table beside the bed. It teetered dangerously, making her grab on to a nearby wall light fixture to steady herself. She felt the towel around her slip ever so slightly and grabbed on to the loosening knot between her breasts to keep it from opening.

"Where is it?" she demanded.

Daniel answered with an amused look, crawled on his hands and knees around to her side then with sock and shoe in hand he promptly dived under the bed.

Oh my goodness, the man had nerve. She crouched in an effort to get a closer look. All she could see were Daniel's long legs sticking out from beneath the king-sized bed.

Suddenly he cursed.

“What’s happening?” She leaned closer to see, but the table moved again and she straightened.

“Little bugger tried to bite me!” came his shout from beneath the bed.

“It bites?” Jo screeched. “I can’t believe it!”

Horror shot through her. She didn’t know mice bit. Maybe it wasn’t even a mouse. Maybe it was a rat! A big one. A really big one. Her heart pounded furiously.

Suddenly Daniel became quiet and his legs stilled.

“Daniel?” she whispered.

No answer.

Her heart bashed painfully against her rib cage. Had the rat gone for Daniel’s throat? *Killed him?*

“Heavens, Daniel, answer me!”

Still no answer.

Suddenly his legs moved like crazy. She heard another curse followed by a low chuckle. He began to crawl out and she winced when she heard his head crack against the bedframe.

“Man-eating mouse,” he said with glee as he climbed out and held up his wiggling sock.

“You got it? You got it!” Jo danced on the shaky night table. “Wait ’til the manager hears about this one! I’m going to demand he give us another room. Or get an exterminator in here and see if there are others. Then I’ll make sure we get the room free. Oh God, I can’t believe he has rats in here.”

“Did I say rats?” McCullen looked stunned at her accusation.

“Whatever. Just bring it to the manager and demand the room free for tonight. I just cannot believe this.”

A sharp knock at the door stilled her.

McCullen cocked an eyebrow. “Wonder who that could be?”

“Careful, it could be Martin,” she breathed harshly, once again wondering where the car keys were. She needed to get that gun.

McCullen swung into action and strolled across the room. He peeked out the peephole then murmured something unintelligible under his breath before opening the door. The manager stood there.

Thank God! Just the person she wanted to see!

Daniel held out the creature trapped in the struggling sock as if to display his capture. The motel manager’s eyes widened when he spotted the wiggling sock and Jo cringed as the sock squeaked.

“Freed?” The motel manager choked out a strangled cry.

The sock squeaked in response.

What the hell did he mean by Freed?

“Freed! You found her!” the motel manager gasped with utmost excitement, and she swore she saw the man’s eyes tear up with relief and happiness behind the thick-

rimmed Coke-bottle glasses. Briskly he snatched the sock from Daniel, and to Jo's horror, the man reached inside.

"Be careful, the rat bites!" Jo called out.

The manager glanced at her in puzzlement and quickly returned his attention to Daniel's sock. He was cooing softly as he brought out the big tuft of struggling caramel-colored fur with wildly twitching white whiskers.

Jo felt her face flame as she recognized it wasn't a white rat as she'd envisioned.

"A hamster?" she said meekly.

"Whoops!" Daniel grimaced sheepishly.

"This is Freeda." The motel manager smiled as he patted the little creature lovingly on its head. "She stays with me when I clean the rooms."

Had she heard right? He took the hamster to clean the rooms with him? Okay, it was best not to ask why. Come to think of it, she didn't want to know why.

The manager lifted the fur ball into his palm and gave it a giant kiss on its dark brown nose. The hairball squealed with obvious delight. Jo couldn't help but watch helplessly as the manager's eyes now glowed with exquisite excitement.

"Thank you so much for finding her. I lost her this afternoon. Thought I'd sucked her up with my vacuum cleaner." The man shivered with obvious horror. "Checked through the bag but thankfully my Freeda wasn't there. My wife went into town tonight to play bingo so I had to take over the desk and couldn't keep looking for Freeda. I've been asking all the newcomers to keep an eye out for her, but I forgot to mention her to you."

He peered curiously at Jo and she felt herself shrivel with embarrassment.

"I'm so sorry if she was an inconvenience," the manager said gently.

"No problem. No problem at all," Daniel replied.

"Well, good night then," the manager waved to her.

"Good night," Jo called out, feeling quite thankful she'd freaked out over nothing.

"You had Poppy so worried, my baby," the manager cooed to the wriggling hairball, and turned away.

Daniel closed the door, shaking his head with dismay.

"If I act like that about a freaking hamster when I get his age, shoot me, will you?"

Suddenly, Jo couldn't help but laugh. McCullen looked so serious and distraught at the manager's behavior about the hamster. She laughed until the tears blurred her vision and her stomach hurt.

All the while Daniel stood at the foot of the bed, a sheepish smile on his sexy lips.

"You thought that was a mouse, McCullen? You need glasses," she finally managed to say.

"All I saw was a twitchy little nose peeking out from beneath the lace curtains over there by the front window. I assumed it was a mouse," he stated defiantly. He came to stand by the table below her and shook his head in apparent wonder as he looked up at her. He crossed his arms, showing off a bunch of muscles that strained nicely against his sweatshirt.

"And you, Brady. Tough. All business exterior. Afraid of a little-bitty hamster."

“Mouse, you said it was a mouse,” Jo corrected and she stifled another giggle.

“That mouse and its master took my sock. I don’t have a replacement,” he grumbled. He looked so unhappy as he looked down at his one bare foot that she couldn’t help but burst out laughing again.

Suddenly the night table teetered and she found herself sailing through the air right into Daniel McCullen’s strong, muscular arms.

The laughter died in her throat as their gazes clashed. She felt the catch in her breath as his pupils widened slowly, blocking out the deep blue of his eyes. Felt the fire curl through her as his strong chest pressed against her and his arms branded her ass where he held her.

“It’s your turn to say ‘kiss me’,” he breathed. There was something different about his look tonight. His eyes were clear, devoid of the fogged, drugged look. He was desperate and horny. Instinctively she knew he was ready for sex. She could feel the same feelings untangling inside her too.

He wanted to fuck her. She wanted him to fuck her. This was crazy. Insane.

“Put me down, McCullen,” she whispered, struggling to keep her thoughts away from dangerous territory. Even to her ears her demand didn’t ring true. She sounded breathy and horny.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you’ve been up to in that bathroom, Brady,” he murmured tightly. His eyes flashed heavily with lust.

She felt her cheeks flush with extreme heat. How could he know? Had he heard her moans above the noise of the water?

“The brochure over there on the table. It mentions a unique little contraption in that bathroom.”

Oh God, he knew about the machine full of toys. She swallowed tightly, wishing she were anywhere but here right now.

“Just reading that brochure and picturing you using one of those toys turned me on so hot, I could take you right here up against the wall, Brady.”

Jesus!

He smiled knowingly. “Ah, so that’s what you want, eh, Brady? Up against the wall again? Hard and fast? Or slow and sexy? Will you make those hot little noises like you made when I fucked you all those years ago? The same ones you made when you were sleeping in the car?”

Oh my God! She’d done something while she slept? His words curled around her like a seductive blanket and she could feel her breath slamming really hard down into her lungs. Yes, she wanted him like this. Wanted him commanding and hot for her.

“It must have been some brochure,” she teased uneasily.

“So? What did you use?”

“None of your business, McCullen,” she replied. Her voice sounded breathless. A dead giveaway that she’d been up to something in the bathroom.

“Maybe I’ll go have me a look. See what your preferences are?”

Oh God.

She found herself struggling in his powerful arms but he didn't give an inch as he easily carried her into the bathroom. He saw the toy on the counter and his eyes went so dark with lust she couldn't believe how hot she felt.

"It seems to be as big as my cock," he whispered in a strangled voice, and set her down on her feet. Her knees felt so wobbly she almost melted onto the toilet seat. Instead, she tried to grab the dildo, but he got to it first.

Hoisting it into his palm, he turned on the taps and ran the water, soaping the smooth toy until it was nice and sudsy.

"You're overdressed for what I have in mind for you, Brady," he said without looking up.

Jo blinked, not quite believing what he'd just said.

"Drop the towel."

The hot command had her hand going to the knot in her towel and her heart pumping with such power she could literally feel her blood zoom through her veins.

"I need to get dressed, McCullen, and you need to get out of here," she managed to say.

God, just watching him rinse off the dildo was making her so aroused she could barely speak.

"You need to be fucked, Brady. I can see it in your eyes."

And he needed to be fucked, she thought as she felt the heat of his body driving against her skin. Saw the lust shining in his penetrating gaze.

He placed the dildo on a towel she'd placed earlier on the counter and disappointment shot through her as she wondered if he'd only been teasing her.

She realized her emotions were out of control. She was seesawing, unsure of what to do.

She noticed his breathing was harsh and ragged as he stepped closer to her. Her heart thundered as he reached out and delicately lifted her hand off the knot that was keeping the towel on her. Her hand fell away and his replaced it.

"Unless you don't want me to fuck you?" he whispered.

His question made her thoughts spiral even more. Made the sensations of arousal race through her at a quick silver speed she swore she'd never experienced before.

Yes, she wanted him to fuck her. Why else had she been dreaming about him? Fantasizing and masturbating in the shower with him on her mind? They had unfinished business from that night together. They needed closure.

Oh hell, who was she kidding? She wanted him to fuck her. Just like that night. And suddenly she realized she would just let pure instinct take over.

He must have seen her answer in her gaze for his head lowered and his mouth melted like a searing brand over her lips. Hot and demanding he kissed her with such greed, she felt heady. The towel dropped and warm, damp air splashed against her nude skin.

The kiss was intoxicating and a moment later they both came up for air.

He swept the dildo off the towel and faced her. His eyes glowed with arousal and she found herself whimpering as his gaze swept over her nakedness.

“You’re beautiful, Brady. You’ve always been so beautiful.”

He kissed her again. Taking her mouth with such possession her body shivered at the raw hunger screaming through her. There was a desperation as he kissed her. Pure domination in the thrust of his tongue as he slipped between her lips and prodded against her teeth. His body came against hers. His chest flattening her breasts, his swollen erection pushing against the restraint of his jeans and against her lower abdomen.

Moisture erupted between her thighs, dampening her pussy.

Oh boy, she liked the feel of his bulge. She began gyrating her hips, moving her pussy against the rough texture of his jeans. She could already feel the sharp sensations of a climax tightening her body and couldn’t stop herself from crying out in protest when he moved his lower half away.

“Easy, Brady,” he soothed, and she found herself being pushed up against the closed door of the bathroom.

God, she didn’t even realize he’d closed it.

One of his hands settled on the curve of her hip and when she felt the smooth head of the glass dildo begin a wondrous massage against her clit, she widened her legs.

Butterfly kisses drifted over her neck and he made his way down to her left breast, quickly taking a nipple into his mouth. She moaned at the erotic sensations and her knees almost buckled just as they had all those years ago that first time he’d taken her up against her motel door.

And he was doing it again. Here. Tonight.

She could feel the need uncoil inside her as he took her other nipple. The gentle massage of the dildo against her clit had her grabbing his shoulders, holding on tight. She moved her hips, gyrating and loving the warmth of his mouth upon her breast.

“That’s it, Brady. Move for me,” he breathed against her nipple, and then took her again. His mouth sucking and his tongue lashing her there.

Through a sexual haze she looked down and watched as his eyes fluttered closed and his mouth moved in a sensual rhythm. She noticed her other nipple was red and tight and ached so sweetly that she had to drop her hand from his shoulder and touch herself there.

Sensations burst through her like a rocket and she moaned.

She heard Daniel curse softly, saw his eyes flicker open. His mouth left her nipple and suddenly she heard the crackle of his jeans zipper lowering.

“Protection,” he moaned.

She watched as he moved away from her, moaned at the loss of his body heat, the disappearance of the dildo against her clit. Her hand dipped between her thighs and she began a frantic massage there. Her body tightened as she heard the zip of foil ripping.

She could feel the climax mounting its attack. Wanted him inside her when it happened.

“Hurry,” she gasped, her eyes closing as she neared orgasm.

“I am!” She heard the desperation slash through his voice and felt his body come against hers. Hard and fast. His swollen cock head stretched into her vagina and she cried out as she came.

She couldn't believe how fast.

He'd barely entered and she was coming. The climax was sharp and beautiful, bursting through her like a firestorm as he thrust his entire length into her. She arched against him, her body trembling as she bucked and accepted his thick girth.

God, he went so deep inside of her, hitting the sensitive areas that needed release. She heard herself crying out as she came again. And then he captured her cries in his mouth as he took her lips.

His tongue slipped into her cavern and he began thrusting into her with the same exotic rhythm as his cock was doing to her pussy.

An animalistic growl shot through the air and he plunged faster and harder. She didn't know how long he fucked her, but it felt fantastic. He made her come over and over.

Made her spiral into a world of escape that seemed to last longer and longer every time she entered it. By the time he was finished fucking her up against the bathroom door, she felt flushed, satiated and exhausted.

God, she felt so good. Better than she'd felt in a long time.

As he picked her up, she burrowed her head into the crook of his neck and enjoyed the strength of his powerful arms as he carried her. She barely felt the sheets against her back as he laid her down. Barely felt the warm blankets cover her before she fell asleep.

Chapter Eleven

As a social worker, Jo had been working with Johnnie Garrett on a one-to-one basis for almost a year. She'd grown attached to the teenager, taking a personal interest in him. She took him to baseball games, the movies, the zoo and other things a fifteen-year-old teenage boy would like to do with an adult. Today she'd actually played hooky from work and taken him to the ocean for a picnic.

The Maine coastline shimmered in the heat of the August day. The smell of decaying seaweed and dead fish hung heavy in the air but they'd gone swimming in the cool blue ocean anyway. After their swim, Johnnie had attacked the nearby blueberry bushes while Jo laid out the wrapped sandwiches and drinks on the giant picnic quilt she'd brought along for the occasion.

Sitting amidst the tall, swaying grass on a gently rolling hillside, she watched the blond teenager, her heart bursting with pride. She'd managed to talk him into going to summer school and he'd passed his tests with flying colors so far. She couldn't believe the change in him from the angry, drug-addicted kid he'd been in the beginning to a relatively confident young man who admitted he wanted to become a doctor.

His face was turned into the warm breeze and he gazed with wide-eyed wonder as a dozen or so screaming white seagulls flew past, hugging the waterline, some dipping into the sparkling waters coming up with flailing silver fish in their beaks while other seagulls simply screamed with delight, their stomachs already full.

Speaking of stomachs, she was famished.

"Johnnie! Lunch is ready!"

His head turned toward her and waved his hand in acknowledgement. Then he grabbed the bucket of blueberries he'd been collecting and ran up the hill to join her.

He smiled with appreciation when he spotted the goodies she'd laid out and in a split second he was wolfing down the food.

They chatted about everything. How to bake blueberry pies, how to make blueberry jam, why do birds eat fish and wouldn't it be great if he could fly like the birds and visit faraway places, and when could they go see the next ball game? All the while he devoured the scrumptious arrangement of fried chicken, egg salad sandwiches and fresh fruit, including his favorite, watermelon.

It was when he was working on his second big slice of juicy watermelon that his demeanor changed abruptly from one of carefree happiness to one of a very serious young man.

"Violet, I want to give you a present that I made."

"A present? For me?" She felt touched that he would get something for her. This was another good sign that he was learning to trust.

His eyes lit up and he nodded eagerly. Leaning over, he withdrew something from the black knapsack that held his clothes and beach towel. Jo's mouth dropped open in

stunned admiration when he placed the braided bracelet into her hand. A bracelet made from his long blond hair.

“Johnnie, it’s beautiful,” she whispered, and her heart filled with warmth at the gesture.

“I made it myself,” he said proudly. “It took me a while because I didn’t want you to know I was having my hair cut, so I told them to cut off just a little every time I went.” He lifted the silky item and slipped it on her wrist. It fit perfectly. Tears of happiness stung Jo’s eyes and she didn’t know what to say.

“I need to tell you something important too,” he said softly.

She smiled and reached up to gently wipe away the watermelon juice dribbling down his chin.

“Sure, Johnnie, you know you can tell me anything.”

He blessed her with a huge, sweet smile.

“Don’t let this go to your head now.” He grinned self-consciously.

“What’s up?”

She didn’t want to appear too eager for fear she might embarrass him, so she took a big bite out of the golden apple she’d been saving for her dessert.

“I love you like a mom. Like I wish my mom would be. I love you as big as the sky, from here to the moon and beyond.”

His words were the sweetest she’d ever heard in her life and before she knew it, he was giving her a bear hug. Jo suddenly realized there was nothing more important in the world to her than helping out another human being. All her hard work with Johnnie and taking a rare day off to celebrate with him was certainly worth it.

After the picnic, she’d returned him to his foster home and gone back to her place. She’d pattered around in the garden for hours, admiring the bracelet he’d made from his hair. She knew how important his long hair was to him. It was a trademark in the gang he ran with. It must have been difficult to cut in order to make it and give to her. Funny thing was, she had noticed his very discreet haircuts but hadn’t mentioned it for fear he would get embarrassed, which he did so easily.

Later, when she’d come inside and checked her answering machine, she heard the shattering news. Johnnie would be returned to his mother. She’d been out of drug rehab for a while now and working steadily. They would return him tonight at seven. She looked at her watch. It was already ten-thirty.

She was devastated. They had gone against her recommendations for giving his mother a few more months to prove she could stay off drugs and hooking as well as allowing Johnnie more visits so he could readjust to his mother. He still had a lot of anger to deal with where his mother was concerned. She’d forced him into selling his body to pay for her drug habit. Thankfully there was a silver lining in this disastrous news. Jo could check on them any time without permission.

And she would do just that. Tonight...

She’d been to the run-down house on several occasions to supervise the mother and Johnnie, so she had no trouble finding the place in the darkness. It was the last house on a dead-end street in a very poor part of town. The surroundings were very private with

huge hanging willow trees lined the road as well as in front of the homes. This particular house was virtually unseen by neighbors in other nearby homes. It was a perfect place for someone who was interested in illegal activities such as buying and selling drugs or prostitution, as Johnnie's mother had been involved in.

A nearby church steeple clanged out eleven bells as she parked her car against the curb and got out. She would have used the driveway, but she knew there were too many huge potholes and she didn't want to wreck her car. Having springs, shock absorbers and tires repaired, as what had happened in the past when she'd used the driveway, was expensive on her salary as a social worker.

It was dark as she picked her way up the neglected driveway, walked along the cracked patio stones toward the front porch of the tiny bungalow.

She'd just placed her foot onto the first creaking wooden step when she turned around at the distinct sound of a door closing somewhere nearby. Jo froze at the unmistakable crunch of gravel under quickly paced feet.

A dog began barking somewhere in a nearby yard and the footsteps quickened. She watched silently from the first step as a slightly stooped-over man erupted from the side of the bungalow along the driveway. He carried what appeared to be a picnic cooler.

His squinty eyes searched his surroundings, making sure no one was watching him. A sliver of unease crawled along Jo's spine when he cast a glimpse her way. She doubted he could see her in the shadows. But she caught a good glimpse of him and got the distinct feeling she'd seen him before, yet she just couldn't seem to place him.

Thin strands of gray-white hair escaped the black knit ski cap he wore. A wrinkled face, a long gangly nose and a thin twisted mouth, gave Jo the impression she wouldn't want to be caught alone in a dark alley with this old fellow.

The next thing she noticed was his unusual attire. He was dressed entirely in black, including black gloves. Jo tried to squash the spear of fear creeping along the back of her neck. Why would he be wearing a ski hat in the middle of a hot summer evening? And was he looking around with such suspicion? He was acting as if he hoped he wouldn't be seen by anyone.

With lightning speed he jumped into a dark Chevrolet parked at the curb near her car. Before she could even think to get the license plate number, he'd disappeared into the night.

With a sense of urgency, Jo climbed the rickety steps onto the porch and knocked loudly on the aluminum door storm door. If Johnnie's mother was in the process of entertaining male guests, Jo would make it a point to find out who he was and if the man had any arrest warrants or prior convictions. The teenager should not be in this house with creeps such as the one she'd just seen lurking around here and she would have Johnnie removed immediately if the man had a record.

"Miss Garrett?" she called out.

The silence was deafening.

She waited a few anxious seconds before opening the screen door. She tried the other door. It was unlocked. Opening it a crack, she wrinkled her nose at the smell of stale cigarette smoke fanning out from inside and yelled into the silence. Still no answer.

Fear crept up a notch. She pushed at the door and stepped inside. It was dark and she couldn't find the light switch, but she did remember the layout of the bungalow from her previous visits so she was able to maneuver past an old couch.

Walking farther into the house, she stopped in the beginning of the hallway, which led to the bedrooms. From here she spied a faint light coming from one of the rooms. She remembered it as belonging to Johnnie.

"Miss Garrett? Johnnie? Hello," she called.

Her words echoed eerily in the stifling heat of the evening and she listened intently for an answer or some kind of sound. A clock ticked loudly from somewhere and the summer crickets chirped cheerfully through a slightly open window. Other than that, there was no other sound.

Why weren't they answering? The hairs on the back of her neck prickled at the unusual quiet and she proceeded down the dark hallway toward the dimly lit bedroom.

Tomorrow morning first thing, she'd go to her supervisor and get Johnnie out of here. All her instincts screamed that she should have come earlier but she hadn't known Johnnie would be returned. She should have checked the machine sooner.

If she had then maybe she could have prevented this absurd decision to return Johnnie to his mother. She'd written up the report only yesterday, stating he'd passed summer school and had made realistic goals for himself. He'd been opening up. Expressing his feelings. Learning to trust people again. The major breakthrough had occurred only this afternoon when he'd hugged her and told her he wished his mother was like her and giving her the bracelet, which she now gazed at on her wrist.

She knew she was being naïve when she thought she could keep him out of this house. She knew she shouldn't have gotten so involved with helping him. But he'd just tugged at her heartstrings so much and she'd grown so protective of him that she didn't want him around a mother who Jo realized instinctively would return to her drugs and prostitution at the first sign of financial troubles. She'd done it a couple of times in the past. It was a pattern. Why couldn't social services see that and leave him in foster care?

Cautiously, she peeked into the dimly lit bedroom. She grinned when she spotted his almost full blueberry bucket on the night table. Her smile dropped and her heart stopped when she spotted Johnnie lying unnaturally still on his narrow bed. A thin blanket lay draped over his body, tucked in beneath his armpits. He wasn't wearing a shirt. Both arms were stretched out at the sides in ninety-degree angles.

She shivered violently at how pale his arms looked. Had he gone back to drugs? She tossed the idea aside. Now that he knew what he wanted she had no doubt he would pursue his dreams.

"Johnnie?"

She stood in the doorway for what seemed an eternity and tried to clamp down on the icy terror squeezing her lungs and fought to stifle the horrible sick feeling clawing at her gut. Most of all she attempted to ignore the other presence in the room. The presence of stillness, of finality.

Shaking with despair, she stumbled toward the bed. Toward the figure of a teenage boy who lay too still.

Everything will be all right. Everything will be all right. The words resounded in her mind like a slow death chant. She sat down on the bed beside him and reached out her horribly trembling fingers to touch his wrist and feel for a pulse. She couldn't find one. She stifled the scream threatening to choke her.

"Johnnie?" she whispered hoarsely. "Can you hear me?"

In the dim glow of the moonlight shining through the window she suddenly noticed the blood and wondered why she hadn't noticed it before, why she hadn't smelled it. The blood was everywhere. Streaked along the side of his face. In his beautiful long blond hair, on his neck, on the blanket.

"Oh Lord! No! Please! No!" she finally cried out as the shock of what had happened here began to uncurl through her.

Everything will be all right!

His face was turned away from her, toward the open window, toward the thin fingernail sliver of a moon peeking out from beneath a break in the giant rolling black storm clouds. Sheet lightning flickered there.

I love you. As big as the sky. From here to the moon. And beyond, he'd said today.

Everything will be all right.

As if she were suddenly moving in slow motion, she reached out and touched Johnnie's cool chin. His bloody head rolled sideways like a rag doll and his empty eye sockets stared through her. Stared into the next world.

Jo woke with a start and stared into the darkness, anxiety slamming into her. Cold perspiration coated her skin and her breathing sounded rough and ragged in the quiet motel room.

Shit! Another nightmare.

God, were these nightmares ever going to go away?

Beside her she could hear McCullen's deep steady breath of sleep. She blew out a tense breath and slowly climbed out of bed. She needed to get out of here before she got sick.

* * * * *

She'd left McCullen in a deep sleep. Writing a note saying she'd gone in search of coffee and donuts up the highway instead of waiting for morning. She'd found the car keys lying on the night table on his side of the bed. Taking them, she'd snuck out of the motel room and driven off.

While she drove, warm, cool salty air blasted against her hot face as it flowed through the open car window. She could still smell their arousal from the sex they'd had. Could feel the erotic soreness in her pussy at having sex with a well-hung man. But she ignored the discomfort and concentrated on the freshness and familiarity of the ocean night air, which did little to diminish the remnants of anxiety left behind from the nightmare. She realized her anger against him had returned with a vengeance. McCullen was a fucking criminal himself for defending Martin in a court of law. He'd known the son of a bitch was guilty as sin but had gotten him off just so he could pursue his own selfish agenda. She felt the hatred burning through her nice and strong. Needed to keep it

there so she wouldn't think how wonderful it had felt to be in his arms. How fantastic she felt when he was thrusting into her or how beautiful her orgasms were with him.

She was so busy entertaining her hatred she almost missed her cutoff. Relief swept over her as she turned into the spruce-tree-lined circular driveway and spotted the familiar Cape Cod-style house perched on the gray rocky cliffs near Maine's Pemaquid Point. This was her parents' house. They were out of town, away on a yearlong cruise, totally unaware that their eldest daughter Sara was about to get married to a man who was in hiding and that Jo had gone to rescue Sara's fiancé's brother, a man she'd hated all these years. A man she'd hated until she'd discovered the truth about him.

She and Sara and their brother Jessie kept her parents in the dark about anything that would ruin their peaceful retirement, feeding them only happy tidbits from their lives.

They told her parents that Sara had met a nice, decent fellow and Jo was too busy with her work to bother with men. If she told them the truth about the wedding, they would return home immediately. Being the supporting parents, they would want to be involved with the plans of a wedding that could never be public and they would try to soothe Jo's woes over McCullen by encouraging forgiveness, especially after learning the truth about why he'd done to her what he had to discredit her as a witness to Johnnie's murder all those years ago.

Thankfully being among familiar surroundings made her relax and allowed her to think more clearly. Heaven only knew she needed to get her bearings back before she returned to the motel to hook up with him again.

* * * * *

He waited until the lights went on inside the two-story Cape-style house before walking up the spruce-lined driveway. At the front door he spotted the security keypad and let out a low frustrated sigh. Of all the rotten luck.

Hesitating a moment, he then reached and turned the doorknob. It opened. He shook his head in disappointment when the security alarm didn't go off. Obviously she'd forgotten to reactivate the password.

Big mistake.

He stole inside.

His gaze raked over the elegant setting. Cathedral ceilings upheld by limestone pillars and rough-hewn dark wood beams gave the house a breezy, western kind of beauty. From his vantage in the front foyer, he sampled the living room with its shiny oak-planked floors, the modern gas fireplace set in one of the knotty pine walls and the cozy-looking beige couches overflowing with a galore of high-energy-colored cushions. They were a citrus-inspired palette of pale yellow, lime green and a soft splash of watermelon to add an old-fashioned charm to the room.

The living room emitted such a cozy feel, he found himself relaxing and enjoying the view of the kitchen with its variety of spacious, unpainted knotty pine wall cabinets, solid beige marble countertops, and shelving that presented antique navy blue and white English dinnerware.

In the far corner, he spotted a comfortable-looking breakfast nook, complemented by contrasting yellow-padded pine benches and an oak table. Instead of walls, there were

windows, decorated by cool green ruffled curtains with thick, buttery yellow vertical stripes. The orange sun was starting to tinge the ocean's horizon. It made for a very nice view. Very nice indeed.

He could hear her moving around upstairs. He'd give her another minute before heading up. In the meantime, he'd nose around down here.

He'd start with the nearest door. Quietly, he opened it and flicked on the light switch. Another comfortable room. It looked like some sort of hobby room or office.

Stepping inside, he allowed the walls of vivid blue to surround him. Instead of airy and cheerful, this room conveyed a professional, no-nonsense atmosphere. A dark slate blue-and-white-plaid couch stretched full length along one wall. No fancy-colored cushions in here. Just plain white or blue prints to match the sofa.

A bay window with a sitting bench under it hogged most of the west wall and a knotty pine bookcase filled with books and knickknacks and a very scuffed-up cherry wood table was being used as the desk, which was overflowing with a fax machine, computer, phone and several file folders. He spotted the dark blue filing cabinet in the corner and headed toward it. After a few minutes of intense searching, he came up with information that this was her parents' house and this room was her private investigator's office.

It was time to go upstairs.

* * * * *

Jo gave out a small cry of glee when she found what she'd been searching for hidden way back in the walk-in closet. Now that she discovered what she wanted, her mind automatically returned to Daniel and last night.

A weird elevator kind of feeling punched her gut that she'd almost let herself sleep with the guy. Almost destroyed her values just so she could pursue a few minutes of physical lust with a man who had no idea how much he'd changed her life.

On a groan of frustration, she grabbed the heavy cardboard box and backed out of the closet. Now all she had to do was keep this box hidden from Daniel McCullen. If he saw the contents, it would only encourage his curiosity to fly out of whack. The last thing she needed was questions she didn't want to answer just yet.

As she turned around, she spied someone standing in the doorway. Instincts kicked in instantly. Dropping the box, she crouched, palmed her gun, released the safety catch and aimed, quite ready to shoot the unexpected intruder. Who she saw made her eyes widen with surprise. Why in the world hadn't she heard him come in? And then she remembered that in her haste to get in and retrieve the box then get out again, she'd forgotten to reset the alarm and lock the door behind her.

Shit! This just reinforced how dangerous it was for her to think about McCullen and have him around her.

"What's in the box?" McCullen asked as he leaned casually against the doorjamb of her parents' bedroom, his muscular arms rippling dangerously beneath his tight sweatshirt as he folded his arms across his strong chest. Amusement washed away the brief flicker of impressed surprise that flooded his features when she aimed at him.

Irritated at almost blowing his head off, feeling her body flush as she remembered she'd just finished having hot sex with the guy in the motel room, she gave in to the rush of relief at seeing him. The relief was quickly replaced by anger as she made sure the safety catch was on before she slammed her pistol against the small of her back and into her pants. Picking up the giant box, she headed toward the door and Daniel.

"Do you have a death wish, McCullen?" she snapped as she neared him.

"I've got a wish, but it has nothing to do with lying still."

Jo didn't miss the searing desire flash in his eyes and felt her face blush with excitement at the meaning of his words. Dear Lord, with all the men she'd encountered in her job, why did her body have to have the hots for this one? The one man who fucked her so completely every time that she couldn't think sex with him could get any better.

"You've got nerve following me." She kept her voice deliberately low and emotionally detached. "How did you find me anyway?"

"Taxi. It was just dropping off the manager's wife after her night of bingo playing when you pulled out. I'd just woken up and saw your note. When I looked out the window the taxi was pulling in and you were getting into the car. Thought I'd catch up to you and grab a cup of coffee with you."

"You sure followed me a long way just for a cup of coffee, McCullen." She didn't believe a word he said.

He shrugged. "How was I supposed to know you were coming to your parents' house?"

"And you know this is their place, how?"

"Saw the name on the mailbox out on the road. Noticed some bills lying on the table in your office."

"Obviously you've been snooping."

"Obviously. How about showing me your bedroom? We can pick up where we left off back at the motel." He winked.

"How about I show you the door? You're wearing out your welcome very fast, McCullen."

He chuckled. "And you seem very nervous having a man in your parents' house. I suppose you don't invite one over very often, do you? Where are your parents by the way? I'd love to meet them."

"You weren't invited and they aren't here." Obviously her saying no to him last night had done nothing to deter him from coming on to her.

"Oh, and by the way, the taxi guy is down at the end of the driveway waiting for some money. The meter is still running."

"If that isn't a hint, I don't know what is. I'll take care of it. Now get out of my way."

To her irritation, he remained rooted to his spot at the bedroom door and Jo didn't dare get any closer. She had the feeling he might grab her and kiss her and fuck her right here in her parents' bedroom. She didn't trust him, but most of all she didn't trust herself.

His eyes narrowed suspiciously as he eyed the box in her hand.

“What are you up to now?”

“None of your business. Now move.”

He didn’t budge. Instead, his appreciative gaze wandered around the bedroom.

“If I were to venture a guess, this would be your parents’ room. It’s, shall we say, old-fashioned. Make no mistake, old-fashioned is very admirable. But—” He waved at the antique dark-walnut-stained furniture, the colorful knitted granny square quilt on the king-size bed and the bright orange-and-chocolate brown-quilted plaid curtains. “You strike me as being a bit more modern and adventurous.”

Jo cocked a curious eyebrow at him as he continued.

“You seem more along the lines of delicate lace, dainty heart quilts and...masturbating with sex toys that are probably stuffed in big boxes in your closet so your parents don’t see them.”

Her cheeks suddenly flamed hot. Had he found her bedroom? And the box of toys she kept hidden in her closet? No, he couldn’t have been here that long. He’d been here only as long as she’d been here and that was ten minutes, tops.

Before she had a chance to respond, he reached out and grabbed the box from her arms. In a split second he had the lid off and his twinkling eyes opened wide in surprise then quickly rose to study her face.

“A wedding dress?” he said with obvious puzzlement.

Approval shone in his eyes as he delicately brushed his fingers over the smooth, white velvet and frilly lace of the dress. In one split second something flashed in his eyes. It passed so quickly, Jo couldn’t put a name to it. Whatever it was, it made McCullen set his jaw tight and eye her with suspicion.

“You getting married?”

“Looks like it,” Jo said easily, suddenly not wanting to tell him her sister wanted to wear it when she married his brother. Besides, he didn’t deserve the truth just yet. Maybe if he thought she was getting married it would rein him in.

“Are you sure the dress isn’t for your sister?” he grinned.

Damn him!

“Can I have the box back, please? I think it’s time we get back to the motel and pick up our things.”

“White lace,” McCullen mumbled with a frown as he touched the dress.

“Not too old-fashioned for you, is it, McCullen? It’s my mother’s wedding dress and now she’s passing it on.”

His fingers dropped the fine fabric and he quickly replaced the lid. He didn’t look at her when he said, “Next time someone sneaks up on you, Brady, don’t hesitate to shoot. Next time it might not be me.”

“I’ll make it a point to remember that.”

He handed the box back to her and pushed himself away from the doorway. As he headed down the hallway, he called over his shoulder in a rather irritated tone, “I’ll wait outside.”

Jo grinned. He'd bitten the bait and now he thought she was getting married. That would teach him for following her and snooping around her parents' home.

Hmm, it was actually fun teasing McCullen. She should do it more often.

* * * * *

Daniel welcomed the slap of cool, salty ocean air as he let himself out of Jocelyn's parents' house and hurried on rather shaky legs around to the back toward the sound of the pounding ocean surf. He found some rickety wood steps and followed them.

In a moment he stood on the beach. The roar of crashing waves against the sand drowned his curses. He picked up a fist-sized rock and hurled it with all his might into the dark waters.

Jo was getting married? Bullshit. It had to do with her sister's wedding and she was just teasing him. Maybe she was scared of the feelings between them. Afraid of the wild sexual tension they shared and hoped he would back off? Or maybe she was telling the truth and she was getting married?

He shoved a frustrated hand through his hair and stared at the splash of sunshine coming up over the ocean horizon. Another day dawning. Another day closer to her wedding.

If she was telling the truth, then she would be more upset than she was tonight.

Fuck! What if some lucky son of a bitch had caught her? Hell, if she had some other guy then he'd have a hell of a fight on his hands because Daniel would fight for her. Especially at what had happened between them tonight. He knew they would share a hell of a good sexual relationship.

But if she was getting married then why wasn't she wearing an engagement ring? He'd checked her fingers the day they'd switched cars. She didn't wear any jewelry. But that didn't mean she didn't have it tucked away in some jewelry box somewhere and would put it on at some point.

Suddenly he wished he could punch the guy who'd caught her right in the nose. He was some creep who'd caught her before he even had a chance in romancing her, loving her, marrying her.

The last thought struck him dumb.

Marry Jo? He shook his head in denial. Those drugs Colby Martin had siphoned into him were making him think crazy thoughts again. Or were they so crazy?

She was an enticing woman. He'd no doubt she would be a perfect mother for his kids.

Kids! Babies.

The thought zeroed into him like a nuclear missile. He licked his suddenly dry lips and rubbed a suddenly shaking hand over the bristly stubble on his face.

Babies. He was starting to think about babies again. The thought actually surprised him and made him smile.

If she was telling the truth about her wedding maybe he still had a chance with Brady? He could romance her away from the groom-to-be. He could show her he was a

hell of a better lover than the other guy. That he could be good husband and father material.

He could do it.

Daniel frowned. But not with Colby Martin wanting him dead. As long as that old man was in the picture, Jo's life would be in danger. And that's the last thing he wanted for her.

Chapter Twelve

“What’s got you so pissed off, McCullen?” Jocelyn finally asked Daniel. He’d been quiet ever since she told him she was getting married. A couple of times the silence had almost prompted her to tell him the truth, that she’d only been teasing him, but she’d backed down at the last second, opting to let him stew about it.

It was now sailing into late afternoon and about an hour ago they’d crossed the US-Canada border from New York into the province of Ontario, and he’d barely said ten words all day.

“I think we should part company. It’s too dangerous for you to be with me.”

His words slammed into her gut like a sledgehammer. She didn’t know why she should react so violently. She’d been expecting something like this. She meant nothing to him and he meant nothing to her except for a wicked physical attraction she would be pursuing if he were anyone else but him.

“Don’t you want to go to your brother’s wedding? What about giving Emily the medallion?”

He was silent for a few moments as he pondered what she’d said.

“All right, I’ll tag along with you. Once we meet up with my brother then we’ll say our goodbyes, okay?”

“Sure, whatever you want, McCullen.”

“That’s what I want, Brady,” he replied firmly, and fell silent again. Obviously the topic of conversation was closed.

His words stung. He couldn’t make it any clearer that he wanted nothing more to do with her, and she found it quite maddening that she actually felt hurt.

* * * * *

The seagulls were calling out to Steve McCullen again. They were taunting him, daring him to climb the prison exercise yard wall and run for freedom. He tried to ignore the birds, but it was hard. All he needed to do was get over this wall, past the spiral fence full of barbs and he was free. He could follow the seagulls and they would lead him to the ocean. He would jump into the water and catch a ride on a boat.

Steve shook away the crazy thoughts and blinked the salty sweat out of his eyes. Man, he was losing it. It wouldn’t be so easy to escape and literally catch a boat ride out of here. He needed to remember that. Needed to stay focused or he truly would be heading over the wall and getting shot.

It was a scorcher out here in the exercise yard today. Even hotter than yesterday. Taking refuge in the shadow of the hot concrete wall did nothing to alleviate the sweat literally soaking his body. He could barely breathe, the air was so humid and he felt sick

to his stomach. He was just about to head back to the gated entrance and ask the guard permission to go inside when a hushed whisper beside him made him tense.

“Hey, Homeboy Donovan!”

Automatically Steve narrowed his eyes against the overwhelming brightness of the late-afternoon sunshine. He almost sunk to his knees in gratitude at seeing his friend Michael gazing happily at him from beneath a tattered Mexican-style straw sombrero.

“Hey! You been in solitary long enough this time around? Your defiant attitude get some adjusting, eh?” Michael chuckled, his dark brown almost black eyes gleamed with mischief.

“Shh!” Steve warned as a slice of panic edged up his spine. He glanced over his shoulder.

“Keep it cool. I’m not supposed to talk to anyone anymore. Badges are watching.”

“Screw the badges. And since when you do care about what they say? You haven’t up until now.”

Steve sucked in a deep, hot breath at Michael’s cavalier attitude and waited impatiently as a round of dizziness shot through him.

Michael frowned. “You okay? You don’t look so good.”

“Nothing what a new kidney and freedom wouldn’t cure,” Steve replied, feeling grateful that at least one person in this freaking nightmare gave a damn about him. He liked Michael, if only for the sole reason he didn’t recoil in horror whenever he looked at his scarred face.

“Bum kidney giving you trouble, eh? You taking your medication?” He didn’t wait for an answer before saying, “I’ve got something for that.” Michael reached gingerly into the front breast pocket of his prison-issue shirt and produced a tube of lip protection.

“Hey! Present for you.” His greasy black mustache twitched slightly as he slipped the cap off the tube and brushed the lip balm gently across his thick lips.

“And what am I going to do with that, pray tell? What is it anyway?” Steve joked, even though he knew it was some sort of drug inside.

Michael shot a hurried look over his shoulder. Satisfied they weren’t being watched, he held the cap of the lip protection close to his chest and tipped it just enough so Steve could see the white powder sparkling inside.

“Cocaine, man. Suck it up your nose and it’ll make you fly.” Michael looked up into the sky at the sailing seagulls. “Make you fly like the birds. Take you away from here. Cheer you up, eh?”

For a desperate moment Steve contemplated taking the cocaine. He could get out of here, just like Michael said. He could fly northeast across the States into Canada. He would sail over the sparkling deep blue ocean. To their island. Feel the damp island air slap against his face again. Let his hot toes sink into the cool sand as he ran along the beaches. He could savor the fishy, salty, ocean aroma that he hadn’t liked yet now wanted to smell it so desperately. He’d let it seep deep into his lungs and listen to the roaring surf pound against the red cliffs just outside their bedroom window.

Most of all he could reach for Emily. Feel her soft body yield beneath his.

God help him! He could almost taste her sweet, warm lips pressing against his. He would tell her he loved her so much.

Michael nudged him and Steve blinked wildly, breaking off his thoughts.

“You want the stuff or not?”

“No, no. But thanks.” The last thing Steve needed was a drug problem in this place. He already had more problems than he could handle.

“You sure?” Michael sounded surprised.

“Yeah.”

Michael shrugged his shoulders, capped his treasure and dumped it back into his breast pocket.

“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught with that during the strip?” Steve asked, shaking his head at his friend’s bravado of taking such a big chance at possibly getting snared and doing time in solitary.

Michael grinned, his eyes twinkled with the utmost satisfaction. He patted his breast pocket. “In here is a picture of a hot babe. One of the badges and I are in a barter system. I painted a portrait of his woman and I get one free week of no strip searches. Last day today. I heard you were getting out sometime this week, so I brought the stash just in case. It being a bummer in the Adjustment Center.” Michael inhaled deeply. “Yup, one week of no search. That’s pure freedom.”

Steve grimaced. Freedom. It was only a word in this place.

Michael’s voice lowered. “Hey, you know? I got the word.”

Steve stilled, not quite believing what he’d just heard.

“Word came to me about four? No. Almost five weeks ago.”

“No way!”

Michael looked offended at his outburst of denial.

“Hey! I told you it would take time to get that necklace through the channels.” He jabbed a long finger painfully into Steve’s chest, stretching each word, disappointment very apparent in his voice. “You’re. The. One. Who. Almost. Blew. It. From. Your. End. You’re the one who ended up in adjustment solitary. Didn’t I tell you to keep your cool? Huh? To trust me?”

Steve shrugged his shoulders, suddenly feeling like a child being chastised for crossing the street when he’d been told not to.

“Did I tell you not to let the guards crawl under your skin and freak you out? Nobody’s going to find you in here if you keep getting stuck in solitary. Rest assured your medallion was delivered to your brother Daniel.”

“You’re sure?”

Michael nodded, looking quite proud of himself.

“The note accompanying it didn’t make it thru, but we knew that it most likely wouldn’t. Some guard found it on my friend and tossed it. He didn’t find the medallion. I won’t tell you where he stashed it when he left from visiting me here either. It’s a good thing you didn’t give too many details on that note or your ass would be fried now.”

Steve nodded. Okay, Daniel had the medallion. He would read the scratches and try to figure out what they meant. He would probably bring it to Emily. She'd get curious, maybe start asking questions. God, he hoped she didn't get hurt if she got nosy. Despite his fear for her safety, he felt himself relax for the first time since this whole crazy nightmare started. He had hope again. It surged through his veins like a drug, making him feel so alive that the unusual feeling scared him.

His family might start to suspect he was alive. All he had to do was sit tight and wait. Heck, he could do that. He'd been doing it for years, hadn't he?

* * * * *

The warm Indian summer October sun had just slipped behind the horizon when up ahead, perched at the side of the road, she spotted the giant red-apple-shaped billboard. On it written in bold white letters were the welcoming words *J & C Orchards*.

She hadn't been here since early summer and, despite her tiredness, she felt a euphoric cheer at the familiar surroundings. She'd used this place on a couple of occasions as a safe house for her clients. This time it was different. This time she'd been shot.

The gravel crumbled noisily beneath the tires as she turned onto the dirt road and drove the few miles of winding farmer lane, which abruptly ended behind a small rustic stone farmhouse. Immediately, she spotted the familiar tall, slender, dark-haired man emerge from the back door and hurry toward her. Obviously he'd been waiting for her.

"Jessie!" she whispered happily as she climbed out of the car. "I have never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

He greeted her by wrapping strong arms around her and hugging her affectionately. Jo stifled a wince as the dull ache in her shoulder blossomed to life for a brief moment, but it was quickly forgotten as the feeling of safety and relief washed over her. She always felt that way with her brother. Safe and someone she could trust.

"Tiny, where the hell have you been?" He always used his nickname for her. She couldn't remember him calling her by her real name since they'd been kids.

"When you didn't show earlier— I called your cell but you didn't answer." He ran a frustrated hand through his long, dark feathery hair. Obviously she'd given him a good scare and felt guilt swamp through her.

"Sorry, I shut the ringer off my cell so he could sleep." Truth was she just wanted to keep driving and get here as soon as she could. There was something about having a close call with death that made her want to see her baby brother again.

Jessie grinned, bent over and glanced in the car at the sleeping Daniel in the passenger seat.

"That's him?"

"That's him," she replied softly.

Jessie nodded and gave a knowing grunt.

"What?" She didn't like it when he made that strange noise. It meant he was in a teasing mood. And she wasn't.

"He doesn't look your type."

“Jessie, please?” she begged.

“Okay, Okay. C’mon let’s get you inside. I’ve got a piping hot apple cider stew waiting for you. We can take care of sleeping beauty later.”

* * * * *

Daniel awoke with a start, swearing he heard Brady’s seductive moan, but realized he’d been dreaming. Actually that wasn’t true. He’d been reliving the memory of taking her up against the bathroom door last night. A smile lifted his lips as he remembered how hot and tight her vagina was as he entered her. How gorgeous she looked, her eyes scrunched up tight, her fingers digging into his shoulders while having a man’s cock thrusting into her.

He hadn’t been able to get enough of looking at her while he fucked her. Hadn’t been able to stop fucking her for that matter. Daniel blew out a tense breath and focused his attention to his surroundings.

He noticed the car had stopped and his stomach clenched uneasily as he realized she wasn’t in the driver’s seat. As a matter of fact, Brady was nowhere in sight.

Cool night air drifted through the half-open window and he shivered in its chilly onslaught.

“Brady?” he called out the window.

No answer. His gut tightened with uneasiness. Where was she? Had something happened to her?

Through the gloomy darkness he made out the shadowy outline of a tiny stone house with a soft glow of lights spilling from the many little windows. Was it a restaurant? Had she stepped out for supper? Female laughter caught his ears. It sounded like Brady.

Stiffly he climbed out of the car, stretched, yawned and glanced around at his immediate surroundings. He stood in a small parking lot. Besides their rental car, there was a pickup and an old battered van parked nearby. A giant full moon had slipped up in the eastern horizon, allowing him to see the endless rows of trees streaming down the side of a hill.

Crisp, fresh air brushed against him and he noticed the distinct aroma of apple. Apple trees? Why would Brady bring him to an apple orchard?

Another tinkle of laughter sifted along the night air. He followed it across the gravel parking lot to the glowing window.

The curtains were open and Daniel peeked inside to see a kitchen. This was someone’s house not a restaurant. Some odd feeling he didn’t much like scrambled through him when he spied Brady sitting at a cozy table for two. An empty bowl sat in front of her on the table and she was drinking what appeared to be a cup of tea. And sitting across from her was some longhaired hooligan.

Daniel’s eyes narrowed with curiosity and annoyance. Was this the guy she was marrying? That would explain why she’d snuck out of the motel to pick up that wedding dress from her parents’ house early this morning.

Brady’s laughter caught his attention again. It irritated him for her to be so happy with another guy. She was probably laughing at one of his stupid jokes, Daniel thought

wryly. And she seemed quite at ease with this fellow. Not tense like the way she acted with him.

She laughed again. It sounded free and hearty. She didn't laugh like that when she was around him. Except for last night when the mouse turned out to be a hamster and the motel manager walked off with his sock. He hadn't had the nerve to go and ask for it back when they'd returned to the motel after her trip to her parents'. Besides, she'd been in such a hurry this morning that she hadn't even allowed him to put a bandage of some sort over her wound.

Most likely in a hurry to meet up with this guy. Who was he? And what did this longhaired ruffian have that he didn't? Maybe he should go right in there and see for himself.

Determination and curiosity raged through him as he made his way to the gray-planked door and knocked loudly. Maybe too loudly. But he didn't care.

The laughter stopped abruptly. Good.

He heard the squeak of a chair and footsteps approach. The door flung inward.

It was the hooligan.

Daniel resisted the urge to punch the competition in the nose.

"Hi!" The fellow smiled. He seemed genuinely pleased to see Daniel. "I guess we lost track of time. Kind of forgot you were out there."

"Brady has a habit of making you lose time," Daniel said coldly.

"Brady? Oh! You mean Tiny. Yeah she can be a riot. Come on in." The man ushered Daniel inside.

Tiny. Stupid nickname. Did the fiancé think it was romantic? He wanted to puke. The house was small, clean and orderly. And something smelled pretty good. His stomach growled. The groom-to-be grinned.

"I've got hot stew on the stove. You hungry?"

"I could use something to eat," he said truthfully. Might as well find out if Brady's man was a good cook or not.

"Go on into the kitchen. Tiny's in there. I'm sure she'll be glad to see you."

Boy, does she have you fooled, Daniel thought as he entered the kitchen. She looked up, and when she saw him the smile she'd been toting disappeared the minute she saw him. Daniel stared at her for a moment, trying to figure out if it was his imagination that her eyes were suddenly shining brighter. Probably because her boyfriend was in the room.

With one rough yank on the chair the hooligan had been using, Daniel moved it away from the spot, plopped it beside Jo and promptly sat down. She frowned, obviously irritated yet again with him. Tough.

The boyfriend was at the stove, and instead of being jealous as Daniel had hoped, he seemed amused when she moved her chair away from him, squishing herself against the sunny yellow kitchen wall.

"Tiny and I were just reminiscing about old times," he said as he ladled something in a giant pot.

“I’m sure you two were having lots of fun,” Daniel sneered at her, finding it hard to keep his jealousy out of his voice.

Her eyes widened in surprise. Apparently she thought he was being rude with his insinuation. Well, tough! Then he noticed the smile tingeing her lips and the mischievous glint in her eyes, and he suddenly had the feeling she was about to make a fool out of him. He wasn’t wrong.

“Jessie, I’d like you to meet Daniel McCullen. McCullen, this is Jessie Brady. My brother.”

Her brother? Shit! He should have noticed the similarities.

“I thought he was your—” He let his sentence trail off, not eager to make an even bigger fool of himself.

“You thought what?” She cocked an eyebrow at him, her smile growing.

“Never mind,” Daniel managed to say. But he sensed she knew exactly what he had thought. Suddenly he felt stupid. Really stupid.

As her brother set a bowl of delicious-smelling stew in front of Daniel, Brady threw him a satisfied smirk then quickly rose. “I’ll leave you two to get acquainted. I’m turning in. Good night.”

Before he could stop her, she left the kitchen. A moment later, he grimaced at the sound of a door slamming just a bit too hard somewhere in the house.

It was followed by Jessie’s soft chuckle. “I think she likes you.”

* * * * *

Half an hour later, Jessie joined Daniel in front of the giant stone fireplace nestled against the far living room wall and handed him an ice-cold glass of apple cider.

“Thanks,” Daniel said gratefully. After downing two bowls of the stew, he was thirsty. He chugged back a giant swig and was pleasantly surprised at the sweet, fruity taste.

“Home brew. I usually wait to give people a drink until after the stew. It makes them appreciate the cider a bit more.”

“It’s good,” Daniel replied, and took a couple more gulps.

“I blended it up late last night as a treat for the apple pickers. With an orchard full of apples, one has to use them in what ever he can,” Jessie explained.

Jo’s brother set his cider on the side arm of a nearby rocking chair and Daniel tensed when he sat down and the cider glass moved back and forth with Jessie as he slowly rocked, his dark eyes studying the crackling fire in the pioneer-style stone hearth.

He found himself relaxing. If it was due to the sugary effects of the welcome cold drink, the warm, snapping fire breathing against his face or Jessie’s easygoing quiet companionship, he couldn’t be sure, but suddenly he realized he could easily make a lifelong friend in Jo’s brother.

Daniel took another drag of the ice-cold drink. It slid smoothly down his parched throat and gurgled with the homemade apple cider stew in his belly. He had to admit, Jessie was a good cook and a good cider-maker.

“Jo can be prickly when she likes a guy. But beneath her quills she’s got a heart of gold,” Jessie said softly, his gaze holding the firelight, a hint of amusement touching his voice.

Daniel didn’t know how to respond, so he remained silent and took another swig of the sweet liquid. His gaze once again returned to study the flickering flames in the stone fireplace.

After a few minutes of listening to the crackling fire, Daniel decided to break the silence.

“How’d Brady get the nickname of Tiny?”

An affectionate glimmer sprang to Jessie’s eyes.

“When we were kids, Jo used to tease me relentlessly about my height. I was very short. She’d call me Shorty, Tiny, Midget, stuff like that. Almost overnight I shot skyward. Before I knew it I was calling her Tiny. The name kind of stuck.”

Daniel chuckled as he imagined her surprise at her brother’s transformation.

“So how come you call her Brady?”

The question jolted him. “Truthfully? I have no idea.”

“She has that effect on men. She leaves them confused.”

Daniel shot him a questioning look.

“Most of the time she doesn’t realize it, but when a guy seems interested in her, her porcupine quills come out.”

“Why’s that?” Daniel asked.

Jessie pursed his lips thoughtfully, and Daniel got the distinct feeling Jessie was deciding whether he should tell him.

“She’s been burned in the past. She’s having trouble forgiving someone for what he did to her, so it’s expanded to guys in general. I guess it’s her survival instincts when she feels threatened.”

Trust issues. That would explain a lot. Why was Jessie telling him this stuff?

“Burned? By whom?” The questions flew out of his mouth so fast he didn’t even have time to think, but when he caught Jessie’s frown, his gut hollowed in a wave of guilt and shame. He knew who Jessie was talking about.

Her brother was talking about Daniel.

Jessie tactfully avoided Daniel’s gaze as he slowly got up and stretched.

“How would you like to give me a hand out in the barn and whip up another batch of cider for the crew?”

“Sure.” Daniel drained his glass and frowned. Man, his lust for revenge against the killer of his brother had really fucked Jo’s life. He needed to make it up to her. Big time.

Chapter Thirteen

When Jo stepped out of the humid shower stall into the cozy bathroom, she was still steaming about McCullen and his snarky possessive attitude. How in the world did he get the idea that Jessie was her imaginary groom-to-be? Jessie and she looked too much alike to be mistaken in that way.

McCullen needed glasses, she huffed as she wrapped a towel around her and gazed at the bullet wound in the mirror. It still looked like an ugly red slash across the back of her shoulder blade and it still smarted when she moved her arm, but the wound was definitely healing.

She picked up her cell off the counter and noticed she'd missed several unidentified calls. Turning on the ringer, she set the cell back down and started drying her hair with the blow dryer Jessie kept on a nearby shelf.

She'd let the bullet wound breathe again tonight and get Jessie to put a patch on it tomorrow morning. Her brother would freak when he saw the bullet wound, but it would be better than having McCullen's hot fingers tenderly massaging ointment into her flesh.

God, she couldn't believe how he'd changed from the sexy man who watched her with hot looks to the jealous jerk he'd acted like earlier when he thought Jessie was her boyfriend. Strangely enough, she suddenly found herself smiling with unexplainable warmth at the idea McCullen might actually be jealous.

If she were smart, she'd find out where the two of them had gone, take Jessie aside and ask her brother not to give away her secret that she wasn't engaged to be married as she'd told McCullen. But they hadn't been in the house when she'd come out of Jessie's bedroom where he insisted she sleep tonight, so she'd headed to the bathroom to shower.

Her brother had probably taken McCullen on a tour of the orchard. Jessie was proud of the five-hundred-plus acres he owned. Most of it consisted of different varieties of apple trees. He also dabbled in growing spruce and pine trees to sell as Christmas trees as well as tended a few acres of blueberry bushes, which produced tons of berries that he sold to the local grocery stores.

Jessie was a natural when it came to farming. He loved the outdoors and accepted all the hardships that came with being self-employed. She knew too that one day he would make some lucky woman very happy.

When her hair felt relatively dry, she switched off the blow dryer and realized her cell phone was ringing. A quick glance at the number revealed it as unlisted.

Disappointment shot through her. She'd hoped one of her contacts would call with information about how Martin had found them so quickly at the other motel.

She placed the blow dryer on the counter and snapped up the phone.

"Brady, here."

"Miss Brady, do you know who this is?"

“Yes!” Jo whispered as she recognized the emotionless female voice. This was the woman who’d called Jo to let her know where they were keeping Daniel McCullen.

“Has he recovered?” the woman asked. Obviously she knew Daniel was out of the hospital and with her.

“He’s fine. I want to thank you for tipping me off as to where I could find him. I owe you another one.”

In actual fact, Jo owed the tipper a few favors and she felt quite confident she was being set up to help this woman in some way in the future. She had also helped Jo on a case last year involving her sister’s fiancé.

“No thanks are needed. You did it all on your own. Goodbye,” the woman replied.

“Wait! Don’t go!” Jo hissed as an idea suddenly hit her.

Silence greeted her and for one sinking moment she thought she’d lost the caller.

Then the woman spoke again.

“Yes?”

“I need some more help.”

Her silence encouraged Jo to continue.

“Someone sent Daniel a Saint Christopher medallion when he was in Mexico. It belonged to his dead brother Steve. Daniel thinks it was Colby Martin trying to flush him out of hiding.”

The woman continued to remain silent. Jo plunged ahead, hoping to capture the woman’s interest.

“There were letters scratched into the back of it. Maybe initials. I don’t know for sure.”

“Go on.”

Jo smiled at the hint of curiosity in the woman’s usually emotionless voice.

“The first two letters are C. D. on one line and on the second line there’s a space and the other letters TXDR.”

Silence.

“I know this is a long shot but I was hoping...”

“Miss Brady, those initials could mean anything.”

“Yes, I know, but I can’t help wondering who really sent it to him and where the necklace and accompanying medallion came from after all these years. Daniel’s brother was apparently wearing it when he committed suicide in jail. It hadn’t been seen since, until it was delivered to Daniel. We think it is a message from someone—”

The woman broke her off with her unemotional tone again.

“I’ll have it checked out.”

Jo sighed with relief. “Thanks. I owe you another one. Let me know how I can return the favor.”

“I’ll be in touch.” The woman hung up.

“Yes!” Jo hissed, and snapped the cell phone cover shut, closed her eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks.

Asking the woman for help was definitely a long shot. It probably would produce nothing. But the caller was an excellent contact Jo had acquired on a personal case she'd been working on last year. At the time she'd been searching for the killer of an old family friend. An FBI acquaintance of Jo's had given her a telephone number he'd discovered in the work files of the undercover cop who had been accused of her friend's murder. The undercover cop had turned out to be Daniel's brother Mathew, framed for not one but two murders.

Jo had called the number the FBI acquaintance had given her and set up a meeting with the contact. When she'd met the woman, the same one who'd tipped her off about McCullen's whereabouts and who'd just called, the woman had sworn Jo to secrecy about her identity and the kind of work she was involved in. Not that Jo knew too much anyway. The woman had never introduced herself by name during the meeting, but she did reveal she was a go-between, or a "cops' angel" for undercover cops and some elite high-level government agency who helped undercover cops do their jobs. Understandably her organization wished to remain out of the public spotlight.

Jo kept the woman's confidence and hadn't heard from her again until she'd called out of the blue a few days ago with Daniel's possible whereabouts.

She totally understood the woman could have refused Jo's request to check out Steve's medallion, but she sensed the "cops' angel" would be intrigued by this mystery. That thought left Jo wondering why the woman was so interested in the McCullen brothers, especially Daniel, who wasn't even an undercover cop but the brother of one.

However, she didn't have time to think about the mysterious woman and the medallion. She had other things to worry about right now. Like heading off to bed for a good night's sleep and getting McCullen to a wedding without him realizing it.

* * * * *

Jo knew she was dreaming. Knew where the dream was heading. Didn't want to go there. Didn't want to see the security guard burst into the witness room where she'd been anxiously waiting and hoping with all her might that the defense would rest and the trial of Johnnie Garrett's murderer would finally be over.

God, she was still reeling over finding out her sexy stranger was actually Martin's criminal defense lawyer. She simply couldn't believe it. She felt so used and dirty. Wondered if maybe the bastard had targeted her on purpose. Known she was the one who'd discovered Johnnie's body and had set her up so he could damage her character in the courtroom and tell the jurors that as a social worker she slept around at the drop of a hat and really shouldn't be around children. That she couldn't be trusted and if she couldn't be trusted then neither could her testimony.

She'd been walking on eggshells waiting for those questions from him during the entire trial and had been surprised when he hadn't asked them during his turns at questioning her. But now being recalled to the witness stand, she felt faint knowing this was probably his last chance to strike by bringing up their night together.

"Miss Brady? As I said you've been recalled to the stand." The guard motioned for her to follow him.

Damn it! Her gut hollowed out as she followed the guard out of the room and down the hallway toward the courtroom. Her mind whirled as to how she would answer his questions. How could she say in a court of law that she'd gone to the bar with full intentions of getting drunk and found Daniel so irresistible that she just wanted to fuck him? That would really make her look good. Well, she would answer his questions truthfully, she had no other choice.

She'd answer and it would all be over. They had to believe she'd seen Martin. Then the jury would find the killer guilty. They just had to.

She was ushered into the courtroom where some people turned to look at her, including the prosecutor, criminal defense lawyers and Dr. Colby Martin, the man she'd seen coming out of Johnnie's house carrying a cooler. Why he would do the dirty work himself and kill an innocent kid for his body parts was beyond her. Heck, she couldn't even believe Martin would do such a thing on his own, so she could certainly understand why not too many people believed her when she'd gone to the cops.

The last time she'd been in the witness chair, one of Colby's several criminal defense lawyers Daniel Black, if she remembered his name correctly, had grilled her as if there were no tomorrow. While asking her questions, she thought she detected sympathy in his eyes. Had sensed he might even believe her. Of course that was wishful thinking on her part. She wasn't so naïve as to actually think one of Martin's defense lawyers might believe his own client guilty, even if she had slept with him months earlier. Even if he did think Martin was guilty, it was his job to protect the man who hired him. She knew that, but she didn't have to like it.

Now as she passed Daniel, she tried to read the expression on his face. His mouth was set in a thin line of regret and he carefully avoided her gaze. Her heart sank with dread. He was going to bring up their past. He was going to try to damage her testimony by bringing her character into question. She had been set up. Dammit!

"Miss Brady? Please retake the witness stand," the judge ordered firmly.

Jo snapped her head to look forward and walked slowly, as if a condemned woman, up the endless aisle toward the white-haired elderly judge. He seemed bored. His fingers were clasped together into a church steeple that he placed under his double chin. It was a gesture of impatience he'd used many times over the past few weeks of the trial. He'd been using it more frequently over the past few days.

Jo knew how he felt. She was tired too. Worn out from all those questions both sides had thrown at her.

The defense lawyer avoided her searching gaze as she sat on the giant witness chair and looked straight at him. Instead of meeting her glare, he studied the sea of faces in the jury box. She found herself following his gaze. Most jurors looked bored, some had their heads down, writing in their notepad and others looked forlornly at the drab decor of the courtroom.

Jo knew they wanted to get this whole trial over with. They wanted to get back to their families, job and their pets. But something horrible had happened to someone she loved and she knew these twelve people were here to do a job. She felt confident they'd see her side of what had happened.

"Miss Brady, for the record may I remind you that you are still under oath." Daniel Black spoke clearly, confidently. She didn't answer but her hands automatically tightened again into tight fists in nervous anticipation of his question.

The tense way he held his shoulders told her he wasn't enjoying what he was about to ask and she wondered for the thousandth time why he was defending this cheap piece of scum she'd accused of murder.

"Miss Brady. Earlier in the trial you stated you first recognized the defendant when you saw his picture in the medical section of the newspaper with the accompanying article of his possible breakthrough of entire eye transplants with the use of a highly sophisticated laser and the use of a controversial new anti-rejection drug?" The young lawyer pointed to the slightly stooped gray-haired man sitting behind the defendant's desk flanked by his entourage of eager-looking lawyers.

Jo found it hard to look at Colby Martin, but she made herself face the accused anyway. For a horrible instant panic enveloped her and bile rose up into her throat. She forced it down. He disgusted her so much she glanced back to Daniel Black who watched her with an odd expression on his face.

"That's correct," she stated firmly.

He frowned for the briefest split second, and then his face went emotionless. Detached. Violet Jocelyn Brady realized with a sick feeling in the pit of her gut the lawyer was about to hang her.

"And you say this man in the courtroom today is the same man who you saw outside the victim's house, did you not?"

Jo nodded slowly. They'd been down this road before. Why was he asking this question again?

"Please answer the question with a yes or no, Miss Brady," the judge chastised.

"Yes, I saw him." She noticed the slight tremble in her voice and immediately cleared her throat.

"You've stated you were wearing your glasses, so there is no visual problem in that regard. You said he was wearing black clothing, black gloves, black knit hat, carrying a large-sized cooler. Is that correct?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"And you say there was a sliver of a moon out that night and that is how you were able to identify him?"

"Yes, that is correct."

"And you also said the defendant's face was in full view to you at least for a couple of seconds. You saw that man quite clearly in the moonlight. You stated that man was walking very quickly and you were around twenty feet away from him. Is that correct?"

"Objection! Your honor, the witness has already stated these facts. This is merely repetition."

"Overruled. Answer the question, Miss Brady." The judge yawned.

"Yes to everything you just said."

"Miss Brady I would like you to read to the jury..." He hesitated a moment before returning to his table to pick up what appeared to be a newspaper. He approached the

witness chair and Jo could now clearly read regret in his eyes and a resigned smile. He handed her the newspaper.

"Would you indulge the court please and read all the yellow highlighted areas on the newspaper?"

Jo glanced down at the paper. What was he up to?

"Please read the paper Miss Brady," the judge said. She didn't miss the curiosity in his voice.

The prosecutor stood. "Objection! Your honor the witness is not here to entertain us with reading the newspaper. If the defense wishes to read it then he may do so himself."

"Overruled. The witness may read the newspaper."

Jo cleared her throat and began to read the highlighted area at the top of the paper. "Bangor Daily News. August 25th. Weather. Sunny, hot, hazy and humid. High of 90°F. Tonight—" Jo stopped cold. How was this possible?

The headache she'd been fighting off all week finally erupted behind her eyes and she lifted her black-rimmed glasses and pinched the bridge of her nose in a desperate effort to control the throbbing pain.

"Please continue reading the newspaper, Miss Brady," the lawyer urged.

Jo poked her glasses higher on her nose and glanced up at him. The lawyer's gaze was once again emotionless.

Her heart began to race, her mind whirled in disbelief. "I don't understand. I—"

"Objection! Your honor!" The district attorney jumped up much to Jo's relief. "This is just courtroom theatrics on behalf of a desperate defense and he should—"

"Overruled!" The judge pounded his gavel violently.

"But your Honor, this is utterly ridiculous."

"Sit down!" the judge replied sternly.

The DA sighed wearily and sat down, leaving Jo feeling totally abandoned, vulnerable and seriously questioning what she'd seen that night.

The judge looked down at her from behind those peaked fingers.

"You have the floor, Miss Brady."

A couple of jurors chuckled quietly.

The judge raised his bushy white eyebrows in admonishment and the courtroom became dead silent.

Tears welled in her eyes. Thankfully they didn't flow out and betray her. At least not yet. Her voice was now shaky and she silently cursed the smart suited lawyer for humiliating her this way.

She took a deep breath and began to read again. "Tonight, cloudy with showers."

A low wave of murmurs flowed throughout the tiny courtroom. And Jo didn't miss someone's hushed whisper float out of the jury box. "She's a bloody liar."

"Order!" The judge banged his gavel. Hard. And more than once. The harsh sound sliced through Jo's head like a sledgehammer. "Order in the courtroom!"

Jo closed her sore eyes for a moment and prayed for it all to be over. She knew she'd lost. The seed of doubt about her credibility had been planted.

"Your Honor!" the defense lawyer said as the crowd finally quieted down. For the first time Jo detected the weariness in his voice and noticed the dark circles that hung like half moons beneath his eyes.

"We've checked with the Weather Bureau regarding the weather on the night in question. They verify it was indeed fully overcast toward late evening, however no showers appeared. We will submit verification to the court after my line of questioning is complete."

Jo's stomach twisted into a sick knot. There's more?

"Miss Brady. Violet. Do you wish to change your statement?"

"No. I saw that man. I know I did. Maybe it was a street lamp or lightning. But I saw him."

"Are you saying you assumed it was the moon casting light on the man?"

Shit, she'd said too much. Jo didn't answer. She knew where he was heading.

"Miss Brady, please answer the question?" the judge prompted sternly.

"I saw him. I know I did."

"You assumed it, Miss Brady. What else did you assume?" the lawyer continued. "Did you assume my client Dr. Colby Martin, M.D., a prominent organ transplant specialist was the man you saw?" His voice gentled a bit. "You were very close to the victim, weren't you?"

Jo felt her chin begin to tremble. If he didn't stop, she'd break down like a blubbering idiot right here in front of all these people. What kind of a witness was that?

"Yes!" she hissed, between clenched teeth.

"And when you found the victim you noticed his eyes had been removed. Naturally you'd assume someone with the delicate knowledge of organ transplantation must have done this horrid mutilation. You must feel very guilty for not having arrived earlier. If you had arrived sooner you probably assume you could have prevented this tragedy?"

Jo squirmed uncomfortably in the hard wooden chair. Daniel didn't wait for her to answer, instead he quickly turned to the eight men and four women of the jury.

"Ladies and gentlemen. The law states you must find my client guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. There is plenty of reasonable doubt in this case. You have heard there was no moon on the night Miss Brady had stated and assumed—"

Jo tuned out the lawyer.

Without gazing at the jury box for confirmation of what she knew would be a not-guilty verdict, her gaze reluctantly fell onto the accused man.

His watery eyes flicked over her and a small satisfied smile lifted his withered lips. Jo felt a cold sliver of hatred slice into her heart.

She kept her eyes focused on him, refusing to turn away from that piercing gaze. Finally, he broke the link and Jo felt some sort of weird victorious feeling creep into her veins.

She used all her strength to remain in the chair and not jump out, go over to him and strangle him. She forced herself to listen to the rest of the defense lawyer's closing statement.

"And I surmise that Miss Brady, overcome by her grief and guilt over finding someone she'd become very attached to through her job as a social worker, to be so horribly mutilated and brutally murdered, wasn't thinking straight. And most likely picked out the defendant at random because Johnnie Garrett's eyes had been removed and Dr. Colby Martin just happened to be in the newspaper the next day in regards to his eye transplant breakthrough. She saw his picture, got confused and assumed he looked like the perpetrator. In closing, I ask the jury to remember Dr. Colby Martin is presumed innocent and he cannot be found guilty unless it is beyond a shadow of a doubt. And we have many doubts now, don't we? Miss Brady was distraught, she assumed things and just because Dr. Colby Martin may look like the man Miss Brady saw leaving the scene, you should not allow her to assume he is the assailant in this case. You should not allow her to justify her need for revenge for her loved one's murder by—"

Jo's mouth dropped open in surprise as the lawyer continued his closing statement.

Revenge?

She'd wanted justice, not revenge. She'd been sure she'd seen that man.

Moonlight. Streetlight. Whatever. She stared at the defendant. She had seen him. The more she thought about it the more sure she became. The lawyer had swayed her with his courtroom antics. But only for a moment.

Violet Jocelyn Brady tilted her chin defiantly and met the defense lawyer's emotionless gaze. She took immense pleasure as he flinched beneath her ice-melting stare.

She leaned back in the witness chair and crossed her arms proudly. This defense lawyer most certainly felt guilty at his hatchet job on her.

Good. She would make sure he paid. She'd make sure they all paid.

Obviously justice was not going to be served in this courtroom today. So she'd just have to find a way to dish it out herself and she'd have to start with Daniel Black, the criminal defense attorney. Even if it took years to exact her revenge, she would get justice.

Justice. Revenge.

She didn't care anymore which she got. But she would get it.

** * * * **

It took Daniel a long time before the crackling sounds of the pine logs burning in the fireplace, opposite from where he slept on the living room pull-out sofa, allowed his troubled mind to fall asleep. And with sleep came dreams.

He found himself on his motorcycle, riding through the valleys of Montana. Giant, snow-capped mountains towered on either side of him and icy snowflakes peppered against his face with such fierceness he had to flinch.

He glanced down at one lonely, delicate snowflake as it gracefully landed on the sleeve of his leather motorcycle jacket. Its perfectly shaped crystals beamed with such

elegance, totally oblivious to the horrible fate that awaited it in the next moment. And then slowly it shrunk and melted away as if it had never even existed.

So beautiful.

Just like Jocelyn.

Sharp, icy edges. Yet beneath that crispy crust she was warm and so passionate.

He could think of the exact moment she'd wound her way into his heart. The instant he'd spotted her in that bar that night. It had happened so fast. His attraction had only grown when he'd taken her up against the motel room. By the time that night had been over he'd been thrilled she'd agreed to meet him again. His attraction to her was still there when they'd met in the hospital the other day. It was stronger than ever since they'd been together last night.

Even through his drugged stupor he'd reacted violently to her kiss in the garage. Feeling the warmth of it flowing into his mouth and spiraling through the rest of him, crackling his senses into alert mode.

She deserved better than a fuck up against a door. She would need a romantic dinner. Candles. Soft music. Not some fleabag motel.

His dreams drifted toward Jessie and both of them squeezing apple cider with his homemade press out in the barn. He'd mentioned their sister Sara was the one who wanted their mother's wedding dress. Hadn't said anything about Jo getting hooked. She'd lied to him to keep him away from her. He understood why.

They would need to talk...

The sound of a strangled scream rippled through the thick layers of sleep, making Daniel's veins turn to ice. For a split second he lay paralyzed, wrapped inside the horrific noise. Then, as it dissipated, he tossed aside his blankets and bolted upright, blinking wildly, feeling totally disoriented.

Icy-cold sweat popped out onto his forehead as he listened and heard nothing but an occasional snap from the dying embers of the wood in the fireplace.

Had the scream come from his memory? His stomach twisted. Had it been Beth?

He didn't think so. Beth's screams had been such an intricate part of his nightmares that he wouldn't even have to guess it was a scream from his memory. He would know.

It sure couldn't be from Jessie. He'd gone out for the evening. While the two of them were pressing cider, some cute petite blonde had popped by totally unannounced and asked if Jessie wanted to go and play pool with her.

It all seemed too convenient for Daniel. Smelled of a setup of Jessie maybe wanting Daniel and Jo to spend the night alone together. Then Jessie said not to expect him back tonight and that Daniel should make himself comfortable on the pull-out couch in front of the living room fireplace as the upstairs bedrooms weren't prepared for company. With a wink, he left with the woman.

When Daniel had come into the house, Brady apparently had already hit the sack and he'd made his bed using the sheets and blankets he'd found on the nearby dining table. And that's when he'd seen the wall of family portraits in a dark corner of the dining room.

His mind drew back to the scream. Had he imagined it? Or had it come from Jo?

His heart began a wild crack against his chest at the next thought. Had Martin found them again? Maybe his men had snuck through her window and into her bedroom?

A low whimper sailed through the living room and Daniel oriented to where the sound came from. In a split second he was on his feet.

* * * * *

A soft, tender voice sailed through Jo's terror-filled dream, making her open her eyes. The lights to her room were on and she blinked in confusion as she pushed aside her blankets and fought the dream-induced cobwebs while groping for her gun on the nearby table.

She didn't remember leaving the lights on before she'd gone to bed. She knew she'd shut them off. So why were they on?

Suddenly McCullen hovered into view. Concern etched his face and Jo bolted upright with gun in hand.

"Martin's here?" she blurted, and aimed the gun at the open doorway.

"Everything is all right," McCullen soothed. If he thought those words would comfort her, he was sadly mistaken. Those were the same words she'd spoken to Johnnie on his last day of life.

"Fuck!" she swore, and let the gun drop onto the blankets. She hated feeling this way after a nightmare. Helpless. Disoriented. Guilty. Full of hatred.

"You were having a bad dream," he said softly.

A bad dream? Boy, was that an understatement.

She found herself tensing. Wanted to pull away from McCullen but also not wanting to as he sat down on the bed beside her. His warm hand cupped her chin and he tilted her face upward slightly. Then his other hand lifted and he gently wiped away the tears trickling down her face.

God, was she crying?

"Talking about a nightmare usually helps."

He cracked a reassuring grin. A total contrast as to the way she felt.

Jo shook her head. Hot, bitter tears continued to stream down her face and he continued to wipe them away. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to remember. She just wished it had never happened.

"It wasn't a nightmare, was it?" There was a hard edge to his question. A push in his voice that led her to believe he wasn't going to ease off. He truly wanted to know.

Biting her lip, Jo shook her head again. Why didn't he just leave it alone?

"You were reliving something. A memory. That's why you won't fully follow through on the sexual attraction between us. Because of what I did to you. Because of Johnnie."

Jo's stomach rolled with nausea. "I guess we need to talk."

"Yes, I think it's time for me to explain."

Chapter Fourteen

Jo's chest tightened with the familiar zing of anger meshing with the gut-wrenching pain that she'd been carrying around for years as McCullen continued to hold her chin, forcing her to look into his eyes. Even now when she should hate him, should be pulling away from him, she couldn't help but notice the guilt marring his blue eyes.

She couldn't stop the tug of emotion punching her in the stomach as her instincts told her McCullen had been grappling with his own demons regarding the trial.

"You knew Martin was guilty, didn't you?"

He nodded.

She'd expected to feel some sort of satisfaction for sensing she'd read him right during that trial. Of having the impression he believed her, despite his casting doubt over her testimony. Instead, she now felt tired. Exhausted actually from holding on to so much anger over the years against him. Weary in the fact she had changed her whole life to go after Martin and still had nothing to pin on him regarding Johnnie's murder.

As if sensing she didn't want to be touched, McCullen let go of her chin. Then he leaned back against the bed's headboard much in the same way as he'd done their first night together in that motel room where he'd caught her about to give him an injection in an effort to help him with the drug withdrawal pain. But there was no drug to ease the pain they both had suffered because of the trial and Johnnie's murder.

McCullen inhaled a deep breath before allowing it out slowly.

"You looked much different five years ago. You had that scruffy bob-cut spiked bleached blonde look and black-rimmed glasses."

"Traded the bleach in for natural hair, switched the glasses for corrective laser eye surgery and dropped about fifty pounds."

He chuckled then stopped.

"I hurt you really bad," he stated.

"I've been remembering every day since it happened, McCullen," she said as she dropped her gaze to her clenched fists. Surprisingly, she thought that when this time came she would confront him by pounding her fists against his chest or punching his face so hard that his blood would spill and ease her anguish.

Instead of the expected anger to continue, she realized it was gone, replaced with a need to know more about McCullen. During their short time together, her instincts told her he would never intentionally hurt anyone if he could help it. Although Emily had revealed Daniel was working undercover to get Martin. Jo wanted to hear it from him. Maybe his saying it out loud would somehow make it real.

"Why did you do it, McCullen? You knew Martin was guilty. Why sacrifice Johnnie?"

Silence followed her question and she turned to look at him.

Her heart did a little flip of sympathy when she noticed the defiant tilt to his chin and the same flash of pain she'd seen a few times since getting him out of the hospital. Pain of regret. Pain of guilt.

"What exactly did my brother tell you about my involvement with Martin?" he finally asked.

In truth, Matt had revealed McCullen was working undercover to gain Martin's confidence so he could find out how Martin was involved in the illegal organ transplant network that Martin allegedly headed as well as trying to find out how he'd been involved in Steve's death.

At the time Jo was steaming mad over the fact McCullen was actually Daniel Black, the lawyer who'd grilled her at Martin's trial. She hadn't known they were one and the same until Sara's fiancé Mathew showed her a picture of his brother Daniel and asked her to locate him because he'd recently disappeared into thin air after leaving Mexico. Mathew wanted his brother as his best man at the impromptu wedding. Totally devastated that Sara would fall in love with the brother of a man who had been so callous and ruthless during the Martin trial, she'd told Mathew that Daniel could rot wherever he was because she wasn't going near him.

That's when Jo had been told the monster she hated all these years had had an agenda. She realized she needed to know more about McCullen's undercover work so her hunt for him had begun.

"I was told enough to get me interested in saving your ass so I could ask you if it was worth sacrificing Johnnie Garrett for your undercover work?"

She didn't miss him flinch at her question. Good. It meant her question hurt. And she wanted him to hurt.

"I never meant for Martin to be free, Brady. If things had gone the way we planned, Martin would have been behind bars and his illegal transplant network exposed," he said wearily.

"So what happened? Why is Martin still free?"

McCullen frowned, looked somewhat ashamed. Apparently unable to hold her gaze any longer, he broke eye contact.

"Martin happened. The morning after we were together I got the call that I'd been waiting for. His team of defense lawyers wanted me on the Garrett case. I had to be in New York that afternoon. I realized I didn't even have your last name. Didn't know who you were and couldn't jeopardize my undercover work by not going when his people called on me. So, that's why I stood you up."

Okay, that made sense. He was full of revenge and wanted to meet with Martin. She could understand that. She'd had years of putting aside any chance of a normal relationship because of her need for revenge. However, that didn't explain why Martin was free.

"So? What happened?" she asked again.

He grimaced at her question.

"I blew it. I fell in love."

He fell in love? What the hell? He couldn't have fallen in love with her instead? The question speared right through her heart, but she covered her hurt quickly. She didn't want him to know how jealous she suddenly felt.

"You aren't supposed to fall in love when you're undercover, McCullen," she joked, trying to lighten the darkness that suddenly flooded his features.

"She was Martin's granddaughter. Beth. She reminded me of you."

Wow, that tidbit of news made her feel real good. Not. This must be the mysterious Beth he'd been mumbling about during his drug withdrawal.

"Over the years as I look back on it, my relationship with Beth happened too fast and things went out of control quickly. It happened shortly after the trial ended. She'd breezed into my life, we fell in love and eloped and I suddenly wanted to give up my undercover work."

"Okay, I think you should tell me everything," she urged, suddenly wanting all of her hostility toward him gone. Not that it would be gone, knowing some other woman had caught his heart before she'd even had a chance.

Jo blinked in surprise. No, she didn't want his heart, did she? Okay so maybe she did want a chance with him. In the past. Not now. Now she just wanted to know the truth. Wanted to know he wasn't the monster she'd always thought he'd been. And then maybe she could give in to the sexual attraction that was still sparking like crazy between them.

He nodded in agreement.

"It's almost dawn. I'll go put on some coffee for us," he said, and got up off the bed. His broad shoulders were high with tension as Jo watched him leave the bedroom.

She couldn't believe what he'd just said. He'd fallen in love with Martin's granddaughter? That's whom he'd been calling out to in his delirium when withdrawing from the drugs?

Elizabeth Christianne Martin was Beth?

But Martin's granddaughter was dead. Gunned down in cold blood on a rainy night by unknown assailants.

Jo frowned as she headed for the bathroom to freshen up. Obviously whatever had gone on back then with Daniel wasn't all cut-and-dried undercover work as Emily had led her to believe.

* * * * *

Daniel was well aware of the quickening thud of his heart as minutes later he watched Jo shuffle into the kitchen wearing puffy slippers and a frumpy brown bathrobe, which he assumed both belonged to Jessie. Her hair was all mussed from sleep and she didn't wear a touch of makeup on her freshly washed face. Her cheeks were rosy and damned if there wasn't a bit of a sparkle he'd not seen before in her eyes.

She looked absolutely fantastic.

He suddenly realized his reaction to Jo was totally different than his feelings for Beth. Pleasing Beth had been his ultimate goal in life when he'd been around her. With Jo, his ultimate goal was to share his feelings with her. Feelings of not letting the past

destroy the attraction between them. His feelings of wanting to romance her, tease her and make love to her.

Shit. He had it bad for her, didn't he?

She said nothing as they stood beside each other, waiting for the coffee to brew in the machine. He followed her gaze as she looked around the cozy kitchen. He had to admit, he liked this room. It consisted of two windows facing west, which would let the afternoon sunshine splash over the table while a couple ate supper. Two windows faced south to capture the late-morning sunshine. The walls were painted in a soothing yellow color and the table for two and accompanying chairs as well as the kitchen cabinets were a golden oak.

From the ceiling hung several shiny copper and cast iron pots, giving the room an air of newness. In contrast, the claw foot stove and an old-fashioned fridge were old but clean and the countertops were a shiny marble green that matched perfectly with the rest of the décor.

He found himself relaxing amidst the surroundings and inhaling the tantalizing aroma of coffee as it drifted through the air. A moment later Jo poured them two mugs of coffee, ripping him back to tense mode. He would have to tell her everything. She needed to hear it so she could free the demons he'd held over her all these years.

Retrieving a couple of spoons, the sugar canister and some cream in a glass jar from the fridge, they settled themselves at the table.

"Usually I have nothing to do with coffee," Jo stated as she opened the Mason jar and poured a generous amount of cream into her mug before pushing the jar over to him.

"But I can't resist the cream. Jessie's neighbor Kellie and Jessie have a barter system. He supplies her with apples and blueberries and a Christmas tree, and she supplies him with fresh eggs and dairy products she makes from her goat's milk."

McCullen's head snapped up from the coffee he'd been pouring the cream into.

"Kellie wouldn't happen to be a cute, petite blonde, kind of chubby and shy, with a snazzy white pickup, would she?"

Jo smiled. "That's her. She's also the town mechanic. Did she drop by last night?"

"More than that. She took your brother away for the night. He said not to expect him back until this morning."

Jo almost dropped the spoon of sugar she'd been about to deposit into her mug.

"Really?"

"You look surprised."

"I thought they were just good friends."

"They shared a kiss."

Jo grimaced as she sipped the coffee.

"Too much information?" He couldn't help but chuckle at her reaction.

"No, this is bad coffee, even with Kellie's cream."

"Thanks for the compliment, Brady," he said, trying to inject sarcasm into his voice but it sounded more like an amused retort.

They fell silent again. Both of them fixing their coffees to the way they liked it then stirring the ingredients and him stalling for time. He wasn't keen on getting into this trial with Jo. But he knew she needed to have some closure.

She stopped stirring and fiddled nervously with a funny-looking braided bracelet that hung on her wrist.

When she caught him staring at it, she held it out for him to get a closer look at it.

"Johnnie made this for me. He gave it to me on the day he died."

Oh shit.

"He did a good job." It was all he could think to say as guilt rammed into him. She seemed to be wearing that bracelet a lot. Probably as a reminder of the asshole he was.

He'd expected to see pain in her eyes as she mentioned the bracelet. Instead he saw her bright eyes were filled with hope and it made him shift uncomfortably in his chair. It seemed as if she were now quite ready to hear what he had to say, a total contrast to earlier when she'd woken from her nightmare and hadn't wanted to talk about it.

But he'd known she was dreaming of Johnnie. Had recognized the terror, the hurt and the fear crashing through her eyes.

"You're frowning, McCullen. Thinking about backing out in telling me about Martin?"

"You'll get your story, Brady," he reassured. He just hoped she didn't hate him more than she already did once he was finished telling her the truth about how gullible he'd been when it came to Beth. He wasn't eager to reminisce about his undercover time with Martin either. He hated himself for the pain he brought to her while he grilled her on the witness stand. There was little consolation in the fact if another of Martin's lawyers grilled her, it would have been a hundred times worse for her. He also hated the other things he'd done to gain Martin's lawyers trust.

Once again silence swept between them. After a couple of moments, Jo broke the stillness.

"Okay I'll pose the first question. Why don't you start from the beginning? How did you become interested in Martin?"

Daniel leveled his gaze at her and allowed himself to sail back to the day he'd first learned about Dr. Colby Martin, M.D.

"I know this is cliché but it started with an anonymous phone call."

As he spoke, he noted a subtle change in Brady. She became alert. Her shoulders lifted ever so slightly, her mouth tightened and he distinctly heard her breath hitch. Other than those reactions she remained quiet, waiting for him to continue.

"After a couple of phone calls from a woman who said Martin might be responsible for my brother's so-called suicide in jail, she approached me in the parking lot of the law office I worked at. It was dark, after hours, and I was alone. It was all mysterious cloak and dagger stuff. She wore the cliché trench coat and kept in the shadows of the building as she called out to me. At first I thought maybe one of my partners was trying to play some twisted sick joke on me but then the woman said she was the one who'd called and handed me some emails she said came to her from Steve."

"This woman. Can you identify her?"

“Petite. Red hair. Quite attractive and persuasive. She said Steve had been working for her and some network she belonged with. Angels or something.”

“Cops’ Angels Network?”

Jo’s question obviously stunned McCullen for his face grew a shade paler.

“You know of them?” he asked.

“The woman who met with you is the one who tipped me off you were in that Florida hospital.”

So the woman had managed to get all three of the McCullen brothers involved with the organization, Jo thought. No wonder she had helped Jo find Daniel. Hopefully she would help locate who sent that Saint Christopher to him in Mexico.

“You said your brother sent the woman emails. Those emails could have been staged in order to get you to do what they wanted. Are you sure your brother wrote them?”

She noticed McCullen’s face warm as he obviously thought about his late brother.

“Oh, they were from him all right. I could read his personality in those lines. No matter how businesslike he had to be in his journalism job, he always injected humor into something. He mentioned the ocean wind where he lived making his lips too dry. Suggestions about how he couldn’t wait to get off the island and away from the rotting smell of seaweed. You see, his wife inherited a little lighthouse on some isolated island just off the coast of Eastern Canada. They moved there shortly before his death because they were going to start a family. They’re both writers and were planning to do freelance. Emily was going to homeschool the kids as well as start her own business on the side of her writing.”

McCullen smiled wistfully and Jo couldn’t believe how serene he looked. By the look on his face she sensed he had dreams of having his own family.

“Sounds like a dream place. But Emily didn’t have any idea Steve was working for this Cops’ Angels Network?” she asked.

He shook his head and frowned. “I never told her.”

She should have been told, Jo thought. But she didn’t say anything else about the matter. Instead she needed to focus on Steve’s work regarding Martin.

“What did the emails say?”

“Most of them were short. Reports from Steve regarding his interviews with Martin about Martin’s breaking technology in transplantation. Steve used his journalism job as a cover and got the interviews with Martin that the group asked him to get.”

“What did they want with Martin’s organ transplantation interviews? Why get Steve to interview him? Who would it benefit? Martin wouldn’t be stupid enough to inadvertently give away something that would incriminate himself.”

“Apparently Martin spends most of his time in seclusion. In his hospital labs doing research, and when he travels, it is with the utmost secret. This makes following him a problem. They discovered he enjoys bragging about his accomplishments in order to get research funding from various sources. So Steve was able to tap into that bragging weakness. And because of my brother’s popularity as an award-winning journalist, Martin found it hard to refuse his requests for interviews. The interviews allowed Steve

to draw Martin out into the open. Steve made sure they met in public places such as restaurants in order for another team to follow Martin after the interviews.”

“Makes sense,” Jo acknowledged. She’d also read those articles and interviews Steve had done on Martin’s research, but she had never found anything that would lead her to find a crack into Martin’s underground empire. The interviews stated that Martin was experimenting with new drugs that would prevent rejection of transplanted organs as well as reduce the side effects associated with the current drugs on the market. Side effects such as sterility and bloating. He also was researching techniques into new ways of total eye transplantation instead of only partial transplants such as corneal or retina.

Daniel broke into her thoughts as he continued. “The last email, however, was very informative. Steve said he’d received a computer disc from an anonymous source who had dropped it on his lighthouse front door. This anonymous drop spooked him and he realized he’d put Emily into danger. He said the information in the disc would blow Martin’s illegal transplant organization right out into the open.

“He said he would send a copy to the Cops’ Angel woman, but first he needed to attend to some business. Emily had said he was heading to New York to quit his journalism job that day. He had originally planned on doing it several weeks later but as we can see the appearance of the disc spooked him. He probably wanted to get out of the spotlight and fast.

“It must have made him realize that someone was on to him and his work on Martin. That same day he was arrested for drug possession and thrown into jail. He was dead within hours after that. The only things we got back were his personal effects and his ashes. Mix-up in paperwork they said.”

“He was cremated?”

Daniel nodded.

“I never bought the suicide story they fed us. There was no way Steve would kill himself. He had everything to live for.”

Obviously a setup, Jo mused silently. “Did you try to get the ashes analyzed to make sure they were Steve’s?”

“Unfortunately we were never able to because Emily was so distraught she tossed them into the ocean. She feels pretty bad about it.”

“I bet. So, what happened to the computer disc?” she asked.

“Disappeared. There was a break-in that night at Emily’s lighthouse. Steve’s laptop disappeared, his personal computer, some of his files. If I’d known beforehand Steve was into this shit, I would have locked down the lighthouse. It’s safe to assume the bad guys, maybe Martin himself, somehow got wind of Steve working undercover and had damaging evidence on him. Whoever got the disc most likely wasn’t the Cops’ Angels Network or they wouldn’t have come to me for help.”

“So you were hooked into helping by wanting revenge against Martin.”

McCullen nodded and took several gulps of his coffee before continuing.

“The woman asked if I would agree to go undercover as one of Martin’s lawyers. They would supply the fake background and fake identification. They would make sure

the law partnership Martin used would find me irresistible. I was given a background of being ruthless in winning malpractice lawsuits and an insatiable craving for money.”

“In other words your cover showed those lawyers you could be bought.”

“That’s it, exactly. But it wasn’t easy. Aside from his bragging weakness, Martin is a careful man. Kind of like a godfather of the Mafia. Except he’s the godfather of the underground organ transplant industry. He does most of his dirty work himself and has only trustful family members and friends doing other stuff he needs done. As you saw with Johnnie, Martin goes and gets the body parts that he needs for his research.

“He doesn’t wait for the organs to be donated for scientific research. Obviously he has ties to that foster agency Johnnie was placed with and that’s how he was able to get to the kid. Why Johnnie? The boy didn’t have too many people who would miss him. Aside from his mother, who died on that night on the couch from being injected with a bad batch of drugs, he really had no other family.

“They would have played it out that Johnnie saw his mother die and simply ran away. He would have been reported as a runaway. You can bet though, that Martin had someone nearby ready to come in and dispose of his body.

“Johnnie would have been just another kid who disappeared without a trace, just like thousands of people all over the world disappear. Unfortunately for Martin you showed up when you did. I’m sure if there hadn’t been so much news media hype around you that he would have done the same to you as what he’d done to my brother, killed you and made it look like a suicide or made you disappear without a trace.”

Jo’s stomach somersaulted at McCullen’s words. Martin was truly a monster. What McCullen was saying essentially revealed that Martin pretty much went window-shopping for the body parts he wanted. He’d almost done the same thing to Daniel. Made him mysteriously go missing on that deserted stretch of Florida highway. Martin knew Daniel was a match for him and had taken him down.

“As I said, Martin is a very careful man. He picked that particular law agency to protect his ass for a reason. Those were men he grew up with. Men he went to school with. When I applied for a position, I was as the Cops’ Angel said ‘irresistible’ to them. This organization knows what they’re doing that’s for sure. The law agency hired me almost immediately.”

“And you were able to convince them you could be trusted,” Jo stated.

“They did a good job testing me. They gave me names of judges and prosecutors and the bribes or threats I needed to get them on our side. I was in town doing some unrelated work for Martin’s lawyers when I saw you in that bar. I hadn’t planned on picking you up. I just saw you and, well, I sensed you were heading for trouble and I wanted to stop it from happening. I had no idea you were to be the prime witness. I mean it wasn’t as if we talked much that night.”

He grinned and continued. “I had no idea that the Violet Jocelyn Brady was my sexy hot Violet. Not until I saw you in the courtroom. I was totally shocked, but I knew I had to discredit your testimony to prove to Martin and his lawyers I could finally be trusted.”

“I’m glad I came in handy,” Jo replied tartly, and saw Daniel grimace. Guilt sliced through her at making that jab. She understood that undercover work was dirty and people had to do things they wouldn’t normally do in order to get what they wanted done.

It wasn't McCullen's fault for getting dragged into all this. She could see that now. Could forgive him for that.

"Sorry. My bad," she whispered, trying to ease his sorrow. "I've been angry for a long time. I can't just drop it and pretend nothing happened."

"I don't want you to pretend, Brady. Your feelings matter, despite the reasons of why I did what I did back then to you. If I could have spared you, I would have. I volunteered to grill you. I figured if one of the other lawyers handled you, it would have gone much worse for you. They would have made sure you lost your social worker license. I would have confided in you about why I was killing your testimony but I couldn't risk my cover."

Genuine regret flooded his face and she felt the lingering hate for what he'd done to her diminish.

"So you were able to get your foot in the door. What did you find out?"

"Not much."

Jo's hopes fell somewhat at his answer. Obviously McCullen didn't think he would have useful information for her.

"As I said he's a careful man. I knew this undercover gig could take years so I was willing to be patient to stay under for as long as it took, but then..."

He hesitated and a frown darkened his face. He had mentioned he'd fallen in love.

"Then Beth came into the picture?" she prodded.

"She hit me like a ton of bricks."

Ah yes, Beth. The name Daniel had called out during his drug withdrawal.

"She caught my attention the minute she came into the law office. At first I had no idea who she was. Figured she was a client. She flirted with me. I fell for it and asked her out for coffee. We hit it off right away. Slept together that night. Talked about our dreams. It was unbelievable how attracted we were to each other."

Suddenly he got that same pained expression she saw when she'd wheeled him through the birthing suite in that private hospital while they were escaping.

"She'd smile a smile that literally made my hormones race. I couldn't keep my hands off her. I let the attraction consume me. I was in love. Head over heels in love like a naïve teenager with his first crush. After I was under her spell, she told me she was Martin's granddaughter."

"But it was already too late to get out, wasn't it?" Jo said softly, knowing by the look on McCullen's face that with him, once he gave his heart to a woman he was in love for life.

"Suddenly nothing else mattered. We wanted to be together. Martin got wind of the relationship. Didn't approve of his granddaughter and me together. The fake cover didn't help my chances with her regarding her grandfather. I was no good for her. I wanted money. Grandfather's money."

Jo bet that no man would have been good enough for his granddaughter. She'd read that Elizabeth, her real name, had been raised by her grandfather since she was orphaned at the age of five, after Martin's only daughter and son-in-law died in a head-on crash with a tree. The son-in-law had been drunk.

“Until she and I met, her grandfather had a firm hold on her. I admit she was spoiled. She had the best of everything. He thought she was a sweet, innocent, loyal granddaughter. He had no idea she’d been anything but. Away at college she’d found her way into the BDSM scene. She wanted to get me into it and she wanted to explore it by both of us disappearing in Mexico. As luck would have it, my dad had moved down there shortly after my mom’s death, so I was game to the idea.

“When Martin threatened to disinherit her, she became rebellious, flaunting our relationship even more in his face. I was totally under the spotlight. The group who put me undercover contacted me. Told me to break it off with Beth. Said the assignment was in jeopardy because Martin wouldn’t want his granddaughter involved with someone like me. He might have me killed to get me away from her. I must admit I became defiant. They weren’t going to tell me who I could see and who I couldn’t.”

A grim smile shadowed McCullen’s face as he stood.

“My mouth is getting dry from all this talking. Want another cup of coffee. Brady?”

Jo shook her head. This was a lot to take in. McCullen had fallen in love with Martin’s granddaughter. He’d become defiant. The undercover work was in jeopardy because he was in love. Obviously McCullen was a passionate man when it came to love. She’d experienced his lovemaking. She realized he wouldn’t be fucking her unless he was interested in her. But was he truly interested in her? They’d had a one-night stand and now seemed to be picking up where they’d left off that night.

She watched him pour another coffee. Watched the way his long fingers grabbed the handle of the mug. Watched the confident way he strolled back to the table. When he sat down, he continued.

“Things got out of hand very quickly after that. The organization that put me undercover was right. Martin threatened to have me killed if Beth didn’t stop seeing me. It was a Romeo and Juliet type of scenario playing out now. Beth wanted to get married. I couldn’t deny her, so we married. The undercover case was forgotten.

“We were going to run away to Mexico just like she wanted. I was stupid and bold enough to believe I could protect her from danger. If she had said let’s jump out of an airplane at ten thousand feet without a parachute, I would have done it with her without hesitation.”

They didn’t say love was blind without a reason, Jo pondered as she watched the array of emotions cross McCullen’s face. Pain. Anger. Guilt. Confusion.

“I read Martin’s granddaughter was gunned down. No one knew who’d done it,” Jo mused.

“Martin did it. Beth and I had just gotten married that morning. She was at my undercover-assigned apartment that night. It was raining. Dark. She put on my raincoat to go to the store to pick up something for my dad. They were waiting. Thought she was me and shot her.”

Oh my God.

“I’m so sorry,” Jo soothed. She didn’t know what else to say. Obviously he’d been dealing with his own demons over the years, just as she’d been doing.

McCullen stretched his arms over his head. The gesture sent the muscles in his arms rippling, and despite her sorrow for him, her breath hitched at the intoxicating sight. Damn him for looking so hot even when he was in so much emotional pain.

“Nothing can be done to change things that have happened. We just go on with the hand dealt to us,” he said.

True. How very true.

“What I’ve said pretty much covers everything. Now you know why I went undercover and why I did to you what I did. Any questions?”

She couldn’t think of anything, so she shook her head.

He grinned, obviously very relieved this was over.

“And now I have a question for you, Brady. After everything I did to you on the witness stand and me almost getting you killed in that garage, you’re still sticking to me like glue. I’m assuming it’s my charm?”

Jo couldn’t help but laugh and roll her eyes.

He stood and grabbed both their mugs, his gaze capturing hers. Her mouth went dry as he said, “I’ll leave you with this to ponder while I take a shower. Do you always laugh to hide your true feelings, Brady?”

He winked, placed the mugs in the kitchen sink and walked out of the room.

It looked like McCullen was back to his old charming sexy self again. Now that the full truth was out about him not being a monster as she’d once believed, there were no reasons not to follow her instincts when it came to their sexual attraction.

No more excuses, Brady, she chastised herself. No more excuses.

Chapter Fifteen

Daniel stood beneath the shower spray with his hands pressed up against the ceramic tile, making sure the plaster cast on his left wrist stayed out of water's way as much as possible. His breaths came fast as the hot water peppered his tense back muscles.

It hadn't been so bad dealing with the past, he mused. Once he started talking, things just flowed like poison being lanced from his soul. While he spoke, he watched the fragments of dislike for him literally dissolve from Brady's eyes. It didn't give him the best of feelings to know he had to help her deal with what he'd done to her in the past. It would have been better had he not been involved in that trial or, for that matter, that Johnnie had never been murdered in the first place.

He'd felt like a dirtbag ripping her apart and had found justification in doing so because the only thing on his mind had been finding Steve's killer.

He didn't blame Jo for not liking what he'd done to her on the stand. Over the course of his career as a criminal defense lawyer he discredited many witnesses who testified against his clients. Part of his job entailed looking for flaws in testimony, exposing them and then leaving it up to the judges and juries to do with the information what they had to do. But not once had he truly put himself in his victim's shoes.

Not until now. Not until this morning when he'd literally felt Jo's pain slice through his entire being when she woke to find him in her bedroom, her face contorted in anguish. He'd known instinctively she'd been having a nightmare about Johnnie and the trial. Had wanted so badly to soothe the hurt from her eyes, but he knew she wouldn't accept anything from him, no romance, no love, nothing until he told her about why he'd done what he had to her on the witness stand and why he'd been working as one of Martin's lawyers.

Turning a bit in the shower, he grimaced as a jet of water massaged a particularly sore knot in a shoulder muscle. It reminded him to check Brady's wound and make sure it was still healing properly.

His thoughts turned to a sexual nature as he thought about her. He turned totally around and clutched the casted hand against his chest out of the water's way as he let the spray of heat hit his cock. Immediately visions of Brady rushed to his mind. Visions of how hot she looked when she shuffled into the kitchen wearing that bulky robe and her messy chestnut curls running over her shoulders in shiny waves.

The hot water lashed his cock, awakening the sensitive length as he fantasized about reaching out and untying the robe's belt. Peeling the openings aside, he would take her breasts into his hands and feel their warm heaviness. She would sigh with satisfaction as he thumbed her nipples until they peaked like pink rosebuds.

Keeping his eyes closed, Daniel reached down with his good hand and cupped his balls, pretending Jo's hand clasped him there. She wouldn't be shy, he mused as he let go and stroked his fingertips along the length of his shaft. She would enjoy exploring his

cock and balls, and she'd squeeze and massage him until his breath came in aroused gasps.

He would lower his head and take one of her pink nipples into his mouth. She would cry out with a softness that encouraged him to suck her beaded, warm nipple until she held his head, pushing his face into her plumpness. Quivering, she would gyrate her hips against him, her hot body melting against his. Nice and soft and curvy.

Daniel's breath hitched as he stroked his cock harder, enjoying the expanding of his flesh beneath his fingers.

He'd aim his cock at her clit, using his bulging cock head to massage her there. Caressing the sensitive bud nice and slow at first and then when she started to gasp from the pleasant sensations she would beg him for more. He would increase the pressure, sliding his cock head against her tender flesh up and down, up and down, until her hands were clapping his shoulders, her fingernails digging painfully into his muscles, her breasts heaving as she panted wildly and her violet-blue eyes sparkling with need.

Daniel groaned at the vision. He could almost imagine the smell of her sex wafting through the steamy shower. Could almost taste her soft lips. Could feel her scented breath against his mouth as she cried out to him to take her.

Gripping her firm hips, he would push her up against the tiled shower wall and press his cock into her.

Daniel hissed as he felt her wet tightness envelop him. He was almost too big for her, almost too full as he sunk deep into her channel. But her muscles stretched and she keened with satisfaction as he began a slow, steady pump.

Her cries for him to fuck her hard made his balls tighten as his orgasm began to take hold. Her vaginal muscles clamped around his flesh like steel silk, pulsing and massaging until he cried out softly. The brilliant climax spiraled up his shaft like searing lightning bolts, slamming into him, making him explode onto his fingers, his hot semen spurting into the shower spray.

Daniel groaned out his release. Hoped to hell Brady hadn't heard. Or maybe she should hear? He grinned. Wouldn't that be something to see? Brady's reaction to how much his fantasy of her pleased him.

When the orgasm slid away, Daniel sighed with satisfaction.

It felt good. Really good. It was a first-class way to release his sexual tension as well as the stress he'd been holding on to for too long. He definitely felt better now.

Grabbing the bar of soap from the nearby holder, he started soaping himself, not the easiest to do with keeping one hand away from the water. The smooth bubbles and slippery soap felt good against his skin as he rubbed himself. Suddenly everything felt good, he realized as he lifted his wrist over his head and let the hot spray pour against his face.

His spirits were up, his emotions weren't focused on Beth and physically something hummed inside him. A nice sexual hum. He liked it.

Come to think of it, he hadn't orgasmed this quick and hard in quite a long time. Hadn't felt like masturbating to visions of a woman in a long time either. His attraction to Brady had him masturbating. He was definitely on the mend.

And that was a good sign.

* * * * *

“Hey, Tiny,” Jo’s brother’s deep voice shattered her thoughts as she sat at the kitchen table where McCullen had left her. She had no idea how long she sat there thinking about Daniel’s undercover work, Johnnie and Martin, but it couldn’t have been too long because the creaks and groans of the shower taps being turned off indicated he was finished his shower.

She would give him a little time to clear out and then head in for a shower herself. She needed to feel the welcome heat of water against her flesh. Needed to feel happy that McCullen wasn’t a bad guy after all.

“Hey, bro.” She smiled up at him, thrilled to see him looking so cheerful. She hadn’t seen him this joyful since before his wife died several years earlier.

And obviously he must have showered at Kellie’s place if the dampness of his dark hair was an indication.

“How come you’re up so early?” he asked as he undid his black leather jacket, shrugged it off and draped it across the back of the chair McCullen had used earlier. She could see the sparkle of mischievous in his eyes and knew he meant to have a field day about her and McCullen spending the night alone under his roof. Obviously she was right.

“I would have thought the two of you would still be in bed.” Jessie winked.

“And I thought you and Kellie were just friendly neighbors,” she shot back.

He chuckled and wiggled his eyebrows at her.

“We are. I just needed an excuse to get out of the house so you and Sleeping Beauty could play house by yourselves.”

Jo ignored his teasing jab and frowned. “You didn’t have to clear out. There’s nothing going on between McCullen and me. He slept out on the pullout couch where you told him to sleep and I took your room like you said. I thought you were going to use one of the upstairs bedrooms?”

Jessie grinned sheepishly. “Well, actually they’re both out of commission. Did I not mention that the heaters upstairs are on the blitz? I must have forgotten to tell you. Anyways, I haven’t had a chance to take a look at them. They’re old. It’s a downfall of a century-old house.

“Lots of things need to be replaced. Maybe I’ll put new heaters in when the apple season is out of the way, but there’s no need to keep the upstairs heated with just me around here. Saves on electricity.”

“We could have gone to a motel. I didn’t mean to literally put you out, Jess.”

“Hey, if Kellie hadn’t come to my rescue, I would have insisted you and Sleeping Beauty take my bed and I would have taken the sofa. Besides, I wanted to see you and the man you’ve got the hots for. You know what they say about there being a fine line between love and hate.”

At the word “hate” she got a bad, sinking feeling in her tummy. She didn’t want anyone thinking that she thought ill of Daniel. At least not anymore.

“Who told you I hated him?”

“Sara said you and his brother had quite the blowup when you found out Sleeping Beauty was actually the bastard who fried you up on the witness chair years ago.”

“Yeah, well it took me by surprise he was the same guy as Mathew’s brother. But he’s explained everything and things are okay between us.”

Jessie’s eyes widened in apparent disbelief.

“Just okay? He didn’t act out on his jealous impulses last night and lay claim to his woman?”

Jo shook her head and hoped to high heaven her suddenly hot cheeks weren’t flashing a warning sign that he was embarrassing her. God, would he guess that she’d slept with him? He would tease her endlessly.

“You’re blushing, sis. That justifies my instincts that something hot is going on between you two,” her brother laughed as he stood and headed for the coffee machine.

“But that’s nothing compared to Sleeping Beauty’s face after you got pissed off at him last night and left the kitchen. He looked like a little lost puppy dog. You may not realize it, Tiny, but you’ve got that man collared and on a leash and he isn’t going anywhere but near you.”

Jo laughed at his description of McCullen. A collar and leash might be an interesting thing to try out on him someday.

She remained silent as she watched her brother grab a mug from the cabinet and pour himself a cup of coffee. She hoped he would turn around before he took a sip of McCullen’s lousy coffee. She would like to see Jessie’s reaction at how someone could so easily ruin pre-mixed coffee. It would be a good payback for his comments and for leaving her alone with McCullen last night.

“What’s on your agenda today? Are you going to hang around for a bit so we can catch up?” he asked.

“If you really insist.”

She lowered her voice in case McCullen was within hearing distance.

“I’m waiting to hear back from Sara. I called and left a message on her cell. Have you heard anything in the past few days from her? And when the wedding might be?”

Her brother sat down opposite her and grabbed the jar of cream.

“I talked to her the same day you called and told her you had Mathew’s brother. She said they were waiting to hear back from the preacher Mathew wanted to marry them. I guess the guy is someone Matt knows. The preacher’s been cleared by Witness Protection so he’s a man they can trust. But the preacher’s wife went into labor earlier than expected so the wedding is delayed a day or two until he can leave her.”

Jo braced herself, holding back a laugh as Jessie lifted his mug to his lips. As he sipped, his nose scrunched up in disgust and his mouth twisted into a delightful grimace.

“This tastes like shit. Who made it?”

“You should know by now that making coffee isn’t my cup of tea, Jess. And obviously it isn’t McCullen’s either. Sorry, I guess I should have warned you.”

Not. Payback’s a bitch, brother, she chuckled silently.

“Sleeping Beauty made it?”

Jo nodded.

Jessie swore softly as he stood. With mug in hand he headed for the counter where he tossed the contents into the sink, grabbed the coffee pot and poured the remainder of the coffee down the sink as well.

“I just hope his cooking isn’t as bad as his coffee, Tiny, or you’re in really big trouble.”

Oh great, she’d just handed Jessie more joking fodder.

“Okay, I think it’s best I get dressed before you start in on my lousy culinary skills or have McCullen and me married and starving to death,” Jo replied as she stood.

“Don’t be too sure it won’t happen between the two of you,” Jessie called out as she quickly escaped through the doorway.

Cripes. Sometimes her brother could be such a doorknob with his teasing. Why didn’t he just forget about McCullen and her getting together? It wouldn’t happen. No way in hell.

She passed through the living room and noticed McCullen still hadn’t come out of the bathroom. If she hurried, she could pass the door and get into her room before he came out.

She picked up her speed.

Too late!

The bathroom door swung inward and he stepped out, turned and she slammed right into McCullen.

In an effort to brace herself for the impact, her hands came up and slapped right onto his naked muscular chest. Touching him, feeling the powerful flex of muscles quivering beneath her fingertips, sent her senses flying into alert mode within a split second, oh heck, even earlier than that.

Heat rose into her cheeks as she noticed how intimately her fingers splayed across his rock-hard muscles.

And, boy, did he ever smell good. A rich scent of soap and shampoo and all things man.

Very man, she thought as her fingers sifted through damp chest curls.

“Whoa there, Brady. What’s the hurry?” His voice rumbled from deep in his chest.

Despite the thick robe she wore, a part of it was definitely open down there because she could feel the heat of his thigh brush the inside of her pajama-clad leg.

Okay. How in the world did this position develop? she wondered. Feeling heady, she blew out a breath and suddenly wished she hadn’t been wearing anything beneath the robe.

She hadn’t even realized McCullen was clasping her upper arms. The last thing she wanted was for him to see how rattled his nearness made her so she snapped her hands off that gorgeously rock-hard chest and made herself meet his gaze.

“No hurry, McCullen. Just need to get dressed.”

“As I said, what’s the hurry?”

His eyes twinkled with sexual amusement.

"My brother is back. He's in the kitchen," she said quickly.

"So? He had his woman last night. I'm sure he won't mind if I have mine this morning."

Oh God. Could this actually be happening?

Visions of McCullen taking her up against the wall right here and now shot another round of heat flaring into her cheeks.

He grinned and loosened his grip on her arms.

"Are you blushing, Brady?"

Sweet Jesus, make the floor swallow me up! Now! Please!

She forced herself to straighten in defiance.

"I don't blush, McCullen. It's all that nice fresh Canadian air. Now if you don't mind?"

"Don't mind if I do, Brady."

Before she could even blink, McCullen grabbed her wrists, much in the same way he did that first night they'd been together, and brought them up against the wall over her head and held her captive there.

The erotic position stunned her to the point where she thought maybe she was indeed reliving a memory.

With the fingers from his injured hand he firmly held her chin and his head lowered. His eyes were lusty as his lips parted.

"Kiss me, Brady," he whispered, his warm breath caressing her face. His breath smelled minty, she realized, indicating he'd brushed his teeth. He'd had a shave too because his early morning shadow was gone from his chin and cheeks. His face drew closer, blurred and automatically her lips parted as if having a mind of their own.

She closed her eyes in anticipation and the impact of his mouth melting over hers staggered her to the point where she could do nothing but eagerly accept the powerful thrust of his tongue entering her mouth.

Oh lordy, did he ever kiss good, she thought as her mind whirled out of control. She found herself wishing for her hands to be free so she could run them through his chest hair again, but she liked this position of him having power over her, so instead, she kissed him back.

Blood poured through her ears in an almost-deafening roar, tuning out all common sense. For a moment it was just the two of them.

Kissing.

Bodies pressed together. Desire shooting through her pussy.

She felt alive. Aroused. Very much aroused.

It wasn't until she heard herself moaning and the clatter of pots and pans erupting from the kitchen area that reality crashed into her, making her bite McCullen's bottom lip, not too hard but just hard enough for him to take the hint that her damn brother was in the house.

He stopped.

“You’re such a tease, Brady,” McCullen whispered against her mouth. “But next time, there won’t be any interruptions. Remember that.”

His eyes blazed with the fierce promise and it literally stole her breath.

She almost toppled as he let go of her wrists and stepped aside. Thankfully she kept herself grounded. She felt anything but as he brushed past her. She was flying. Flying high with anticipation and arousal.

As he strolled down the hallway, she knew she shouldn’t look at him but damned if she could stop herself from dropping her gaze to get an awesome view of his bare waist and the towel riding oh-so low over his lean hips.

“We really shouldn’t stop meeting like this, Brady.” His chuckled reply came as he turned and caught her watching him.

His words made her remember the other night in the motel room when she’d fallen into his arms.

“I want to see that wound. I’ll get my clothes out of the bathroom in a few minutes and then you can have it. Forgot to bring in a fresh pair of underwear from the shopping bag. Is there anything you need? Panties perhaps? Not that you’ll be wearing them for long.”

He smiled a sexual smile that made her belly do some very nice flips.

Oh dear. Her cheeks were really on fire now.

“I’m fine, McCullen,” she said. Damned if she didn’t sound way too breathless as she opened the bedroom door and slipped inside.

Once she closed the door, she leaned her back up against it, her heart pounding a mile a minute.

Not that you’ll be wearing your panties for long?

Holy moly! If that wasn’t a message as to his intentions for her, then she didn’t know what was.

* * * * *

Jo was still sexually excited after taking her shower. McCullen’s kiss, the erotic way he held her wrists over her head, the feel of his hard body pressing her into the wall, had her so aroused she wasn’t sure she could pull herself together enough to face him.

When a knock rapped at the bathroom door, Jo literally jumped.

“Yes?” she called out, hoping to hell it wasn’t who she suspected it might be.

“I need to check your shoulder.”

Shit. McCullen.

“Don’t worry about it. It’s fine.”

“Unlock the door, Brady, or I’ll give your brother something to tease you about by me breaking it down.” His voice sounded low, sexy and determined.

She didn’t doubt he would do just that. The last thing she wanted was to give Jessie something to tease her about, especially after what she’d said to him in the kitchen earlier, telling him there was nothing going on between McCullen and herself. Sighing

heavily, she made sure her towel was knotted tight and her breasts weren't the least bit showing before unlocking the door and letting him in.

"Geez, Brady, I don't know what you're afraid of. I'm not the one who goes around biting," he chuckled as he obviously remembered her giving his lip a warning bite earlier in the hallway. He entered the bathroom with the supplies they would need for her shoulder and placed the bag on the counter.

Part of her wanted him to grab her, push her up against the wall and start fucking. Another part, the shy part that was pissing her off, made sure she avoided his gaze as he closed the door behind him.

"Your brother just got a phone call that's got him all excited," he said as he arranged the items he needed on the countertop and told her to turn around so he could look at her shoulder wound. He made no mention of what happened earlier in the hallway and she was grateful. Hopefully her luck would hold out until she got her bearings. That is if she ever did regain her bearings from that charged kiss he gave her.

His scent wrapped around her and she thought the same thing she'd thought earlier. She liked the way he smelled. Heck, who was she kidding, she loved the way he smelled. Who would have thought shampoo, soap, aftershave, minty toothpaste and man made such a fantastic combination? And why hadn't she noticed it earlier?

She jumped as he smeared cool ointment across the tender wound.

"Sorry," he whispered.

She suddenly wished the bathroom mirror wasn't fogged up so she could watch his expression while he tended to her. He probably had that tender look she adored so much. Shoot! Why hadn't she wiped that mirror?

She wondered if he was reeling as much from their kiss as she was? Had she turned him off by biting him? By the comment he'd made upon entering the bathroom, she got the impression he found her bite amusing. She certainly could think of other places she'd like to bite and nibble on, and they weren't his lips. His nipples, his belly, his cock. Whew, her cheeks were warming up again.

Not good.

She remained silent as he prattled on about her brother's phone call about a last-minute order for Golden Delicious apples.

Excitement rushed through Jo at the mention of her favorite apple. With everything that had happened over the past few days, she'd totally forgotten apples were in season.

"We'll have to pick ourselves a couple bags of Golden Delicious before we leave," she found herself saying.

"He mentioned if the two of us wouldn't mind joining in on picking today. Think your shoulder could handle it?"

"Only if you think your wrist can handle it, McCullen?"

"Tell you the truth, I don't think I need this cast. The wrist feels fine and I can use my fingers no problem, so things should be healed already."

She heard him snip off a few strips of tape then felt a thick wad of gauze cover her wound, followed by the pressure of his placing on the tape. She felt his breath whisper against her ear and trembled, anticipating another kiss.

Instead, he said, “The damn thing is a bitch in the shower, always getting in the way of more important things, if you know what I mean.”

She was sure there was a sexual undertone in that remark so she remained silent as he repacked the supplies.

“I can’t believe I’m actually saying this, Brady, but hurry up and get dressed. Jessie’s making blueberry pancakes and hashed browns for us. Let’s not keep him waiting. I’m starved.”

She yelped as he gave her a quick smack to her towel-covered ass, and before she could grab a brush to hit him, he was out the door with a laugh that had her mind whirling for a way to pay him back.

* * * * *

Breakfast with her brother and McCullen turned out to be not as bad as she anticipated. McCullen acted like a perfect gentleman, much to Jo’s surprise, and he seemed quite interested in learning from Jessie about the daily running of an apple orchard.

Unfortunately for her, by the end of breakfast, Jessie had wrangled Jo and Daniel into picking apples for the day. Picking apples wasn’t what bothered her though. Picking apples with Daniel in the most secluded section of the orchard with only the two of them is what bugged her. Plenty of alone time. If she’d put up the least bit of resistance to her brother’s suggestion about Daniel and her working by themselves, Jessie would begin with his teasing yet again. Of course McCullen would find it most amusing too if she’d said no to Jessie’s suggestion.

Dammit! How did she allow herself to get into these predicaments?

Chapter Sixteen

After the best-tasting breakfast Jo had eaten in a long time, her brother supplied them with a battered beige van so they could drive to the section where the Golden Delicious apple trees grew. Rain gear had been piled on one of the backseats and a giant cardboard box partially covered with a red and white tablecloth hid what Jo assumed would be their lunch.

The idea of being alone with McCullen and working in the most-secluded section of the apple orchard made Jo desperate for a good excuse to get out of this trap she'd conveniently fallen into.

Not to mention trying to forget the sizzling kiss and sexual threat he'd given her in the hallway wouldn't be easy if it was just the two of them. The memory of his hard body pressed against hers made her so hot and confused she had trouble keeping her attention off him as they busily picked apples.

Despite their solitude, it was the clear blue sky and fresh autumn air that thankfully pushed away some of her sexual awareness and Jo found herself growing cheerful. Soon she was picking like a lean, mean apple-picking machine, alternating between delicately placing apples into the basket hanging off her ladder and taking juicy bites out of her current Delicious Golden victim.

Daniel proved to be a very good partner, having no problem keeping up with her. To her surprise he used his injured hand almost as well as his good hand to strip the opposite sides of the trees she worked on. She found it even more pleasant when she saw the red color blush across his cheeks, giving him a healthy glow. And she was surprised to discover she truly enjoyed his company when he wasn't confusing her with his sexual threats and scorching looks.

They picked the rest of the morning in relative silence, each of them enjoying the warm October sunshine beating down upon them. Amidst safe, quiet conversations about her brother and his orchard, they ate a hearty and hot lunch of Jessie's apple cider stew packed inside a couple of wide mouth thermoses, along with cold homemade beer and some freshly baked apple spice muffins for dessert. Knowing this was a tight deadline for Jessie and a truck would come later this afternoon to pick up the bins of apples, they quickly returned to work.

In the late afternoon hour they wearily turned into the last row of Golden Delicious trees and Daniel immediately pointed to the numerous white wooden crates lining the edge of the orchard.

"What are those wooden crates for?"

"They house the orchard's bees," she explained as she placed her ladder next to the tree.

Grabbing her basket, she hung it on a rung and began picking along the bottom of her side of the tree.

“Jessie’s got his own bees?” He sounded surprised as he joined her in picking along the bottom of his side of the tree.

“Actually the bees belong to Stick, the foreman. Beekeeping is a hobby of his. In the spring when the trees are in full bloom, Jessie and Stick ride up and down the rows of trees with their tractors, spraying the trees with a chemical bee scent. The chemical attracts the bees to the open blossoms and encourages them to stay longer, thus producing more fruit.”

“So that’s the secret to so many apples,” Daniel chuckled.

“There’s more trade secrets,” Jo admitted.

“Like?”

Jo smiled at the curiosity glowing in Daniel’s eyes as he stopped and peered at her through the branches. His hair was all mussed from the breeze and his shirt was half open, giving her a glimpse of sweat glistening on his chest and she didn’t miss the curly chest hairs peeking out too.

Ignoring the sexual awareness fluttering in her abdomen, Jo forced herself to keep picking.

“Pruning. Hand thinning—”

“Hand thinning? What’s that?”

“When the bees pollinate the apple blossoms properly there are way too many apples growing too close together, they call these bunches ‘clusters’. The workers come along and pinch two to three apples from the clusters, allowing the remaining apples to grow larger.”

“People do that kind of work? They check the whole tree?”

“From top to bottom.”

“You ever try it?”

Pride swelled through Jo as she thought about how much she’d helped her brother get this orchard up and running.

“I’ve had my hand in almost every job in here. Planting trees, pruning, using the tractor to spray, cutting the grass beneath the trees with the bush hog machine and I even helped install those.” Jo pointed to the endless single line of a thin, black plastic hose running along the foot of the row of trees they were working on.

“That was my next question. What are they?” he asked as he continued picking toward her.

“There’s a pump house down by the creek. When the pump is on, the hoses carry water up from the creek. Each tree has its own emitter. An emitter is a tiny hole where a small controlled amount of water leaks into the earth beneath the trees, day and night as long as the pump is on.”

“Irrigation. I should have guessed. From what Jessie and you have been telling me I can see that tons of work goes into running an apple orchard. And lots of fringe benefits too!” Daniel chuckled near her and took a giant bite out of one of the apples, sending juice flying everywhere.

Jo laughed and helped herself to another sweet treat, biting into her luscious treasure. They grinned at each other for a long time, happily munching on their apples as if they

were old friends enjoying each other's company. Suddenly Jo found herself feeling a bit too relaxed and started back to her picking.

"Ow! Shit!" he complained a moment later as he cracked his cast against the aluminum ladder.

"Why don't you take a break and grab the last beer out of the van?" she suggested. He was getting tired and had been hitting his casted wrist quite often over the past hour or so. The last thing she wanted to do was go to a doctor or a hospital here to check out his wrist. He didn't have any identification or any medical insurance on him here in Canada. With her luck their location would somehow be given to Martin and he'd find them.

She had to be careful, just as McCullen said Martin was careful. She needed to be in her line of business. Until meeting McCullen, she had been cautious in her career as a private eye to the point of paranoia. Since meeting him again though, she had to admit she'd slacked off, allowing herself to become lax in the security department. To the point where she hadn't truly thought about how Martin had honed in on them at that motel in Georgia. And none of her contacts had called back to let her know if they'd found anything either.

The not knowing how they'd been found bothered her to the point where all day she'd been experiencing odd little prickles of warning at the base of her neck. Something was making her uneasy and damned if she could figure out what.

Gritting his teeth as he lifted the basket full of apples off the ladder rung, he said smoothly, "I can handle it, Brady. I wouldn't want to leave you alone. You might miss me."

He chuckled as he walked the short length to the large empty bin at the top of their row. As he leaned over the wood container and gently let the apples roll from his basket into the bin she got a nice profile of his curvy ass.

A very nice ass, she thought as she remembered seeing the flap of his hospital gown open several times when they'd made their escape in the hospital staircase back in Florida. A very nice ass that she wouldn't mind seeing again.

Suddenly he tensed into an upright position and she heard the low hum of an approaching vehicle.

"Someone's coming," he called to her, and hung his basket on the edge of the bin as he waited to see who it was.

Up the laneway she saw Jessie's pickup roar into the row they were working. She didn't like the quick way he was driving and nervousness shifted through her.

The nervousness spread into an icy shiver of warning as her brother came to an abrupt stop beside their tree and rolled down the window. He looked far from the teasing, happy brother she'd left this morning. He looked pale, worried and anxious.

"What's wrong, Jess?" Daniel asked as he strolled to the truck, concern quite evident in his voice.

"Colby Martin. Up at the house. I'd recognize that bastard anywhere."

Jo went cold as her brother continued in a frantic rush.

“He’s with three others. They’ve got guns. One of them was holding something else in his hand. It was too big for a cell phone. Maybe a GPS tracking unit? I don’t know. I wasn’t close enough to get a good look. Do you have GPS on your rental?”

An odd tangle of disbelief and terror shot through her. For a split second she thought Jessie might be playing a really bad joke on them. But brutal reality pushed through that hope as she started toward the van and her gun in the glove compartment.

“No, there’s no GPS,” she said as she picked up speed and left McCullen to talk with Jessie.

“Were you seen?” she heard McCullen ask as she opened the van door and slid the key into the glove compartment slot. They’d moved the van here earlier in the day so they wouldn’t have to walk far when they finished picking. Thank God they had that foresight. The compartment door opened and relief flooded through her at the sight of her silver handgun. The relief pushed aside a bit of her panic as the cool metal slid against her palm. There was no way in hell Martin was taking McCullen down again. Not over her dead body. Sliding the gun into the waistband she pushed the weapon against the small of her back and quickly returned to Jessie and McCullen.

“I was in the barn,” Jessie was saying. “I heard the car drive past and watched from the window as the four men got out. I couldn’t believe it was Martin. At least not here and in broad daylight. They walked up to my door and I watched them knock. While they waited, they made sure no one was watching and withdrew their guns. I noticed one of the men holding a little computer and he was tapping on the screen like he was frustrated.”

Jo had never seen her brother talk so much when he was upset. It was a wonder he could keep everything straight in his head as he continued to speak.

“Needless to say, when I watched them break into my house, I jumped into my truck, which I had thankfully parked in behind the barn in the shade, and took the back road here. I doubt they saw me, but I didn’t like the idea that they’re here in broad daylight with guns. Stick and the crew of pickers are quitting in about half an hour and they’ll be passing the house on their way out.

“I need to warn them and I would have called Stick and you guys, but the cell battery died yesterday and I forgot to recharge it last night. I need to get over to the crew and call 9-1-1 and get the cops over here.”

“Here, use my cell.” Jo lifted the phone from her pocket and handed it to Jessie.

As her brother made the calls, she found herself gazing up the laneway Jessie had just come down, fully expecting Martin’s car to come roaring toward them. When she saw nothing, she hoped Jessie was right. Maybe Martin hadn’t seen or heard the truck heading this way. But if Jessie was right, Martin was tracking them in some way and she had no idea how.

“Brady, I think I might know how he found us again,” McCullen said tightly. When she looked over at him, the nice color he’d acquired from the fresh air had vanished. He looked pale again and she suddenly felt sick to her stomach at the twisted anguish on his face.

“Martin is a careful man. What if he anticipated a rescue and implanted a tracking device on me?”

At his words, a fresh rise of terror sifted through her. Even while Jo shook her head in denial, she wondered if McCullen might be right. It would be a viable explanation as to how they were found twice now. But if McCullen had a tracking device embedded on him, why did Martin and his men wait so long to appear? They could have come last night. Surprised them. Or hit them any time since they'd escaped that first time. It just didn't make sense. Why here in broad daylight? Unless Martin was getting desperate for his lungs? Desperate people did make mistakes.

"If I have a device on me, then it's best the two of you get away from me," McCullen warned, and started backing away from Jessie's truck. She had the feeling he was going to run so she reached out and grabbed his upper arm stopping him cold.

"We're not leaving you, McCullen. We'll wait for the cops," Jessie reassured.

She felt the powerful flex of muscles beneath her fingers and she knew McCullen was debating whether to listen to Jessie or follow his own instincts, which she sensed was wrench free from her grasp and lead Martin away from the area by running.

"This is not the time to freak out, McCullen. I've got a gun. If Martin shows up, I can keep them at bay until the cops get here."

Despite her reassurance, she felt the adrenaline rushing through her like a rocket. She wanted to get away from here. Wanted to keep moving so Martin wouldn't harm Jessie or other innocent bystanders.

Shit. She shouldn't have come here. Shouldn't have put everyone in such danger just because she'd wanted to see her brother again.

"It's done. Stick is gonna call the cops and tell them our location in the orchard." Jessie replied as he handed her back the cell phone.

McCullen's arm flexed beneath her fingers again, making her grip tighten. She doubted she could hold him if he decided to break free but she sure wasn't going to let him go it alone.

But how in the world could she convince him to stick with her?

As if in answer to her question she heard the far away toot of an approaching train along the nearby train tracks and suddenly had her answer. If McCullen was right and he did have a tracking device embedded on him, they would have to go somewhere and check him for the device. Somewhere away from here. Catching the train might be the solution to their immediate problem. Martin wouldn't be able to stop a train. At least not for a while.

"Okay McCullen get in the truck. Jessie, drive us to the train tracks. We can hop the train and that way if we're being tracked Martin can follow the train and lead the gunmen away from this area. That way everyone is safe," Jo said quickly.

"Are you sure?" Jessie's brows were furrowed in a frown and he looked dead set against her idea.

The train tooted again. It was getting closer. Mental calculations had them missing the train if they didn't get moving now.

"Let's go!" she said, and to her relief McCullen allowed her to pull him to the other side of the truck. He opened the door and climbed inside. She quickly followed.

Jessie didn't even wait until the truck door was closed before he jammed on the gas. The truck lurched forward and Jo swore as she almost lost her grip on the handle. McCullen grabbed her arm, preventing her from falling out, and allowed her to swing the door shut. When she focused her attention ahead, her heart lurched as the trees whizzed past at a frantic speed and her brother drove like a bat out of hell, knocking apples off nearby branches of the few remaining trees they'd still had left to pick.

"Sorry about your apple order, Jess," Jo said as she double-checked her back pocket to make sure she had her wallet, gun and cell phone firmly in their places. Thankfully they were.

"Don't worry about it, Tiny. There are a hell of a lot of more important things to do right now—like catching that train!" Jessie yelled as they reached the end of the row of trees.

"It'll be a freight train," he continued. "It always comes through around this time. It'll be going slow because of the sharp turn up the track so you can catch it if you run fast."

"McCullen has new sneakers," she joked, trying to shake off a bit of the adrenaline rush zipping through her at the thought Martin was probably hot on their heels if Daniel did have that implant. Hopping the train was the best thing to do. It would buy them time and hopefully Martin wouldn't even guess they were on the train.

Jessie swung the vehicle onto a laneway so sharply that she tumbled against McCullen, who grinned that tummy-tilting sexy grin. His eyes sparkled as he whispered low enough for only her to hear, "We do seem to be crashing into each other a lot, don't we? Don't think I haven't forgotten that promise earlier this morning about your underwear. Once I check myself out for bugs and get rid of it, I'll be back for you and we'll continue where we left off this morning."

Oh lordy! Even under this type of pressure the man thought sex! But there was no way she would let him get on the train alone.

"I can see it!" Jessie shouted. Anxiety laced his voice and he slammed harder on the gas, pushing them against the bench seat.

The truck now ran adjacent to the train tracks and down along the west end a yellow beam of light sliced through the late-afternoon sunshine. Jo could tell the train wasn't travelling too fast, just as Jessie had predicted. They would make it if they ran good and hard as it passed.

As Jessie brought the truck to a skidding halt, the three of them hopped out of the truck. Hiding behind a weeping willow tree so the train engineer wouldn't get suspicious, they waited for the train.

"Just so we're clear, McCullen. I am coming with you," she stated in defiance. At her words, he swung his gaze upon her and she noted the firm set of his lips and the anger flashing in his eyes.

"If you're coming with me, then you'll be doing the strip search, Brady. And I'll be expecting the same liberties to your body."

She heard Jessie chuckle and felt her pulse pound at McCullen's threat. Son of a bitch. He was trying to scare her away. Screw him. She didn't scare that easily.

"I said I'm coming with you, McCullen."

His lips slanted upward ever so gently. “No matter how much I want your hands on my body, Brady, it’s too dangerous for you to come with me. I want you safe and that means away from me.”

“Sorry, McCullen, but I didn’t get your ass out of the hospital so I could lose it on a train. I’m coming with you and that’s final.” She ignored the narrowing of his eyes and before he could argue with her again she turned to her brother.

“You come with us, Jessie. If McCullen’s theory is wrong, then Martin has figured out who I am. He’ll be wanting to know where I went. With him being here in daylight he’s desperate.”

Jessie reached out and rubbed her wounded shoulder affectionately. Did he know about the bullet wound? Had Daniel told him?

“Don’t worry about me, Tiny. I’m a pretty tough guy, but I’ll wait around and wait for the cops. When I find out anything I’ll call you on the cell. Now come here and give me a hug.”

Jo almost broke down into a washer full of tears when her brother wrapped his arms tight around her and gave her a giant hug. He let go of her and reached over to swat Daniel’s back.

“It’s no use arguing with my sister. She always gets what she wants, Dan.”

“I said she’s not coming. I’m going alone.”

McCullen’s calm words tore through Jo like an explosion.

“The hell you are. I’m coming with you,” she growled, not liking the frown on Daniel’s face. A frown that indicated what he said was law.

Before she could tell McCullen where to go, Jessie broke in. “You better get ready because the train is almost here.”

The roar of the approaching train set Jo’s teeth to rattling and her adrenaline pumping.

After a few cars had gone by, she spotted a partially open boxcar and got ready to move. To her surprise Daniel grabbed her hand and pulled her along with him.

Within minutes McCullen let go of her hand and managed to climb into the open doorway of the boxcar. For a horrible split second she thought she wouldn’t be able to get on board herself, but then his hand sailed out and he grabbed her wrist.

With relative ease he pulled her up onto the metal opening and a moment later they stood in the doorway, huffing and puffing from the exertion of running to catch the train. Jessie was waving and they both waved back. Soon her heart sunk as he vanished from view and the train took the curve, picking up speed.

“He’ll be okay!” McCullen shouted into the blast of air blowing against them and gestured for her to step farther inside the boxcar, out of the wind.

When she moved inside, Jo started as she stared around the dark interior. She’d expected to find cars or crates of items stored inside the boxcar but certainly not what she was seeing.

“I can’t believe this. It’s a showroom,” Jo whispered.

To her surprise the interior lights flicked on and for a moment her tummy hollowed out at the thought someone had seen them climb aboard. But then she spotted McCullen standing by the light switch.

“Not a showroom, but a house. It’s headed for British Columbia,” he said as he quickly pulled the boxcar door shut.

Okay, he’d flipped his lid. “This is a boxcar, McCullen. It can’t be a house and where are they getting the electricity?”

“The lights must be wired to the train and yes it is definitely a house, Brady. A very cozy one from what I can see.”

She couldn’t argue with him for it did look like a house. The walls were drywall and painted a warm white. Plush beige carpeting covered the entire floor. Taking up most of the back wall was a kitchen complete with kitchen sink, tan-painted drawers and cabinets, dark blue countertops, light fixtures and even a ceiling fan, which swirled gently over the living room area.

McCullen passed her and tugged a protective plastic covering aside to reveal a chocolate brown sofa. He plopped himself onto it, leisurely placed his feet up on the nearby coffee table and pointed to the narrow hallway beside the kitchen.

“Down that hallway are the bedroom and a bathroom.”

“Okay, why do I get the feeling you know exactly what this place is? Mind filling me in? Why British Columbia? Why does this boxcar look like a house?”

He smiled and pointed to the closed boxcar door. Right there on the wall were drawings of the house or boxcar or whatever they wanted to call it. McCullen obviously had seen it and decided to play smart-ass.

She walked over to study the detailed plan.

According to the diagrams and information, this particular boxcar had been converted into a home and was indeed headed for British Columbia as low-income affordable housing.

What a cool idea!

It was a one bedroom, one bathroom unit complete with kitchen and living room. Fully wired with septic hookups, it boasted electric baseboard heating. Windows were also in the boxcar. She looked around the room and noticed that windows were indeed cut out of the sides but carefully covered and packaged to prevent damage during the trip.

Okay, now this made sense. She remembered hearing something about this on the news not too long ago. The units were made in the States from unused boxcars. An entrepreneur was buying the old, varied sizes of boxcars for a pittance, refurbishing them and turning them into small homes.

The homey interior made it look as if she’d stepped into a home decorating magazine. But McCullen’s next comment made her feel as if she were about to step right into a *Playgirl* magazine.

“Time to strip search me, Brady.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jo ignored McCullen's amused grin and blew out a quiet, tense breath as she removed her gun from where she'd stashed it against the small of her back.

She truly hoped he didn't have a tracking device planted on him. If he did, it probably would have healed over by now, leaving no sign of an incision. Even by visually searching and physically touching his every inch she may not find a device. She would then have to seek out help from her contacts.

But help could be days away. She needed to search him.

Every inch.

Oh boy, she suddenly felt hot. Extremely hot.

"Let's start by removing my shirt. I can do a Chippendale's act for you, if you like," McCullen's dark husky voice smoothed around her like an aphrodisiac. As she removed her cell phone and wallet from her back pockets, she heard the rustle of clothing and found her heart picking up speed.

"This is serious shit, McCullen," she admonished, trying like crazy to keep herself calm, but she could already feel her face flame with heat.

She heard him get off the couch. Smelled his sexy masculine scent drift around her. Felt his body heat wrap around her like a seductive flame as he moved closer.

"The sooner we start the better. I'm all yours, Brady."

His voice sounded tight yet tinged with both excitement and amusement.

The son of a bitch was playing with her. *Well, mister, two can play at this game.*

"All right, McCullen, let's get started then. Turn around," she instructed as she placed her gun on the coffee table.

Starting a visual check on his back would be the safest avenue. Besides, the fleshy part of his waist would be the most likely place where a tracking device would be implanted. She probably wouldn't even have to investigate any other part of him. But since he was in a teasing mood, she would indulge him in a little bit of teasing herself. Just for amusement purposes to pass the time, of course.

When he turned away from her and showed her his nicely muscled broad back, her mouth went dry.

Oh my lordy. He had so many yummy muscles. She could almost see herself licking his back with her tongue. Teasing those muscles until they quivered with need. Until his breathing was as ragged as hers and he reached around and took her into his arms and...

"Any day now, Brady," his sultry voice cut through her thoughts.

Oh geez, if she thought doing his back was safe territory, she was wrong. Way too many distractions back here.

But a girl must do what a girl must do. Holding her breath, she visually checked him out and scanned the contours of muscles, hard strong arms, the broad shoulders, and finally his narrow waist. But she couldn't see any signs of scalpel cuts or other incisions.

"You might be able to feel something beneath your fingertips," he prodded. Again his voice sounded tight and sultry.

Feel something? Was that a sexual innuendo in his words? Or merely a suggestion?

Concentrate. Tracking device. She needed to concentrate on feeling around for the device.

She would start at the top and work her way down. As she lifted the soft tendrils of hair off the base of his neck, she heard his sharp inhalation. He must have an erogenous zone here, she thought, and purposely skimmed her fingers gently along the base of his hairline from the back of one ear to the back of the other, recalling his earlier teasing smiles and remembering she could play at this game just as much as he could.

Her fingers sparked against his hot skin as she pressed erotically here and there, hoping she might find some sort of raised area where an implant might be hidden. But of course found nothing.

Powerful muscles jerked as she massaged along the sides and then the back of his sinewy neck before spanning her palms across his wide shoulders and down his arms. When she touched his wrist and the cast on the other wrist, she almost followed a strong impulse to go farther down and interlace her fingers with his.

Biting back a groan of frustration she moved her hands back up his arms and noticed how his body was now very tense. She smiled to herself, loving the idea her touch was having an impact on him. Spanning her palms over the rugged terrain of muscles made her hungry for the feel of his flesh beneath her hands.

By the time she reached his lower back, her hands had settled nicely on each side of his waist and her breathing had become erratic and excited.

Hmm, she was liking this a wee bit too much.

"Find anything?"

The sound of his deep voice made need uncoil inside her.

"No," she replied.

Oh, she'd found something out all right. Discovered exactly how hot she always got for this guy. Her voice sounded throaty, her body ached to press against his and she wanted to kiss him again. Kiss him and fuck him again.

Reluctantly she dropped her hands from his waist.

He turned and faced her.

He said nothing but there was something in his eyes as he watched her reach up and placed her hands upon the curve of his shoulders. It was a wild look. Carnal.

His biceps flexed beneath her hands as she ran them smoothly over the strong bunches of muscles. Once again as she neared his wrists, the urge to tangle her fingers with his rammed into her.

She discovered no sign of any implants and dropped her hands but continued to study the wide expanse of his chest, the dusky mass of dark brown curly chest hairs and the burgundy nipples.

“Don’t chicken out now, Brady,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Teasing glints sparkled in his eyes again. Teasing mixed with mischief and barely restrained arousal.

“Come on, Brady. You’re on a roll,” he prodded.

Flattening her palms against his hot steely chest, she took satisfaction at his sharp inhalation. The sound of his arousal made her nipples tighten against her top.

Smoothing her hands over his flesh, she avoided his gaze. Avoided the hot stare and the unguarded need steaming in his eyes. She flicked her fingers over his beaded nipples then down along the washboard of his stomach and abdomen. She halted at the waistband of his track pants.

Hot-blooded male, she thought as her gaze lowered to the very tented area between his thighs.

Her hot-blooded male.

“Come on, Brady. I’m getting a bit cold here.” His gaze was anything but cold as her eyes snapped up to meet his. They were heated with desire and the soft tilt to his full lips told her he was enjoying her touch. Enjoying the way her fingertips explored his hard contours.

Cold, her ass.

She was getting to him and he didn’t want her to know it by his remark. She started toying with the waistband of his pants, enjoying the power of her femininity.

What would he do if she pulled the waistband of his pants and underwear out and took a peek at his cock?

Shivers of excitement zipped through her.

Oh man, this was getting way too intense for a strip search. She decided to let go of the waistband.

“Turn around, McCullen,” she whispered. Her voice still sounded throaty but there was a line of confidence there too. He must have heard it for he swore softly and did her bidding.

He cursed again as her fingers slid beneath the elastic band at the sides of his waist. Suddenly she wanted to hurry and pull his pants down and just do the inspection. But she couldn’t lose herself now. She wasn’t finished with the search.

She ran her hands just a little deeper into his pants, the backs of her fingers melting against the hard contours of his ass cheeks, feeling his muscles tense against her touches.

“Brady,” his warning tone made a wicked arousal pulse through her pussy, made her cream with warm wetness. Using her thumbs she hooked the waistband and began to draw it down over his hips, lowering the pants slowly, teasingly.

This is payback, McCullen, she thought as she remembered how he’d teased her in the hallway this morning by grabbing her wrists and bringing them over her head, holding her captive against the wall. How he’d pressed his cock against her and made the scorching promise of getting her out of her panties.

Her nostrils flared as she inhaled his scent.

Sexy smell. Sexy man. Sex.

Shit. She felt good. Aroused.

Her senses were aware of him. Her breasts were swollen and tight as she peeled his underwear down his legs, revealing his cute tush. His clothes puddled around his feet. Socked feet. Hmm, she hadn't noticed he'd removed his running shoes. Hadn't realized how sexy a man looked wearing nothing but socks.

She swallowed as her gaze traveled back to his ass. She cupped his cheek again. He groaned.

"Quiet, McCullen. I need to concentrate." *And touch you*, she silently added.

Caressing the hard muscles of his ass, she found no sign of injuries.

"Make it faster, Brady, or I won't be responsible for my actions."

The warning had her trembling with anticipation, but she forced herself to slow down. To slide her hands along the outsides of his thighs. To feel the restrained power beneath her fingertips. She got down on her haunches and something clenched deep inside her vagina as she caught sight of his side profile in a full-length mirror hanging on the nearby wall. Have mercy! She'd not noticed that mirror there. A round of hot blush swept into her face as she caught sight of his rigid cock spearing outward from a dark nest of curls.

Oh lordy, how nice and big. Very big.

As hard as it was, Jo forced herself to tear her gaze from the mirror and back to his legs. After running her hands up and down and doing a visual inspection, she found no evidence here either. The only part left was his front lower half.

Panic swirled around her.

"This is a crazy idea, McCullen. There's no tracking device," she said. He must have sensed her panic for he turned and his hot fingers curled over her shoulders, preventing her from getting up.

She came face-to-face with his front lower half and blinked at how tight and swollen his balls looked. His cock was inches from her face. Inches from her mouth!

Awareness of what he wanted buzzed through her. Yes, she wanted it too. Wanted him hot and heavy in her mouth.

"Brady?" His voice sounded hoarse, intense, desperate.

She heard the desire in the way he said her name. She opened her mouth. At the sign of her submission, his fingers curled tighter around her shoulders.

The erotic sight of his sex drove her to distraction. Lordy have mercy, but her heart was hammering so fast she couldn't think straight. All she knew was she wanted him in her mouth.

"Keep...checking..." he growled between clenched teeth.

Oh God. Yes. She'd forgotten that. Forgotten why he was naked in front of her.

Reaching out, she placed her hands against the tops of his thighs and began skimming her palms along his flesh, feeling his muscles shudder beneath her touch.

Ignoring his soft curse, she continued checking. And it was hard keeping her mind to the task at hand, especially with a gorgeous erection so close.

"Anything?" he hissed as she finished her inspection at his feet.

She shook her head, trembling as her gaze drew back to his erection.

More shards of need tore through her and her mind exploded with taunts of encouragement.

Take him. Taste him. Kiss him there.

She licked her lips. Felt his hands leave her shoulders. Watched hungrily as he curled his fingers around the base of his cock.

Don't do this. Once you do, you can't go back, another voice chimed inside her head.

Suddenly she didn't care. Didn't care what he might think of her taking him so boldly. Didn't care how embarrassed she would feel afterward. She'd never done this before. Had never wanted to do this before.

Until now.

He stared down at her. His eyes hungry and wild. She loved that look. Loved the flush of excitement racing through her at the thought of having him in her mouth.

Leaning forward, she kissed the smooth, hot crown. He groaned and his cock immediately pulsed in response. Reaching up with one hand, she dipped beneath the knuckles of his hand that held his cock and began to knead his swollen scrotum.

Another groan of distinct pleasure. She loved the way he groaned. Clasp the curve of one ass cheek, Jo took his throbbing erection into her mouth. She felt her cunt clench as his hips jerked.

Using her tongue, she probed beneath the cock head, exploring the ridge and the veins there. His breaths grew harsher. The fingers lifted from her shoulder and his palm pressed against the back of her head, bringing his cock deeper into her. She began to suck him. Swirling her tongue around the thick shaft with teasing lashes.

He swore.

Withdrew. Came back inside. As he did, she used her teeth to rake his flesh.

"Damn you're good, Brady," he hissed, and started a barely controlled thrust. His cock shuddered in her mouth. She tightened her lips and gave him her best.

"Sexy Brady," he moaned.

He felt way out of control. She gave him pleasure beyond anything he'd ever experienced. He could barely think as her hot mouth shot blades of exquisite sensations through his shaft and into his balls and abdomen. Her sweet mouth touched something deep inside him. Brought forth an array of emotions.

Happiness. Lust. Freedom from the guilt that had been plaguing him about Beth's death. Jo made him feel alive again. She made him feel like a man.

Her mouth was like smooth silk over his flesh. Soft and succulent. Her lips lashed him with pleasure and branded him with arousal. The sensations made him pleasantly dizzy. Through heavy-lidded eyes he watched his erection slide in and out of her pursed mouth.

His body tensed as he neared a climax. Her chestnut-colored curls were flying as she bobbed her head and continued to take him in and out of her mouth.

His breaths came harder, more ragged. He shivered and cried out as he came. He came hard and fast, spurting into her. Slurps echoed as she sucked and licked.

When she was finished, his knees were so weak he let go of her and stumbled back to the sofa, his casted wrist falling into his lap.

And that's when he realized something they'd both missed and he knew exactly where the tracking device was concealed.

"Brady."

Her last name was uttered so tightly Jo knew instantly something was wrong. She was reeling at what she'd just done and wiped away cum from her tingling lips when she met his gaze. He looked utterly serious. She followed his gaze to where his injured hand lay in his lap.

Uneasiness zipped through her as she wondered if he'd injured his hand. She wouldn't be surprised due to the tight way both his hands had curled around her shoulder.

Then another thought entered her mind. A thought that punched a solid blow right into her midsection. She hadn't even thought about examining his cast or his wrist beneath the cast.

"Why would Martin put a cast on my wrist if he was planning on killing me?"

Oh shit. He was thinking the same thing she was.

"You said he's a careful man," she whispered, stood and joined him on the couch.

She tried to ignore his nakedness. Tried to forget how wanton she'd just been with him. Pushing aside a hot blush, Jo focused her attention to the cast wrapped around his wrist.

The medical chart had mentioned a wrist fracture. That entry had thrown her off. Instinctively she'd known she'd missed something. This was it.

"We need to get the cast off and check things out."

God of all the times for them to find out where the tracking device was most likely hidden! She had the most rotten luck!

* * * * *

Two hours later Daniel stood at the open boxcar door and watched a train pass on the nearby train tracks. He'd managed to toss the cast onto a flatbed of the passing train and now Martin would be following that train instead of the one they were currently riding. He should be closing the door and telling Jo they were now safe.

But he didn't.

He enjoyed the cold air whipping against his body and face as he looked around at the dense forest. He needed the cold. Especially after the hot way Brady made him feel while going down on him.

He swallowed as memories assailed him. Memories of how pretty she looked with his cock impaling her mouth. How soft her hair felt beneath his fingers as he held her head steady and fucked her.

Even now, after putting on his track pants and top, he felt hot. Not to mention his pants were tented again, giving her a pretty good idea of how aroused she made him.

But damn it, he shouldn't be thinking about sex at a time like this. He should be figuring out how to get off this fast-moving train and finding a way to keep Brady safe. They should be trying to contact Jessie too and find out what happened with the cops and Martin.

He eyed Brady's cell phone in his hand. Still no signal. Must be the interference from the metal of the boxcar. He snapped off the cell to conserve the batteries.

Brady was worried about her brother. He understood that. He was worried too. But there was nothing they could do at this point. Not until the train slowed significantly or stopped.

It was almost dark and near as he could figure they were somewhere north of the city of Toronto.

"I found some blankets in the bedroom to help keep us warm," Jo said from behind him.

He hadn't realized she'd been standing there. But she couldn't have been there long as only now her sensual feminine scent was sifting around him like an aphrodisiac and teasing his senses.

"Did you toss the cast?" she asked, coming closer.

The original plan was to toss it out the door and into a ditch. But that would only have bought a bit of time because if Martin knew they were on this train, he would have sent them a welcoming committee.

"Threw it onto a passing train. It was on the other tracks and going the same way as us. Martin will think we're on that one."

She smiled at him and his breath caught at how gorgeous she looked. The wind was whipping her hair around, making her look like a goddess, and the air was blasting red into her cheeks. She looked healthy and tempting. Very tempting.

"That's a great idea, McCullen. Hopefully Martin will be out of our hair for a very long time. But when he realizes he can't find you, he'll try to get his lungs from someone else. We're going to have to find a way to stop it."

"I guess I'll have to hire a private eye to follow him around," he teased.

"You can also bring him up on kidnapping charges. That will keep him under the spotlight."

"I'm sure he's covered his ass with an alibi over this past month. It would be his word against mine."

Jo nodded. "Hence the fake name you were admitted under. But we could still try."

She'd drawn closer to him now. He could feel her body heat pushing away the cold he'd been enjoying.

Did she realize how her closeness affected him? He doubted it. Or she wouldn't be so close. Unless she had a change of heart about him since their early morning conversation about his being undercover. Heck, who was he kidding? Of course she'd had a change of heart concerning him or she wouldn't have teased him with her hands the way she had while checking for a tracking device.

She wouldn't have run her palms so seductively over his flesh, branding him as hers with those heated hungry touches.

"I know Martin. He's covered all his bases," he managed to say as he struggled to keep his thoughts off the very good way she made him feel just by being near him.

"I'd estimate we're heading north. If we're lucky we can stay on this train until it gets into Northern Ontario and we can get to your late brother's wife. My estimate is another five to six hours before we start thinking of hopping off on a slow turn."

"And if we hop off and get lost in the secluded wilderness?" He wasn't too fond of escaping Martin's death grip and ending up starving to death in the woods. They needed to think this plan of hers through.

"We'll get off close to a village or a road. It'll be dark but with the full moon we can see houses or the lights from the cars on a road."

Yes, she'd thought this plan of hers through. Which meant only one thing. They would have several hours to kill, and he for one wasn't sleepy.

Not one damn bit.

Chapter Eighteen

Jessie found himself smiling while he stirred the apple cider stew in the cast iron pot on his stove and remembered Daniel's suggestion about strip searching Tiny and himself. He'd been pleasantly surprised hearing that remark from Daniel and quite excited to see how passionate Jo was about following him onto the train.

Those two just might make a good couple if they gave in to the feelings of attraction that flared so obviously between them. Hopefully they were safely tucked away on the train and were in the process of doing that strip search. He didn't doubt Jo would be able to find a tracking device on McCullen if he indeed had one implanted on him. And he felt confident she would keep one step ahead of the devil doctor. She was a fantastic private eye and he was really proud of her accomplishment in becoming one.

Thankfully Martin and his henchmen had disappeared by the time the cops had rolled in. He'd been so worried for his crew's safety he'd kept them out of harm's way in the orchard until the cops finished searching his property and his house. When they'd been told the coast was clear, he let everyone go home with the promise they would be paid an extra couple of hours for their troubles.

He'd tried to contact Jo via her cell phone several times over the past couple of hours but he kept getting her voice mail. If they were still on the train that meant the metal from the boxcar would interfere with the signal. Despite his confidence of Tiny being a capable investigator, he still had anxiety about her safety. Truth be told, her safety was always at the back of his mind. He couldn't wait to hear her voice and learn firsthand she was safe.

At the thought of Jo, his phone suddenly rang and he couldn't get to it fast enough as hope flared it would be his sister calling to say they were safe.

"Hello," he said into the receiver.

"It's me," came a man's voice full of suspicion, and Jessie immediately recognized it as belonging to Mathew, Daniel's brother.

"Can we talk?"

"Go ahead."

"How's it going your way? Did Jo make it to you okay?"

"Oh yeah. More than okay."

"And Daniel?"

"He's more than okay too. But you missed them. We had unexpected company."

Jessie went on to tell Mathew what happened with Martin and his goons showing up and Daniel possibly wearing a tracking device.

"Sounds like Martin is desperate. We need to get Daniel into protective custody," came his anxious reply.

“Jo’s keeping quite a close eye on him. If my guess is right, there might be something going on between the two of them.”

“Seriously? The last time I talked with her she couldn’t wait to slice some daggers into him.”

Jessie chuckled at Mathew’s remark. It was true. Jo had never been keen on the lawyer who’d shot her testimony down regarding Johnnie Garrett. The two having the hots for each other certainly came as a surprise.

He’d suspected something in the devastated lost-dog look Daniel had thrown last night when Jo had pranced out of the kitchen after introductions. Then this morning he’d seen them kissing in the hallway. He’d wanted to get rid of the sheets and blankets off the sofa before McCullen came out of the bathroom.

But he’d already come out and they’d been kissing. He’d quickly ducked into the kitchen to make a racket with the pots and pans. If he hadn’t, who knew how far things would have gone.

“Would I kid you about something like that? So have you reached your destination for the wedding?”

Mathew and Sara had picked a secluded area in the Northern Ontario wilderness to get married. According to Sara no one would ever think of looking for them there.

“We’ll head in there in a day or two. Hold on a second, I’ll give you Sara.” There was a round of low murmurs and then an anxious feminine voice ripped across the line.

“What’s happening, Jessie? Is Jo okay? Mathew said something was going on between them. He better not hurt her or I’ll kill him myself,” his oldest sister’s concerned voice burst over the phone, making Jessie laugh again.

Quickly he filled her in, reassuring her that Jo would get Daniel to the wedding come hell or high water, that is if the two survived the intimate strip searches.

“Oh you little brat!” she chastised him cheerfully.

The sound of his sister’s sparkling laughter took Jessie’s breath away. She sounded so good. So happy. It was amazing. Not more than three years ago her husband had been murdered. That same day she’d miscarried their twins and then she’d gone through hell with a devastating depression, and when she was finally on the mend, Matt had dropped into her life.

Mathew McCullen, a man with amnesia who she’d nursed to health and fallen in love with while hiding him from the crooked cops who wanted to kill him. When Mathew subsequently regained his memory, they discovered he was an undercover cop who had incriminating evidence on a New York chief of police. In retaliation, someone had put a hit out on Mathew. Sara and Mathew were now in hiding and wanted to get married.

“Are you sure you’re not going to be able to make the wedding?”

“No, sorry, sis. Like I told you a couple of weeks ago when you were here, I just can’t get away right now. It’s the busiest time of the season. Remember though, I’ll make it for the other wedding when you get out of hiding like I promised.”

“I’ll miss you.”

The longing in her voice almost had him buckling and saying he would attend the wedding. But he remained steadfast. This orchard was his livelihood and he needed to

pay his bills. Going to his sister's wedding would involve several days away from the orchard and with his experience, when he was away, things always tended to go wrong.

"By the way, Jo got the wedding dress for you, but she had to leave it behind."

Sara's surprised gasp had him quickly reassuring her that all was not as bleak as it sounded.

"Don't worry, when I hear from her, I'll forward it through a courier service."

"Oh, thanks so much, Jessie. I really appreciate it. I know I don't need one to get married in it, but with all this cloak and dagger stuff surrounding us over the past few months I want something sweet and innocent and traditional to look forward to, and Mom's wedding dress is perfect. So, listen, I'll call again, okay? I love you. Please take care of yourself."

"Love you too, sis. Bye."

Before he could turn around and head back to his simmering apple cider stew, he felt the unmistakable cold barrel of a gun kiss his left temple.

Jessie froze and his stomach hollowed out as if he were on a runaway elevator.

A rough voice hissed in his ear, "Don't turn around. Keep facing the wall and you won't get hurt. Where are they?"

"Who?"

The gun prodded painfully into his temple and Jessie winced.

Fuck!

"Okay, okay. Relax. Just tell me who you're talking about. I'm easy, man."

"Easy to kill," came the man's reply.

Despite the overwhelming urge to turn and see the face of whoever was about to blow his brains all over the place, Jessie fought to remain cool. With Sara and Mathew in hiding and now Jo and Daniel also on the run, the guy pressing the barrel of the gun could be looking for either of his sisters.

From the corner of his eye, Jessie noticed movement. Heard the unmistakable sound of someone having difficulty breathing.

Colby Martin.

Son of a bitch!

"Does he know anything?" the old man asked.

"Hasn't had the time to answer my question."

"Kill him," Martin ordered with an eerily calm voice.

Shit!

"Okay. Okay. I'll tell you everything you want to know. I don't know who she is. She uses my place as a safe house on occasion. She and the guy she was with left about two hours ago. Got picked up by some car down by the train tracks. She pays me money to use my place on occasion on the basis of anonymity. I don't ask her questions. I don't know anything."

Jessie felt the cold barrel of the gun slide heavily across his temple. His limbs grew weak as the mouth of the gun slithered downward and stopped on his cheek.

Games! They were playing games with him. *Weren't they?*

"Tell me about the car that picked them up," the man holding the gun replied.

Jessie swallowed the tight lump lodged in his throat and fought to come up with a car description. It was understandably quite difficult to think under the circumstances.

He opted to describe the van Jo and Daniel had been using in the orchard. Hopefully they hadn't seen it out there.

"A beige Ford van. Um, I don't know the year. It was an old make. Early eighties, I think."

A low beep from the direction of Martin interrupted his confession. He noticed Martin drag something out of his pocket. It looked like the handheld computer he'd seen one of his goons looking at this afternoon.

Martin spoke softly with a calculating coldness. "The device is working again. They're north of Toronto, heading northwest. Kill him!"

Oh fuck, this can't be happening! Jessie swallowed hard as the gun cocked.

A brisk knock at Jessie's front door made him tense and the two men in the room grew silent. For a split second Jessie thought about shouting a warning to whoever was at the door, but the gun, which was poking a painful warning into his cheek, urged him to remain quiet.

Jessie closed his eyes and began to pray. Another round of knocks followed by his foreman's shout, "Come on, Jessie. I know you're in there. Open up!"

He heard the knob twist, thanked God he'd locked the door earlier when he'd headed off to shower. He had no doubt Stick would get shot had he walked inside.

The knocking and hollering continued.

"There's a meeting here tonight. A few of the apple growers are discussing what new varieties of apple trees to plant next year. You may have to kill about eight of us." Jessie couldn't believe how easily he could lie nor how cool and calm his voice surrounded when all he wanted to do was yell at Stick to get the hell out of here.

There was a pregnant pause of silence between the two men, and although he couldn't see their faces, Jessie could actually feel the eye signals zipping between the men.

He braced himself for death.

"Today's your lucky day, my friend," the man with the gun hissed.

Jessie sighed a slow, long breath of relief. However his relief was short-lived when a shot of searing pain sliced across the back of his head.

Everything went black.

* * * * *

Steve McCullen had been itchy all over for most of today. At first he'd figured it was due to the bed bugs and then later he figured it could be an allergic reaction to the antiseptics they used to clean the cell this morning. But when the blinding headache kicked in and the nausea that threatened to make him puke all over the exercise yard

where he now stood, he knew he was in trouble. His transplanted kidney was starting to reject.

It was bloody ironic. He'd done stories on the subject of rejection for Christ's sake and now it was happening to him.

"Hey, Donovan! You want a cancer stick to celebrate the possibility of you getting out of here?"

Steve inhaled the humid air hovering over the Texas prison exercise yard and despite his dislike of drawing attention to his friendship with Michael he just didn't give a shit about anything today. He turned his attention to Michael who held out a cigarette.

Steve shook his head, declining the offer.

"Suit yourself." Michael lit the weed and inhaled deep then exhaled slowly, blowing the smoke out in a pile of perfect halos.

Then he smiled at Steve and said softly, "So you remember your part of the deal? I made you happy by getting that Saint Christopher's cross out of here for you, now you make me happy, right?"

Steve scratched his belly button and nodded solemnly. Michael was convinced Steve would get out of here and they had made a deal before the medallion was sent through the channels.

"A deal is a deal," he acknowledged.

"I like bachelor buttons. All kinds of colors. Bachelor buttons and those wild purple flowers that grow on your little island. What did you call them?"

"Lupines."

"You bring me those flowers when you look me up, okay? Oh, and make sure they plant me under that big fir tree in that Prince Edward Island cemetery where your mom is buried. Remember. The big fir tree. The real big one. Okay?"

Cripes, Michael was depressing him with this talk. If anyone was going to be put six feet under, it was him, especially in the way he was feeling today.

"Yeah, I remember," Steve mumbled, as he squinted through the late-afternoon haze and watched the sailing seagulls. They were teasing him again. Urging him to climb the cinderblock wall and follow them to the ocean.

"Good. Good," Michael replied.

His friend had been pestering him for months to promise to get him buried in the tiny cemetery on Prince Edward Island. The cemetery Steve had mentioned on occasion. At first he'd told him no. How in the world could he honor the guy's wishes when he himself was on death row and to top it off, no one even knew he was alive?

After a while he'd gone along with the promise, if only for the reason of getting word out of this godforsaken place that he was alive.

Beside him, Michael took another deep drag on his almost finished cigarette and blew out a smoke stack. The gray smoke curled into Steve's throat and burned a line of hot fire deep into his lungs. He stifled a cough.

The thought of returning to a clean cell began to look good. At least in there he could be alone with his thoughts, his dreams and his new found hope.

Michael nudged him sharply in the ribs catching Steve's attention.

"Now all you gotta do is just go along with the ride I'm supplying you, hey, bro?"

Steve frowned, not understanding his comment.

"What?" he questioned.

Michael didn't answer, but Steve noticed a strange kind of smile curl his friend's lips as he flicked his glowing cigarette into a nearby crowd of men playing basketball. Steve flinched as the smoke hit the biggest basketball player right in the back of his neck where it settled.

Shit. Talk about a good shot!

The tall bald-headed player let out a surprised curse and did a wild dance in the yard as the stub began to burn his flesh. Shrugging the butt off him, the player turned toward Steve and Michael.

"Hey, jerk! Watch where you're throwing the freaking weed. You stupid idiot!"

Beside him, Michael bounced on his heels, suddenly excited and obviously eager for a fight. He shot Steve a quick glance and the strange smile Michael had been toting drifted into a carefree look and he tilted his head, motioning toward the wall.

Suddenly Steve understood exactly what Michael was offering him. A distraction. The guards would be watching Michael and the player, allowing Steve a way out. Over the wall. That is if he survived the shards of razors lacing the tops of the cinderblocks.

Shit! He was feeling bad enough to make a try at an escape today.

Steve's stomach heaved with another nasty bout of nausea as the big bald man turned back to shooting hoops, shaking his head, the tattoos up and down his beefy arms jiggling as he bounced the ball.

Michael threw Steve another wink before focusing his attention back to the player.

"Hey! Dumb son of a bitch, skin head!"

Steve jolted as Michael screamed the words at the player. Then he whispered again to Steve. "Remember, bro. Bachelor buttons and lupines."

Before Steve could reach out and stop him, Michael was gone, jumping on the basketball player's back. It took only a split second before all hell broke loose.

Harsh whistles blew and the sound of heavy boots scrambling along the catwalk made Steve look up. As if in slow motion, he watched the guards lift their M-14 rifles to their shoulders and aim into the growing crowd of fighters. For a moment Steve heard nothing but the violent rushing sound of his hot blood roaring in his ears.

He looked over at the barbed wires struggling along the tops of the thick cinder block walls and chain link fences then gazed at the bullet marks in the wall. He found himself wondering how it would feel when the bullet slammed into his brain. With luck, he wouldn't feel a thing.

He took one step toward the wall. Toward ultimate freedom.

Someone grabbed his arm and pulled him down and out of death's way. He fell roughly, his hands reaching out, breaking his fall.

"Today's your lucky day, Donovan."

The man who'd pulled him down was Karl Phillips, the fellow who'd wiped out his family in the plaza parking lot and then tried to off himself.

Suddenly shots split the air and a rain of bullets sparked brilliantly off the nearby steel supports cradling the cinder block walls. Steve could only watch in wide-eyed horror as part of his rescuer's head disintegrated into a pile of ground beef. A split second later, something painful slammed into Steve's upper shoulder, making him gasp in surprise.

"Ricochet! Men down!" someone screamed, echoing his thoughts.

Steve felt faint. Felt the agonizing pain exploding through his shoulder into his chest and shrieking up into his neck.

Automatically he reached up to grab at his safety line, but his Saint Christopher necklace wasn't there. Then he remembered. It was on the outside, waiting for him.

Someone might know he was alive. He had to stay alive.

Fuck, he felt so tired.

"I love you so much," her gentle voice whispered into his ears. Her sweet ruby red lips tilted into a welcoming smile and her cute dimples made him catch his breath.

"I love you my darling," she whispered again.

"I love you too, Emily," he whispered back, his heart bursting with love.

Ah shit. He had his wish. He had seen her one more time.

Steve allowed himself to be swept away by the tidal wave of blessed oblivion.

* * * * *

Jessie could hear his foreman Stick yelling at someone. His voice sounded so damn far away. As if he were out in the orchard somewhere, hollering at one of the crew. Maybe he was giving one of the pickers hell for not doing a good job?

But most of the regular pickers knew Stick's bark was worse than his bite. Unfortunately the newbies were always scared straight into doing a good job before they caught on. Stick was a real softie beneath his tough exterior. Picking apples wasn't an easy job. Lugging around those twenty-five-pound baskets full of apples all day long took their toll on them. And if one or two decided to slack off once in a while, it was understandable.

But why was Stick's yelling getting louder and so close to his ears? And why did he have such a goddamn headache?

Jessie forced himself to concentrate on what Stick was saying.

"Yeah, I found him just a couple of minutes ago. I don't know how long he's been this way. Found him laid out cold on his kitchen floor. Can't wake him up. Yeah, he's breathing, but it looks like he hit his head on the way down. He's bleeding like a stuck pig."

Can't wake who up? Someone was lying on his kitchen floor?

"Yeah, I've already checked for broken bones. Yeah, all the first-aid stuff."

"Who are you talking to?" Jessie mumbled as he tried to move, tried to open his eyes.

He managed to do the latter and saw his kitchen roll into focus. Stick was sitting on the floor beside him with a phone in hand. When his foreman saw him awake, Stick cut loose a loud curse and before Jessie knew it, his hand crossed Jessie's chest like a steel bar, preventing him from moving. His face was paler than his bees' white honey, his eyes large and frantic with worry.

Suddenly in one great big rolling wave, it all came back to Jessie and he became engulfed in a wild panic.

Jo!

Daniel!

Martin!

Shit!

Jessie swatted Stick's arms away and struggled into a sitting position.

"Are you all right? What in the world happened?" Stick's concerned voice almost brought a smile of relief to Jessie. It was nice to know the normally restrained cool-mannered man actually had some affection for him.

"Who the hell are you gabbing with? Get off the damn phone. I need it." Jessie reached for the receiver.

A flicker of amusement crossed Stick's weathered lips and he spoke into the receiver.

"Cancel the paramedics. He's back to his ornery self."

Stick listened for a moment to whoever he was talking to then nodded.

"Sure thing. He will definitely get himself checked out. Sorry for all the trouble."

He hung up and, much to Jessie's annoyance, held the phone out of his reach. His eyes narrowed angrily as he watched Jessie stumble to his feet. The room spun wickedly for a moment and then righted itself. That's when Stick let him have it with both barrels.

"Dammit, Jess! What the hell happened? You're bleeding like a stuck pig. Scared the bees out of me."

Jessie accepted the kitchen towel Stick thrust at him and gingerly pressed it to the giant knot thumping against the back of his head. Damn! It hurt!

He reached for the phone and thankfully Stick let him have it. Without saying anything he called the information operator. After a couple of rings he got a bored-sounding woman on the line.

"I need the number for—" His mind scrambled to remember the initials on the train or even what time it had been when Tiny and Daniel had jumped on board. He couldn't remember a thing. He swore viciously and slammed the phone down. The look of concern was gone from Stick's face, replaced by one of anger and helplessness.

"What's wrong? You look like shit."

"Tiny, Jo's in trouble."

His foreman instantly tensed. "What happened?"

"I can't help her, Stick. My sister is in trouble and I can't help her!"

"Easy, Jess. Tell me what's wrong?"

Jessie told Stick everything. About Jo and Daniel's hasty departure. About Martin coming back. A tracking device on Daniel, which told Martin exactly where his sister and Daniel were.

When Jessie finished explaining, Stick calmly told him the name of the train that whizzed by every weekday at exactly four-thirty, and he also gave him the Florida license plates on the car he'd seen parked along a farmer's lane down the road from Jessie's house only minutes ago.

Jessie picked up the phone and for the second time that day called the police.

Chapter Nineteen

“Here comes the train!” Colby Martin growled to the two men who flanked him as they hid behind a clump of bushes by the wood platform hugging the train tracks.

Excitement raged through him as he spied the beacon of light from the train piercing the early morning darkness a mile down the track. In a matter of moments Daniel would be back in his care and within twenty-four hours he’d finally have his lungs.

It was unbelievable. He’d never had to work so hard for an organ in his entire career. If that tracking device he’d planted inside Danny Boy’s cast hadn’t been defective, then he and the woman wouldn’t have made it an hour from the hospital that night. Due to the precautions he’d taken in capturing Danny on that secluded stretch of Florida highway as well as having him admitted to his private hospital under a fake name, he really hadn’t expected Danny to be rescued. But being the ultra-careful man he usually was, today being an exception of course, he had the highly sophisticated tracking device implanted beneath the cast.

From what he could tell from the surveillance cameras in the garage and hospital corridors, Danny Boy’s rescuer was a very smart woman. She’d kept her face carefully averted from the cameras. Until now he hadn’t been able to find out her identity. But he would. He had no doubt about that.

Now he had several of his men staked out in positions on both sides of the tracks. They were hiding in the bushes, waiting for their chance to pounce on the unsuspecting victims. There was no way the woman or Danny Boy would slip past him.

As the train approached the station, he snapped up his oxygen mask and sucked in some huge gulps. His lungs were damaged from too much smoking and the oxygen from the tank strapped to his back helped to keep him alert.

Oh, he couldn’t wait to see Daniel’s surprised look when he hopped off the train and found the welcoming committee.

Colby Martin gazed down at the grid lining his handheld computer. The dot indicating his prey was still blinking. Danny Boy was definitely on this train. Now all he had to do was stay out of sight and wait for the lad to show.

The train screeched to a halt and Colby waited. His anxiety mounted when not a flicker of movement transpired. The earpiece he wore remained silent, indicating none of his men had seen anything yet.

When several moments passed, he gave the signal for his men to fan out and begin the search. It may be possible the two of them were fast asleep.

Ten minutes later he heard a cry from one his men and Colby Martin grinned into his mask. Shifting the tank on his back, he rose from behind the bushes he’d been hiding behind and ambled down the platform to where one of his men stood atop an open-roofed car. In his hand he held Danny Boy’s wrist cast.

Colby Martin’s frustrated screams were drowned by his mask.

* * * * *

“You can’t be serious. Only a cabin is available?” Jo gasped in disbelief at Hilda McCloud, the woman who was running Peppermint Creek Inn while Sara was in hiding with her fiancé. What she’d just told Jo had her thinking she’d been set up by either her brother, her sister or maybe even the matchmaking Widow McCloud herself.

Earlier this morning McCullen and she had jumped off the boxcar at the outskirts of Thunder Bay after the train had slowed and they’d seen the city limits sign. She’d then contacted her brother and learned of his narrow escape from Martin’s second visit. After freaking out, her brother’s assurance he was okay and that Martin did indeed have a tracking device on Daniel, her brother almost keeled over from laughter when she told him McCullen had dumped the cast with the device onto a passing train, throwing Martin off their trail.

She was grateful when he mentioned he was couriering her the wedding dress she’d left behind. Before disconnecting their call, she also let him know she would swing by on the way back home in a few days to pick up their personal effects they’d left behind.

Personal items, which included Johnnie’s hair bracelet that she’d left in Jessie’s room because she hadn’t wanted to get it dirty while picking apples and the pink glass dildo she’d taken from that motel. Thankfully she’d left the dildo snuggled in her bag of clothing and of course she didn’t tell her brother that last part. Sweet Lord! He would never let her hear the end of it.

Daniel and she trekked through a damp, misty rain into the bustling city. There, they’d secured a rental car with another one of her fake-name credit cards, picked up necessary toiletries, purchased a couple of sets of clothes and changed into them in the public washrooms of the store. Then they drove the few hours to her sister’s inn only to discover one vacancy.

“I’m sorry, Jo. I’m serious. Your sister didn’t reserve two rooms. She reserved a cabin. It’s the pretty one-room log cabin at the edge of the meadow.”

That *was* a cute little place. She’d helped Sara decorate it herself.

“I would give you a second cabin or a room at the inn for your young man, but it’s fall tourism as well as hunting season and all the rooms and cabins are taken except that one little cabin your sister reserved for the two of you.”

Damn her sister!

And damn Hilda’s overly sparkling eyes as she looked down her long witchlike nose over Jo’s shoulder at McCullen with a smile of approval. What woman wouldn’t approve of him? He had devilish good looks, a nice big cock, a hot body and quite an intensely kissable pair of lips. Lips she didn’t mind having on her mouth or on other parts of her.

At that last thought, she found herself heating up as she stood in the warm office log interior of the inn and blew out a slow, tense breath.

Why was she stressing over sharing a cabin with McCullen? She needed him to put her out of her misery.

“Your brother couriered the wedding dress over and I put it in your cabin,” Hilda said.

“Already?” Jo couldn’t believe it!

“Courier service these days is quite impressive. Even up here in the wilderness. I can buy bus tickets for our clients via the internet now. At a predetermined time we drive the tourists out to the main highway and wait for the bus to pick them up. The tourists are whisked away to the city where they join the shopping tours that fan out from the city bus station,” Hilda explained as she watched Jo sign the guest book.

“Well, at least the wedding dress is safe,” came McCullen’s lazy drawl from behind her, where he’d been standing most likely admiring the gifts strewn about the office-gift shop.

He smelled nice she had to admit. It seemed the misty rain that followed them here to Sara’s inn illuminated his raw masculine scent, making her more aware of him.

She was sure he was chuckling to himself at this one-room situation they’d gotten into again. Maybe he would be back to his sexy teasing self once again when they were alone? Part of her wished he would continue the seductive assault he’d started in the hallway at Jessie’s house and yet another part, a smaller part, an irritatingly hopeful part wished he might have given up on her. Life would be much easier to not fight this attraction she felt for him.

“I’ve already taken the package your brother couriered over to your cabin,” Mrs. McCloud continued. “And supper starts at six p.m. in the dining hall. We’re having sautéed lamb medallions with red wine and fresh mint. And for dessert we’ve got peppermint chocolate truffle cake.”

I’d rather have McCullen for dessert, she found herself thinking, and her face grew hot as she remembered the powerful spasming cock he’d stuffed into her mouth after she’d done the strip search in the boxcar.

“Thanks, Hilda. I really appreciate you doing that with the package,” Jo said, forcing herself to remain calm as visions of a naked McCullen began dancing wildly in her head.

Mrs. McCloud grinned and dangled a couple of keys from her fingertips.

“Here’s your keys. One for him and one for her. Oh! And here. Don’t forget to grab some homemade peppermint candies. It does wonders to keep your breath minty fresh. Garry and I made them ourselves from some of the nearby creek’s summer peppermint. Here, help yourself,” Hilda said as she lifted a bowl full of green-colored round mints, allowing Jo and McCullen to grab a handful each and gave Jo the keys.

Garry was Sara’s late husband’s widower father. After fighting off the Widow McCloud’s attentions for a long time, Garry had finally given in and allowed the woman into his heart. Right now he was down in the States helping with the case that McCullen’s brother would eventually testify at regarding what his brother knew about some crooked cops in New York.

“I think the two of you will love that cabin. Especially you, Jo. Sara tells me you helped her decorate this one.”

Jo nodded.

Suddenly Hilda frowned as she glanced at a nearby window. “You’d best hurry along. They’re calling for heavy downpours through the afternoon as well as a wind warning. It’s a shame too because the wind will blow all the beautiful autumn leaves off the trees.”

Popping one of the sweet mints into her mouth, Jo almost groaned out loud at the taste.

"You did an excellent job with these mints," Jo complimented Hilda. The woman gushed modestly and smiled her thanks.

"Very good, Mrs. McCloud," McCullen added as he followed Jo to the door.

The woman giggled and Jo smiled. Her smile dropped when she stepped outside. It was raining harder than when they'd come in minutes earlier. The wind had picked up too, howling through the nearby pine trees like a pack of wolves. The spooky sound as well as the cold wind sent a volley of shivers through her and she hugged herself as her teeth began chattering.

Shit! She'd forgotten how cold and damp it got around these wooded areas when it rained.

"Go on ahead to the cabin, Brady. I'll bring the stuff," McCullen shouted above the downpour, and headed for the rental where it was parked.

"It's down this trail," she shouted, and pointed along the gloomy path that meandered through the wildly dancing pine trees.

"I'll find it. Just go!" He waved her on and headed for their car.

She nodded her thanks, hunched her shoulders against the downpour and quickly darted around the puddles lining the dirt path as she followed it through the gloomy trees. A couple of minutes later she spied the log cabin. Nestled snugly in a grove of white birch bark trees, it looked breathtaking as the silver sheets of rain enveloped it. Yellow leaves spiraled crazily in the wind and Jo's heart tightened at the sight of gray smoke curling from the stone chimney.

The fireplace! Heat! Yes!

Picking up speed, she ran the last twenty feet through the increasing downpour, popped open the white-painted antique screen door and slipped one of the cold keys into the lock.

A moment later she stepped inside the cabin and was blasted by toasty warmth. Flipping on the nearby light switch, she smiled at the neat sound of rain slapping against the two small skylights in the low ceiling.

Years ago this cabin and the handful of others on her sister's property were nothing more than derelict shells. Her sister, her sister's late husband and herself had invested a lot of money into renovating these buildings and it showed. The windows were modernized and well insulated. Old walls had been ripped out and new insulation and drywall installed. Jo had picked the delicate wallpaper herself for this cabin.

They'd kept the accents simple in here with a contrasting feminine yellow and masculine dark green. The floor was planked with golden pinewood and pushed into one corner was a queen-sized black wrought iron bed, which consisted of puffy green comforters, yellow sheets and pillows. The windows were adorned with hunter green blinds and set into one entire wall was a stone fireplace where a hearty fire crackled noisily.

Man, this place sure looked nice, Jo thought as she closed the door to shut out the cold, howling wind. Then she headed for the bathroom. She needed a quick hot shower to get rid of the chill that had seeped into her body.

* * * * *

Daniel's heart pounded a mile a minute as he raced along the drenched trail into the stand of birch trees toward the tiny cabin with the buttery lights splashing from its many windows. The autumn rain poured over him in sheets, and by the time he reached the cabin he was cold, wet and thinking about Brady and the nice warm way her hot mouth had wrapped around his cock when they'd been back in the boxcar.

Warmth welcomed him as he entered the cabin. Quickly dropping the bags that contained their supplies, he closed the door and immediately noticed the toasty fire in the fireplace and the room being devoid of Brady. But above the pounding of the rain on the roof and against the windows he could hear the shower running in the bathroom.

Daniel blew out a sharp breath as he imagined the spray of water splashing against her sensual curves. Imagined the sweet way she would cry out as he entered her pussy in one swift thrust, putting both of them out of their sexual misery.

Forcing his thoughts away from Brady, he dug a mint out of his pocket and popped one into his mouth. Cool flavor exploded against his tongue and he moaned softly at the taste of the homemade treat.

For a moment he stood and watched the rain lashing the windows then gazed around the rest of the room. It looked quaint and rustic. This would definitely be a place he would bring a woman he loved.

He blinked at the "L" word. Nah, he wasn't in love. He liked her. Cared for her. Wanted her.

Shit. Wanted wasn't the right word. Needed or craved her might be more appropriate. Back on the train he'd craved Brady so bad. But he'd held himself back. Wanted their first time together to be somewhere special.

And this place was definitely special.

* * * * *

It took Jo but a mere minute to hop in the shower and get warm beneath the hot spray of water. After a quick shampoo, a speedy body soaping and rinse, she stepped from the steamy shower only to realize there were no towels in the bathroom.

Shit!

Mentally she tried to remember the full layout of the cabin. Had there been towels on the dresser just outside the bathroom door? Maybe. A definite maybe. She'd been in such a hurry to get to the shower she hadn't even stopped to think about towels.

Dripping wet, she stepped into her panties and clutched her track top to her breasts. Okay, so she was a bit modest. Sue her.

Opening the door slightly, she was just about blown away at what she saw. Make that who she saw.

McCullen stood there at the foot of the bed. He was in the process of changing his clothes and she watched as he tossed his drenched fleece top onto the floor. The sight of him fired her blood. His torso was bare, the magnificent muscles flexing in his chest, the biceps bulging as he reached into the shopping bag he'd placed on the bed to grab another top.

After being caught in the rain, the new pair of jeans she'd purchased for him in the city were wet and hugged his legs like a glove, showing off a nice-sized bulge between his thighs. His pants were slung so low over his hips she couldn't help but appreciate how good his erection looked pressed boldly against the tight restraints of the material. When she heard the sound of his zipper lowering, she felt edgy and needy.

Suddenly she hungered for his cock being in her mouth again, Hungered for a man she barely knew. The feeling was foreign and it was potent.

And she liked it. A lot.

As if he sensed she was watching him, his head snapped up and he looked straight at her.

And smiled.

Fire speared her pussy and a thrill of tension raced up her spine. Jo swore she fell head over heels in love with him right at the moment he smiled. Suddenly she knew she could deny him nothing. Deny herself nothing when it came to McCullen.

Damn, she was screwed.

She stared at him as he started toward her. He reminded her of a wild animal who'd decided he craved to mate with her. If she wanted to slam the door shut to close out his heated look, or try for an escape, she wouldn't have been able to move. His eyes just captivated her, mesmerized her.

He got to the door and pulled it open. Reached for her. Grabbed her wrist and drew her through the entrance and into his embrace. She felt her top, the one she'd been holding against her breasts, squish awkwardly between their bodies. One quick yank from him and the clothing slipped from between them and dropped to the ground.

She watched him look down at her. Watched the pink tip of his tongue peek out from between his lips as he gazed at her breasts.

Heat blushed across her cheeks and she quivered at his look of appreciation.

"I think it's time to go onto the next step, Brady," he whispered as he reached up and threaded his fingers through her wet hair.

She couldn't answer him if her life depended on it. His touch felt like fire as he firmly held both sides of her head. His head dipped closer and his lips ground against hers in a hard, passionate kiss that left her so hot she felt lightheaded.

In contrast, his mouth tasted cool from the mint candy Hilda had given them and his tongue speared into her, leaving no part untouched or unexplored. He kissed her until her mouth seared with wicked tingles and her arms went up around his neck. They kissed wildly, enjoying the intense arousal their mouths so easily created.

He smelled so good. Amidst the traces of mint candy, his masculine scent of sweat intermingled with the rain he'd been caught in and the spicy combination made her pulse pound. The exquisite bulge held captive by his jeans pushed against her pussy. The

dominant way his powerful hips were thrusting against her created such a perfect sexual rhythm she just about came on the spot.

She gyrated against him too. Heard him growl his appreciation. The sound of his guttural groans brought a rush of emotion swelling through her. She could feel his restrained control in the tense way he touched her. And felt the answering storm inside her.

“It’s time we got ourselves reacquainted, Brady,” he hissed as he broke her kiss. His breath felt hot against her ear. His hands were untamed as they skimmed the outside of her arms, his fingers tangling with hers. God, she loved the intimate way he held her hands.

“Come to the bed,” he ordered. His voice sounded husky. His eyes sparkled with a need that had tremors raging through her.

Oh damn! This was happening too fast, she thought numbly as he led her to the bed and made her sit on the edge. Then he let go of her hands and knelt on the floor in front of her.

Oh, way too fast! Yet she didn’t want to stop it. Didn’t want to stop the intense way he looked at her breasts. She could feel their heaviness with her every breath. Without warning he cupped her breasts and his thumbs erotically brushed her nipples. His strokes created an intense blaze of sensations deep inside her abdomen and she grabbed the edge of the mattress to steady herself.

Man, this guy knew how to make a girl feel good!

His touches made her mouth drop open and she found herself panting softly. Closing her eyes, she whimpered at the loving feel of his hands upon her breasts.

“I knew you’d react like this, Brady. Knew you would feel the fire,” he murmured.

Fire? Heck, she was an inferno.

Reaching out she touched his chest, felt the hard, velvety muscles quiver beneath her fingertips and the soft chest hairs curling around her fingers.

“This is weird,” she found herself mumbling, more to herself than to him.

“Why’s it weird?” he asked, his thumb pads brushed her nipples, continuing to create those sparks of arousal she loved.

“I barely know you and I want to jump into the sack with you. It just hasn’t happened this quickly with another guy before,” she admitted.

“Hmm, I guess I should be honored,” he replied, amusement lacing his voice.

Letting her fingers trail down the hairy line over his belly, she took a quick dip with one finger into his bellybutton, loving the way he moaned softly at that gesture. Then she came out to settle her fingers on that button he’d been about to pop open only moments earlier.

Her pussy burned for his cock and she could feel the moisture of her desire escaping between her thighs. She wanted him inside her. Wanted him pounding and thrusting and loving her.

Sweet mercy, the mere thought of McCullen fucking her had her panting shamelessly.

His hands dropped from her breasts and his fingers wrapped around her wrists, stopping her from undoing the button. He shook his head, his breaths harsh and uneven with excitement.

“Uh-uh, it’s my turn to do you, Brady.”

At his words she could barely breathe. He let go of her wrists and his hands went beneath her knees, his touch felt like two hot brands. He lifted her legs up onto the bed.

“Lie down,” he instructed. His voice was filled with tension and his gaze looked so intense she almost came on the spot.

She found herself doing his bidding. Lying on her back, the puffy comforter felt like silk against her skin. Heat pooled in her pussy as his fingers slipped beneath the elastic waistband of her panties. Within a second he was sliding the thin white fabric down her hips and off her legs. He tossed the material aside.

His eyes sparkled with lust and his hands went to her knees again. He was spreading her legs now, spreading her wide for him to see.

She could smell her musky scent. Could hear how hard he was breathing. Noticed the flashes of heat drowning his eyes.

Oh God! was all she could think as his head lowered.

Oh fuck that feels good! was all she could think when he took her sensitive clit into his hot mouth and sucked her hard.

Feminine instincts pushed away any and all of her shyness. Reaching up, she began to play with her breasts, loving the feel of his hands smoothing over her curves, enjoying the way her hips rocked and bucked as his mouth made love to her.

He suckled her pussy, making the tension inside her mount. He speared into her vagina, his tongue teasing, bringing her to the edge of orgasm. She moaned in protest as he backed off again. He held her thighs tight and feasted on her clit, burying his face between her legs.

She became aware of everything, the pounding of her heart and the intense heat claiming her body. She became sensitive to the raspy sounds of his heavy breathing and the intoxicating slurps of his mouth as he sucked.

The climax continued to snowball, the arousal raging and churning. The intensity threatened to send her screaming if she didn’t come. He brought her to the edge over and over again and backed off. Her fingers frantically tweaked her nipples, her hips bucked as she looked for the elusive satisfaction. She was panting and begging and mindless from having his mouth loving her pussy.

Finally he teased her to the edge again and let her come.

And boy did she come!

Shuddering with arousal, she gyrated her hips and pushed her pussy against his head, crying out his name. Not McCullen. But Daniel.

She said his name over and over again as if a chant. Damn but she liked his name.

Beneath the sucking of his mouth, the lapping of his moist velvet tongue against her clit, she bucked and shuddered with explosive force. She took everything he gave. Took the killing pleasure, the uncontrolled wildness unleashing inside her and the joy he brought to her senses.

Her climax was powerful, long and convulsive. And when he finally drew his mouth away from her soaked pussy, she felt drained and loved and branded as his woman.

Ah shit! She was so in love with how he made her feel it wasn't even funny.

Chapter Twenty

She didn't know how many orgasms he gave her after the first one but the rest of them had drained her completely. She felt weak but satisfied.

She smiled. Oh yes, very satisfied.

At one point he must have removed his wet jeans and underwear for now his naked heated body spooned very nicely against her backside and a large possessive hand palmed one of her breasts as he slept. Why he was sleeping when she was the one who'd had all the action was beyond her and she almost laughed out loud at this quirk in him.

Flares of sensations shimmered through the areas of where her body melted against his. His chest hairs tingled against her back. She swallowed at the feel of his swollen erection pressed against the crack of her ass and she wanted it inside her ass. Plunging, thrusting and fucking.

Heat flared through her at the thought of anal.

Shoot! The last thing she needed in her life was a man. Especially this man who she'd hated so passionately until recently.

There's a fine line between love and hate, Jessie's teasing words popped into her head.

Fuck off! she chastised herself at the insane thought she could already be falling in love with McCullen. Falling in love fast and hard only happened in the movies or romance novels. In reality, couples had to work daily on a relationship. It didn't just happen.

Did it?

A totally delightful shiver raced through her at that posed question. Her sister Sara had fallen in love quickly. Or that's what Sara confided in Jo.

One minute her sister had been terrified of an intruder who'd broken into her home and the next she was having sex with the guy. Their relationship had started with oral sex too.

Oh dammit! Stop thinking this way, Jo! You are not in love with Daniel McCullen. It was just good sex. A good oral, addictive fucking.

The hand cupping her breast squeezed ever so slightly, sending her breath into a hitch.

"I thought you might be awake," he whispered, and nuzzled his face against the crook of her neck and shoulder. The feel of his warm lips gently kissing her flesh had Jo's pussy throbbing. Not to mention the burn of his cock against her ass made her suddenly very curious as to how it might feel to have McCullen doing anal on her.

"I'm getting hungry," he whispered. "Hungry for you and for food. What time did Mrs. McCloud say dinner would be served?"

“Six. In the dining room,” she managed to squeak out, surprised she wasn’t as truly embarrassed as she thought she might be.

“Another hour. Think we might have time for a shower? Together?”

Jo closed her eyes at that question and held her breath. This was definitely developing into something.

He gave her nipple a bold squeeze that left her creaming and then the cozy comforter they’d climbed under was yanked off her. She bristled as cool air swept over her flesh.

“Last one in gets the last oral,” he laughed, and was already out of bed, racing for the bathroom. On the way he grabbed a small plastic bag from the floor and she swallowed when she glimpsed the solid erection curving upward as he passed and disappeared into the bathroom.

A moment later she heard the water running and realized she couldn’t get to him fast enough.

It was the pleasure he promised, she told herself as she boldly walked into the steamy bathroom. Yes, the pleasure he would give her with those nice big hands that were now soaping his bulging muscular arms. He mesmerized her in the way those soap bubbles streamed in rivulets along his chest over his stomach and flat abdomen to caress the nest of hair haloing his balls and stiff cock.

When he saw her eyeballing his cock, he began to soap his equipment. Leisurely, erotically, sensually.

Whew! She was burning up! This was quite the change from a little while ago when she’d been caught out in the cold downpour.

“Come on, Brady. Don’t be shy. Step into my pleasure parlor,” he teased.

She hesitated, loving the way her body hummed as she watched him touch himself.

“Don’t tease me, Brady. Or you’ll suffer the consequences.”

His warning didn’t scare her. As a matter of fact it intrigued her.

He was a magnificent sight in the shower and the intimate way his eyes held hers made her so aware of him sexually. He made her feel so alive. So wickedly out of control.

Maybe they did have a chance at something more than just a sexual attraction?

A half smile tilted his lips and her heart pounded faster. Curiosity flared in his eyes. She sensed he was wondering why she hesitated. Or perhaps he was wondering what she was thinking? She didn’t want him to know she might be lust over heels for him already.

“Come on, Brady, or I just may have to come by myself.”

Above the sound of the shower spray, she could hear the desperate slurp of his hands massaging his swollen cock. Could see the thick member swelling right before her eyes. Sexual awareness blossomed into hunger. It sunk deep inside her, wrapped around her every fiber and suddenly she was lost.

Lost in lust. In excitement. In him.

Shit.

She was so screwed.

As she stepped into the small shower stall, sliding the glass door closed behind her, his eyes darkened. His soapy hands left his shaft and slipped around her neck, cupping the back of her head and holding her steady. His lips brushed hers and at the same time his cock head nudged against her clit. She slipped her arms over his strong shoulders, the smooth, hard contours of his muscles feeling fabulous under her hands.

His eyes twinkled as he spoke, "You make me feel really good, Brady. It makes me want to make you feel real good too."

"I like the way you make me feel too," she admitted. She loved the way his face lit up at her words.

Her nostrils flared at his masculine scent and she realized she would never get enough of inhaling his sexy aroma. The exquisite rhythm of his swollen cock head massaging her clit had her tightening her hold on McCullen and her breaths came faster as the pleasure snowballed and erotic sensations lashed through her at lightning speed.

Oh man, this feels so good.

Lowering her head, she took his left nipple into her mouth. He moaned and held her head captive against his warm chest. The wild thumping of his heart beating against her mouth grew faster. His nipple beaded tighter as she rolled the puckered bud between her teeth. She could feel his soft chest hairs tickle her cheek and she enjoyed the way he groaned as she licked and sucked and bit.

Soon his aroused cries split through the noise of the running water and the fingers clenching the back of her head were moving her. Suddenly the shower spray hit her in the face, making her gasp. Pulling her head away from his chest, she looked up to see McCullen chuckling. As he looked down into her eyes, his hands now tenderly cupped her cheeks and chin.

"I had to cool you off, Brady. You were nibbling on me a bit too much. You almost made me come and I don't want to come without you," he said with a restrained roughness in his voice.

Suddenly she became painfully aware of how much he wanted to pleasure her. It made her feel warm and secure. Not to mention cared for in a way she'd never truly felt before.

He angled the two of them away from the spray, allowing it to hit her backside. As she licked the warm water droplets from her lips, he watched the movement and grinned.

"You're so cute when you do that."

He held her face and gave her a toe-curling kiss then drew away. Her pulse pounded as she watched him grab a wrapped condom off the soap dish.

"Where did you get that?"

"The spending money you gave me when you sent me away while you were trying clothes on in the mall. I found a drugstore. Thought the condoms would come in handy."

"I'm glad one of us was thinking about protection," Jo muttered, tasting herself on her lips. He'd kissed her after going down on her. She'd never tasted herself before and she realized she tasted pretty good. The sound of ripping foil snapped her attention back to McCullen and she watched as he rolled the protection onto his engorged cock.

Slipping his hands onto her hips, he angled his cock against her clit again. This time rubbing his cock head against her with increased pressure and speed. Within seconds brilliant spasms of arousal exploded, tightening her body with arousal. She cried out her satisfaction as he bucked his hips and plunged his nice big cock into her.

Oh yeah, he made her feel so damn good.

McCullen couldn't hold back a second longer even if his life depended on it. He quickly sheathed her, inhaling at how intense her spasming vagina welcomed him inside.

She came fast and hard, her body tightening around his cock. He captured her pants with his mouth as he kissed her again and again. Continuing his thrusts, he plunged into her velvety warmth over and over, unleashing the wildness he knew she possessed.

Her silky-warm cream lubricated him and he thrust harder and faster, pumping her until she was whimpering with fulfillment. Then and only then did he allow the hard knot of arousal blazing through him to explode. The magnificent crescendo shot him into a pleasure world he'd never been before.

Oh yeah, she made him feel so damn good he doubted he would ever let her leave his life.

* * * * *

"Brady and I have been busy working up an appetite so I'm starved." McCullen winked at Jo and rubbed his hands together with anticipation as Mrs. McCloud placed the dinner plates laden with their meals in front of them.

At his comment, Mrs. McCloud smiled knowingly at Jo. Her face flamed and she suddenly wished the honey stained pine floorboards beneath their intimate table for two would part and she could drop down between the crack and disappear from their view.

"That cabin is quite cozy," McCullen continued. "Romantic fireplace. Nice décor. Hot shower. Well outfitted for our purposes."

He looked as if he were about to say something more when she gave him a swift kick beneath the table.

"Oompf!" came his gasp as her foot hit bone.

Bull's eye!

Mrs. McCloud gazed in puzzlement from him to Jo and then back to him again. It was obvious she'd heard McCullen's gasp and was trying to figure out what had happened under the table.

He threw Jo a surprised grin, which quickly turned to amusement. Hopefully he'd received her message loud and clear and she held her breath as he spoke again.

"I think Brady will have a glass of that red wine you mentioned with her supper," he said to Mrs. McCloud.

At his order the older woman's eyes sparkled.

"A glass of red wine coming right up. And of course you would like one also?"

"I'll have two glasses of red wine. Wine puts me into a hell of a romantic mood."

He winked at Mrs. McCloud and she giggled like a schoolgirl as she rushed off.

McCullen grabbed his fork and knife and readied himself to dig into the sautéed lamb medallions. He paused as he gazed past the flickering candle set in the middle of their table to peer over at her.

“You don’t take to teasing out in public, do you, Brady.”

“I’m not used to announcing I’ve just had sex out in public, McCullen. So no,” she replied, keeping her voice low.

His grin widened.

“I was talking about sex? I don’t recall mentioning sex, Brady. Are you sure it’s not you who has sex on the mind?”

Mentally she went over what he’d said and true enough, he hadn’t so much as said the word. She’d just interpreted his meanings as such.

Shit. He was right. She did have sex on the brain.

“Eat, Brady. And I mean your dinner.” He winked again and concentrated on devouring his meal.

Eat! Meaning go down on him. Another sexual innuendo.

Damn him!

Okay, focus Jo. Focus on the meal. Not on him.

Dinner did smell succulent, she had to admit. Even her mouth was watering.

Mrs. McCloud was true to her word when she’d said they would be having sautéed lamb medallions. The meat looked well cooked, just the way she liked it. Drizzled with a glistening mint sauce, the lamb was flanked with scalloped potatoes and an assortment of vegetables.

“Hmm, tastes almost as good as you, Brady,” he whispered around a forkful of lamb.

Her face heated. God! Did he ever stop?

“Could we please concentrate on normal conversation, McCullen?”

He grinned. “What? You don’t like my compliment?”

“Just eat.”

“You look gorgeous when you blush.”

The man was impossible!

He was watching her so intently that she realized the way he looked at her was making her way too aware of him again. She could so easily lose herself in those pools of blue. So easily tell him to forget about dinner and go back to the cabin and have more hot sex. She was on the verge of doing just that when he broke eye contact and dug into his meal again but didn’t stop speaking.

“Okay, so I’m thinking we’ve made mad, passionate sex and I really don’t know squat about you. In the boxcar we talked about everything under the sun except each other. Let’s start with something safe. Why are you so afraid of mice?”

Jo rolled her eyes. So much for safe talk. Mice. Freeda, the hamster. Motel. McCullen. Hot kiss. Sex.

Damn him.

She tried to ignore the quickening beat of her heart as visions of falling into his powerful embrace and then everything that had happened afterward.

Forcing herself to pick up her fork, she started to eat and began to reveal why she was afraid of mice.

“I was eleven. In Girl Guide’s summer camp. I was sleeping and a mouse crawled over my face at night. I woke up to find a couple of black beady eyes and a twitchy wet nose not more than two inches from my face. Call it a rude awakening. I’ve been terrified of them ever since.”

Mrs. McCloud interrupted them with three huge goblets of wine and thankfully before Jo could misinterpret any further words between him and Mrs. McCloud, the elderly women had to rush off to tend to another couple entering the dining room.

The wine tasted good. Very good. After a few swallows she found her uneasiness drift away. The wine loosened her tongue enough to question him about his childhood in Montana. She knew from Mathew that their parents had run a combination ranch and farm and owned thousands of acres. They’d raised crops, cattle and horses. It all came to an end when the three brothers—Steve, Mathew and Daniel—decided the rural life wasn’t for them.

“And then Mom got sick. Cancer.”

Daniel’s voice had softened as he spoke about his mother.

“The cancer spread fast and she was gone.”

Pain welled inside Jo at Daniel’s loss. For a moment his jaw tightened as he obviously fought his emotions.

Then he smiled at her, the pain in his eyes gone.

“You don’t think I forgot your ruse about you being the one getting married, did you? I think I should punish you for that lie.”

A mischievous twinkle appeared in his eyes. His voice lowered.

“Perhaps a naughty spanking? Or some anal?”

Anal as punishment? She tried to keep her composure. Tried to keep the excitement from firing her blood even more than she was already fired. Some weird savage need to have him bury his cock in her ass swept through her. The desire was so strong Jo could barely swallow the last bit of food left on her plate.

After his anal punishment suggestion, McCullen didn’t say anything more about it. It was as if he knew she wanted it. Wanted him that way. It was as if he were leaving that taunt hanging between them. As if it were a promise.

By the time they finished their dessert, a scrumptious piece of peppermint chocolate truffle cake, she could see the words *you’re mine* blazing boldly in his eyes. As they bid Mrs. McCloud farewell and walked quickly through the rain shower along the moonlit trail back to their cabin, the silence between them had intensified to such a fiery level, Jo was creaming up a storm in her panties.

* * * * *

Before leaving for supper Daniel had thrown a couple of logs onto the fire in the hearth. As they stepped into the cabin, he noticed the fire was almost out but it had warmed the cabin quite nicely.

Not that they needed it to be warm in here. He was hotter than blazes just watching Jo as she settled on the sofa beneath the south window and looked around the room. She was pouting. Unsure of herself. He watched how her breasts rose and fell just a little quicker when she spied the box of condoms he'd conveniently left on the night table beside the bed.

She licked her lips nervously. He knew she wanted more sex. Knew she wanted him. And that last thought spread a really nice warmth through him. Brady wanted him to make love to her again.

He felt tight and tense as he strolled toward the night table. He could feel her hot gaze on his back. She was already undressing him with her eyes. Had been doing it since he'd mentioned anal during dinner.

He hadn't taken a woman that way since Beth. Hadn't wanted to be reminded of her cries of arousal that last night. The night she'd been gunned down. But with Jo it felt right. He would introduce her to this new world and she would enjoy it. He had no doubts about that.

Opening the drawer, he gazed down at the butt plug he'd purchased early this morning at a sex shop. He'd spied the shop on the way to the mall. It was only minutes from the shopping establishment and when Jo had given him money, telling him to make himself scarce while she tried on clothes, he'd gone and bought the condoms, headed out to the parking lot, hopped into the rental and found the store.

He hadn't realized he would be using the toy so soon. It had been a spur-of-the-moment decision and he was glad he'd followed through with it.

As he removed the toy and the lubricant he'd purchased, her eyes widened. But she said nothing. Her body was doing all the talking for her. Her hands were knotted in her lap but she was trembling with excitement and her long, slender throat moved delicately with every swallow. His throat was dry too. Excitement and anticipation did that to him.

With the toy and lubricant in hand, he slowly stalked to her. He felt like a wild animal lusting after the female he wanted. The mate he would conquer and keep forever.

"Get undressed," he said as he circled in front of her and placed the items on the armrest of the sofa. Her eyes widened when she saw the plug and he could tell she was suddenly unsure of what was happening. She looked nervous, doubtful and maybe even a bit scared of the unknown. He expected hesitation. Anal was something new to her.

"Undress now," he said, putting a slight harsh tone to his voice. He wanted her to know he was in charge. Wanted her to drop the tight blanket of control she wore when she was spooked.

She stood from the sofa and twisted around, wanting to face him. He stopped her with a sharp "No".

"Undress, Jo. Face away from me."

He watched her tense at his order. Knew she was fighting that control that kept her grounded. The control that kept her from her true emotions and from fully trusting him.

On a couple of occasions he'd felt her lose that control. Had seen the vulnerability in her eyes, the feeling of safety. Of trust. Brief instances, however fleeting, gave him hope she would eventually forgive him for what he'd done to her on the witness stand.

As he watched her undress, his cock began to ache with need. The need built as he gazed upon her bare back. When she was clad only in her thin panties, he smacked her ass. Hard.

The sharp sound of flesh hitting material mingled with her surprised gasp.

"That's for lying to me about the wedding dress," he explained before she could question him.

He swatted her again. This time on her other cheek. She swore softly but didn't make a move to stop him. Didn't try to run either, so he slapped her again and told her to remove her panties.

As she did his bidding and removed the thin fabric, his cock swelled painfully. The curves of her ass cheeks were slightly pink from his slaps. They looked good. Her body was tense, poised for more. It was obvious she liked the pain of his hand slapping her ass. He gave her a few more spanks and stopped when she sucked in her breath.

"And now for the pleasure," he said, and dropped on to his knees behind her.

He kissed her right ass cheek. Smelled the soap they'd used. Fresh and perfumey. The sexy scent of strawberries. He liked strawberries. Always had. Smelling that fruity scent on her ass turned him on more. He kissed her right ass cheek. Felt the burn of her blushing flesh against his lips. When he lapped her hot curve with his tongue, her ass muscles tightly flexed.

He grinned and continued kissing and licking until he smelled her arousal. It sifted sweet and strong through the air, mingling with her soft gasps.

"This plug is inflatable," he explained. "Earlier when you headed out for supper and I told you I'd catch up with you, I cleaned the plug. Made it ready for you. I didn't realize I'd be using it so quickly."

"McCullen, I've never done this before," she whispered.

Daniel's stomach knotted with satisfaction. There, her admission was out. The trust factor was beginning.

"I know."

"You do?"

Her voice was still etched with uncertainty and anticipation. He kissed her neck and said, "I can read your experience in your eyes, Brady. Most of the time you're cool, calm and confident, but when I tease you, I sense your uneasiness and your excitement. Just like I sensed tonight when I mentioned a spanking and anal that you would be curious about them. That you would be willing to try them."

He removed the butt plug from the plastic he'd wrapped it in and placed it on the sofa then reached for the tube of lubricant. Uncapping it, he squirted a generous amount onto the plug. He lifted the plug and proceeded to smear the lube around the shaft then placed the toy back onto the plastic.

She hissed as he pulled her blushing cheeks apart and quickly lubricated the puckered sphincter muscle. Sliding a finger against the tight knot, he noted the eager shift of her hips.

Oh baby. Despite her fear of the unknown, she liked him touching her here. Tight muscles wrapped like velvet steel around his lubed finger and his cock twitched boldly against his pants as he thought of how nice and taut she would be when he finally penetrated her. But that wouldn't be for a few days. He wanted her to be open and ready for him when he fucked her here. The plug would prepare her for him.

In the meantime he'd enjoy Brady in other sexual ways.

Chapter Twenty-One

As Daniel sunk his finger into her, he told her to relax and breathe deeply. She did as he asked and soon her muscles began to relax around his finger. A few moments later he slid a second lubed finger inside her. For several minutes he explored and massaged her, his fingers slurping in and out in a sensual rhythm that had her anal muscles welcoming him with every plunge.

When she stretched nicely, he slid out his fingers and picked up the plug.

“Okay, Jo. I’m going to slide the toy inside. It’s lubed so it should go in easy enough. Are you ready?”

He waited for an answer. Instead she nodded. Since becoming naked, she hadn’t said a word. Perhaps she was embarrassed. She’d get over that. He’d make sure she was comfortable with him and hopefully she would trust him too.

Having her ass bared to him, allowing him to prepare her for anal was a damn good start toward that trust.

“Bend over and grab your ankles. It’ll go in easier that way.”

She did as he asked and hung her head, her hair trailing down to the floor like a chestnut waterfall. When she looked at him, he noticed the anticipation flaring in her eyes.

“Don’t tease me with your gorgeous eyes, Brady,” he warned, feeling his erection swell as the blood pounded through the length of him.

She snapped her eyes shut. Her long lashes framed her eyelids in such a sexy way he almost wished she hadn’t closed them. He couldn’t wait until later when he was facing her again. He wanted to kiss those lashes so badly. Wanted to kiss her mouth and her pussy.

He reined in his sudden impatience and drew in a breath, forcing himself to be calm. Pressing the narrowed end of the lubricated plug to her anal opening, he began to slide the plug in. At first there was resistance. Normal under the circumstances.

He told her to relax again. She did and then he was able to slide the enlarged shaft of the toy past the puckered opening, allowing the flat wide base to hold it in place.

“Stay like that for a little while longer, Brady,” he whispered, and began to remove his clothing. Seeing her ass bared to him, the plug held so tight inside her and her pussy glistening with cream—well, it just about drove him wild.

His cock was swollen, heavy and angry, demanding satisfaction as he rolled on a condom. Still keeping behind her, he quickly found her hot clit with his finger. She was already engorged. Aroused. Ready for him.

Her breath hitched as he stroked her with firm pressure. He could feel her clit swell more. Dipping into her wet vagina he collected more moisture and rubbed her clit harder. Her breaths came faster. Her body tightened as he drove her close to a climax.

And just before she came, he aimed at her slit and thrust his cock into her vagina. No warning. Just nice and fast. She cried out, whether in surprise or arousal, he wasn't sure. She was so exquisitely tight due to the butt plug and her creamy, velvety muscles hungrily wrapped around his shaft sucking him inside.

He buried himself to the hilt.

She was so warm. So beautiful.

He began to plunge in and out. Slowly at first and then quickly as his climax began to take hold. Her orgasm seemed endless. Her wild spasms milking him with greed, spreading his arousal until he was joining her moans with groans of his own satisfaction.

* * * * *

The butt plug didn't bother Jo. At least not too much. She cleaned it when she needed to and wiggled around when McCullen inflated it every so often throughout the night. She still couldn't believe she had a toy buried up her ass and that she'd allowed him to put it there.

He'd been so gentle with her. His lubricated fingers prodding and exploring patiently until every nerve ending inside her was alive and aware. He made her feel free. Just looking at him made her feel that way. And that's how she was feeling this morning as she watched him sleep after a night of sex. In his sleep he had a satisfied grin on his face. He looked so different from the first time she'd seen him lying unconscious in that hospital bed. Now there was color in his face and with a few meals tucked under his belt, he'd lost that sick haggard look of illness and put on a few pounds.

Damn! He was so cute, she thought as she quietly strolled into the bathroom for a quick shower. The thought of waking him and asking him to join her was so tempting she almost did it, but if she did wake him, they'd end up having sex in the shower again. That would be carried into the bedroom and they wouldn't be leaving the cabin today.

She smiled as she turned on the faucets. Not leaving the cabin ever was a tempting way of life. Having one exploding orgasm after another was an enticing way to live too. It would be nice to toss away all responsibilities and just live sex. Very nice indeed.

When the water reached the desired level, Jo stepped into the shower and gasped at the welcome warm spray caressing her. Sex and showers. She could live with that.

* * * * *

Every tender touch of his fingers caressing her heavy breasts made Jo shiver with excitement. Every whispered promise in her ear of how slow and deep he would fuck her had her body humming in anticipation. As he kissed her lips in the gentlest, most torturous of ways she could feel her hunger racing through her blood, firing her insides.

While she'd been in the shower, McCullen had shown up and joined her. He'd also brought along some entertainment in the form of silky scarves he'd picked up in the gift shop.

He'd bound and blindfolded her with them in the shower stall. Partial punishment, he said, due to the fact she'd taken a shower without asking him to join her this morning.

Now as the warm water shot from the shower jets, pulsing and caressing her back, it gave her the feeling of safety. Her breasts felt full and swollen as he tended them. He nibbled and bit and licked both her nipples until her hips were gyrating and her pussy was creaming.

She inhaled sharply and arched against him as his fingers trailed around the contours of her breasts, circling her areolas, but this time he didn't touch her nipples. They were aching. Aching from the moist brand of his mouth and of his suckling moments earlier.

Suddenly his mouth closed on the right side of her neck. She hissed at the sweet flare of pain as his teeth bit and his mouth sucked hard.

"Shit!" she gasped, pulling against her restraints as he drew away, chuckling. His fingers danced over the fiery area, brushing at her flesh until the pain faded into a gentle throb.

"There's going to be a nice bruise here to remind you that you're mine, Brady."

A hickey! The bastard had given her a hickey!

"One of these silky scarves wrapped around your neck will cover the hickey over the next few days. Only the two of us has to know about what happened here today," he whispered.

She tensed as his warm breath splashed against her right breast. He wouldn't dare give her a hickey on her breast, would he? He cupped her and she felt his mouth touch just beside her areola. Immediately she felt the sting of his teeth and the pleasure-pain of suction.

Son of a bitch! He was giving her another one!

She realized she was excited at his marking her. Sensed he was thrilled too. The sound of his rapid breathing as he drew his head away made her imagine how dark his eyes would look as he watched the bruise form on her skin. Last night she'd sensed he liked to watch her ass blush after the spanks he'd given her. Realized that Daniel McCullen had a BDSM streak in him!

She hadn't even thought he might be that type of man. But he was. He'd been in control last night. His voice slightly harsh and commanding as he'd instructed her to undress. The confident way he'd put in the butt plug and the arousing spanks. Today, the bindings around her wrists, the blindfold and his marking her.

"A little bit of pain with pleasure makes things more adventurous, don't you think, Brady?" he asked.

She held still, felt the tension grow inside her and became very aware of his male scent as his breath caressed her other breast. He cupped her there. Held her firm. Something soft and fine brushed back and forth across her nipple. A silk scarf? He kept brushing it until she felt the white-hot flares of arousal in her pussy.

She felt the odd prick of disappointment when the touch of the scarf vanished. To her frustration, he let go of her breast.

"How does that feel, Brady? One side pain and the other side pleasure."

"Is that your best work, McCullen?" she challenged, feeling the hot moisture of arousal coating her pussy. Feeling one breast burning with need from his hickey and the other tingling with anticipation from the scarf.

“Don’t worry, Brady. My best work is yet to come. I’ll have you begging soon, sweetness. Begging me to fuck you long and hard.”

“I never beg, McCullen,” she warned. But even as she said those words she knew she’d just sealed her fate.

She held still as he kissed her earlobe then he whispered softly into her ear, “You’ve never had a reason to beg before, Brady.”

Oh damn!

McCullen was having fun with her. His cock throbbed as hard as a rock as he watched her struggle against the scarves holding her. She looked good with her arms tied over her head, her breasts thrust out for him, her eyes blindfolded.

She was totally at his mercy and he knew she was enjoying this twist. He could see it with the expressions slipping across her face. The surprise in the way her lips tightened when he’d given her the two hickeys—the sexy inhalation of her breath, the heated feel of her skin giving way beneath his mouth as he sucked and the cute way her teeth bit softly into her lower lip afterward.

He admired those hickeys. The red marks looked sexy on her skin, and just the thought of her admiring them in the mirror and remembering what happened today made his cock swell even more. He bit back a groan at the bite of discomfort.

“I bet you’d like to feel how hard my cock is getting as I watch these bruises forming,” he whispered against her ear.

She moaned softly as he pushed his cock head against the moist opening of her pussy then pulled away before she could buck.

“Come on, McCullen. Don’t back away. Give me your best,” she breathed.

Excitement flared in her voice. There was a curiosity in her. Probably wondering how far he could push her before she started begging for him. He wanted to know how far he could push as well.

Need raged through him as he got down on his haunches in front of her and nestled himself between her thighs.

“Spread your legs, Brady,” he commanded.

She cursed softly, and he watched as she tugged at her restraints just a little before doing as he asked. She widened her stance and he noted how breathtaking the view was of the warm water from the shower spraying off her backside like a waterfall, the silvery water illuminating her pussy, framing her just for him.

Grabbing a couple more scarves from where he’d hung them on the nearby handicap access bar, he tied them together.

Wrapping one end of the scarf rope around the bar, he tied it firmly. With the other end he made a loop with a slipknot.

“Move your right leg out about two more feet and then lift it slightly,” he instructed. She did as he asked and when she felt the silky scarf slip over her foot and wrap snugly around her ankle she cursed and pulled at the new restraint.

The slip knot tightened and she was caught, unable to bring her legs together again.

Good. He had her exactly the way he wanted her.

“I’m detecting a scarf fetish, McCullen. What are you up to?” Her voice sounded tense and aroused and she was biting her lower lip in wonderment and curiosity.

He said nothing. He sensed her mounting anticipation by the sweet smell of arousal sifting up with the steam. As he placed his hands firmly on her hips, he watched her tummy tighten. Oh yeah, she was truly excited to have him going down on her again. By the time he was finished, she’d be more than excited.

He looked at the pretty pink folds of her pussy. Felt his cock and balls swell even more at imagining himself sliding into her ultra-tight channel, compliments of the butt plug, of which he could see the base.

Fuck, this was getting harder by the minute.

Earlier, in anticipation of what he was going to do to her with the mints, he’d placed a couple of them within easy reach on the edge of the soap dish. Grabbing them he popped them into his mouth, savoring the tingling sensations melting against his tongue.

When he’d first tasted the candy yesterday and felt the coolness burst inside his mouth, he’d thought of doing to Brady what he was about to do to her. Licking his lips, he dipped his head between her thighs. She cried out as his tongue lapped at her clit. She was sweet and wet and he enjoyed the warm splash of her hot flesh melting against his mouth.

Then he sucked. Not hard enough to hurt. Just hard enough to scatter her senses.

She swore as he continued to suck.

When he laved his tongue against her pulsing clit, her legs quivered. He noticed she was trying to move them together. He’d anticipated this natural response, hence why he’d raised and tied her legs apart. Unless she wanted to fall, she wouldn’t be able to lift her free leg either.

When she swore a second time and then moaned softly as she obviously began to enjoy his licking and sucking, he stopped. She muttered something unintelligible.

“You know you like it, Brady,” he chuckled against her pussy. Then he gave her clit another few tender laps with his tongue.

“McCullen...”

He sensed she wanted to start begging, but then thought the better of it. She remained silent.

“And now, Brady, brace yourself for your punishment for lying to me.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Punishment? She thought he was already punishing her! Her clit burned with arousal and felt swollen complements of his teeth. And all she wanted to do was grab McCullen's cock and thrust his flesh into her.

Damn him. She was tortured enough, thank you very much. And she'd only been in here a few minutes!

Sucking in a frustrated breath, she twisted against her restraints when the warm spray from the showerhead pulsed against her clit.

He'd removed the handheld showerhead from the stand! At home she had one of these and she had no problem climaxing while she masturbated in her shower while using one. If he knew what he was doing with this contraption, then she was in big trouble.

"Oh shit! Water torture, McCullen? Oh—" she tried to tell him to please don't make her laugh, but her taunt became trapped in her throat as the jets of water effectively seduced her pussy.

Oh damn! He knew what he was doing, she thought as the familiar tension uncurled in her.

"You like that, don't you, Brady," he hissed.

She cried out his first name as he grabbed her ass and held her still. He brought the pulsing jets of water cascading against her clit.

Oh fuck! That felt so good!

Before she could enjoy the full effects of the caresses, the water was gone and she whimpered her distress. The water splashed against her feet now and she realized he'd placed the showerhead on the floor. He was moving around her in the shower. She could feel him. Could smell him. He was standing to her right. Aside from his ragged breathing, he was quiet.

What was he doing?

Watching her? Waiting? For what? For her to start begging of course.

She almost did but then she felt his hand cup her breast again. Felt something soft and satiny slide beneath her breast. She felt the pressure of something being tied around her. Tied just enough to make her feel swollen. Just enough so the binding wouldn't easily fall off.

"McCullen?" What was he up to now?

"Breast bondage. Ever hear of it?" His voice sounded harsh, ragged and aroused. And damned if she wasn't creaming as he lifted up her other breast and she felt the satiny item being tied around her.

Her breasts seemed to feel larger than they'd ever felt in her life. They felt so heavy, pert and, well, it just felt so interesting.

“I’ve heard of it,” she replied, suddenly wishing the blindfold were off so she could look down and see how it looked.

She felt the spray of the water move away from her feet. A moment later the hot water lashed first one nipple and then the other. Back and forth he went until she her breasts felt as if they were huge and on fire. Wet heat zipped burned through her pussy and she realized she was nearing the end of her sexual patience.

She gasped as his mouth once again latched on to her nipple.

God! The man must be an octopus!

He sucked her nipple and used the pulsing jets of water from the showerhead to arouse her other nipple. Using his thumb, he massaged her clit.

The unique combination had her senses swirling for relief and bringing her quickly to the edge of what she suspected would be a fantastic orgasm, if only he would let her have it!

“Okay, Mc...Daniel...”

She whimpered when she felt the burn of his thick erection slide across her right hip. He was rubbing his cock against her, making her feel how swollen and hot he was for her. Making her imagine how big and powerful he would feel sliding into her, stretching her, fucking her.

“Oh God. Okay, you win.”

McCullen chuckled around her nipple and just kept on rubbing his gorgeous cock against her hip. The movements were getting faster and more desperate.

His mouth was working wonders on her too as he continued nipping and biting and sucking. Not to mention how full and swollen her breasts were feeling being bound or how fast and beautiful his thumb felt moving around and over her engorged clit.

And then she heard a moan erupt from him.

Oh shoot! He was going to come without her!

“Daniel, please...”

He swore softly.

Within a flash his mouth left her breast, the showerhead dropped with a crash to the ceramic floor and she felt him remove the mints from inside her. They clattered to the floor as well.

To her delight he cupped her ass cheeks and she felt his thick condom-sheathed cock head pressing into her. Entering her. Stretching her.

“Oh yes,” she muttered, and pulled against the restraints as she tried to position herself into a better way to get him inside her faster.

“Beg, Brady, beg me to fuck you,” he hissed as he slid deeper.

She shuddered.

“Fuck me, Daniel. Fuck me. Hard.”

His cock was long and thick and she could feel it pulsing inside her. He came back out and plunged into her again.

This time harder. He thrust into her a third time.

Again and again. Plunging into her, fast and furious and she loved it. Loved the way the sensual tightness he'd teased into all her nerves simply burst. She exploded. Shatters of pleasure ripped into her like waves of love. Those were the only words she could describe it as.

Waves of love.

She bucked against the restraints. Against him. Pressed her swollen bound breasts against his hard chest. Gyrated her hips. Met his thrusts with her own.

They melted into each other. Came apart. Became one again.

Oh God! It was fantastic! This must be how it felt in heaven, she found herself thinking.

She was flying. She was shaking. She was thrust into a world of pleasure that stretched as endless as the universe.

* * * * *

From where she and Daniel stood on the railroad tracks, they had a great view of the abandoned ghost town of Jackfish down below. It was early evening, the day after Jo's punishment sex, which had been followed by several more sessions of sex throughout that day and night.

Early this morning, Jo and Daniel had been jostled out of bed by a phone call. The Witness Program was taking no chances with Matt and Sara's lives, so in an effort to make sure Jo and Daniel weren't being followed, Jo was instructed to take certain precautions. A drive that should have taken them only an hour to the ghost town took them most of the day.

First they were instructed to drive along the Trans Canada highway toward the city of Thunder Bay. Before reaching it, however, they received a call on Jo's cell phone from Mathew, instructing them to go to a rural address in a nearby town. There, two serious-looking plainclothes cops that Mathew trusted, met them. Given a new car with tinted windows, they were told not to stop anywhere but to go straight to the ghost town.

And here they stood. The car was parked nearby in a clearing beside the car Matt and Sara must have arrived in. They'd taken the knapsacks with camping gear, which Witness Protection had provided, out of the trunk, and a couple of bags containing their personal clothing, and followed the railroad tracks to the town.

From their perch on the tracks, Jo noted the quickly setting sun and the cool chill of evening stab through her turtleneck. Even the waters of Lake Superior's Jackfish Bay looked cold and daunting as the shimmering gray mist swirled over it.

The buildings of the ghost town appeared ancient, their green moss-covered roofs sagging under the weight of time. Some homes struggled to stand proud and erect, their glassless windows an eerie welcome, while other buildings were settling at tilted angles or had simply given up the fight to stand and had fallen over and apart.

"I hate to admit it but it looks romantic in a spooky kind of way," Daniel said in a low whisper, as if afraid to wake the ghosts of the people who had once lived here.

"So what's this town's story? Why is it abandoned?"

Jo looked over at him and smiled at the curious way his eyes flickered from one building to another.

“Well if I remember correctly from the history 101 lesson Sara gave me, Jackfish started out in the mid-1880s as a train order station where the train would stop and pick up orders of where to go next. It was also a commercial fishing port where fish were caught and shipped to Toronto and Montreal. It was also used as a port to deliver and pick up coal for local steamships. And then in the 1930s the town also accepted lumber from a local lumber company that shipped the lumber to the States. When the Canadian Pacific Railroad replaced their steam engines, there was no need for the trains to stop in Jackfish to load up with coal anymore.

“The town’s inhabitants started to move away and then there was an explosion of lamprey that killed off most of the fish and the rest of the people moved away, abandoning the town back in 1963.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed with disbelief. “That is one hell of a history. But is this where they want to get married?”

Jo nodded. She’d been here on several occasions with her sister over the years. Sara loved collecting antiques, and in the past, before going into hiding with Matt, her sister had made it a habit of coming here many times to collect antique tin coffee pots or chairs, fixing them up. Sara had won several awards and prizes in local fairs with the floral arrangements adorning her antique Jackfish coffee pots.

“This place has sentimental value for both of them. They spent some time here getting to know each other when Mathew was wanted for murder.”

McCullen chuckled and shook his head. “I’m going to have to have a talk with my brother. Didn’t he ever hear of taking his woman out and wining and dining her like a normal guy?”

“Oh, I don’t know. When a couple is hiding from the authorities, I think this a nice place to get to know each other without interruptions. It’s secluded, quiet and—”

“And no one can hear you beg when you are being punished?” he added softly.

Jo’s face warmed at his teasing remark. She felt a bit sore from all that sex they’d had, but thankfully the butt plug she wore wasn’t giving her any troubles.

“I think I rather enjoy you punishing me into begging, McCullen. We’ll have to do it again real soon.”

Throwing him a quick wink, she hoisted her knapsack onto her back, and with McCullen’s teasing chuckle following her, she started down the trail that would take her to the ghost town of Jackfish.

* * * * *

Jo’s sexual taunt made his breath back up in his lungs and his cock thicken with arousal as Daniel shifted the heavy knapsack on his back and watched Jo get swallowed by a clump of saplings that skirted a couple of the haunted houses below. In the quickly falling darkness he knew it was only a matter of half an hour before he wouldn’t be able to make out the trail that meandered down the side of this hill. But he wanted a few minutes to check out this awesome scenery, so he let her go on alone.

The cool air was filled with the sounds of chirping crickets and an occasional splash of a beaver's tail slapped the water below. A full moon had come out and cast an eerie glow over the dark buildings. One structure in particular caught his attention. It was the farthest away from the town and nestled snugly on a knoll. At the top of the hill he spied a pointed steeple that tilted dangerously to one side, spearing into the sky. Beneath the steeple was a small chapel.

Daniel found himself grinning. This would be the local church where the bride- and groom-to-be would say "I do". Hell, leave it to his brother to be original.

He stiffened when somewhere down below he heard the squeal and laughter of two women. Obviously Jo and her sister were getting reacquainted.

His breath hitched at the happy sound and a swell of emotion sifted through him.

Mathew and he had been close like that too. Being the two older boys of the three and closer together in age than Steve, they had been like two peas in a pod.

But after Steve dying they'd drifted apart. Both of them going undercover trying to find out who was connected to his death. Cripes, he hadn't seen his brother in several years but he and their dad had spoken on the phone with him many times. He knew Matt had met Sara when he'd had amnesia and while she'd helped him find out his identity and who wanted to kill him, they'd fallen in love. That had been about a year ago.

As he thought of Matt, his brother suddenly appeared on the path down below.

His brother slowly lifted an arm and waved. Daniel waved back, and a surprising happiness burst inside his chest.

"You need some meat on your bones, kiddo. What has Dad been feeding you down Mexico way? Too many burritos and not enough prime steak," his brother kidded as he reached him.

Before Daniel could answer, Matt reached out and crushed him to his powerful chest in a brutal hug that squeezed the breath from his lungs.

"I've missed you," he growled, and hugged him tighter. "And I'm getting married!"

"I know!" Daniel laughed at his brother's exuberance.

It was then that Daniel noticed Jo and another woman walking up the trail toward them, flashlights in hand. The woman wore baggy black track pants and a loose sweetheart-pink smock-type sweater. Her auburn waist-length hair sparkled beneath the glow of moonlight and her heart-shaped face gleamed at him with such a fierce happiness it shocked Daniel. Something else startled him. The woman was pregnant.

Very pregnant.

Jo had neglected to tell him his brother was soon going to be a father.

Mathew, having noticed Daniel's reaction, drew away and gathered the woman into his arms. He'd never seen Matt look so happy as he made the introductions.

"Daniel, meet Sara Brady Clarke, my fiancée. Sara, this is my middle brother Daniel."

With a welcoming smile Sara extended her hand.

"Pleased to finally meet you, Daniel. I've heard lots of stories about you."

Daniel shook hands with her, struggling to find his voice. She was so pretty it was breathtaking. It was true about pregnant woman for Sara literally glowed.

"None of those stories are true, I assure you," he chuckled when he remembered how to speak.

Sara was gifted with the same well-rounded lips, perfect nose, pretty heart-shaped face as Jo and yet the similarity ended there. Where Jo possessed blue eyes, Sara's eyes were wider set and a startling shade of fudge brown. Their hair colors were different too. Jo's hair was gently waving and midway down her back with the color of roasting chestnuts, whereas Sara's hair was a delightful auburn that flowed in tumbling waves down to her waist.

"Jo, thanks for finding him and bringing him here," Matt said as he reached out and hugged Jo to his other side. Both women beamed at Mathew before Jo snapped her gaze to Daniel.

"Piece of cake," she replied, and threw him a wink, which he assumed meant for him to keep his mouth shut about their wild escape from the transplant hospital and their subsequent close calls with Colby Martin.

"Jo and I are going to take a walk up to the car and grab the wedding dress from the trunk. We'll leave you two men to unpack all the camping gear," Sara said as she happily clasped Jo's hand and pulled her past Daniel and Mathew.

"Sure, let us do the easy work," Mathew chuckled.

Sara and Jo were already near the top of the trail when Daniel heard Sara laughing. She turned around and patted her bulging belly.

"Husband of mine, I'll give you lots of easy work to do when the baby shows up. Midnight feedings, diaper changes and burping should be a good start."

Daniel watched in disbelief as Mathew strolled up the trail, grabbed Sara, drew her into his arms and gave her a passionate kiss. It was obvious they had forgotten Jo and Daniel were even there because the kiss lasted a hell of a long time before they separated.

He held her at arm's length and said softly, "Make sure you're very careful."

"I've got Jo as my bodyguard. Can't get any better than that," came her reply.

He gave her a quick kiss before Mathew let her go and both women disappeared in silence. Obviously his warning had reminded the ladies of how much danger lurked despite being in the Witness Protection Program.

"So? What do you think of her? Isn't Sara the most beautiful woman you've ever seen in your life?"

Daniel slapped an affectionate hand against his brother's back. "She's absolutely fantastic. Jo's not too bad either."

At his comment, a curious smile crossed Matt's lips. "What's this? Something going on between the two of you?"

Daniel recognized the curious look in his brother's eyes and grinned inwardly. Without a word he headed down the trail toward the dark town.

He could hear Mathew rushing along behind him.

"Hey! C'mon, you can tell me. I saw the way you two were looking at each other just now. Jo's brother mentioned something about strip searches too."

Jessie had a big mouth.

“Sorry, I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Daniel replied as he tried to hold his excitement inside, but it didn’t quite work. His laughter came bubbling out of him like a giant explosion.

“Is my brother in love?”

“That’s for me to know and you to find out,” Daniel teased as he kept rushing ahead along the dark trail. A moment later it ended in a clearing where he spotted a small flickering campfire. A teapot was nestled in the orange flames on a metal grill.

Obviously Mathew and Sara had made camp on what had once been the main street of the village. Abandoned houses lined both sides of the clearing. A small pup tent had been pitched near the campfire and Jo’s knapsack was propped up against a nearby log.

“Come on. You can tell me. I won’t say anything.” Mathew laughed as he came up beside him. His brother’s excitement was infectious and Daniel found himself laughing like a teenage boy who’d just kissed his first girl.

“It’s too soon to tell,” he lied. Truth was, he wanted Jo in his life. Probably forever.

Daniel jumped out of the way just in time to avoid Mathew’s playful swing and within minutes the two of them were unpacking the knapsacks and setting up a second tent.

Chapter Twenty-Three

“Ouch!” Sara wiggled beneath Jo’s hand as she speared another pin through the white fabric of their mother’s wedding dress.

“Sorry. I just need one more sec,” Jo replied, her voice filtering through the mouthful of pins.

Fixing the dress was proving to be an interesting challenge tonight. After retrieving it from the car, Sara had been unable to contain her excitement. Swearing she wouldn’t be able to sleep unless she tried on the dress, they’d picked out a nearby smaller abandoned cabin to be the dressing room. Once the dress was on, neither of them could wait to get to work.

Doing a quick search of the cabin, Jo discovered an old half-length dirt-encrusted mirror in one of the back rooms. After summoning Daniel, she asked him to wash it for them so they could use it, which he gladly did, returning the mirror in a glistening, workable condition.

Before he left the cabin, he’d cast Jo a lusty look that had her heating up and wondering what the sleeping arrangements would be tonight. She had the feeling Sara would invite Jo to sleep in her tent and Matt and Daniel would bunk together.

But Jo didn’t want Sara as her sleeping companion. Not that she didn’t enjoy her sister’s company. She wanted Daniel in her bed tonight and every night.

Oh darn! She should just come out and tell Sara her wishes, but she kept her mouth shut. She couldn’t see too well inside this debilitated cabin. The only light sources came from a couple of propane camping lanterns that Jo snatched from the campsite and hung on nearby rusty nails, which she’d found and pounded into the walls with a huge rock. The wooden floor sloped slightly to one side, but it was the straightest and safest one they’d been able to find. Being nine months pregnant with a due date of two days ago hadn’t slowed her sister down either.

Aside from a sore back and swollen feet sticking out from a pair of sandals, Sara had no problems keeping up to Jo’s brisk walk as they’d gone out to the car earlier to retrieve the wedding dress. After returning, Sara whipped up a hot meal for the four of them, chatting up a storm with Daniel, who was being quite the gentleman tonight.

He helped Sara with pretty much everything, including the dishes. He doted on her much to Mathew’s amusement and joked with her. Jo could see Mathew was pleased the two got along so famously and Jo was happy too.

After supper, the men had tiptoed through a few of the cabins with their flashlights before finding this one as being the most acceptable for the wedding dress alterations.

While they had been away, Jo discovered from Sara that the preacher would be arriving tomorrow morning via car and there was a bodyguard lurking around here somewhere. He was maintaining surveillance around the town as well as keeping such a

low profile Jo hadn't seen anything more than a nearby shadow of a hulky figure a couple of times.

In the cabin, the crooked floorboards made it a challenge to get a decent hem and since she'd never been any good with a needle in the first place, she'd poked poor Sara several times in the ankles as she tried to pin the material.

On the good side, since their mother was a tall, plus-sized woman as well as very pregnant with Sara at the time she'd married their father, they only had to deal with the hem and shoulders.

"Sure, one more sec so you can stick it to me again," Sara laughed. Despite her complaint, she held still as Jo placed the final pin.

She removed the remainder of the pins from her mouth and sighed as she inspected her work. It didn't look too bad, she had to admit. The hem was pinned relatively straight. The waist as well as the shoulder areas had been taken in and basted to make a better fit. Now all the dress needed was to be sewn, which Sara would do by hand because Jo wasn't any good at hand-sewing either.

"There. All finished. I think," she said, her voice sounding a bit unsure in the cool air of the cabin.

"Don't worry so much, Jo. You did an excellent job," Sara replied as she gazed down at the dress. Jo had to admit her sister looked breathtakingly beautiful in the white gown, and she was glad Jessie had been able to courier it in time for the wedding.

"You know I'm all thumbs when it comes to this kind of stuff. Always have been. When God was handing out feminine frills he forgot about me."

Sara laughed and did an elegant ballerina twirl. Well, as elegant as a pregnant woman of nine months could.

"Hey, would I ask you to pin this dress if I didn't think you were any good at it. You have feminine skills, sweetie. If you didn't, then Daniel wouldn't be eyeing you the way he is. Speaking of Daniel, I have the feeling there's more going on than either of you are showing Mathew and me."

Jo found herself blushing with embarrassment and twirled Sara around so she could inspect the back scalloped shoulders of the dress again.

"It's your imagination. He's not eyeballing me. Do you think we should take the waist out a wee bit more? Is it too tight?"

Sara sighed. "No more, please, Jo. If I stand here any longer you'll have to take the waist back into my old size because the baby will be born right in this cabin. Unzip me, will you?"

Jo laughed at her sister's remark and did as she asked. Within a minute Sara was back into her regular maternity clothes and holding the dress up in front of her to do a closer inspection of what Jo had done with needle and thread.

"I think this is perfect. You did great. Hey! I have an idea, Jo. Why don't you try it on? I want to see how you look in Mom's wedding dress."

She had an aversion to wearing dresses. She felt weird in them. Way too feminine. She was a pants and top kind of girl. Putting on that nurse's uniform to break Daniel out

of that hospital had already been asking too much. Besides, Sara was very pregnant and the dress was way too big.

"It won't fit," Jo said quickly.

"You let me worry about that. All I have to do is gather the extra material to the back. Besides that'll give me a better idea of how well you did the basting of the hem line."

Who is going to care out here if the hemline is crooked, she thought to herself. But Sara cared. The poor dear was stuck in hiding, her freedom ripped from her, so it probably wasn't too much to ask for a straight hemline. The hope flashing in her sister's eyes made Jo reluctantly agree and in a minute she had the dress on.

It didn't take Sara but a few seconds to cry out in alarm as she saw the ugly slash across the back of Jo's shoulder, complements of the bullet from Martin's gun. Since it was healing nicely, she didn't wear the patch anymore and barely felt a twinge when she moved her arm. Unlike now as Sara prodded around the wound, which made Jo, realize it still was sensitive.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Jo said quickly, chastising herself for not warning her sister.

"When did this happen? It looks recent." Concern ripped through her voice and Jo quickly downplayed what had happened.

"I had a bit of trouble extracting Daniel. It's nothing serious. Really. Daniel's been keeping an eye on it for me. Cleaning it and dressing it."

"And tending to other parts of your body, I see, if that hickey on your neck is an indication."

Oh shit! In the mirror, Jo's eyes snapped to the bluish bruise on the side of her neck. She'd forgotten about that. Had purposely worn a turtleneck to make sure no one saw it. She watched her cheeks glow pink in the mirror as her sister stared at her with a wide knowing grin on her face. Jo's gaze quickly dropped to make sure the hickey on her breast wasn't showing. Thankfully it was covered by the dress. There were certain things she would prefer to keep private. For instance, the fact she was wearing a butt plug and Daniel had inserted it.

"It's just a bruise," she stammered, trying to make an excuse.

Sara smiled knowingly.

"Sweetheart, I know a hickey when I see one. I can see you're in very good hands with Mathew's brother. I'm glad he's been taking such good care of you," she said, and giggled as she went to work on the dress.

With a quick tuck here and a pin there, and Sara holding all the extra fabric in the back, Jo was very surprised to find that the wedding dress fit her like a glove. Well, almost a glove, she thought as she gazed at herself in the mirror and found herself pleasantly surprised. She did look and feel very feminine in the silky, lace covered dress.

"You look so beautiful. So perfect," Sara whispered in awe.

"You really think so?"

"Absolutely. Just like a model in a bridal magazine. Except for that hickey. Exactly what else has he been doing to your body?"

Sara's eyes glittered with teasing and Jo brought her cool hands to her hot cheeks, blushing even harder.

Understanding flared across Sara's face. "Oh my God! You two have had sex, haven't you?"

Shoot. She'd given herself away. Jo nodded, feeling both overwhelmed with excitement and embarrassment.

"I knew it!" Sara squealed, and with big belly in tow gave Jo a big hug.

"You knew what?"

Jo stiffened as Daniel's deep voice filtered into the cabin.

"Hi, Daniel. Jo and I were just talking about the dress. I knew she would look beautiful in it. What's your opinion?"

Jo sighed in relief. *Nice deflect, Sara.*

But when she looked up to see Daniel standing there, his wide shoulders blocking the narrow doorway and his dark gaze fixated on the hickey he'd given her, her throat went dry.

"I think Jo would look beautiful in anything she wears," he answered. *Or anything she doesn't wear*, his eyes said. Translation—naked.

"That answer will get you two helpings of dessert tomorrow. We'll be having wedding cake. It's peppermint chocolate."

"We had some back at the inn and it was absolutely delicious, Sara," Daniel praised.

Sara gushed at his compliment.

Daniel ripped his hot gaze from Jo and beamed at Sara. "Peppermint chocolate loaded with liquor sounds good. You can be sure I'll be tossing compliments all day tomorrow so I can have three helpings of that cake."

"Compliments are always welcome, Daniel." Sara said warmly.

"Anyway, the reason I'm here. I've got a table here for you to use to sew up that dress. Mathew washed it and it's very clean so you don't have to worry about messing the material. He wanted to bring the table over himself, but I didn't think you would approve. I think he's curious about sneaking a peek at your dress. I told him Jo showed it to me it and he won't be disappointed."

Sara shook her head vehemently and waddled over to an overflowing bag she'd brought into the cabin earlier. Jo watched her pull a red-and-white-checkered table cloth from it.

"He's not seeing that dress until I'm wearing it at our wedding. And he won't be sleeping with me until the wedding night. Be sure you tell him that when you see him. I'm afraid you'll have to bunk with Mathew and Jo will be bunking with me."

Shit. Just as Jo had suspected. She swore she read a flash of frustration in Daniel's eyes at Sara's remark. She felt the sharp edge of disappointment soar through her also at not being with Daniel tonight. However, her disappointment vanished when he turned and grabbed the table.

Muscles in his broad back and shoulders bunched quite nicely beneath the thin white T-shirt he wore, making Jo want those fingers touching her breasts and pushing inside her pussy.

She couldn't help but regard those strong hands also as he held the table and brought it into the building, setting it down near the gas lamps. Those hands had touched her intimately. Cupped her breasts and caressed her. When his gaze snapped up and he caught her watching him, she felt the tingle of erotic heat rip through her.

"I can help strip off that dress, Brady. We can also put this table to some really good use after the wedding." The suggestion was said low enough so only the both of them could hear.

"You can strip me after the wedding, McCullen. Consider it a date," she whispered, barely able to hold in her excitement. Suddenly Sara stepped forward and placed the tablecloth as well as a sewing basket onto the table.

"Thank you, Daniel, for bringing the table over. It'll come in very handy for finishing the dress. We should be done in a couple of hours and then it'll be available again."

Oh dear. Had Sara heard Daniel's suggestion about them having sex on the table? He was only kidding about the table, wasn't he?

"Yes, perfect for the dress," she answered quickly, trying to avoid imagining herself sprawled out naked on top of the table while McCullen thrust into her.

Just before Daniel turned to leave, Jo didn't miss the ever so slightly dark color shadowing his cheeks. Obviously he thought Sara had heard what he'd said about the table. Jo groaned inwardly as he quietly closed the door behind him.

Her sister's wedding couldn't come soon enough!

Chapter Twenty-Four

The next day dawned sunny and warm as Jo and Sara climbed out of their tent to hurry with the day's wedding preparations. Last night Sara had stated she didn't want Mathew to see her the morning of the wedding. She was, she said, superstitious and wanted no bad luck. Thankfully Daniel had agreed to keep Mathew occupied with a hike along the train tracks while Sara and Jo met with the preacher in the church to discuss how they would enter and say her vows. Later they changed in the cabin they'd used to alter the dress last night.

If ever a perfect day was made for an autumn wedding, this was definitely it. Warm sunshine flooded the abandoned village of empty houses and cast diamond-like glints off the white-capped waves in the blue waters below. A stiff warm breeze blew in from the bay, bringing a faint scent of fish and the tall yellowing grass that hugged the nearby hillside swayed wildly in front of the gray-planked chapel with the awkward tilted steeple.

Chipmunks scurried like lightning throughout the branches of a nearby golden-leaved oak tree. With sharp teeth they cut and dropped acorns while their companions hustled back and forth below busily collecting the treasures. Birds of all kinds—gray jays, blue jays, woodpeckers and chickadees—sang in other nearby trees that dropped orange, yellow and red leaves.

According to Daniel, who had done a quick knock on the door about an hour earlier, the ceremony would begin promptly at noon.

"I'm a nervous wreck," Sara laughed as Jo zipped up the wedding dress and grabbed the digital camera they'd been using all morning to lock in this memorable day forever.

As she took several shots, Jo's heart burst with love for her sister. After such a horrible tragedy in her past of losing her first husband and unborn twins, Sara had a second chance at happiness. And her bliss showed. She looked so beautiful, she glowed. Her wavy hair trailed over her shoulders like an auburn waterfall and her brown eyes glistened with contentment.

Sara had brought along an elegant figure-flattering dress for Jo to wear as her maid of honor. Despite her hatred of dresses, Jo didn't protest as she'd slipped into the pretty pink garment complete with a chocolate brown linen sash and a gorgeous pink silk flower that settled on the left side of the waist.

Thankfully Sara had a makeup kit, which contained concealer, allowing Jo to hide the reddish coloring around the bullet wound slash as well as the bluish bruise that Daniel had given her on her neck and breast. Thankfully her breast hickey remained hidden by the clothing.

Before putting on their dresses they'd done each other's makeup too.

After using concealer and a dusting of powder, Jo had illuminated her sister's eyes with brown mascara and swept a shimmering white eye shadow over her eyelids. The shadow illuminated the white wedding dress and complemented Sara's brown eyes.

Sara's cheeks were already blushed with excitement so there was no need to do her cheeks. She dashed bright coral-colored lipstick on and Jo had put on pink lipstick that matched her own dress, opting to go without eye shadow herself.

They also decided not to wear the fancy shoes Sara had brought along until they reached the church because the outside terrain was too rough. Instead they would carry their shoes with their white rose cloth bouquets and wear their regular footwear to the church, changing before entering the building.

As she turned Sara around to face her, Jo did a final check of the hem and shoulders. Her sister had sewn the dress like a professional seamstress and it appeared as if it had been made specifically for her and not their mother. She looked absolutely precious with the plain dress that did a wonderful job in trying to hide her pregnancy.

As a matter of fact, Sara looked exceptionally beautiful today. Not in the least bit like the nervous bride she'd been acting like all morning.

"C'mon, sis. What's to be nervous about? You've lived with the man for a while. You certainly know everything about him. You said he's a kind gentle man. Not to mention drop-dead gorgeous and a sexy hunk and—"

"It's not my getting married that's got me worried," Sara broke in as Jo set the camera's timer and placed the camera on a nearby window sill so it would take a couple of pictures of the two of them standing together.

After clicking the button she raced to her sister and they took their pose, hugging each other and smiling. After the two flashes were done, Jo retrieved the camera.

"What is wrong then? I'm sure he knows everything that he needs to know about you. Like the fact you're an early riser and very chipper in the morning. And that you irritate the hell out of me when you grind your teeth while you sleep and not to mention the occasional snore that erupts—"

"Oh my God! I don't snore!" Sara looked aghast with horror and Jo tried like crazy to keep a straight face so her sister wouldn't see she was teasing her in order to keep the nervous bride occupied.

"You better ask your hubby-to-be. Better yet, don't. He'd never tell you the truth anyway, not if he knows what's good for him."

"Oh come on. Seriously? Do I really snore?"

Jo shook her head and laughed. "I'm kidding you."

"Well, I sure hope you are. Mathew does enough snoring for the both of us. But there's something else that has me nervous."

"What? That your soufflés almost always drop?" Jo laughed as Sara frowned at her insult.

Man, she was so happy today, nothing would bring her down. Sara would be married and hopefully tonight she could hook up with Daniel. She didn't know how it was possible, but she missed him like crazy. In bed and out.

Last night had been hell. She'd tossed and turned and woken up several times to look out the tent windows in the hopes of seeing Daniel lurking around in the darkness. But the night had been still. The abandoned houses showed no sign of life. With the moonlight splashing over the village, casting eerie shadows everything had looked quite

spooky sending shivers up her spine. With the occasional creepy sound that she could only identify as night creatures roaming around, she'd kept her hand gun closely beneath her pillow. She'd never been so happy to see the glow of early morning light in her life.

"Jo, I'm serious. I think the baby is coming today."

At Sara's comment Jo's stomach dropped in a really bad sinking kind of way. Then she immediately relaxed. Her sister was just getting back at her for her snoring and dropped soufflé comments.

"Bad joke, Sara." Jo laughed and began pinning the headpiece to Sara's hair. The piece was made of a soft fluffy lace that matched the lace overlay on their mom's dress. A see-through veil was attached and just before walking down the isle, Jo would bring it down over Sara's face. Although no one would be here to walk her down the aisle, Jo knew that once this horrid business with Mathew's enemies was over they could have a traditional and safe wedding. Their mom and dad would be there and Jo would make sure it was a wedding no one would ever forget.

"The contractions started early this morning, and if we don't get a move on, I'm afraid the baby will be here before the wedding. Call me old-fashioned but I want to be married to my baby's father when I bring him or her into the world." Okay. She was kidding that the baby was coming now, right?

But one look at her sister's suddenly pale face and Jo knew she was telling the truth. Although Jo was usually calm under stressful situations, she had no idea what to do about babies being born in the land of nowhere. Panic set in like a bolt of lightning.

"Oh my God. What are we going to do?" Jo squealed.

"Shh. The bodyguard will hear," her sister chastised.

Jo toned her voice down. "I can't believe this. We can't keep this a secret. We have to get you out of here. To a hospital. A doctor. Someone who knows how to deliver a baby."

"The preacher knows."

The preacher? Had Jo heard right. Was Sara hallucinating?

Jo's eyes fell to Sara's ballooned waist. "How far apart are the contractions?"

"I can still manage the pain. The water broke a couple of hours ago."

Holy shit!

"God, Sara. Don't you think we should tell Matt his kid is coming?"

Sara bit her lip and grimaced as a spasm of pain rippled through her and shook her head.

This can't be happening! Jo's eyes strayed to the door. Maybe she should tell Matt herself. They needed to get Sara to a hospital. She had no idea where the nearest one was. If they left now they might make it.

As if reading her mind, Sara grabbed Jo's arm and hissed through gritted teeth.

"I'll tell Matt after we get married. He's nervous enough. The baby will be his wedding present."

Jo frowned, feeling the grip of panic increase. "Some wedding present. I really think we should tell the guys."

Suddenly Sara was sighing in relief as the contraction obviously ended. Then she was laughing again, acting as if nothing traumatic were happening. As if having a baby in nowhere land was the most natural thing in the world.

“Jo, besides being a friend of Matt’s, the preacher has delivered many babies. He used to be a cop in New York and delivered three babies in taxies and one in an apartment. On top of that, he helped his wife deliver their six children.”

Oh thank God!

Sara’s eyes were sparkling with happiness and despite her earlier paleness, her cheeks were once again blushed pink as she handed Jo her bouquet of flowers, the digital camera and the fancy shoes Sara wanted her to wear as she walked down the aisle.

“Come on. It’s almost noon. Give the bodyguard the digital camera when he shows up in the church. He’s agreed to videotape the wedding. Come one! Let’s get this show on the road before the baby arrives.”

Jo swallowed at the cold knot of fear that continued to zap her. How could Sara be so calm? How could she take this chance? What if something happened to the baby? What if she miscarried like she’d done with her twins?

Cold perspiration dotted her forehead as she accepted the shoes and digital camera and allowed Sara to pull her out of the cabin into the warm sunshine. Despite the wind being warm, she felt a bit chilled from her nerves.

She didn’t want anything to happen to her first niece or nephew. Didn’t want anything to happen to Sara.

Nothing would happen, she reassured herself. Her sister’s pregnancy had been normal up to now. No complications. Sara was a healthy woman and lots of women in the old days gave birth without doctors helping them, right?

Right.

Jo nodded, feeling a bit of her confidence return as she hurried through the tall waving grass up the hill toward the gray-planked church with the paneless windows.

Besides, the preacher would know what to do. Thank God for baby-delivering preachers.

* * * * *

Matt and Daniel stood just inside the entrance to the debilitated chapel as they waited for the preacher, who was out exploring the ghost town and vehemently promised he would be on time for the wedding.

Everything that was happening today seemed kind of *Twilight Zone*-ish, Daniel thought as he tugged on his too-tight necktie, trying to loosen it.

Here they were in a spooky town devoid of people with a preacher who wanted to explore a ghost town. There was a bodyguard he hadn’t spotted yet and a wedding about to take place in a chapel that probably hadn’t seen a paint bucket for more than sixty years. It was amazing the damn building was still standing. He wouldn’t be surprised if the next stiff wind blew the weathered gray planks apart and the whole place came crashing down on their heads. To make things even more odd, the church seemed as if it had been stuck in time with a wooden pulpit up front and its wooden pews still intact.

Okay, almost all of them were intact. Give or take a few gray benches badly gnawed by the local beavers and porcupines.

To top it all off, Mathew wanted them to wear suits. So Daniel obliged, albeit reluctantly. He'd never been one for suits. Hated them. Thought they should only be worn at funerals. But hey, he'd indulge his brother on his wedding day. How could he not? The man was marrying a beautiful woman who he found very fun to be around. In his book Sara was perfect for Mathew. And instincts told him despite their rocky beginning Jo was perfect for him.

Now he and his brother stood in the weathered church wearing freshly pressed black suits with pink hankies, pink ties and starched white shirts. Mathew had even taken a few shots of them with a digital camera he'd brought along, saying Sara had one also and was taking pictures of the women.

Despite the oddness of the situation, Daniel was nervous and a bit angry. His brother was getting married for crying out loud. They should be having a big fancy wedding in order to celebrate this great occasion and not a small one hidden away from family and friends. Sometimes life sucked.

A loose board slapped noisily from the ceiling area, snapping him from his momentary brood and Matt cursed softly at the noise. They both looked up to see what was causing the sudden racket and noticed a hole in the ceiling about the size of a large beach ball with a loose board swaying below it. With every strong gust of wind it appeared the board was going to hit the wall. Thankfully the wood dangled far enough off to the side that if it fell, no one would be in its path.

"At least you got air conditioning out of the deal," Daniel muttered.

"And it's sunny. We have that on our side. I don't know what we would have done if it had rained. Maybe have the ceremony in one of the pup tents?"

Matt grinned with amusement and despite Daniel's nervousness and anger he found himself smiling back at his brother. Mathew and Sara's lives were in constant danger, they were in hiding, and they were being denied the traditional wedding that Daniel was sure he and Sara wanted, yet Mathew looked happier than a pig in shit.

"I still can't believe you're getting married," he found himself confessing.

"Why is it so unbelievable?" Mathew asked as he started tugging at his own pink necktie. Why in the world hadn't Matt suggested another color? There was no way in the world he'd wear a pink necktie and pink hankie to his own wedding. No way, not even if Jo allowed oral or anal or bondage every night for the rest of their lives. Well, okay, maybe he would wear pink under certain circumstances.

"You never seemed like the marrying type. You were always involved with your police work. You told me more than once you were married to your job and there was no room in your life for a permanent relationship."

"I met Sara and everything changed. I know I went undercover to help find out who killed Steve, but he's dead and no amount of undercover work will bring him back. It's time to go on living."

"Yeah, but I just didn't think any woman would reel you in."

"Sara's not any woman. She's *the* woman. We could be marrying each other while wearing rags in front of the justice of the peace or dressed to the nines in an elaborate

church ceremony full of family and friends, it wouldn't matter to either of us. As long as we're together, in love and safe, nothing else matters. I've never felt this way before about any woman. It's like being high all the time. Know what I mean?"

Daniel nodded, suddenly understanding. He was feeling that way about Jo too. All he wanted was for her to be close to him and for her to be healthy and safe. Everything else was less important.

They both jumped to attention when the short, chubby, bald preacher entered the church. He wore the traditional black flowing robe and carried a bible in his hand as he slammed the wobbly door shut behind him. He pocketed his bible then sharply clapped his hands at them to get their attention.

"The ceremony will begin shortly. Please take your positions. Hustle. Hustle. The bride is on her way and she has left strict instructions the groom is not to see her until she comes down that aisle."

To Daniel's surprise the preacher grabbed both of them by their arms and quickly led them down the aisle, making sure to sidestep the rotting holes in the floor. He brought them to the front of the church and positioned them before heading to the podium where he placed the bible, opened it and muttered to himself as he hastily flipped through the pages as if searching for something.

"He seems awfully nervous for a preacher," Daniel whispered beneath his breath as the man yanked out a handkerchief and dotted his perspiring forehead.

Mathew promptly nudged him in the ribs to keep him quiet.

"Don't you recognize him? We knew him when we were kids. I met up with him when I first became a cop and we've kept in touch since."

Daniel studied the man and it took him a full minute before he thought he might remember the guy.

"Jim O'Brian? The same Jim we went to grammar school with?"

"One and only."

"I thought he got married. Last I heard he had four kids and was still a cop."

"They just had their sixth. And then he found the good Lord a few years back and became a preacher. He agreed to do the ceremony. I had to pay him some big bucks to get him to come out here because he didn't want to leave his wife so soon after she had the baby. But he needed the money. Two of his kids need braces."

"You better be careful, Mathew."

His brother threw him a questioning look.

"You might end up with six kids yourself if you and Sara aren't careful."

A warning nudge, this one much sharper than the last one, made Daniel shut up.

From the corner of his eye he noticed movement and swung around to see a strange man taking pictures of them with a digital camera.

Alarm shot through him. "Who's that?"

"The bodyguard. We conned him into videotaping the wedding using the video recorder in Sara's digital camera."

Oookay. There was a bodyguard photographer videotaping the wedding with a digital camera. The eerie background music from the *Twilight Zone* zipped through the back of his mind again. Yes, Daniel you've definitely entered another dimension. The love dimension is where anything went.

Daniel nodded and focused his attention back to the preacher who suddenly looked up, smiled, pocketed his handkerchief and cleared his throat as the church door behind them began to creak open.

"Let the ceremony begin," the preacher said, and motioned for Daniel and his brother to turn around. He did turn around but not before he noticed the preacher whip out a silver harmonica. He started to blow out the wedding march, which sounded pretty good, Daniel had to admit.

Despite the oddness of this situation, he found his heart pounding a mile a minute as Jo walked into the church.

Man, she looked stunning in a pink ankle-length dress that hugged her curves. Her hair had been swept up off her neck into an attractive updo, and from here he didn't notice the hickey but grinned as he remembered last night when he'd entered the cabin the women were using and came face-to-face with Sara's excited deflection question about how he thought Jo looked in the wedding dress. In fact he'd suspected they were talking about the hickey on her neck. Jo's flushed cheeks and the way she averted her gaze as he'd looked at her had been a dead giveaway.

"She sure does look beautiful," Daniel found himself whispering, totally mesmerized by the gentle sway of her hips as she walked up the isle toward them.

If he didn't know any better, he'd think she was just as nervous as he was. Her face seemed a bit pale and she was biting her lower lip as if worried about something. Instantly he became alert and tried to capture her gaze. When she reached the front of the church and took her position across from them she threw him a wobbly smile but the smile didn't reach her worried, creased forehead or eyes.

All right, something was definitely wrong here.

He looked over at his brother, wanting to tell him something was up but couldn't. Mathew's eyes lit up as Sara walked in and Daniel realized nothing was going to ruin this moment for his brother. Not even his suspicions that something was wrong.

He turned his attention to Sara as she walked down the aisle.

Sara wore her hair loose and she looked fantastic. Tiny ringlets adorned the sides of her face and he could see that behind the thin veil placed over her face her eyes sparkled with obvious love as her gaze connected with Mathew's. They'd done a great job with the dress. She looked every bit the elegant bride and in her hand she held a breathtaking arrangement of white cloth flowers. She looked like a sexy-sweet angel. He watched her waddle around the couple of porcupine-eaten holes in the wooden aisle floorboards as if they were mere puddles.

He glanced over at Mathew again and his heart just about burst with love for his brother. He wore the happiest smile and Daniel realized once again that it didn't matter where these two lovebirds got married. All that mattered was they were in love.

* * * * *

Jo sighed with relief when she heard the preacher's wonderful words, "You may kiss the bride."

Tears of happiness welled in her eyes as without hesitation Mathew drew his new wife into his arms, lifted the veil and claimed his right to kiss her sister. A tissue was suddenly thrust in front of her nose and Jo lifted her gaze to find Daniel's worried gaze resting on her face.

"What's the matter?" he asked, his voice so low she almost couldn't hear him.

The vows had seemed endless but beautiful, and for perhaps a few minutes Jo forgot what Sara had said earlier in the cabin about the baby coming today. She was about to tell him about her sister being in labor when a loud cry from Sara shot ice-cold fear through Jo. Her sister's face was as white as a ghost and twisted in pain.

"The baby," Jo squeaked.

Sara nodded.

"Okay, sweetness. Take it easy. We have to start timing them." Mathew gasped as he huddled around his wife, pressing his hand to her swollen belly.

"It started earlier this morning," Jo confessed, her heart hammering as if she'd just been running the marathon.

Mathew cursed. Daniel's eyes widened with shock. The preacher swooned and also swore before whipping his bible against a nearby bench, motioned to the bodyguard to follow him and barreled past the newlyweds, shaking his head with disbelief and muttering something about having to boil water.

"So much for his help," Matt muttered anxiously, and reached out to support his wife as she cut loose with another groan. The cry broke the remaining party into action.

Jo rushed to her sister's side, murmuring words of encouragement.

Matt looked at Jo and she read the same kind of panic shining in his eyes as she'd felt when Sara had first told her about the baby. Obviously Matt was already losing it.

His next words confirmed it. "The contractions aren't even a minute apart! She can't have the baby out here. We have to get her to the hospital."

"Too late for the hospital," Jo said quickly. "Daniel, go find the preacher and ask him what kind of help he'll need. Don't forget to gather clean towels, clean sheets or blankets or whatever you can find and bring it to Sara's tent."

He didn't move and stared at her as if she'd gone insane. "The preacher?"

"I'll explain later. Just do it."

He shook his head in disbelief and took off down the aisle.

"Matt, help me get Sara to our tent."

Before Jo could blink, Mathew swooped Sara into his arms, scrambled around the porcupine-eaten holes in the wedding aisle and disappeared out the door of the church with his new bride.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Daniel grimaced at Sara's painful moans. She'd been in the tent with the preacher for about four hours and he'd started to worry that maybe something was wrong. A harried and nervous Mathew had come out a few times for quick breaks and had explained about the preacher's experience with babies. Despite being on the edge of panic, his brother seemed quite confident the preacher had everything under control. The bodyguard-photographer had conveniently disappeared again and Jo hadn't so much as stuck her head out of the tent since all this began.

Thankfully, before the tension killed him, she came out a few minutes later with a huge beaming smile on her face. He found himself relaxing as she joined him on the makeshift bench he'd lugged earlier from the campsite to a spot near the tent so he could wait and be on hand in case they needed help.

"Congratulations, McCullen. We are the proud aunt and uncle of a brand-new baby boy," she beamed. Her eyes were sparkling with excitement and her pretty pink dress was wrinkled like crazy. But boy, she was a sight for sore eyes and frazzled nerves.

A boy? He was an uncle? Man, he couldn't believe it. Excitement swelled through him like a giant wave.

"The baby is here?"

His answer came as a guttural baby wail erupted from inside the tent, and in response his knees began to shake with nervousness. Holy shit, the baby had one hell of a good pair of lungs on him. Thankfully though, he didn't feel the least bit freaked out as he'd felt the night Jo was wheeling him through the birthing suite. That night he'd felt as if all hope for a future for himself was wiped out because Beth was dead.

But now he had Jo. Somehow things would work out for them. He just knew it.

"How are they?" he asked, suddenly feeling a bit disoriented at all that had happened.

"The preacher says things are looking okay. He's got a satellite phone up in his car and the bodyguard has called Witness Protection to make emergency plans to get a water plane or helicopter in here so they can get Sara and the baby to the nearest hospital for a checkup. Apparently the preacher and bodyguard will be going with them for now."

Daniel nodded, feeling quite thankful that Sara and the baby would have a real live doctor to tend to them soon.

As the baby continued to wail from the tent, excitement began to build.

"So, when do I get a look at my nephew?"

"The preacher is cleaning him. Let's give the new family a bit of time to bond before we go and introduce ourselves to him. I for one am starving. Let's grab a bite to eat. I can whip up some spaghetti and tomato sauce. Sara says the supplies are in the knapsack in Mathew's tent."

Daniel's mouth began to water and his stomach growled as he eagerly followed Jo.

* * * * *

Jo cradled her nephew in her arms and gazed down at his cute little red face. He in turn blinked up at her with emerald green eyes that couldn't quite focus.

"Your mom and dad are right down there. See?" Jo held the baby so he could see his parents, who were sitting on a fallen log about twenty feet away beside the shoreline. Sara had been adamant that she wanted to see the sun go down one last time before leaving Jackfish and Mathew had bundled her up in blankets to keep her warm and carried her down to the bay. The sunset was a spectacular sight. It seemed as if the entire western horizon were on fire. Orange and red clashed with wisps of white and blue.

Jo swore she'd never seen anything so beautiful.

"They're trying to figure out a name for you," she whispered as she drew her attention back to the baby.

At the sound of Jo's voice, the infant stilled, blinked some more then heaved a giant yawn at her, his tiny fingers clenching into tight little fists. Jo's heart twisted with a fierce love for the little guy and she stroked the few fine fluffs of auburn hair poking out from his almost bald head.

"You've got your daddy's gorgeous green eyes and your mom's beautiful hair color. You're the most beautiful baby in the whole world. But I guess I could be prejudiced. You are after all my only nephew."

She brushed her thumb lightly along his chubby cheeks and over his ruby rosebud lips, wondering how such a tiny creature could be so perfect. His fingers suddenly opened and Jo laughed as she placed a finger against one of his palms and his minuscule fingers grabbed hold and held on tight.

"Handsome little fellow, isn't he?"

Daniel's masculine scent mingled with the musky odor of the fresh outdoors and the enticing feel of wanting to reach out and touch Daniel McCullen shot through her like a sizzling arrow. Oh dear, she was feeling wonderfully warm all of a sudden. Who needed a sweater when she had him around?

"You look really good with a baby in your arms."

His unexpected words surprised Jo and she felt her cheeks burn with yet another blush. Why did he have to affect her in this way? She'd never blushed so much in her life. All this blushing was getting rather embarrassing.

She didn't know how to respond to his compliment so she kept her attention on her nephew.

"Hey, little man," Daniel said, and smiled as he placed his finger against the baby's palm. The baby clasped tight around it, not letting go.

"Hey, now look at that. The kid is holding us both hostage. Wow, you're a strong little bugger, aren't you? I guess you'll be winning in arm wrestling matches with your dad and me in no time flat."

He laughed and the free and easy sound sunk deep into Jo's heart. The desire to reach out and wrap her arms around him and kiss him was almost overwhelming. She almost did it too, but suddenly the baby let go of both their fingers and emitted an angry yowl.

“Uh-oh! I think the little man’s hungry,” Daniel growled against her ear. “And the big guy is getting hungry too. It seems like forever since I’ve kissed you, Brady. Not to mention I’ve missed you in my bed. You still wearing that butt plug?”

A nervous flutter zipped through her as she nodded.

“Good. Because the first chance I get I’m going to have you over that table, Brady. And I’ll start with a punishment.”

Jo’s mouth went dry at his words and excitement and curiosity rammed through her.

“Punishment for what?”

“For not telling us that Sara was in labor for one, and for not giving me the promised two pieces of chocolate mint cake.”

“Hey, no fair. Sara’s the one who promised you the cake. It’s not my fault she went into labor.”

“Exactly my point. She did go into labor and now I’m pissed off. I want my cake and I want you over a table with my cock inside your ass.”

He winked at her as he intimately rubbed his thick erection against her thigh. The hard feel of it made her pussy cream and she found herself swallowing at how big he felt.

“Hey, you guys,” Sara’s chipper voice broke through Jo’s thoughts and she looked to see Mathew carrying her sister back up the hill toward them. In an instant the two new parents were crowding around them, fussing with their newborn.

“We’ve decided on a name.” Sara smiled and reached out to take the baby into her arms.

It was a cute sight to see Matt carrying Sara and Sara holding the baby, and Jo wished for the digital camera they’d left in the chapel.

“We’ve decided on Joseph Daniel Jack McCullen,” Mathew said, pride quite evident in his voice.

Jo blinked in surprise. “You named him after Daniel and me?”

“Yep! And Jack for Jackfish where he was born. But you can call him J.D. for short.”

Jo was at a loss for words. She’d never had anyone named after her before.

“Cool,” came Daniel’s thrilled reply.

The clattering sound of a helicopter captured everyone’s attention.

“Looks like our ride is here,” Mathew shouted as a helicopter burst into the horizon like a giant looming bird and quickly zeroed in on them.

“Can you two stay behind and take care of the cleanup? I know it’s a lot to ask—” Sara cried out to Jo and Daniel as Mathew began carrying her and the baby toward the chopper. It appeared as if it would be landing up on the train tracks a few hundred feet away.

“We’ll take care of everything. Don’t worry,” Daniel shouted back, and Jo found his hand melting against the small of her back. His hot palm felt like a possessive brand, and the promise of what was to come tonight had her breath hitching in her lungs.

She could barely hear Sara’s next words as the chopper neared them.

“We’ll leave that cake for the two of you. Don’t get too drunk and don’t do anything we wouldn’t do with all that whipped cream. Bye!”

Jo and Daniel waved goodbye as they watched the bodyguard and preacher rush along the tracks to join the helicopter.

When Jo felt his hand slip below her lower back and into her pants, her breath hitched as he nudged at the butt plug.

“Easy, McCullen, they can see.”

He leaned over and kissed her on the neck, making her entire body tingle with awareness.

“I don’t care if they see, Brady. I’ve missed you like crazy.”

At his words, warmth and excitement scrambled through her and suddenly her body ached for him.

“You sure are in a good mood tonight, McCullen,” she said, and leaned against him, feeling his body heat wrap around her like a seductive lover. Suddenly she found herself wondering how in the world she’d ever managed to live without having him in her life?

He made her feel safe, happy, aroused and oh-just-so perfect.

A few moments later the new family as well as the preacher and bodyguard were safely on the helicopter. Within minutes the chopper had taken off and quickly disappeared over the horizon in the direction it had come from.

Silence swooped in around them and soon she once again heard the crickets begin to chirp in the nearby tall grass.

Oh dear, and she was once again alone with Daniel McCullen.

Daniel removed his hand from her pants and his strong arms came around her waist, his hands pressing intimately against her lower belly. He hugged her close and nibbled erotically on her earlobe before whispering in her ear, “Let the punishment begin.”

* * * * *

About fifteen minutes later Jo stared up at the stars twinkling in the dark blue evening sky and enjoyed the erotic way McCullen caressed her ass cheeks. He’d put her into a unique position for her “punishment”.

She was naked and spread frontward over the table he’d removed moments earlier from the cabin and plopped into the middle of their camp. Tossing a sleeping bag over it in order to protect her from potential splinters, he’d instructed her to remove her clothing and bend over the table. He’d proceeded to spread her legs and used the silk scarves, which he’d conveniently tucked into one of their knapsacks, to tie her ankles to each table leg. Her hands rested on the edge of the table where scarves were wrapped around her wrists and secured to the opposite table legs. She could barely move her legs and arms, and this restrained position made her feel quite vulnerable and surprisingly aroused.

She could just imagine how she must look to him, her plugged ass bared and her wet vagina exposed and at his mercy.

“I love your ass, Brady. You’re so curvy and smooth. Feels like velvet,” he whispered as his warm palms tenderly kneaded her buttocks. She noticed that with every

massage he moved inward toward her butt plug. Knew he was going to remove it soon and replace it with his cock. The idea of anal with him made the tension inside her mount. Made her anal muscles tighten around the plug in anticipation.

“I’ve missed you so much, Brady. I think if I wasn’t kept so busy with my brother, I would have gone mad missing you.”

Jo smiled at his words and at the lust that darkened his voice. He was naked now. She’d heard the rip of a foil quickly followed by his soft moan as he’d placed the condom on. And when she’d heard the squishy sound of lube, her breath hitched for she knew he was preparing himself.

Now he pushed her upper half just a tad more forward above the table, allowing her bare breasts to dangle only inches from the two huge pieces of the wedding cake he’d sliced moments before and placed strategically on paper plates.

Her mouth watered as the minty scent of the chocolate cake drenched in pretty white swirls of whipped cream wafted teasingly to her nostrils. Oh man, she loved her sister’s chocolate mint cake. Having it so close to her and not being able to eat it was in itself sheer torture.

She gasped when his lubed finger found her clit and he began rubbing her there. Beautiful sensations spiraled through her. The cake faded from view as her eyelids became heavier. He stroked her nice and slow. Touching her firmly until the familiar fire of need erupted and she was shuddering and jerking her hips with want.

Arousal flared through her pussy as he quickened the strokes and the pressure. He brought her to the edge and then backed off, making her whimper in frustration. Making her want him touching her again.

God, he was good.

“Feels nice, doesn’t it, Brady.”

“Make me come, McCullen,” she panted. She felt wet between her thighs. Wet and desperate to be filled.

“Not yet. I want to see you properly punished.”

“Punish me another time. Fuck me now,” she demanded. She hadn’t realized that twenty-four hours without sex with McCullen could have her self-control shattered so quickly.

His response was a mere chuckle.

Irritating man!

He moved his finger from her clit and she yelped as a moment later something sharp and tingly snapped against her left butt cheek. Hot pain seared through her, making her ass clench tight around the butt plug. The unexpected movement sent a roll of arousal up through her vagina.

“What the hell was that?” she gasped.

He held a small sapling branch in front of her eyes.

“Your punishment for keeping us in the dark regarding Sara being in labor.”

The sapling branch disappeared and before she could so much as brace herself, he snapped it against her other ass cheek. She jerked and cursed the bonds that held her firm. Heat and pain lashed the curve of her right cheek.

“And that’s your punishment for not being nice enough in offering me a piece of cake when your sister offered me two last night when I said you’d look good in anything but was thinking you’d look better in nothing.”

“Screw you.” She smiled.

“I intend to screw you. But first things first.”

He continued ministering her punishment. The lashes came fast enough to leave a pleasant burn yet slow enough to sting in a really nice way.

By the time he finished, her entire ass felt as if it were being consumed by heat. But it was a pleasant fire, which he soothed with his palms. They were wet when they touched her cheeks and she realized he was smearing her with the peppermint whipping cream. The sweet treat tingled a pleasant cool and dampened the fire raging across her flesh.

“Open your mouth,” he whispered when he finished spreading the cream. His voice magnetized her and she did his bidding.

Creamy mint exploded on her tongue and Jo moaned at the delicacy as he fed her a piece of the wedding cake. It tasted absolutely exquisite and she didn’t miss the zip of peppermint liquor in the sweet chocolate.

“One of your rewards for being a good girl in accepting your punishment. Here’s another reward.”

He grabbed her chin and held her tight as he kissed her once again. His lips ground against hers and his tongue prodded into her mouth, deepening the heat throughout her body. By the time he finished kissing her, she was truly aching for him. Aching and needy and wonderfully aroused.

She jerked when she felt his palms cupping her breasts, his fingers pulled at her nipples until she felt the flashes of sexual fire pounding through her. Her breasts felt swollen and full by the time he stopped. Then his hand was at her back and he was pushing her forward until each of her breasts nestled into the two pieces of cake he’d placed on the table. The whipping cream tingled nice and cool against her breasts and if she wasn’t bound to the table she would have scooped some of the delicacy off her breasts and eaten some more.

Then he tugged on the butt plug.

Instinctively she tensed.

“Easy, Brady. Here you go. Have another piece and then I’ll pull it out.” He fed her another piece of delicious cake. She licked his fingers and then found herself laughing when she thought about what her sister would say if she saw what was happening with her cake.

“Didn’t know you had a funny bone in your behind,” he said, amusement lacing his voice.

“I’m going to have to ask my sister for this recipe. Every time I eat this cake I’m going to remember tonight. My first ever anal experience.”

“Hold that thought,” he chuckled.

A moment later there came a steady pressure as he pulled the plug, leaving her anus empty and her anal muscles clenching tight on air. Through narrowed eyes she watched

him scoop a finger of whipped cream off the main cake where he'd placed it near the far edge of the table.

She heard the squirt of lube and a moment later bucked when a finger slid into her backside. The lube smoothed warm and slippery as he gently prodded.

While his finger explored her his other hand was busy feeding her another morsel of cake.

"Look this way, sweetheart, and kiss me." She did as he asked and he kissed her, his hot lips covering hers. Within seconds she was once more drowning in the intimate heat his mouth gave so freely.

"I should be punishing you a bit longer, Jo," he whispered against her mouth, his voice pulsing with arousal.

"So what's stopping you, McCullen," she breathed harshly, and held tight to the edges of the table as she felt his finger slip out and his cock head nudge against the entrance.

"Because I can't. You're too damn hot and too damn sexy. I just want to fuck you. Besides we have the rest of our lives for punishment sex," he said.

His slippery hands were on her waist now. He held her firmly and she tried to keep her nerves steady as she felt a pinch of pain as he came in farther.

He mumbled something in a soothing voice and she found herself relaxing as the pressure began to build.

"Did you know that anal sex is illegal in some countries?" he whispered against her ear, and pushed into her deeper then stopped. His right hand left her waist and fiddled with the scarf that held her right wrist hostage.

"Illegal makes it more exciting," she gasped. The scarf loosened, fell away and her hand was free.

"Massage your clit with some cream while I fuck your ass, Jo. Make yourself come. I need more lube."

Jo's breath hitched at his command. His palm settled against her belly and pulled her body back toward him just a few inches, allowing her to barely keep her balance but also allowing her hand to dip between the table and her belly. When the cool cream hit her hot, sensitive clit, Jo lost her breath for a second. It did feel great and the cream made it so much easier to massage herself. Within seconds she was panting as the familiar erotic sensations resurfaced. A moment later she cried out as an orgasm exploded through her, driving her senseless.

Gyrating her hips, she rode the pleasure waves, loving the thick feel of his cock buried in her ass and the way she trembled through the spasms.

"Keep masturbating, Brady," he whispered, and his hand settled back on her waist again.

He held her firm as he started a slow, rhythmic thrusting in and out of her ass.

"Take me in with your muscles when I come in," he whispered.

She barely heard him as she rubbed her clit harder, searching for the next orgasm. She did as he asked, clenching her muscles tight, trying to suck him in.

Behind her, he groaned.

He liked it. It felt damn good, Daniel thought as he plunged into her tight ass.

Excitement raced through him as she moaned and gyrated her hips in a frenzied dance. He kept up the slow rhythm but it was torture. Sheer torture.

“You’re doing great, Jo,” he breathed out her name. Loved her name. It fit her.

She bucked backward against him, whimpering and wanting a deeper stimulation. The movement made him go in deeper. She cried out, thrashed her head back and forth, tossing her sweet, silky hair against his chest.

As he plunged into her again, pleasure coursed through his cock. It slammed into him like a bolt of lightning, coming out of nowhere and hitting him so fast he groaned out his approval. The sensations were sharp. So damn sharp he could barely keep himself under control as he continued his deeper thrust. The sensations gripped his cock and shot into his balls and belly. He thrust into her again. Felt her ass tighten some more. He held her tighter so she could ride along with him.

Backward, she bucked. Forward, he thrust. It was an almost doggie-style position with her bent over the table. He leaned against her back and looked over her shoulder seeing her breasts squishing the pieces of cake on the table.

He’d have fun licking that cake off her later. Lots of fun.

He liked this position. It must make her feel vulnerable. Made her give up that control she carried like a shield. It made him in charge this time around, but he knew as their relationship grew she’d begin to boldly explore.

And he for one was going to look forward to watching her sexual side blossom.

Within his heart he knew they would be a perfect couple.

* * * * *

Jo woke to the sound of her cell phone ringing. At first she didn’t have a clue where she was, but when the red material of the tent walls rolled into focus, she remembered last night. The punishment, the exquisite sex and both of them finally falling asleep sometime early this morning when dawn cracked through the horizon.

“Hey, your cell is ringing,” Daniel grumbled from beside her. Tussled brown hair and one squinty eye stared back at her as he irritably tried to yank part of the sleeping bag they’d been sharing over his head but couldn’t complete the task because she’d crawled onto it as she looked for the phone.

“Can you shut that thing up, Brady? It’s worse than an alarm clock going off on the weekend.”

“Obviously you aren’t a morning person, McCullen,” she snapped back as she rummaged through the clothes they’d dragged in last night.

“I can’t find the damn thing. And why is it ringing? I thought there was no service around these parts?”

“That’s what Matt said,” he grumbled, and to her surprise gave her a light smack on her naked ass.

Pain blossomed and she yelped in surprise.

“Get your ass back in here, woman. I want to continue where we left off last night.”

Oh boy, she was tempted to climb back inside. He looked so sexy with day-old shadow on his face and not to mention how lusty dark his eyes had become once again. She found herself shivering with anticipation of continuing another sex fest.

The insistent ringing continued.

“But the cell?”

“Leave it. They’ll call back.”

“But it could be Sara.”

He nodded his head and seemed to come fully awake at her suggestion. God, she hoped something wasn’t wrong with Sara and the baby. Her heart began a violent pounding as she finally found the cell and snapped it open. The caller ID read *Unknown number*.

Perhaps Sara was calling from the hospital?

Oh please, God. Don’t be anything wrong with Sara or the baby, she began to pray as she answered.

“Brady, here.”

“Miss Brady, do you know who this is?” a familiar woman’s voice ripped her to attention.

Oh my God! It was her! The woman she’d asked to look into Steve’s medallion. Had she found something out? Or was she simply calling to say she had nothing to report?

“Yes.”

“I have some information for you.”

Thank you, Lord! She had some information on Steve. It had to be.

“Listen carefully. Tomorrow night. 6 p.m. The Miami private hospital where you extracted Daniel McCullen. In the lower basement, the northeast corner of the hospital, there is a room. On the door is says Private. No admittance. Everything you need to hang Dr. Colby Martin can be found in that room. Check the lime green filing cabinet. The door will be left unlocked for you. Please do not contact the authorities. I don’t want our inside man to be discovered. His life may already be in jeopardy. This next piece of information may be of interest to you too. In that hospital is a man from a Texas prison. His initials are C.D. He was brought in with a gunshot wound under the name Chance Donovan. Records show he is delusional and insane but he could be the one who sent you the medallion. I know it’s a long shot.”

Texas prison death row could be the TXDR she was looking for and C.D. a.k.a. Chance Donovan could be their man.

“It’s the only long shot I have. I really appreciate this,” Jo replied, feeling excitement begin to surge through her at all the information the woman just supplied.

The woman continued. “Miss Brady, watch your back. This is very dangerous.”

Before Jo could question the woman further the line went dead.

“Shit!” How could she get the evidence without a search warrant? And she couldn’t get a search warrant without contacting a judge. And the judge wouldn’t issue her a warrant without some sort of proof and a phone call wasn’t going to be enough. So, there really was no reason to contact the authorities, was there? Hopefully with McCullen’s

knowledge of the system, she could make any evidence she found on Martin stick in a court of law.

If she thought her heart couldn't pound any harder or faster, she was mistaken. Anticipation raged through her.

"What's wrong?" Daniel's troubled voice ripped through her anger. She looked over at McCullen, who stared back at her expectantly.

"I think we may have been given Colby Martin on a silver platter."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Jo stood in front of the door her contact had told her about. The halls were deserted and not a sound drifted from the room. She'd secured herself a nurse's uniform in the nurses' locker room and then joined McCullen as they hid in a nearby broom closet. From there they kept an eye on the room.

It was six-fifteen. Twenty minutes ago a security guard had gone into the room for a minute and then came out again.

They'd waited an extra few minutes just to be sure there were no more unexpected visitors before she left McCullen behind in the broom closet to cover her in case someone came when she was in the room.

Now her hand hesitated on the door handle. She'd been waiting years to get Martin. One tip from her contact and all those years of waiting could be over.

The thought of being set up crossed her mind numerous times as they'd flown down to Florida. In this business, one could never be too careful. But up until now her contact had always been reliable, so she felt relatively confident what she'd been told by the Cops' Angel was legit.

Hopefully on the other side of the door was the information she'd been searching for.

Twisting the knob, she pushed the door inward. Glancing back, she saw McCullen peeking out the crack of the broom closet door. She took a deep breath and stepped into the room.

* * * * *

"Intruder in Records!"

The security guard's head snapped up at his partner's excited gasp and his gaze shifted to the red blinking button flashing on the computer screen.

"I'd better check it out," his partner said, and began to get up.

"Nope. I'll go," he said quickly, and stood.

His partner's brow furrowed with worry.

"You sure?"

"Yeah."

He grabbed his gun off the desk and slipped it into his holster.

"It's probably another mouse, just like earlier today before you got here. Besides, I've got a hankering for a jelly doughnut and coffee from the cafeteria. Want something? I'm buying."

"In that case, get me two of those powdery things. One cherry and one blueberry. And don't take too long. If the boss catches us lollygagging, we could get fired."

He nodded at his friend and waited as his partner programmed the computer to shut off the red flag to the Records room. When the flag was cleared from the computer he headed toward the stairs.

* * * * *

It took Jo very little time to find out that something very wrong was going on in this hospital. The records showed too many brain dead men coming in from small-town hospitals in Texas. Why would these hospitals have so many brain dead men? And why did most of the men come from one particular Texas prison facility?

Jo flipped through the papers of the last few weeks' transplant patients. All of them revealed Martin as the head of surgery for each operation, along with the recipient's name, which hospital each body part went to and the payment received. There was no indication of how Martin's private hospital was paid. Most likely cash as Martin and his cohorts wouldn't want a paper trail.

As she read through the pages, she felt sick to her stomach. From her research on organ transplantation, it was supposed to be done in a democratic manner. People were supposed to be prioritized according to how sick they were, not by the amount of money the hospital paid for the body part.

And where were the hospitals getting this kind of money? Most likely from the recipients of the organs.

God, this was widespread. How did Martin manage to keep such a big operation so low-key?

The records proved what she'd known all along. Colby Martin dabbled in the underground organ transplant industry. He was harvesting the organs from a Texas prison system, taking prisoner body parts and selling them like beef at a market. Which led to her next question of how did Johnnie Garrett, a troubled child, mix into all of this? He wasn't part of the prison system. He had, however, been a part of the foster care system. Did Martin also make foster kids disappear and perhaps pay the foster parents money for the children? All the foster parents had to do was say the child had run away. No one would be the wiser.

Jo shivered at that thought. This was too creepy. Finding information like this was going to make her even more paranoid than she already was.

The sound of a gun being cocked made her freeze.

"Glad you could join the party," a crisp voice sliced through the air from behind her.

She'd been so involved reading the various charts and thinking about the prisoners and Johnnie that she hadn't heard someone enter the room. Instinct told her to go for her weapon. But if the newcomer had a gun he would plug her before she could turn around. How had the man slipped past Daniel? Had he been injured? Jumped and killed?

Jo tried to stem her panic. The last thing she could do was lose her head. She had to keep calm. Not easy under the circumstances.

Holding her breath, she slowly turned around.

A burly security officer stood in an open doorway. A doorway she hadn't noticed when she'd come into the room. Part of a wall had slid open revealing a secret entrance. Shit! She should have known something like this might happen.

She let out a quick breath as she spied a gun trained on her heart.

An odd smile curled the guard's lips. "May I inquire as to what you're doing in here, ma'am?"

Oh boy, she'd really stepped in it big time, hadn't she?

"I work here," she answered, and tried to keep the tremble of fear out of her voice.

His eyes narrowed as he looked at her and then it almost seemed as if he recognized her. But she'd never seen this guy before in her life.

"Miss Brady?"

"Who's asking?" she asked cautiously.

"I'm with Cops' Angels. I believe you were told about them. You look a little different than the picture I was sent of you."

Oh great, now they were handing out her photo.

"Did you find what you need, Miss Brady?"

Jo relaxed as the guard holstered his gun, keyed a code into a key pad and waited. Jo watched as the wall closed silently and the keypad slid into a shoe-sized hole and an air vent cover dropped over it.

Wow, what an elaborate system.

The guard strolled over to Jo and leaned closer to inspect what she was looking at.

"Yes, I can see that you have found what you need. You know I've been working Martin for several years. Worked up the ranks through various hospitals. Cops' Angels rigged me up a tight alibi about my being desperate for money due to a daughter being very seriously ill. Anyway, I'll give you the lowdown of what is in those papers. Martin is using prisoners for body parts. He does the surgeries in this private hospital through that door I came in. There's a secret operating room in the basement. It's strange the police never got tipped off by concerned families about their incarcerated family member suddenly going missing. But I'm sure Martin has that all covered and that's why no one is suspicious about the particular Texas prison that you see here on these papers. Overcrowding generally makes inmates appear and disappear without a trace."

He continued to look over her shoulder reading the top sheet of paper she held in her hand.

After a moment the guard said quietly, "You ever hear about China?"

Before Jo could respond the officer continued. "Thirty thousand and up will get you a kidney and one week's stay at a real posh hospital in China. You call in your reservation, give them all the pertinent information on your medical history, your blood type, antibodies, what organ you need and they'll juggle the Chinese prison execution schedules. You'll have yourself a new kidney or whatever you want in no time flat."

Jo nodded her understanding. "It looks like that's what's happening in Texas."

"Most people think it only happens in other countries. Now's your chance to set them straight. You'll be quite popular for years for breaking this illegal transplant

organization wide open. You'll be tied up in court for years too. Probably under the Witness Protection until you complete your testimony. People who go against Colby Martin and types like him put themselves into danger. Are you ready for that?"

"I'm prepared. I want Colby Martin's ass in jail for what he's been doing."

"Yes I realize your mission started with what happened to Johnnie Garrett. As you can see he's just a tip of the iceberg, Miss Brady," the guard replied.

Uneasiness powered through Jo. How did this man know about Johnnie? God, was nothing about her kept secret in this Cops' Angels network?

The guard yanked out a file folder near the bottom of the pile of papers and held it out to her.

"You'll want to read this. Open it," he instructed.

She placed the papers on the nearby desk and accepted the file folder from the guard and flipped it open. As she read the contents, shivers of horror raced up her back.

The guard continued speaking. "They've got the prisoner in this file upstairs right now, ready as a donor for Martin's lungs. He's scheduled for surgery tonight. It's standard procedure around here to do these surgeries at midnight. Keeps the legitimate day staff innocent. As I said earlier, they've got a whole underground operating room set aside specifically for transplant surgeries. It's not on any of the building plans. A great cover. Rest assured, Miss Brady, Dr. Martin covers his tracks very well. Mph!"

Jo gasped in horror as the guard's eyes widened and he suddenly pitched forward. She tried to grab him but he weighed a ton and she had to let him go. He hit the cement floor with a sickening thud. Protruding from his uniformed back was a long, serrated knife.

What in the world?

Next time don't hesitate. Daniel had said those words to her when he'd surprised her in her parents' home while she'd been retrieving her mother's wedding dress.

Now she listened to those words. Within a split second she palmed her gun and trained it on the newcomer.

Sweet Lord! It was Colby Martin!

"Stay right there," she warned him.

Ignoring the odd gleam of happiness twinkling in his eyes, Jo kept her gaze on the doctor, squatted and leaned over the prone guard.

"He is quite dead I assure you."

"Don't mind if I don't trust you," Jo hissed as her fingers pressed against the guard's cool neck. No pulse. He was dead as the doctor predicted.

She swore beneath her breath.

"You amuse me, Miss Brady."

"You disgust me, Martin."

Colby Martin frowned, obviously not liking what she'd just told him.

"Please, Miss Brady, such hostility does not become a healthy young woman."

Jo took in a deep breath in an effort to calm the anger rising within her. This was her first chance to be face-to-face with the murderer of Johnnie Garrett alone, and she could feel her finger tightening on the trigger.

This man had dissected little Johnnie like a guinea pig in the teenager's own bedroom. He'd taken the teen's eyes and a kidney and casually gotten away with murder. The urge to kill him, to exact her own form of justice by plugging a bullet into his head was almost more than she could bear.

"I must say, Miss Brady. You did have me perplexed for a while as to your identity. I couldn't for the life of me place you when I caught partial glimpses of your face when I saw you in that nurse's uniform and your blonde wig as you rescued Danny Boy from my hospital. But when you left your fingerprints all over your purse in the motel room, I was able to pull some strings. I had someone locate a set of your fingerprints from when your parents had you finger-printed when you were a mere babe in case you were ever kidnapped or lost. Well, it was a match and I learned your name and everything else about you. Don't think I've forgotten what a thorn you've been in my side all these years, Miss Brady. You do have an unusually rare type of blood, did you know that? You would be very lucrative on the organ auction block."

Jo's uneasiness increased a few notches at Martin's blood comment.

Martin's smile widened. Nodding, he eyed the papers on the desk where she'd placed them and then his gaze fell to file folder she'd dropped on the floor when the guard had been knifed.

"I take it you have figured it all out, have you?" He chuckled.

He obviously wanted to know exactly how much she knew, and with her holding the gun on him, she figured she was pretty safe in telling him.

"You want Daniel's lungs. So when you couldn't get them you had a prisoner brought in who is a good match for you."

"Quite correct."

"Why Johnnie?" she asked the question that had been burning inside of her for years. Before she called Daniel in, she wanted to know the answer. If he didn't tell her, she'd just have to shoot him in the kneecaps.

He winced and replied, "Johnnie's case was a bit unorthodox I must admit. I don't usually do the retrieval of the organs myself but he was on file and the closest available to me."

He smiled at her but the smile didn't quite reach his watery stare. Jo suddenly got the feeling as if she were a tiny little field mouse and Martin the big tomcat, his razor-sharp nails ready to strike. He didn't have any more weapons visible, but he all he'd needed was a scalpel to put the guard out of commission.

She almost grabbed the cell phone in her pocket to call McCullen. But she feared Martin wouldn't tell her anything more if Daniel was here.

"He felt no pain I assure you. His mother put something into his supper and he simply fell asleep. I gave her the payment of the drugs she requested for herself. Of course I couldn't leave her as a potential witness. You can't trust druggies. So she met her demise with a tainted batch of drugs."

At his confession Jo's hand tightened around her gun. She was truly surprised the gun hadn't gone off yet.

"I sent an acquaintance to dispose of the bodies. No one would have known a thing. Johnnie Garrett and his mother would have simply disappeared like so many other people do in this country. We hadn't counted on you showing up."

"Sorry for raining on your parade," Jo said wryly. "You really haven't answered my question. Why Johnnie? Why did you need his eyes and kidney?"

"I had a young gentleman who needed a kidney and a pair of eyes. He was at the hospital around the corner from Johnnie's house. Johnnie was a good match. As I mentioned, he was...convenient."

The doctor blurred as hot tears swelled in Jo's eyes.

"Convenience is no reason to go around killing perfectly healthy children so you can make money," Jo said shakily. The need to blow him away was so strong, she'd never felt so out of control and she had no idea how she managed to keep the thread of sanity not to pull the trigger.

"Ah, but, Miss Brady, this was a special case. I don't normally go around killing innocent children."

Jo reached into her pocket and withdrew her cell phone. She'd better call McCullen in or she would kill this bastard right now.

When he saw the cell phone in her hand, he shook his head.

"There are more surgeons out there besides myself, a whole conglomerate of underground transplant surgeons. If you expose me you won't be able to stop the others. There's just too many of us. Too many people who need the money we offer to help us find the organs that we require."

Jo switched on the cell and waited anxiously for the signal. She could feel her grip on reality begin to slip. If he didn't shut up, he'd die.

"What do you think happened to those six men who were simply taking a midnight joy ride on a stolen boat out on Lake Ontario a few years back? One minute they existed and then poof! Gone!"

"Shut up!" Jo snapped. She'd heard about the young men disappearing without a trace. Rumors of all kinds had flown around. Some said they'd drowned and the fish had eaten them. Some said they'd all decided to make it look like a disappearance and left their families and their country, taking off for some exotic island. Others said they'd been kidnapped, their bodies taken for transplants.

"It won't work." He said it so casually Jo thought he was talking about something else. But he meant her cell phone.

"The walls surrounding this room are metal. Soundproof too. It is the entrance to the whole shrine below. The door locks automatically behind you. You can't get out without the proper code."

Shit!

Jo searched the desk and then the room for another phone.

"There isn't a phone in here if that's what you are looking for, Miss Brady. It is only a record room. No need for a phone."

Fear shrieked up her spine. Without taking her eyes off Martin, she headed for the door she'd come in. Twisting the knob, her heart picked up speed when it didn't turn.

"Open it," she ordered, and pointed the gun at his head.

He didn't so much as flinch.

"I'm sorry but like I said—"

"Unless you want your head blown off you'll open this door."

"But if you blow my head off, then you wouldn't hear what happened to Steve."

"I really don't care what you have to say," she lied. She couldn't let him know she was very interested in what he had to say, but she was getting spooked with the casual way he was acting. As if he had no fear, she knew what was going on here. It took every effort to keep her voice calm, cool and detached. "You can save your confessions for the police."

"Danny Boy believes his brother is dead. But is he really?"

"We already know you were involved in his death."

"Did Danny not receive a little present in the guise of a Saint Christopher medal some time in the recent past?"

"You knowing about it proves you sent it."

Martin shook his head smugly.

"Sorry to disappoint you, Miss Brady. The medallion and necklace weren't in Steven's possessions when I recently saw him. I knew I should have taken those items away from him, but he was so attached to them, I feared he would go mad if I took them away. And that's the last thing I wanted. For him to go mad, as I was having him tortured to see how much information he knew about me. My torturers couldn't crack him though. Eventually I realized that he knew nothing or something would have happened to my organization by now. So I had him put away until I needed him for parts. He was cleverer than I first anticipated. I didn't know he would get the necklace out of the prison system. Didn't even know it was out until one of my contacts told me someone was doing some snooping about it."

That had to be the Cops' Angel Network. Jo would have to tell her contact that Martin had someone in her organization. That's probably how he knew about this guard.

"Steve's been another thorn in my side. But I plan on rectifying that problem tonight when I take his lungs at midnight."

The prisoner in the file folder? What had his name been? Donovan? Chance Donovan.

Mentally Jo made the connection. The initials CD on the back of the medallion. And TXDR for Texas death row.

Oh God. Steve was alive? Steve was Chance Donovan? Was that possible? Or was she just desperately grasping at straws? Could Steve be in this very hospital? She needed to get to Daniel. Needed to tell him.

Just then Jo realized Martin had a sickeningly sweet smile plastered over his blue tinged lips. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck scream in warning but the warning came too late.

A hand clamped around her mouth. Before she could react a sharp pinprick plunged painfully into the side of her neck.

She gasped as the drug sizzled through her veins with ferocious intent. In a split second her entire body went numb. A scream died in her throat as it seized up. She urged her legs to bolt forward. Nothing happened.

Paralyzing fear flooded her. She realized Daniel must have gone through this same feeling when he'd been held captive in this hospital. It was an ugly fear, something she wouldn't wish on anyone.

She wanted to reach out and swipe that smug smile right off the doctor's gray face as he calmly watched her fight the effects of the drug. But her arms went limp. She couldn't even pull the trigger of her gun. Her weapon slipped from her numb fingers and crashed onto the ground right beside the dead guard.

Oh God! She couldn't do a thing to protect herself. She fell to the floor like a limp doll. Her stomach lurched as she gazed into his lifeless open eyes.

"Anyone ever tell you to watch your back, Miss Brady?" Martin's words echoed with sickening clarity in her ears.

Through the black haze claiming her sight, Jo noticed the secret door standing ajar. Damn, she was a fool for turning her back on that door. That's why Martin had been talking about Steve. To keep her attention on him so someone could sneak up on her.

Had he been telling the truth about Steve being alive? Or making it up just to keep her occupied?

Martin was talking to someone. Probably the person who'd drugged her. "Get rid of the guard. Do an entire search of the hospital with security. Lock the place down if you have to. Use the bomb threat scenario. I don't know if she came alone. She may have backup somewhere. Probably Danny Boy. I want any intruders found."

Her mind began to fuzz as she helplessly watched a man dressed in medical white garb pick up the file folder containing Steve's identity. She didn't miss the hypodermic needle glistening in his hand.

The last thing she saw was Martin waver into her field of vision with a satisfied sneer creeping wider across his thin blue lips.

Then everything went black.

* * * * *

Chills of fear for Jo's safety screamed through Daniel when the door to the room burst open. Instead of Jo walking out, a man dressed like an orderly rushed out of the room.

With gun firmly in hand Daniel stepped out of the broom closet.

* * * * *

Colby Martin and his surgical team hovered around the Jo's death-still form like a bunch of eager vultures ready to tear apart their prey.

“Has the appropriate hospital in Kansas City been notified as I asked?” Colby Martin’s confident voice sliced through the partially opened operating doors, making Daniel McCullen stiffen with dread.

A man wearing white garb, standing to the doctor’s right replied, “It’s confirmed, sir. They are expecting her liver and pancreas.”

Another person, a woman, working a hissing machine chipped in sharply, “Her eyes have been confirmed for Toronto. And the burn unit in Boston has purchased her skin online.”

Daniel sucked in a deep breath at the horrific conversation. Every instinct in him screamed at him to barge through the doors and into the operating room to save Jo. He forced himself to remain hidden. To wait for backup. It was the hardest thing he’d ever had to do in his life.

He watched helplessly as the doctor, his face and head covered with blue gauze, smeared an orange liquid over the exposed stomach and abdomen of Jo. The rest of her body was hidden beneath flowing sheets of lime green.

“Her bone marrow has a home in New Mexico,” the woman continued.

“What about her heart? Kidneys?”

“Nothing yet,” another man replied. “We’re still waiting for word at the online auction.”

“We can’t wait forever,” Colby snapped. “My surgery is at midnight. I need to be prepped for it. The window of opportunity is narrowing. I can only hold off for a few more minutes. Keep an eye on the bidding.”

“Everything is fine, Colby. You’ve taken the precautions and medications required for the surgery. All that needs to be done is clean this room and then your prep. We can delay your surgery for an hour or so. No problems. Before you know it you’ll be breathing normally again and back to work within a few weeks,” someone from the group reassured.

Daniel couldn’t believe it. They were talking about body parts as if they were car parts. He needed to get Jo out of here, but he didn’t dare move a muscle. Going in with a gun blaring might make the transplant surgeon dig into Jo with his scalpel.

He’d wait until he had no other choice. When he’d greeted the orderly with his gun, a fight had ensued. With Daniel’s element of surprise he’d easily overpowered the orderly with a smack to his jaw complements of the butt of his gun.

After a few solid punches to the orderly’s stomach, Daniel had gotten the man to confess Martin had taken Jo. He’d also confessed about the secret entrance in the room and the keypad behind the air vent. Daniel securely tied the orderly and called Mathew for help.

Instead of following Mathew’s order that he stay put in the broom closet until help arrived, Daniel had been too impatient. Keying in the code the orderly had given him for the door to the Records room, he’d discovered the dead guard on the floor, found the keypad inside the air vent and entered the second code.

To his amazement a section of the nearby wall had silently slid open. Obviously that's how Jo had been ambushed. Entering the secret doorway, he found a cool concrete hallway, which brought him to the stairway that led into the bowels of the hospital.

He'd snuck into a drab changing room devoid of people where he immediately spotted Jo's clothes heaped in a bundle on a bench. He'd found her gun, fully loaded, and placed beneath her clothes. Picking it up, he'd jammed it into the waistband of his pants and cautiously snuck into an adjoining room, which was also thankfully devoid of people. This room was brightly lit, filled with stainless steel sinks and shelves upon shelves of medical supplies. A window in a nearby door revealed yet another room ablaze with lights and people dressed in white and mint green garb milling about a person lying like a corpse on an operating room table.

He didn't have to be a genius to know the person on the table was Jo.

He'd almost gone wild when he'd seen the horrific sight. Thankfully he'd kept himself together, realizing he was outnumbered.

"We've got the confirmations for her other parts, Dr. Martin. You may proceed with the surgery," a woman sitting at a computer console dressed just like all the others said with enthusiasm from behind her mask.

Daniel's stomach rolled with anguish as the stainless steel scalpel in Martin's gnarled fingers glistened and moved closer to Jo's velvety skin.

He'd run out of time.

While waiting, he'd donned a surgical mask, smock and slid on the paper cap he'd seen the other people in the operating room wearing on their heads. Now he slipped his hand into the pocket of the surgical smock and held his breath as his fingers touched first Jo's small gun and then slid around the cold metal handle of his gun. He withdrew his gun, released the safety catch, slid it back into his pocket and slipped through the doors.

Conversation stopped abruptly when he entered. But he continued to walk as if he belonged there. Anticipation about getting the scalpel out of the doctor's hand rose as he drew closer to the old man.

"If you want Miss Brady dead, then keep coming."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

It took Daniel a long split second to realize Martin was speaking to him. The urge to fly across the table and grab the deadly scalpel before it could pierce Jo's skin was almost too powerful to resist. Yet an internal voice to control himself slammed into his senses.

Daniel skidded to a halt, pulled out his gun and pointed it at Colby. Some of the medical staff gasped in shock. Colby Martin merely smiled.

"I knew Miss Brady had you around here somewhere."

Quickly Daniel cast a quick glance at Jo and thankfully saw no incisions on her skin.

Indecision preyed on him. How could he save Jo with all these medical gadgets attached to her? Monitors, tubes and things he couldn't even name.

He didn't have a clue which machine to turn off, which tube to pull or anything. The sucking sounds of pumps, beeps on various machines and the frightened glances from the staff made Daniel's brain whirl. Saving Jo wouldn't be as simple as removing an IV and walking out with her as she'd done with him.

"Order all machines and medications stopped on her," Daniel demanded.

No one moved.

"Do it now and do it right! If she dies, you all die!" Daniel waved the gun at them for added incentive, but his gaze quickly returned to the glimmering scalpel in Martin's hand.

From the corner of his eye he watched one of the garbed figures move quickly, efficiently. Steady hands turned knobs and pushed buttons.

Two others dressed in mint green garb followed suit with their machines. When they finished, all anxious gazes, except Colby Martin's, fell upon Daniel for more instructions. Thankfully they realized the gun he held was at this moment more powerful than their boss.

"Okay everybody! Get the hell out of here!" Daniel shouted.

The entire surgical staff moved in one solid unit toward the exit. Surprisingly no one spoke as they quickly headed in single file through the doors. The rustle of gowns and padded feet faded as the last person left the room.

Colby glared at him, much in the same hateful way he'd done when Daniel had been helplessly strapped to the hospital bed and the powerful drugs had screamed through his brain, trying to subdue him.

"I should kill her right now," Colby hissed between clenched teeth. His gloved hand moved a fraction of an inch downward. Daniel tensed, readied his finger on the trigger.

"Don't do it, old man. I will kill you before you hurt her."

"Watching you squirm while your loved one dies right in front of you will be sweet."

"Like you killed Beth?"

Daniel's words had the desired impact. The scalpel hanging precariously over Jo's exposed skin stilled.

Daniel took advantage of Martin's hesitation. "I know you put a hit out on me. You were probably relaxing in the study, in that comfortable old black leather chair you like so much. Maybe sucking on a cigar to celebrate. Probably sipping on that smooth Italian whiskey you're so fond of, waiting for the big call to say I was dead. I bet you were pretty blown away when you found out that they killed your granddaughter instead of me."

The razor-sharp scalpel moved away from Jo's skin and Daniel exhaled in a sigh of relief.

Martin grinned, his blue-tinged lips pulled back to show a flash of teeth. He shook his head. "I'm afraid you are the one who is going to be 'blown away' as you put it, when I tell you that Beth revealed your true identity to me days before your so-called wedding."

A sliver of betrayal flutter through him at those words.

"You didn't think my granddaughter was actually in love with you, did you? I had instructed her to find out everything about you. To find out if I could trust you. She did that work for all the male members I investigate. It was her job to gain your trust."

He was lying. Wasn't he?

"She told me about your very spontaneous proposal of marriage. She had no other choice but to say yes and go through with it. Or you might become suspicious."

Daniel smiled uneasily. "Okay I'll bite. Suspicious in what way?"

"That you would suspect she was using you of course. Oh, Danny Boy, do you seriously think I don't check out the people who work for me? Do you think Beth wouldn't tell me that Daniel Black was in fact Daniel McCullen who was searching for the murderer of his little brother Steven."

Despite not wanting to believe it, Daniel knew Martin was right. He'd sensed something wrong on their wedding day. Had figured it was wedding jitters. Beth had been a plant. He felt the bottom fall out of his world. The gun in his hand suddenly grew very heavy.

"Danny Boy, you're a good lawyer, very good, you proved it when you defended me at that Garrett boy's trial. Your instincts for trusting people, however, are a bit shall we say—off?"

His face twisted into a grimace.

"Unfortunately my granddaughter had the same trait for trusting the wrong people. She eventually fell in love with you. You turned her into a pathetic weak creature who couldn't even think for her own safety. She begged me not to kill you. When I found out you two were heading off to Mexico that night, we had to make our move or she would have disappeared with you. I couldn't risk that. Don't you see, Danny Boy? She knew too much. I couldn't let her go. You had to be stopped."

"She didn't have to die because of it."

Martin frowned and nodded. "No, you're right. She didn't have to die. But because she was in love with you, she did die. You will put down that gun now or I will kill another lover of yours," Colby said smoothly.

Daniel shook his head. "If I put down this gun, you'll kill Jo anyway."

"Then I guess we are at a check as they say in the chess game."

"Then we are at a check," Daniel agreed.

* * * * *

Something horrible was jammed down Jo's throat. She tried to swallow, but it was lodged in nice and tight. And she couldn't move her arms or legs. Couldn't speak. Couldn't even open her eyes.

Fuck! What was wrong?

Panic rose like a raw sword and threatened to take hold. She fought it back. Tried to remember what had happened.

Fleeting visions of Colby Martin's watery gaze and satisfied smile floated past Jo's eyes. She remembered what he'd said about Steve. About him being alive. Was it true? Her heart jumped with anxiety. It might be possible. Daniel had said Steve was cremated. Could the McCullen family have been given some other person's ashes?

Voices penetrated the thick haze fogging her mind. There were two of them talking. Men. They sounded familiar. Colby Martin was one of them. And the other one talking, Daniel? She heard the hatred in their raised voices as they spoke to each other.

Yes. Daniel. Oh thank God. It was him. Her relief was short-lived and her heart lurched with dread for his safety. She needed to warn him about Steve. To tell him to be careful.

She tried to speak around the item jammed down her throat but nothing happened. The tube prevented any sound from getting out. She felt the grogginess begin to smother her again and fought to move her limbs. Nothing cooperated. Blackness swallowed her.

* * * * *

"You should have pulled the trigger the minute you entered the room, Danny, my boy. You've lost your chance at finding out about what I told Miss Brady about your brother Steve and where he is, now I'm going to kill your girlfriend." Martin chuckled heartily.

Daniel's mouth went dry at the doctor's words. About Steve? Where he is?

He held his breath as the doctor's finger twitched on the scalpel.

He was baiting him about Steve. Probably lying.

Colby licked his blue lips with utmost satisfaction. "The owner of that medallion you're wearing around your neck has volunteered his lungs for me."

The owner of the medallion? Steve?

Stunned confusion ripped through him and he reached up to finger Steve's necklace. Daniel had put it on earlier this morning so he wouldn't lose it.

The split second in his hesitation was all the time Colby needed. Daniel gasped as the scalpel sliced into Jo's tummy. A tiny crimson streak oozed across her pale flesh.

Martin lifted the knife and looked up at Daniel, satisfaction on his face.

"I know you won't shoot me as I know the whereabouts of the owner of your necklace. And I'm not saying where he is until Miss Brady is quite dead."

Then the knife lowered again.

An explosion sent blood spraying against the mint green tiles of the operating room walls behind Martin. He watched helplessly as a giant red stain blossomed across the chest area of Martin's sterile green surgical scrubs.

Shocked at how fast it happened, Daniel dropped the gun he'd just fired and stared at the surgeon who glared back at him, obviously surprised at how quickly Daniel had been able to turn the gun and shoot Martin. A satisfied smile crossed the doctor's gray face and the scalpel fell from his limp fingers.

Daniel burst into action, lunging around the operating table and grabbing the old man by the scruff of his collar before he could fall.

"Is my brother alive? Dammit! Where's my brother?" he shouted into Martin's face.

He could feel the life draining from the doctor's body. Desperation unleashed a wild fury inside Daniel and a hot blade of hate for allowing this man to take the truth about his brother to the grave made Daniel let go of the man's scrubs and his hands went smoothly around Colby's scrawny neck.

"You bastard! Tell me where my brother is!"

The satisfied smile tipped higher on Martin's blue lips and his final words leaked out in painful gasps.

"I'll...die...happy...knowing...I...left...doubts."

Daniel couldn't help but grimace as part of himself died at hearing Martin's smug words. The death rattle blew out of Martin's mouth and slammed into Daniel's face, leaving him with powerful feeling of loss.

He didn't know how long he stood there, his hands wrapped around the surgeon's thin neck. But suddenly a warm, comforting hand curled around his shoulder.

"He's dead, brother. Let him go." Matt's voice was gentle and soft, allowing Daniel to let go.

He shivered as the body dropped like a rag doll. It hit the floor with a soft, sickening thud, the smug smile still on Colby Martin's lips.

"I had to shoot him. He was going to kill Jo." Daniel slumped against the operating table gazing down at Jo who lay fast asleep. Thankfully she hadn't realized what was going on.

"She's going to be all right. She's breathing on her own. He barely cut her. I'll call a doctor for her."

"Nobody in this place is going to touch her," Daniel growled. "It's an insane asylum."

"I'll get someone from a nearby clinic."

"Good."

“Just keep the gun handy for a while longer until I can get this place secure and a doctor down here.”

Daniel nodded and wearily picked up the gun as Mathew hurried from the room. Once again his gaze fell to Jo’s deathly still figure lying on the operating table.

He’d had to shoot Colby. He’d had no other choice but to save the woman he loved. But if Colby had been telling the truth about Steve, then he’d taken his whereabouts with him to his grave.

* * * * *

“Hey there, pretty lady.”

Jo’s eyes snapped open at Daniel’s voice and her heart burst with love when she spotted him looking down at her.

“What hap-en-ed?” Oh man, her throat was sore.

“Don’t talk. You’re in a hospital down the road from Martin’s private facility. You had tubes down your throat and they said it’s going to be raw for a few days.”

She knew all of that already. Earlier Mathew had been here and told her Martin was dead and that Daniel had shot him before Martin could kill Jo. She noticed the dark semi-circles hanging beneath his tired eyes and a dark shadow of beard covered his chin and around his mouth. Her tummy did some really cool somersaults. He’d never looked sexier.

“You...look...tir-ed.”

He rolled his eyes and his grin widened. “Thanks for the compliment.”

With everything that had happened, at least he still had his humor intact. That was a good sign, but she should find out what was happening with the prisoner named Chance Donovan. Was he Steve? Was he safe?

Earlier when Mathew had been here, Jo had signaled for him to get her a pad and paper. Jo had written down the pertinent things Martin had said. Mathew had been understandably stunned but had assured her he would get right on it.

“Mar-tin?”

“He’s dead. You don’t have to worry about him anymore. He’s out of our lives. And speaking of our lives...” He chuckled heartily and suddenly took her hand into his. She noticed his fingers were trembling and before she knew what was happening he’d slipped a ring on her finger.

It was gorgeous. A thin platinum silver band with a solitaire heart-shaped, glittering one-carat diamond in the center.

Jo’s head snapped up to see the love sparkling in his eyes.

“Daniel?”

“I want to marry you, Jo. If you’ll have me.”

Oh, how sweet. She couldn’t believe Daniel was proposing to her. They barely knew each other, but she knew without a doubt she was in love with him. Happiness gushed through her like an explosion.

Throwing her arms around his neck, she hugged him fiercely then quickly looked at the sparkling diamond ring on her finger to make sure this wasn't a dream.

This was so unbelievable.

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes!" she managed to squeak, ignoring the pain in her throat at speaking. Now was definitely a time she needed her voice.

"What's going on in here?" Matt shouted as he strolled into the room.

"Look!" Jo croaked with excitement, and held up her hand to show off her new ring.

Mathew stood still and gazed at the ring. His mouth dropped open in apparent shock and surprise etched his face.

"I cannot believe it." Daniel laughed. "My big brother is at a loss for words. Priceless. Absolutely priceless."

Jo noticed Mathew's eyes tear up as he looked at the ring and then slapped Daniel on the back. Jo had to laugh at Daniel's painful grimace.

"Man, you work fast! When's the wedding?" Mathew asked, apparently remembering how to speak again.

"We were just about to discuss it when you barged in," Daniel replied.

Matt didn't take the hint. Instead he rubbed his hands together with obvious pleasure.

"This will give that new wife of mine something to plan besides our own second wedding. Oh and, Jo! Emily is having a field day going through that room. She says she'll drop by later. Sara and the baby are getting a once-over at the Thunder Bay hospital and they'll be here in a day or two. Last I heard, J.D. was already smiling," Mathew replied proudly.

Then he grew serious and Jo could tell he had something else on his mind.

"Mind if I borrow your fiancé, Jo? I'm going to give him an early stag present."

Jo's eyes narrowed and she pursed her lips thoughtfully.

Stag party, huh? She wasn't sure she liked the idea of Daniel going off to a stag party.

But then she spotted the silent pleading in Matt's eyes and her senses became fully alert.

Something was up.

She found herself nodding and whispered hoarsely, "Go ahead."

Daniel winked at Jo and said to his brother, "The present can wait, Matt. I think we'll skip straight to the honeymoon."

Jo shivered with excitement as Daniel's lips showered her diamond ring with kisses and promises of things to come.

"Daniel. This is one present you'll need to see."

Instead of sounding excited, Matt seemed subdued.

Again Jo's senses prickled into full alert as she caught the tension etching Matt's face. Something was up and it was quite obvious to her even though not to Daniel who continued to kiss her fingers one by one.

“The...sooner...you...go...Mc...Cullen. Sooner...you...get...back.”

Over Daniel’s shoulder she caught Mathew’s thankful gaze.

Daniel sighed. “All right, Brady.”

Reluctantly he let go of her hand, stood and followed Matt to the door.

Before he walked out, he blew her a kiss over his shoulder and Jo caught it, delicately placing it on her ring.

“I’ll...be...waiting,” she promised, and Daniel hesitantly followed Matt.

* * * * *

“Can’t this wait? I’ve been looking around for that ring all morning and now I want to talk some more with Jo,” Daniel said impatiently as they stepped into the elevator and he watched Mathew press the button that would take them one floor up.

Matt grinned. “You managed to do all right without talking. You are engaged after all.”

“C’mon, Matt.” Daniel shifted his feet uneasily as the elevator started the ride. He’d been hoofing around from one jewelry store after another looking for the perfect ring for Jo. He hadn’t even told Matt where he was going. Had only told him to stay with Jo until he came back. While hunting for the ring, he’d missed her like crazy. And right now he was already missing her and all he wanted to do was go back to her room and get her out of here so they could get on with their lives. Together.

The elevator slid open and they stepped out into another corridor similar to the one they’d just left.

They passed the empty nurses’ station and a moment later Mathew stopped in front of a closed door.

“I can see you’re chomping at the bit,” he said softly. “But there’s someone I want you to meet. Then you can mosey on down to your future bride.”

Future bride. He liked the sound of that.

“Maybe I’ll take her to Jackfish for a pre-wedding honeymoon. Do a bit of camping. Bit of exploring before the bad weather hits.”

“Now you’re talking.” Matt grinned and knocked lightly on the hospital door and strolled into the room.

Reluctantly Daniel followed his older brother inside. He realized that Mathew had probably hooked up with some old fellow in dire need of some companionship. Matt was always doing that. Hooking up with strangers. Helping out anyone who needed a hand without any caution for his own life.

Whoever was housed in here, Daniel would stay for a short time and humor his big brother.

It was pretty dark in the room. The blinds had been drawn against the early morning sun and it was eerily quiet in here. It felt more like in a library or better yet a tomb. Automatically he lightened his footsteps out of respect.

Matt stopped at the drawn curtain that shielded the patient. “You decent in there?”

A rough male voice answered, “Never been decent in my life.”

Matt shook his head, chuckled and gave the curtain a swift tug. Not enough for Daniel to be able to see the lucky sap who had captured his brother's attention.

"So how's the grub? Looks so bad it'll kill you," Mathew asked the patient.

Daniel rolled his eyes and shook his head with amazement. Some poor fellow gets stuck in this place and Matt has to pick on the food the guy's being forced to eat.

"This fine cuisine is good for the boiler," came the man's amused remark.

Daniel's head snapped up at the familiar remark. When the three of them had been kids, they'd had fun referring to their stomachs as boilers.

"Brought someone along you might want to meet." Was this maybe a friend of theirs from home?

Matt moved aside and cocked his head at Daniel motioning for him to take a peek.

Suddenly feeling uneasy, Daniel stumbled forward to where Matt had stood only moments ago. Reluctantly he poked his head around the curtain.

A sandy-haired man lounged on the bed, his right arm was outstretched as he fiddled with a tray that sat on a hospital table in front of him. His other arm was held in a white sling. The fellow was shirtless. A small bandage was taped to his upper chest, directly over his heart.

Daniel's gaze drifted to the man's face and his breath caught in his throat. Mathew should have warned him. Should have said something to prepare him. He wanted to avert his shocked gaze from the man's horribly scarred face, but strangely enough, he couldn't.

There was something, some unseen magnetic pull or thread or bond or whatever the hell it was. It grabbed him and prevented him from looking away. Daniel stared at the disfigured man and tried to place why the guy seemed so familiar. Perhaps it was the stranger's slightly off-center nose, obviously broken more than once and in more than one place, or maybe it was the oddly familiar crooked smile on the patient's ravaged lips. Or maybe it was something else. Something he couldn't quite figure out that made Daniel believe he knew this man.

He forced the thought away. No way. He'd definitely remember seeing a man so horribly mutilated.

The man grinned but the smile didn't quite reach his piercing blue eyes. "Don't worry. I'm used to it by now."

"Excuse me?"

"My face." The stranger shrugged casually as he speared a piece of rubbery-looking steak and shoved the unappetizing-looking morsel into his mouth, chewing it with apparent gusto. All the while the stranger's brilliant blue eyes remained transfixed on him.

"People's reactions," he said between bites. "Mostly the same. Don't worry you haven't offended me."

Oh, but he had. Daniel could read the pain in the man's eyes.

Daniel looked to his brother for help.

Matt shrugged. His face blank.

The stranger laughed. An interesting laugh. Rough. Unpractised. As if he hadn't had a chance to use it in one heck of a long time. Somewhere deep under the layers of the roughness, Daniel sensed something tugging at him. Something that made him so uneasy he found it difficult to stand here. He would stay for just a few more minutes and then make an excuse to leave.

"Mathew says it's because of you my body parts aren't scattered all over the country. I want to thank you for killing Martin before he could go through with killing me. Apparently I was scheduled for termination last night so he could have my lungs. You saved my life. I owe you."

Daniel relaxed. Mathew had brought him here so this man could thank him. There was nothing familiar about him. It was just his imagination running away with him. That's all.

"Martin had the same plans for me. So I know how you feel," Daniel confessed, understanding exactly how terrified this man must have been.

The patient peered over at Mathew, who drew aside the curtains so he could get in on the action.

The patient shook his head at Mathew. "You obviously told him nothing. Just like I asked. That's a first."

"A first? You two know each other?"

The stranger nodded, scooped up a forkful of something that resembled mashed potatoes and plunged it into his mouth.

"We know each other," he said quietly after swallowing. There was a curious twinkle in his eyes.

"We go way back. Since we were kids. I guess you could say I've known the McCullen family since I was born."

"Oh? You lived in Montana?" Daniel asked. Okay, that was a dumb question. Of course he lived there, if he knew them. Mentally Daniel tried to place the guy and came up with a blank.

The stranger grinned and once again the feeling of familiarity swooped around him. Again he found himself checking out all the scars on the man's face, noticing more scars crawling across his chest and arms. Perhaps he'd been caught up in a fire or maybe a beating?

Some scars were old. Healed over with thick slabs of skin.

But that crooked grin...the shading of the man's hair...but the eyes were a stranger's eyes.

He found himself holding his breath as the man's dark blue eyes crinkled with delight.

"Lived in Montana from when I was born until about eighteen years."

Wasn't that how old Steve had been when he'd taken off to follow Matt to New York? Daniel swallowed against the dry dust bowl lodged in his throat.

No, he had to be crazy thinking thoughts like this about Steve.

"What did you say earlier?"

The stranger cocked his head slightly.

Another familiar trademark. Cocking his head sideways instead of asking a question. Steve used to do that exact thing. The eerie feeling crumbled into the pit of his stomach.

“What you said about the food? Where did you learn that saying about food good for your boiler?”

Sunlight dashed through a slit in the blinds and speared into the fellow’s dull sandy-colored hair, showing off golden highlights. Steve used to have the same golden highlights in his hair. But this guy’s hair was tinged with gray. He had to be much older than Steve.

He caught an odd glance pass between Matt and the patient, and the stranger’s face went neutral.

He lightly patted his swollen stomach. “You mean food for the boiler? My brothers and I used to say that a lot.”

Oh shit.

Then he suddenly extended his hand. “My name’s Chance Donovan.”

Daniel reached out and they shook. Immediately he noticed the firm grip. The warm, familiar greeting of an old friend.

Chance Donovan gazed at the necklace Daniel was wearing and suddenly as if he was speaking through a long tunnel Daniel heard the words, “I believe you’re wearing something that belongs to me?”

The room swayed.

Daniel inhaled automatically.

Mathew cursed at the stranger. “I told you it wasn’t a good idea to just spring it on him. You should have let me tell him before coming up here.”

“Shut up, Matt. Let him make the connection on his own. It’s better this way.”

Chance Donovan’s blue eyes never left Daniel’s face. He was supposed to know this guy? He’d never seen him before in his life. He didn’t recognize him by the eyes but that grin and those highlights in his hair, his mannerisms... He forced himself to think. To focus on the Saint Christopher medallion. The man said it belonged to him. But it belonged to Steve. How had Chance Donovan gotten it?

“You’re C.D.?”

The man nodded.

“This necklace belongs to my brother Steve.”

The man nodded again.

“He gave it to you?”

The stranger shook his head. “I said it belongs to me.”

Daniel’s mind whirled with confusion as both Matt and the man named Chance gave a wild whoop, the same way Steve and Matt used to do when they’d played jokes on him. So this had to be a bad joke, right?

He didn’t know what to do. So he just stood there blinking back the tears, allowing the shock to enter his system and then something inside him clicked and Daniel suddenly knew.

Knew Chance Donovan was his brother. Steve was alive. But how? Hell, he would ask questions later. Right now he needed to celebrate.

He joined in the wild whoops. The back slaps. Fierce hugs. Jovial laughter. Tears rolling down faces.

* * * * *

Jo watched the three brothers from the hospital room doorway. The way Mathew had looked at her when he'd said he had an early stag present for Daniel made her climb out of bed and with her IV stand on wheels in tow, she'd followed them. She'd seen them step into the elevator. Noticed it stopped one floor above. When she'd taken the next elevator up, she'd seen the two brothers entering a hospital room and she'd followed, stopping at the doorway.

She heard everything. Got a good look at the scarred face of the long-assumed-dead brother. And when she'd seen his eyes, the bottom dropped out of her world. Steve had the same brilliant ocean blue eyes that had looked at her with such pleading years earlier from a teenager named Johnnie Garrett.

For some insane reason Steve had been given Johnnie's eyes.

Jo stepped out of the doorway and leaned up against the wall. Her knees shook and she felt drained as she wept for the McCullen brothers' happy reunion and for what Steve must have gone through all these years.

But most of all, she wept for her friend Johnnie Garrett.

Author's Note

The chapel with the tilted tower in the ghost town of Jackfish is fictional, but the town of Jackfish actually exists. It can be found in Northern Ontario, Canada on the shore of Lake Superior in Jackfish Bay just outside of the town of Terrace Bay.

Canada and the United States are drenched in abandoned villages or “ghost towns” and these wonderful glimpses into our past are as close as your library, bookstore or the internet.

For the adventurous folks, many of these “ghost towns” are accessible by car, air, railroad or by water. All you need is a recent “ghost town” book, a dependable map and your imagination.

Enjoy!

Jan Springer

About the Author

Jan Springer writes on four acres of paradise tucked away in the Haliburton Highlands of Ontario, Canada. Past careers include Accounting, Truck Driving, Farming and Factory work but her passion for writing won out in the end. Now Jan writes full time and is a part-time caretaker. She enjoys kayaking, hiking, photography and gardening. She is a member of the Romance Writers of America and Passionate Ink (RWA Erotic Romance chapter). She loves hearing from her readers.

Jan welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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