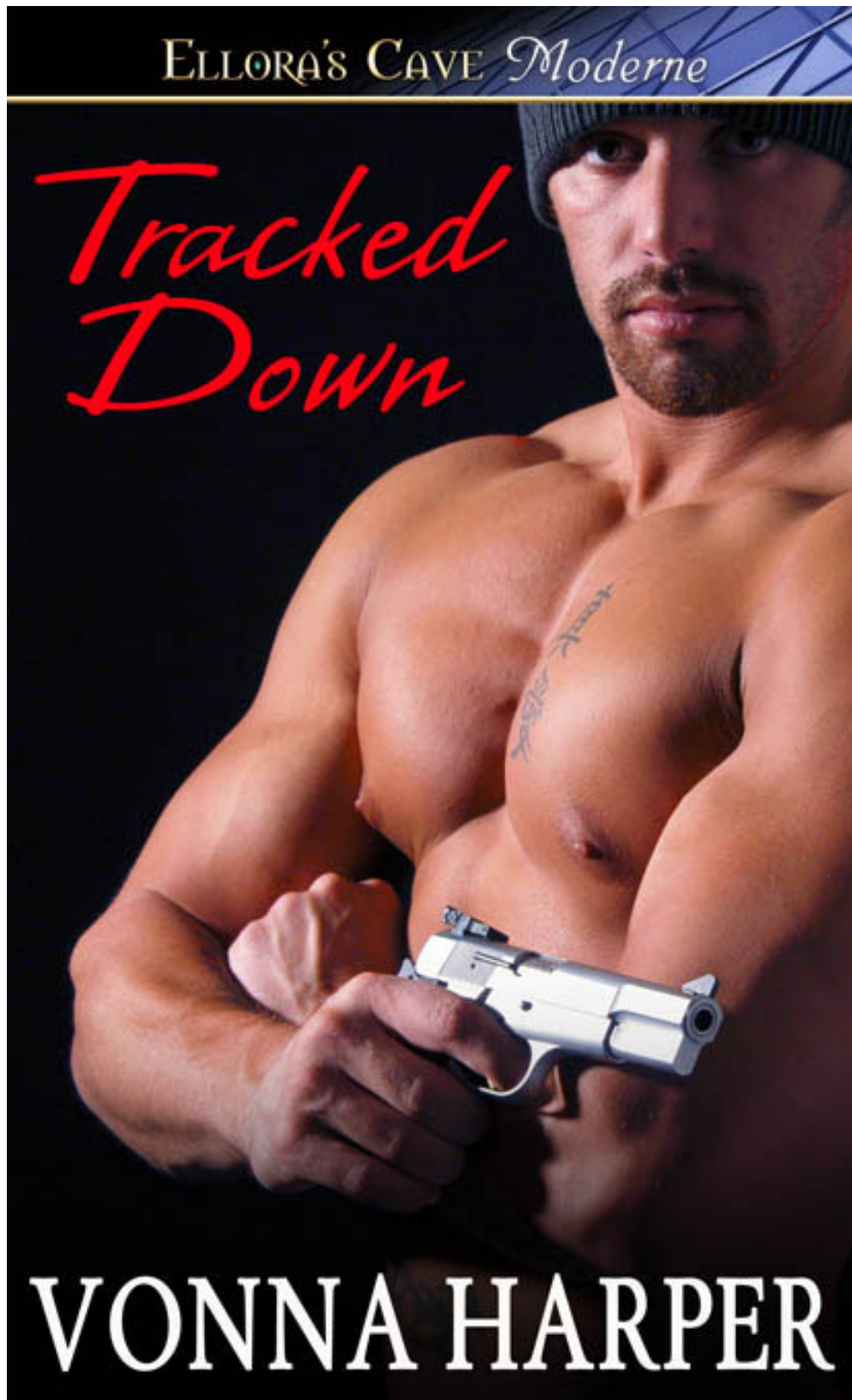


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*

# *Tracked Down*

VONNA HARPER



## **Tracked Down**

*Vonna Harper*

Lonato Ray hunts danger, never acknowledges fear, never admits weakness. Now his ruthless human prey hides deep in the wilderness, and he needs a tracking dog to find him. Canine trainer Carlin Witmer not only knows and understands this forest but insists on accompanying her Doberman. Day slides into night. Their primitive surroundings call to the loners, and they come together in heat and energy. Secrets are stripped away and vulnerability takes on new, deeper meaning. Lives will change in the battle for survival.

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Tracked Down

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# *TRACKED DOWN*

**Vonna Harper**

## Chapter One

Some men can flat out loosen a woman's teeth.

Watching the athletically built, dark-haired man stride toward her looking for all the world like a bull elk, Carlin Witmer amended her initial observation. This prime example of what the male beast should look like could loosen a hell of a lot more than just what was stuck in her jawbone. With not so much as a glance in her direction, he'd revved what lay between her legs to life. True, there wasn't much about the male animal she didn't like, but it made her day when one who lived beyond the top of her hunk list showed up on her property.

*Wild. Yep, that's what he is. Wild.*

Sighing in regret, she reminded herself that Stud Studly hadn't come here to prime her pump. Damn it, he was *simply* a client.

One hell of a client.

"Lonato Ray," she said and stuck out her hand. "And if it isn't you, I gave at the office."

Eyes straight out of the bottom of a cave bore into her as the man closed his strong, rough fingers around her own. He wasn't all that tall, probably no more than six feet, but muscles on top of tendon and bone supplemented by even more muscles had a way of adding to the impact. "What office?" he asked. Although the obligatory shake was behind them, he continued to hold her hand — not that she was complaining.

"Good point." Somehow she managed to keep eye contact going while indicating their surroundings which consisted of a dozen large dog pens, obstacle courses, her small place, and a separate garage. "Actually, I do have one in the house, and since I'm both boss and employee, I control all donations." She thought about pulling free then decided he was trying to learn something about her from the extended flesh to flesh

contact. No way was she going to let him believe she felt overwhelmed since she'd barely ever experienced the emotion. "You are Lonato, aren't you? The man from Recovery."

"Yeah. This place isn't easy —"

Before he could finish, ninety-five pounds of Doberman slammed into his thigh. Rocking back on his heels, he released her. She was glad he made no move to try to defend himself against Rio. If he'd raised a hand against her baby, she would have drop-kicked him.

"Beautiful," he muttered as he spread those so alive fingers over the search and rescue dog's back. "An incredible creature."

"He is," she acknowledged. *And it takes one incredible creature to identify another*, she silently added. "He's my prize pupil, or maybe I should say I'm his because I'm not sure which of us is in charge."

"I'll be using him?"

"Not you, me."

Something that reminded her of a rain cloud slipping between sun and earth settled in his eyes. "We need to talk about that."

*If you say so. I'd rather do something else, big boy.*

She said nothing, and the man from the agency that had retained her and her trained dogs to search the wilderness east of the Oregon coast turned his full attention to Rio. For his part, now that he'd done his part as official greeter, Rio was content to lean against a strong male thigh and have his head rubbed. Watching the interplay, she came to the damn easy conclusion that her first impression of Lonato had been incomplete. Yes, he still put her in mind of a bull elk because of the proud, easy way he carried himself, but there was also more than a bit of junkyard dog to him, although perhaps wolf was a more apt comparison. Despite its size, an elk was, at its core, a prey animal while a wolf was a carnivore, a hunter. So was this man.

Shaken by what she now accepted as fact, she pondered what had turned him into a hunter. It could simply be a by-product of the Native American heritage borne out in his dusky flesh, solid stature, and longish dark hair and eyes, but she couldn't quite convince herself he'd been born that way. Life had infused him with a hunter's mentality. He'd even dressed for action as witnessed by his hiking boots, jeans, and ride-his-chest olive chambray shirt.

Although he continued to give Rio the attention the dog would be content to suck up indefinitely, Lonato fixed his unsettling eyes on her. At least they weren't wolf-yellow. "You agreed to Recovery's request," he said, each word no-nonsense. "If you don't understand how the agency works—"

"Oh, I understand. You may not know this, but my father is a DA. He's told me a great deal about your *agency*."

His gaze became even more intense. "As much as we choose to reveal to law enforcement, you mean. Recovery accomplishes what it does because we're selective about what we share with the outside world."

Although she hated doing so, she had to admit he was right. According to her father, Recovery was part private detective agency, part mercenary unit, part do whatever it takes at all costs. People came to the select group of operatives when they wanted things done that couldn't be accomplished within the normal parameters of law and order. Acknowledging that the male human beast in front of her lived by that code sent her a loud and clear message. Beating him at his game wasn't going to happen.

But it didn't matter that she didn't yet comprehend what his game, his mission was. She held the trump card in Rio. And from what she knew of the situation, an elite wilderness-tracking dog spelled the difference between Lonato's success and failure. "What are you saying?" she demanded. "You believe that because you don't answer to the bureaucracy you can tell me how it's going to be? Not going to happen." She snapped her fingers. "Rio, the best tracking dog in this state, answers only to me."

Even before she'd relaxed her fingers, Rio had left Lonato's side and now stood before her, every line of his body as alive as she felt. "Rio, guard."

Fangs instantly bared, Rio whirled on Lonato. The Doberman made no sound, but his body language said it all. "If I tell him to, he'll kill you," she said.

"Unless I get to him first."

Lonato hadn't done more than drop his hand to his side so how the hell had the slim and deadly knife appeared in his fingers? He didn't point his weapon at Rio, but he didn't need to. She got the message.

"Standoff," she acknowledged.

"Not really. You aren't going to sacrifice your dog."

"No, I'm not." She snapped her fingers again, and Rio went back to his *what do you want next, boss* stance. Feeling not so much defeated as understanding, in part, what made this man tick, she rubbed Rio's head. "But neither is he going to work for you. You want someone found. I'm part of the deal."

"There are guns out there."

"I figured that."

"And men who won't give a damn that you're a woman."

"I didn't figure they would."

"Then why—"

"My reasons are mine," she interrupted. "Tell me something. If I demanded you explain why you do what you do for Recovery before I agree to have anything to do with you, would you?"

He smiled. At least the gesture resembled a smile more than anything else. "No."

"So where do we go from here?"

By way of answer, he trailed his gaze from her eyes down over her body. With each passing millisecond she felt more and more naked, more in tune with her sexuality, more focused on the desire to jump his bones. Damn, but the man could heat flesh and



muscles without so much as a touch. What the hell would happen if he laid his hands on her?

Unnerved by the image of her body smoking and being reduced to ash, she forced herself to stand there while he continued his survey. She'd always thought of herself as long and lean, although in truth she had enough muscle tone thanks to her physical lifestyle that lean didn't really qualify. If he wanted soft and curvy, he wasn't going to get it. She kept her reddish-brown hair cut short and seldom bothered with makeup. She owned one business suit and two dresses, all seldom used.

But if he had complaints, she sure as hell didn't. Far be it for his clothes to hide the packaging. The formfitting shirt said he had no need to hide a soft middle while the jeans—hell, the jeans said *not hard to see what's underneath, is it?* No way could he get away wearing slim-cut slacks with those muscular thighs. He had not so much as a bump of a belly and what she could see of his ass was tight with a capital T, but not only that, he was built for action, for an active life, for staying power.

Staying power? Granted, she couldn't tell much about the discreet bulge except that she hadn't, so far, given him a hard-on, but if his cock lived up to the same billing as the rest of him, any woman lucky enough to ride it would have no complaints.

Feeling her cheeks and other parts heat, she reached for what she hoped was the shutoff switch to her libido. "We're not going to get very far today," she pointed out. "I've arranged for someone to stay here with the rest of my animals and cleared my calendar for the week. I'm guessing you want to take off in the morning."

"He might not have the time."

"He?"

"The man I'm looking for."

"Who is he?"

"Sorry. I'm not giving you that."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want you telling your dad and involving the legal system. This is private, not public."

"In other words, if I knew who Rio is being asked to find, the cops would want to do the same thing?"

"And the press."

"Hmm. And that's a bad thing?"

"Yeah, it is."

Feeling as if she was being sucked into something she should have nothing to do with, she shook off her sense of unease. Too often her and her dogs' work was complicated by the presence of law enforcement, the media, family members, the curious. Having this between her and Lonato had a certain appeal. She just hoped she wouldn't regret it. "What do *you* want to do?" she asked, throwing things back at him. "How do you hope to handle things?"

"Except for giving my backpack a final check, I'm ready." He indicated the all but new rig he'd driven up in. "My gear's in there."

It belatedly dawned on her that he no longer held the knife. What was he, a magician? "And I already keep what I need for a protracted search ready and by the door," she pointed out. "If I get a call about a lost kid, I want to be able to move fast."

"Damn it, I don't want you along."

He'd said it soft enough, but she wasn't the only one who'd caught the hard undertone. Rio looked over his shoulder at Lonato, ears perked forward.

"Doesn't matter. You're getting me."

"No."

"Look, I've had Rio since the day he was born. I put hundreds of hours into training and working with him. More than a few people owe their lives to him. I might let you have another of my dogs, but you're paying for the best. Where Rio goes, I go."

## **Chapter Two**

Although he hadn't been to southern Oregon for several years, Lonato knew mountains, specifically that things got cold there at night, which it now was. As a consequence, he'd pulled on a sweatshirt before getting out of his vehicle.

The determined young woman he hadn't been able to shake had done the same. Then without a word from him, she'd gone about setting up her one-person tent on a level spot near where he'd parked along the side of an old logging road. As soon as it got light, they'd strike off on foot. She hadn't asked how he'd determined that this was where they needed to start, but he saw no harm in telling her he was going by what he knew of the three men who'd supposedly taken the obscenely wealthy Robert Jacob Dowells from his Portland, Oregon office and what an observant ranger had seen two days ago. What he hadn't revealed to Carlin was the name of his quarry.

Not enough added up about the abduction of the CEO of a publicly traded auto enterprise, but his marching orders were to locate and rescue Robert for the corporation's board members before the press, police, and, most importantly, investors got wind of what appeared to have happened. Details such as any ransom demands and the motives of the maybe abductors could wait until later, if at all. He'd taken the assignment, not because he needed the money, which he didn't, but because he'd been bred to track. Like his ancestors, he loved pitting his skills against his prey. Just because he'd been born too late to go to war against enemy tribes or attack unwanted settlers and soldiers didn't mean he couldn't feel the same satisfaction, the same need for revenge his ancients had.

The only difference between him and his great-great-grandfather was that he did his human hunting under the guise of civilization. He used four-wheel-drive vehicles, not horses. He relied on cell phones, binoculars, and GPS systems, not just tracks. And

at times like this, he turned to highly trained search dogs and their bullheaded handlers.

As Carlin went about starting a small warming fire on the rocky logging road, he amended bullheaded to include sexy and sensual and a no-doubt-about-it distraction. While on the scent of his target, he could go days without food or sleep, but tonight he didn't need to make either of those sacrifices. As a result, he thought like a man. Hell, he'd started thinking with his cock the moment he'd first seen her.

From the way Rio went about exploring his turf, Lonato didn't believe another human had been here for a long time. The Doberman still had his balls, and Carlin had explained that she was training several of his pups, making him think the dog would understand why he was contemplating what it would take to get inside her jeans. Getting a woman to shed her clothes had never been much of a problem.

"You smell like testosterone," a woman he'd briefly thought about marrying had told him. "Hell, male oozes out your pores."

But just because his bedpost sported a lot of notches didn't mean sex was all he wanted from a woman. Shaking his head against a mental journey he didn't want to make tonight, he turned his attention to his own tent. As he drove pegs into the hard ground, he acknowledged that they'd be sleeping deep in the forest tomorrow night. Maybe he should be content to indulge in the relative ease and rarity of a hot meal and a snug shelter, but in truth, he could hardly wait to start stalking his prey. He was like Rio and the dog's pups—he lived for the scent.

"You want to get some water from the jeep?" Carlin said. "As soon as it's boiling, we can have dinner."

Dinner would consist of the dried stew she'd brought along. In the morning they'd indulge in real eggs and potatoes, also compliments of her larder. After that they'd *dine* on the trail food he'd supplied. Although they disagreed about a number of core matters, at least they felt the same about wilderness work. Creature comfort didn't factor in.

Sitting on logs across from each other, they ate in silence. The moon was little more than a sliver, but the stars lit up the sky, putting him in touch with his surroundings. He tuned his senses to the sound of night birds and an occasional breeze punctuated by Rio's soft snoring. In his mind he saw owls and bats and sent his thoughts, his soul even, into the air. Modern men didn't rely on spirit helpers to help them survive, at least none of his fellow operatives at Recovery did, but he didn't care. Tonight felt right for communicating with *Wolf*.

*I feel your presence*, he told the life force that had embraced him when, as a fourteen-year-old, he'd gone into the wilderness to think, pray, fast, and commune with nature as his ancestors had done. *You knew I could be coming here so you waited for me. I ask you to guide my eyes and ears and hands during this journey. If my mission is just and right, I ask you to show me the way, and if I should not be doing this, I ask you to share your wisdom with me.*

*Wolf* didn't respond in a way anyone else would ever understand, but Lonato felt himself relax. The questions about whether he should be looking for Robert Jacob Dowells ended because *Wolf* had given him the truth. *Yes, find this man.*

"You do this a lot, don't you?" Carlin asked.

He focused on what he could see of her. Firelight had smoothed away her edges, allowing her to seep into her surroundings. "What? Look for people?"

"No. I rather suspected that because that's a lot of what Recovery stands for. I'm talking about being in the mountains."

"Not as much as I want to. Sometimes I work in a city."

"But you don't like it there."

"No."

"Me either."

Her admission reached deep. "The bright lights don't appeal to you?" he asked.

"Bright lights make me crazy. The wilderness gives me peace."

He'd wondered why, beyond not having to worry about neighbors complaining about barking dogs, she'd located her business in the country. "You live alone, right? You feel safe?"

She laughed, the sound touching nerve endings. "I'm surrounded by dogs. Not too likely anyone's going to sneak up without them sounding the alarm. How do you know I live alone?"

"One cup in the sink. One pair of shoes by the door. Only one of the chairs in front of the TV showing wear."

"You're observant."

"Yeah."

"What about you?" she asked. "You have to share the remote with anyone?"

The question could be casual, but he didn't think so. She wanted to know as much as possible about him. Because her life might depend on her ability to trust him, he gave her what he could. He had the TV remote all to himself, not that he watched that much TV or was home enough to get into the habit. He'd worked for Recovery for nearly three years and before that had done everything from bridge construction to guiding fishermen into remote lakes and streams throughout the west. Formal schooling had ended with the tenth grade, but he didn't tell her that although he'd gotten decent grades, the walls closing in around him had driven him outside. He was full-blooded Indian—his mother had been Apache, while the drunk who'd fathered him had been Comanche. Because she asked, he told her that both parents were dead but kept the details to himself.

When she asked where he saw himself in ten years, he deflected by turning the question on her. She gave a dismissive shrug. "I don't see much changing," she whispered.

The fire needed replenishing. As a consequence, he now could barely detect her shadow. They'd turned into disembodied voices reaching out in the dark. "I love working with dogs," she continued. "And I'm damn good at it. I've been looking into

training someone both to handle what I don't have time for and to give me more time to train police dogs. Occasionally I take my dogs to elementary schools, particularly special ed. I love seeing a child come out of his shell when a dog lets him know he's loved."

"What about children of your own?"

She didn't answer. He sent out his emotional antenna and tried to gauge her mood, but she'd closed herself off.

"Wrong thing to ask?" he said at length.

"None of your damn business."

"Duly noted. What about marriage?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe as in you don't have much faith in the institution or maybe as in you haven't come across any likely candidates?"

"I'm not willing to give up who and what I am." She stood and stepped into the night. "If a man can't understand that, I'm not interested."

He waited until she'd returned and placed a few more logs on the fire. "Does that work both ways?" he asked. "You won't try to change the man?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"On whether he picks up after himself, occasionally takes out the garbage, stokes the fire."

"Guess that means I've failed your test."

For a moment he thought she wasn't going to answer. Then, "Not necessarily. You have a lot going for you."

"Like?"

She laughed. "You have a hot bod."

\* \* \* \* \*

*What a damn-ass thing to say.*

Watching Lonato turn away so he could warm his backside, she amended her self-critique. Telling him he had a hot bod wasn't original, but it certainly was right-on. His sweatshirt covered a lot of his upper body but thanks to what she'd done to the fire, she had a sweet view of his butt. A man with glutes like that had to know their effect on a woman. She could pretend she was immune, but in effect lying to him didn't sit well with her. Who knew whether her life might depend on him before this, whatever it was, was over with.

She wanted to be honest and expected the same from him, at least when it came to sexual attraction. She might not be willing to reveal her hopes, fears, and uncertainties about being a good mother in the wake of going through her teen years without one, and it was obvious he wasn't ready to open up about his own background, but they hadn't come here to psychoanalyze each other.

On the other hand, the night could be a long one.

He'd already told her that he had a piece of the subject's clothing and had good reason to believe the mysterious man's abductors had taken him into this section of the Siskiyou Forest, so as she saw it, they didn't need to say more on that score until Rio picked up a scent. She could tell him good night, crawl into her tent and try to sleep, but she knew herself well enough to admit trying wasn't going to get her anywhere for a long time, if ever.

Damn him for giving out the vibes he did, for being put together the way he was. And damn her for being horny.

"What are we going to do about it?" he asked.

His unexpected voice made her start, but she quickly recovered. Either that or his tone had snaked around her to flame coals just waiting for a little encouragement. "About what?"



"Damn. I told myself not to do that. I hate game playing." He walked around the fire and stopped maybe two feet away. Heat boiled off him. She didn't think all of it came from the flames he'd been standing near. "I want you and I'm pretty sure you want me, right?"

*No game playing, he said. Remember, no games. "Yes."*

"Then we could either sniff around each other and wind up scratching our own itches, or we could fuck."

"You don't beat around the bush, do you?"

"Life's too short."

"Are you saying that because what we're doing is dangerous?" she had to ask, although with his body sending out certain messages, she half believed she could live forever.

"Life is short. My parents taught me that."

"So did my mother," she blurted. She'd been sitting when he'd come near, but somehow she'd wound up standing. Close to him like this, she felt the impact of his size and strength, the untamed quality.

She waited for him to ask about her mother, which would have given her the opening to probe about his parents, but when he didn't, she silently thanked him. Tonight she wanted to be a woman with a man, nothing else.

"Give me your hands," he said. When she did so, he laced his fingers through hers and held the union up so the firelight and stars highlighted them. "That's what I noticed first about you. They're strong and capable."

"Not what most women want to hear."

"What about you?"

"I need strong and capable hands," she told him. After that, she couldn't think of another word. She understood feeling as if she was melting at the moment of climax,

but she still had her clothes on. He hadn't touched her intimately. And yet, hell—so this was what it felt like to stand too close to the flames.

Maybe he sensed her vulnerability and maybe he was being driven by needs that echoed hers. Whatever it was, she wasn't surprised when he released her hands, took hold of the hem of her sweatshirt, and smoothly drew it over her head. Not since early teenage gropings had she felt less in control of a sexual situation. She believed in, demanded, equal billing. At least she had until tonight.

Now, standing before him with her sweatshirt dangling from his fingers and her nipples tight and hard, she felt as if she was on the receiving end of whatever he wanted and demanded.

"Are you on the Pill?" he asked.

"Yes. But that isn't enough. I insist—"

"Rubber? Always."

He'd brought along protection? Shit, was the man that sure of himself? Trying to answer her question made her slow to react to his next move. To her discomfort, he spread his fingers over her throat. True, she could have jerked back and freed herself, but what if he came after her? Despite the possibility of danger, she remained in place. His fingers transmitted not exactly an electrical current but primitive energy. He was testing her in ways she couldn't comprehend, maybe testing himself. Her fingertips buzzed. Her temples felt hot.

"You like sex, right," he said.

"Yes."

"Want it. Need it."

"Yes."

Slow, so slow, he traced the tendons at the side of her neck and then circled her ear. Despite the unbelievable tingling, she leaned into the caress. Head lifted, she sought out

his eyes. Darkness protected them, but she could imagine, could pretend they held more than animal lust.

As for why she wanted to connect with this stranger...

All around them the night pulsed. It spoke with an ancient rhythm that stripped away the modern world. Despite the cell phone at her waist and the nearby vehicle, she felt connected to a world far more basic than any other she'd ever known. Working in the wilderness had always put her in touch with nature, but the connection had never felt this intense or intimate.

Wanting to thank him for providing the path, she lifted her heavy arms and closed her fingers around his forearm. He paused, then returned to mapping her. Small, hot shivers ran through her when he found the valley between her breasts. She couldn't say how he'd managed to unbutton the top buttons on her flannel shirt. Perhaps he'd somehow rendered her senseless during the necessary maneuver.

It didn't matter. She lived where his fingertips touched.

When her hands transmitted acceptance, he pushed past her bra's barrier to envelop soft, full tissue. She sucked in a breath, increasing the space between fabric and flesh. Perhaps understanding the unspoken message of her arousal, he continued his journey. Even before he touched her nipple, shivers traveled down her belly to house themselves in her core. She made no attempt to pull her awareness off the delicious sensations. She hadn't had sex in several months and had no prospects for changing the condition, at least she hadn't before this man had entered her life. Now, just like that, he was offering fulfillment.

And she, who'd just openly admitted she thrived on sex, could barely wait.

With a mental shake, she reminded herself of the value of foreplay, of the benefits of not behaving like some animal in heat, of keeping physical and emotional distance between her and this dangerous stranger.

As he worked her already taut nipples, her hands grew too heavy to continue her hold on him. Giving up, she let them fall to her sides. He abandoned her breasts long

enough to finish the unbuttoning and reach behind her to unfasten her bra but didn't strip her. She supposed he was taking the cool air into account although maybe a slow disrobing turned him on.

Finally he pushed the bra over her breasts, cupped his hands along the outsides of her mounds and used his grip to draw her closer. She felt trapped, owned, possessed. In her mind she struggled against the living bonds. In reality, she leaned into him, and her fingers reached out and found him.

He was erect, hard. The solid layer of denim made it impossible for her to judge width and length, but the mound pressing against its barrier filled her hand to promise a great deal. She contented herself with rotating her palm over his sheltered flesh, but even as she explored and tested him, she knew she was being tested.

*Insane! Animal insane!*

*I know and I don't care!*

She felt him shift but was slow to realize he'd taken a step closer. The move trapped her hand between their bodies. She left it there as he bent toward her so he could run his tongue over her throat. Sounding too much like a small, wounded animal, she threw back her head and exposed her flesh to him. The difference between their heights was such that he had to bend even more and she had to rise onto her toes, but they made it work. His mouth found and then covered a breast. Heated by his breath and her reaction to the intimate contact, she became part of him.

Surrender. Acceptance. Gifting him.

He bathed her flesh, but although she came close to begging for it, he only briefly touched her aching nipple. Her cunt bathed itself. She felt fluid, flowing.

"Please," she whimpered.

He didn't ask what she wanted, thank goodness, because she wasn't sure she could tell him. When he switched his attention to her other breast, the suddenly lonely one instantly reacted to the cold air. It puckered and pulled, causing her to shiver. In contrast, the breast under his control and touch felt full and wet and warm. The heat in

her cheeks reached out until even her eyes felt hot. She couldn't pull in enough air so opened her mouth and drank.

"Please," she repeated.

Perhaps he heard this time because he released her mound and straightened. For a heartbeat she feared he'd leave her, but he clamped hard on her buttocks and pulled her roughly against him. Her hands sought his neck. She clung to him, pelvis grinding against pelvis, nearly fucking through the layers. He held her with almost frightening strength, and she gripped back with a mountain climber's power. They rocked and pushed, briefly pulled away only to crash together.

*Please, please, please.*

Wild, she shoved him away and grabbed blindly for his waistband. He stood motionless and yet trembling while she fumbled with the button and zipper. Then he arched toward her to make her disrobing of him easier. She had to release him while he dispensed with his boots but increased her stance so he could use her body to balance himself. Finally, finally, he stood before her wearing only briefs.

And his shirt, she reminded herself.

Thinking of little except the need to run her hands over his chest, she pulled up on his shirt until it bunched at his armpits. Instead of yanking it off, she grabbed fabric and drew him to her.

"Maybe I'll keep you like this all night," she whispered.

"Maybe you won't."

Putting action to his words, he spun away from her. Instead of seeking freedom however, he shrugged off the shirt before pushing her own top down to her elbows and tethering her with it. He gripped the cloth in one hand and used the other to free her jeans from around her waist.

"Push them down," he ordered.

She started to obey but couldn't complete her mission because he hadn't released her shirt. As a result, she now stood with her jeans under her buttocks and her arms pinned to her sides.

"Maybe I'll keep you like this all night," he said.

"Maybe you will."

He chuckled before pulling her against him. Off balance, she leaned into him, trusting him to keep her from falling. Compelled by something she didn't understand, she looked up. He'd become a blur, all strength and darkness. She wondered if he'd try to kiss her and if she'd let him, or wanted that brand of intimacy. Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, he didn't lower his head.

"It's too cold," he pointed out. "We can't fuck out in the open and our tents are too small."

"So?"

"So we need a sleeping bag."

They wound up using his because he'd reached into his tent while she was getting out of her jeans. He unzipped the bag before making short work of his briefs and slipping on the rubber. Then he dropped to his knees. Although she couldn't see his expression, he sent out an undeniable and inescapable message.

*Next to me. Now.*

Although she'd never allowed a man to order her around when it came to sex, everything felt different this time. Not taking time to try to access the change, she removed her panties and dropped them in the vicinity of his briefs before stepping toward him and lowering herself. He immediately lay her down. Then he stretched beside her and threw the bag over them. She felt trapped and sheltered at the same time. On her side, she reached for and found his waist. His heat seemed to envelop her.

It seeped into her flesh, settled deep in her muscle, housed itself in her bone marrow even. Mostly she felt him along her so far untouched cunt.

When he pressed her head against his chest, she briefly felt caressed and protected. Then, perhaps because she barely knew him and certainly didn't trust him, she straightened. Still, she kept her hands on him.

After positioning himself on his back, he gripped her waist and used his hold to leverage her on top of him. She now straddled his hips with his heated cock pressing against her mons. It would take so little to swallow him, to ride him.

Instead, she cupped a hand over his cock and drew it up toward her belly. His fingers dug into her hips.

*Are you afraid I'll hurt you? As if you'd let me, or anyone, do that.*

It occurred to her that he didn't often trust, not even in bed, but with her nerve endings screaming, and her pussy hot and wet and loose, she couldn't put her mind to the reasons. Even with Rio nearby, she had no existence beyond what was taking place and about to take place in his sleeping bag, so focused on laying claim to him for as long as he allowed. She was no shrinking violet, no naïve innocent ripe for a man's plucking. Surely her hands on his cock told him that.

Then he pushed up on her hips so he could reach between her legs and all control shifted.

Unerringly, masterfully, he dragged his fingers over her labia. Mewling, drenching his fingers, she released him and leaned back. She felt as if she was losing all definition and melting for him, heating to his flame. He kept at her in his practiced way, ruling and directing with a touch here, a nail brush there. In he dipped, then out again.

He let her know how much of her response began and ended with her clit by over and over again touching the too-sensitive bud. Like a man holding a racehorse in check before the opening bell, he brought her to the brink again and again.

Trying but not always succeeding, she fought the whimper clogging her throat by trying to grind herself against him, but he insisted that she hover above him so he could have his playground. She scratched his arms and tried to do the same to his chest.

Because the sleeping bag was unzipped, cool air often touched her. Even though it didn't go far enough, she relished the contrast with her hot flesh. When she managed to focus, she locked into the wilderness night. Everything revolved around Lonato. He played her as if he'd known her body intimately for many years, but although she found that unsettling, she also loved being handled by a master of the art.

Not once did he fall into a rhythm. Not once could she anticipate his next move, which gave her no opportunity to plan, to prepare, to anticipate even. Instead, she felt like a puppet dancing to his strings. Without him to direct them, her muscles might unravel. Her sensual reaction could be nothing more than the excitement generated by fucking a dark and dangerous stranger, but although he represented the unknown in every possible way, she felt comforted by his whisper touches and heated pressure. Comforted and directed.

Locked into the messages her core was giving out, she relished the exhilarating pressure caused by not just one but two fingers being buried deep and strong within her. This time he didn't extricate himself as he'd been doing. Instead, he remained in her so she felt skewered by him. Sure of himself and her acquiescence, he pressed his free hand over her belly until she felt suspended between the two contacts. Her pussy wept. A climax nibbled at her edges, and she clamped her cunt muscles around him.

"Not yet."

What was half whisper and half growl caught a measure of her attention. Yet she didn't fully understand until he withdrew what she'd nearly convinced herself was his cock. Before she could begin to make sense of things, he used his grip on her pelvis to lift her up and onto him.

Her folds embraced him. Her core welcomed him home. She felt him sliding deeper, fuller, until his cock seemed to be reaching for her belly. Surely it had already



made its way into her womb. Crying without tears, she pressed her knees against the ground and began leveraging herself up and down. The covering fell off her back, but she barely felt the chill. As they began working together, sweat formed on her spine. Locked into her once again nibbling climax, she acknowledged the effort she was putting out.

Her world existed nowhere except her body. The greatest sensation was centered on and around her clit, but even her toes and the top of her head seemed to have ignited. She gave everything, demanded everything.

And when the hot crash came, she shuddered in waves before collapsing down, on, and around him. His climax might have come a breath before hers, she couldn't tell. The only thing she knew was that they went on and on.

## Chapter Three

Lonato couldn't always keep Rio in view. Occasionally the dog would disappear into the underbrush, but although minutes might pass while the Doberman searched, he always returned to Carlin's side before ranging out again. He'd watched police dogs at work so knew how far the animals traveled, but he'd never studied one in such heavy vegetation before. If Carlin had any concern about Rio's ability to remember where they were, she didn't show it. Instead, she waited patiently.

After a quick and mostly silent breakfast, they'd put on their backpacks, and she'd introduced Rio to the shirt he'd supplied. Because of what he knew of the subject and his *abductors* and what the ranger had told him, he'd been relatively sure they were on the right road, but so far Rio hadn't picked up anything. If he'd been misinformed —

Tongue hanging and panting heavily, Rio appeared again. This time instead of briefly touching Carlin's hand before taking off once more, the dog sat in front of her.

"He's found something," she said. "He wants us to follow him."

Instead of making a fool of himself by asking questions, he let her lead the way through close-growing brush, so tall he couldn't see around it. At first Rio seemed to be heading back toward the logging road, but before long, the rough terrain straightened and the vegetation thinned, allowing the Doberman to trot. When they caught up to Rio, the dog was sitting at the side of an even narrower logging road than the one they'd left his jeep on.

"Guess I was a little off," he acknowledged.

"Not bad though," she said with a small smile that threatened to distract him. "I've seen enough maps of the area to know these roads are all over. Most of them haven't been used in years, not since logging was curtailed."

"He's found human scent, right?"

“Not just human, *the* human you’re looking for.”

A thrill snaked through him. No matter how many times he’d gone after two-legged prey, the sense of anticipation had never grown old. Most of his fellow operatives preferred doing their hunting in urban areas and relied on gossip, loose lips, and sometimes bribes. He, however, would much rather pit himself against someone who wrongly believed the wilderness would hide his or her tracks. Those wanted men and occasionally a woman didn’t know what they were up against in him, which was what gave him the advantage.

Instead of asking if she could determine how many humans Rio had located, he dropped to his haunches and studied the packed earth and rocks. Hikers could have come through here, or the boot prints could have been made by rangers or foresters, but although the signs were faint, he knew at least one human had been here since the last rain.

Rio had trembled when Carlin first presented the dog with the shirt. Now he felt the same way. *I’m coming after you, you bastard. It’s just a matter of time.*

The realization that he’d thought in the singular stayed with him as he straightened. True, the vice president who’d been with him when Robert Jacob Dowells was grabbed swore that strangers had pulled off a kidnapping, but signs pointing at a simple abduction weren’t adding up. Something else was happening here. He just didn’t understand what.

Giving himself a mental shake, he turned his attention to Carlin. Like her dog, she stood looking at him, her body at rest and yet alert. “What is it?” she asked. “Rio isn’t the only one on a scent. You feel the same way, don’t you?”

“Comes with the territory.”

“The hell it does.” She stalked closer. “Look, I let you get away with this damn veil of secrecy because I figured you knew what you were doing, but this is dangerous. I need to know as much as possible.”

Knowing he might unwittingly risk her life if he didn't give her an honest answer, he nodded. "I told you I didn't want you along," he said.

"I am. End of discussion."

For a clean and wholesome-looking woman, he'd be a fool to think of her as an innocent. Besides, she'd aptly demonstrated her earthy nature. "What do you want to know?" he asked, careful to keep his attention on her eyes and not the rest of her mesmerizing body. Even with his gaze under control, however, he had no control over the messages his own body was giving out. *Fuck the lady, now!*

"For one." She spoke in a measured tone. "What made you at least suspect this joker you're looking for and whoever took him are around here? Why'd you question Siskiyou rangers? There are tens of thousands of acres of forest all through the state, if he's even in Oregon. Who's to say he isn't stashed in some back alley?"

"It's possible," he admitted. He briefly considered taking her in his arms, but not only wouldn't she buy his attempt at distracting her, he didn't trust his reaction. "But I have reason to believe the most likely place for him and his *abductors* to stay out of sight is around here."

"What reason?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Yes, you can," she insisted. "Damn it, you aren't paying me enough for me to play dumb."

*You aren't stupid.* "All right. This much I can tell you. The subject and certain members of his inner circle had a cabin built in the Siskiyou. Unfortunately, none of the board members who hired me know exactly where."

"Nice to have something so remote," she muttered. Then, as he suspected, she frowned. "Wait a minute. You said this guy we're looking for had the cabin built. How would his kidnappers know about it unless..."

"Unless it isn't a real kidnapping."

She stared, mouth slightly parted and nostrils flared. He could all but see the wheels turning. "Let me guess. Money's the motive, money paid as *ransom* our so-called victim hopes finds its way into his pocket."

He didn't speak.

"But if it's a big corporation, isn't he already richer than dirt?"

"Used to be. Not anymore."

"Lousy investments?"

"Lousy gambler."

"Shit." She shook her head. "A desperate man doing desperate things—things that could get someone killed."

"You want to go back?"

He fully expected to see fear in her eyes. In truth, his own system had been on high alert ever since the pieces started falling into place. If he wasn't ruled by the hunt, he'd have called in the cops. Watching the thoughtful expression pass over her features, he wondered if he'd found someone just like him—a predator.

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

"Lonato, when I was thirteen I watched my mother die. It took the cancer two years to beat her down. In the end, she simply wanted to be free. She told me to take each day for what it was but not be afraid of the grim reaper. I try to live by that code."

He wondered how many people she'd told that. Not trying to talk himself out of it, he placed his hand over her cheek. Leaning into the touch, she blinked back the moisture in her eyes. "My parents died when I was eleven," he heard himself say. "You're right. It leaves an impact."

"At the same time?" She placed her hand over his. "Accident?"

He didn't look at her as he spoke. "My old man was drunk when he shot my mother in the head and chest. Then he took another drink and blew himself apart."

Silence punctuated only by birds and the wind working the trees went on for a long time. Finally she closed in on him, lifted herself onto her toes and kissed him. "You were there, weren't you?"

"Yeah."

\* \* \* \* \*

Damn it, why hadn't she been able to think of anything to say?

Staring at Lonato's back as he walked behind Rio had done precious little to free her from the question. She'd tried to tell herself there hadn't been much she could say and after all these years, the last thing the man needed was to reopen old wounds, but from what little she knew of him she was willing to bet he hadn't spilled that story many times, if at all. Maybe he'd opened up with her because he figured she'd been down the same road. Maybe she'd been such incredible lover that there wasn't anything he wasn't now ready to admit to her.

Yeah, right!

He was the incredible lover anyway, not her. Even now, hot and sweaty, and hungry and thirsty, just thinking about last night was nearly enough to catapult her onto his back.

Wouldn't that be something! Right there in view of Mother Nature she'd rip off their clothes and do whatever it took to work him into a frenzy. At the moment he might be focused on whoever the hell he was looking for, but the right touch from her and he'd —

*No you don't! Any more of that thinking and you're going wind up pulling down your pants and doing what you accused him of.*

Her inner battle continued to claim her attention, making her slow to note the change in Rio. He'd been walking nose low to the ground along the excuse for a logging road ever since she'd given him the command to follow the scent. Now, however, he'd stopped and was stretched out on his belly.

"What is it?" Lonato asked.

She'd seen this message from her dog before, trained him to do it in fact, but that didn't make the reality any easier. "He's smelled death," she said softly. "Human."

"Death."

"It's close," she whispered back. "Otherwise he would have had to go looking for it."

Lonato reached out his hand, indicating he wanted her closer. Glad to oblige, she stood next to him. He spoke softly, his mouth near her ear. "I checked. My cell phone doesn't work right here. Yours doesn't either, does it?"

"I haven't checked but probably not." *No calling in the posse.*

"Rio can locate the body?"

"Of course."

"All right." He continued at the end of a long sigh. "I don't suppose there's any way of knowing how long the corpse has been there."

"Sorry."

"What if there's someone alive around?" He more mouthed than spoke the question.

For what was probably the first time in her adult life, she pressed against a human being for reassurance. But even with the potential for danger, she acknowledged her nerve endings' response to the contact. Damn, but her sexuality was on high alert. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "He's trained to track scent and as a cadaver dog. It's too much to expect him to assess everything."

"Oh, he knows what's out there. He just doesn't know how to tell us." Speaking low so their words wouldn't travel, he rubbed his thumb against her palm. "Tell him to locate or whatever he does, but I don't want you coming with me."

"I've seen bodies."

"Damn it, the killer or killers might be here."

She'd already put that particular one and one together but hearing it from this trained hunter of human beings made it even more real. She might have argued that she was SOL if something happened to him, if it hadn't occurred to her that concerning himself with her safety might distract him from his own need for caution.

"Bones, Rio," she ordered in a low tone. "Find bones."

\* \* \* \* \*

The man's head had been bashed in. So much damage had been done to his face that Carlin couldn't begin to guess what he'd looked like before the deadly assault. From what she could tell, he'd been dead at least twenty-four hours.

Although Lonato didn't say anything as he slowly and carefully circled the victim, she suspected the nearby splintered limb had been the murder weapon. Because he'd been carefully trained, Rio didn't need to be reminded not to disturb the crime scene. Like her, the Doberman remained at a distance. Now that he'd found his target, Rio was content to chew on the rawhide she always rewarded him with. She, however, wasn't the least bit interested in food.

Trusting Rio and Lonato equally to alert her if someone approached, she avoided looking at the ruined head while she studied the surroundings and tried to recreate what had taken place. The man's pants were unzipped and his flaccid penis poked out, making her think he'd been taking a piss when he'd been attacked. He could be whoever Lonato was looking for, but she didn't think so as witnessed by the corpse's worn boots and inexpensive shirt. He lay mostly on his side, giving her a view of several of his pockets. Nothing resembling a wallet bulged. Neither was he carrying a weapon. Maybe identification had been deliberately taken, and of course a dead man had no need for a gun or rifle.

*Thanks, Dad. See what I get for being a DA's daughter? I think like a cop.*

Or maybe the truth was, she was being influenced by Lonato's behavior. She'd watched TV programs showing wolves and other meat eaters around a kill—this man



put her in mind of them. At least his fangs weren't bloody, but his total focus was the same. She swore he was sniffing the body. And he'd already thoroughly covered the area around what she thought of as the killing field just as any predator would to assure himself that he was safe.

When he dropped to his haunches next to the body, she half expected him to begin tearing and clawing and was relieved when he did nothing more than push hair away from the corpse's forehead. In his unique way he was conducting a crime scene search but instead of using modern forensic equipment, he was relying on skills maybe he'd inherited from his ancestors. He seemed in no hurry to get to his feet and if his thigh and calf muscles burned from the precarious position, he gave no sign.

A man like that had staying power. *He* had staying power.

At length, Lonato got to his feet, but although she sensed his body relax, she did nothing to break his concentration. When he took off his pack and pulled out a digital camera and took pictures, she mentally applauded his thoroughness. Even Rio, who usually napped after a job well done, appeared impressed. Yesterday she'd taken the handgun strapped to Lonato's waist as nothing more than another tool of his trade. Today she acknowledged its deeper meaning.

"He didn't see it coming," Lonato said as he put the camera away. "There aren't any marks on the ground indicating he tried to get away."

"And he didn't get a chance to zip his fly."

Like her, he saw nothing funny in her observation. "Whoever killed him waited until he was occupied," he said.

"He was one of the kidnappers, wasn't he?"

"What brought you to that conclusion?"

When she told him what she'd concluded from his blue-collar clothes, he nodded. "What are you going to do?" she asked.

"Leave him, for now."

"Then it's a good thing you took those pictures because scavengers are going to find him."

"Yeah, they are." He glanced back at the body and then seemed to dismiss it. "Now you *have* to leave."

"No." She spoke quickly and decisively because she'd already anticipated him saying that. "Rio won't—"

"I've watched you work with him. I know the commands."

"He won't do anything unless I release him, and I'm not going to."

His eyes asked the question. *Why are you doing this? Do you want to risk your life?* Feeling more in tune with him than she remembered ever feeling around another human being, she debated her reply, then decided on honesty. But first she took his wrists and drew him away from the body. She had no need to go on holding him, but she did, absorbing his heat and strength.

"I've never fucked a man I just met," she told him. "Hard to believe after the way I acted, but I always believed I'd need to know someone before the hormones would take over. But you've tapped into a part of me I didn't know existed. I don't fully understand it, but I want to. I need to."

With a movement she nearly missed, he shifted so he now gripped her wrists. She had no doubt he was a master of control when necessary. "You're playing with fire."

"Aren't we both?"

The question made him frown. "Yeah, we are. And not just because there's a killer out there."

She should be focused on that, shouldn't she? Her career had taken her to murder sites before but never without cops and their weapons and authority in attendance and certainly never with the possibility that the murderer might be nearby and determined not to be caught. But if anything, that awareness only heightened her response to Lonato.

"Tell me something," she said. "How many times has your life been at risk?"

"Why? It turns you on?"

*You turn me on.* "Don't be a smartass." She kept her gaze locked on him and didn't try to fight the fingers running along her nerve endings. He led her further away from the body before continuing.

"I'm just trying to get to know the lady," he whispered before settling his mouth over hers. The world blinked out, leaving her locked inside the shelter and prison he'd created with his presence. She hadn't completely dismissed the possibility of danger but trusted him to know more about the reality than she possibly could.

He'd keep her safe. Safe and satisfied.

Alive with sexual hunger, she probed his mouth with her open one. The message she gave out by allowing his tongue access came across loud and clear. Whenever, however he wanted her, he'd get it.

The contact spread until arms, chests, bellies and hips came together, the pressure hard and unmistakable. She felt as if he was drinking from her and using the freely given gift to increase his own reaction. At the same time, she demanded an equal gift. Whether deliberate or a by-product of her hunger, she found herself being fed by him. She no longer felt her weary legs or empty stomach. Now everything centered around her cunt and breasts. She, who had dealt with uncounted bitches in heat, became one herself. Like them, her message of availability and desperate need was being spelled out throughout her body.

Tilting her hips forward, she brought her pelvis into greater contact with him. In turn he pressed his hard and trapped cock against her. She fought to continue the kiss. Her desperation shocked her, but she couldn't put her mind to trying to fight it. She had no fear for her own life, but he lived his on the edge. He took chances and faced down human animals. For him, death wasn't a vague notion but an everyday possibility.

And for as long as he lived, she'd take what he had to give.

Feeling as if she held quicksilver in her hands, she forced herself to ease off on the ferocity of her embrace. She needed to feel not just his power but what was soft and real and alive about him. Perhaps he understood because he began running his hands up and down her sides almost as if he was caressing her. The change did nothing to lessen her need, but in his masterful way he'd managed to bring her back from the brink of desperation. She tried to do the same for him by relaxing her death grip on his neck and running her fingers over his shoulders. She couldn't quite convince herself to pull back on the pelvis to pelvis contact. If he slid his hand between her legs, she might go off.

"Not now."

Trying to make sense of what was more of a growl than spoken words, she leaned back but kept her hands on his upper arms.

"This is insane," he said. "And I don't do insane."

\* \* \* \* \*

Even as night began claiming their surroundings, Lonato continued to ask himself whether his proclamation about having his act together was a bold-faced lie. It seemed incomprehensible that he'd dismissed a violent act simply because Carlin turned him on, and yet he couldn't deny that he'd come within a rational moment of fucking her right then and there.

She hadn't said much after directing Rio to start following the subject's trail again. Her silence should have given him plenty of time to put the pieces together, but once he'd come to the not too brilliant conclusion that the body was one of those who'd supposedly kidnapped Dowells, his mind had done little more than float, although if he was being truthful, he'd spent more mental energy keeping his hands off her than anything else.

Damn it, he didn't want it like this! Awareness of and appreciation for his surroundings had more than once spelled the difference between life and death. He knew better than to allow himself to be distracted!

Only *allow* hadn't factored in.

"It's been at least a day since they were here," he said as he stood after studying another boot print.

"How do you know?"

"Someone kicked aside this branch. The ground under it has had time to dry."

"So we're safe? Time for several minutes worth of commercials before the action picks up again?"

"A man's been murdered," he shot back. "This ain't no TV show."

"You think I don't know it? Damn it. This isn't the first murder scene I've been to. And I watched my mother die."

"And I saw what bullets did to my parents, but that's not why I've got to watch both our backs."

"You, me, and Rio. Lonato, I'll never make light of death." Her voice had fallen several notches. "I mourn for the man we found earlier and everyone who cares or ever cared for him, but we're in the wilderness where eat or be eaten has been played out since the beginning of time."

She was right, righter than he wanted to admit.

"It's primal out here," she continued, coming closer. "Civilization hasn't made it all the way into the forest. I hope it never does."

"Primal," he repeated and pulled her against him. Enough daylight remained that they could have traveled a little further, but a few hundred yards more wouldn't make that much difference. Besides, the wild land and his wild heritage had made its impact. Tomorrow or next month he'd deal with bills and taxes. In the morning he'd continue hunting for a killer or killers.

Tonight was for other things.

## Chapter Four

Carlin lay on her back on the sleeping bag Lonato had unceremoniously spread out a few minutes ago. Neither had spoken while they removed their clothes, and although she was hungry, she didn't care when or whether she ate. Once again daylight had fled, a switch suddenly turned off. Night's cold made its impact. The moon would soon arrive. In the meantime, she folded her arms under her breasts and waited for her warrior.

He wasted no time with subtle foreplay. Instead, he spread her legs and bent her knees slightly. Once he had her in position, he began by stroking her breasts followed by a quick, strong journey down her belly and over her mons. Charged, she struggled to breathe and keep her hips still. She reached for him, but he pressed her arms by her sides.

*Trust me*, she heard. And because she had no choice, she continued to give herself to him. After briefly running his hands over her inner thighs, he changed position so he could place his head near her apex. Even before his tongue touched her, she started shaking. The first stroke was so light that for a moment she thought maybe she'd imagined it. Then she felt her primitive reaction and knew he'd found her clit.

The next touch lasted longer, felt warmer. As she fisted her hand in his hair and he closed his fingers over her pelvis, he bathed and ignited. Assaulted, she rocked from side to side but kept her movements as slight as possible so he could remain in contact with her unbelievably sensitive clitoris. She didn't try to swallow her moans. Neither did she make any attempt to keep her rapidly building climax under control.

He worked her so quick, so expertly! Again, again, and again he stroked until she felt herself shooting over the top. If she'd ever climaxed in less time, she couldn't

remember and didn't care. Waves of pleasure caught and held her. Her legs shook. Her pussy burned and wept.

She'd just begun to come down when he went after her again. This time he spread her legs wider and brought his mouth even closer so he could slide his tongue inside her. In and out he worked, in and out. Her head thrashed. She clawed at what of him she could reach.

"Stop! Please, stop. I can't take —"

"Yes, you can. And you will."

After his growled warning, he forced her to spread herself yet more. His tongue and breath caresses covered her, concentrating on one spot and then another with no sense of pattern, no way for her to anticipate or control her response.

She climaxed again, or maybe he'd simply kept the first one going until she felt as if she might come endlessly. Sweating and barely able to breathe, she cried out into the night. Maybe something about her helpless sobs reached him because he pulled back so now only his harsh breaths reached her.

The wave began to recede. She started to come back in touch with herself, to take back ownership.

But only momentarily because he propped himself up on an elbow and replaced his mouth with his fingers. As she lay there boneless and crying a little, he slid a knuckle between her nether lips and inserted as much of his finger as he could. He pressed, the pressure most intense on her clit. As he'd done before, he used random movement to keep her off balance and on fire. More times than she could count, he rubbed and stroked. The overstimulated nub responded as it had been designed to do, and the rest of her body followed suit.

With the side of his thumb resting against her cleft, she once more lost control. Shuddering waves held her, exhausting her in ways no strenuous day could. When, finally, the last wave died, she couldn't find the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness.

"No more," she whimpered. "Please, no more."

"You like?"

"Like?"

"Multi-orgasmic." He made it sound like a compliment. If he hadn't straightened and closed her legs, she had no idea when she'd have thought to do that.

"Never *that* multi before," she admitted before ordering herself not to reveal any more. Damn him. It had been so easy for him to claim ownership of her. Even now, spent from the waist down, she knew how easily he could force or coax another explosion from her. His power scared her and yet she'd soon crave another demonstration. "Let me up."

"No."

Maybe the single word should have alarmed her. Instead, she insanely embraced it and became part of it. He'd made her his prisoner. Part of an Indian raiding party, he'd run her down and thrown ropes over her. Despite her struggles, he'd taken her back to his teepee and secured her to the center pole so he could do what he wanted with her.

Pulling the fantasy around her, she turned from strong and independent modern woman into a captured pioneer desperate to do whatever it took to remain alive. Or maybe the truth was, the pioneer she'd become in her mind desperately craved be taken by this savage.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Arms over your head. Arch your back and lift your pelvis."

"Just like that? Damn it, I—"

"Now."

Against all reason, his command seeped into her and became part of her. Compliant, she did as her *captor* ordered. He stretched out over her and braced his upper body with his arms positioned on either side of her chest. Although she wasn't



sure her body could handle another assault so soon, she bent her knees, planted her feet, and tilted herself to receive him.

His legs were heat against hers. Despite the dark, she felt his gaze boring into her and locked onto him. He wanted. She wanted. They'd both take, both receive.

Tomorrow was soon enough for fear of his control over her.

Every move one of command and ownership, he entered her soaking cave. She felt her sensitized flesh close around him, cradling and sheltering, housing the savage.

As he began thrusting, she acknowledged that her nerve endings hadn't had time to recover from the intense stimulation they had received. But even if a climax eluded her, she could gift him as he'd *gifted* her if that's what it had been. Grateful for her physical life, she presented herself over and over again while providing the resistance his cock demanded. Even as his breathing lost all cadence and he trembled, she thought, not of a man caught in his body's most primitive and demanding needs, but a stallion, a stud who has mounted his possession. He still owned her, not the other way around. He'd melted her down and turned her compliant. In gratitude and surrender and disbelief, she became what he demanded.

And when the sweet, hot cum shot into her, she joined him in climax.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I didn't use protection," he told her.

"No, we didn't," she responded. When he didn't say anything more, she blew on the small fire made from dry wood that barely smoked, and then watched for the outlines of bats and owls against the moon and stars. Anything was easier than looking at him.

He'd rested on top of her for a while after emptying his seed into her, but when she'd told him he was getting heavy, he'd gotten up and handed her her clothes. As she'd dressed, the feel of denim had erased the last of the savage-captive fantasy. And when he'd started gathering wood, she'd realized she'd gone from being hungry to

starving. Last night they'd sat across from each other with the fire between them while they ate, but this time he'd positioned himself beside her. She felt both trapped and renewed, as much him as herself.

"We need to talk," he said.

*Don't tell me you intend to do the right thing if I get pregnant. I don't want to hear that.*

"What about?"

"I've killed before. I can do it again if I need to."

*That* she hadn't expected to hear. "Do you think it might be necessary?"

"It's an occupational hazard."

"Then why do you do it?" she asked even though she believed she knew. This man operated according to a code she'd once believed existed only in thriller movies and books. His world was rough and raw, survival of the fittest. Hadn't the rough and raw way he'd taken her demonstrated that?

"Someone has to."

"Who do you think you might have to kill this time?"

"Whoever tries to kill me. Or you."

He'd risk his life for her? The thought was surprisingly appealing, the protective male guarding his woman. She chewed.

"Do you understand why I don't want you to be part of this?" His voice was harsh. "Really understand? No one is playing."

"I realize that." She wasn't sure whether her comprehension of the line between life and death would ever be as deep as his.

"I hope to hell so. What you need to understand, what you have to do is do everything I tell you to. If I say hit the ground, you obey, immediately."

"You aren't kidding, are you?" *Damn it, you know he isn't!*

Fortunately he didn't throw her stupid question back at her. "I'm not going to go into all the dangerous situations I've been in because they don't matter beyond providing necessary experience and background information."

*And maybe because you don't want me knowing what you're capable of.* But didn't she already have an inkling as witnessed by the way he'd taken control during sex?

"All right." Her voice faltered a bit. "Ah, do you have any idea what to expect this time with this situation? You must have some sense of what we're getting into."

"Yeah, I do. There's no way I'm buying that shit about Dowells having been kidnapped. The man isn't stupid. He's not going to walk into that pathetic excuse for a trap. My guess is he paid a couple of men to help him set up the scam. He's going to come up with a ransom demand all right, but he's deliberately delaying it."

"Why?" The name of the man he'd been hired to find sounded vaguely familiar. She wondered if Lonato had deliberately finally told her. Of course he had.

"My guess, so he can first dispose of the two people who can blow the whistle on him. And so he's sure he's where no one can find him until he wants to be found."

"This Dowells planned to kill the men he hired?"

"One's already dead. Maybe the other one too. Rio just hasn't found him."

If Rio had any inkling of the role he might be playing in this, the dog gave no indication. At the moment his full attention was on his rawhide chew.

"I see," she said because something was expected of her. "Wouldn't Dowells have to kill them at the same time? Otherwise, the living one would try to do Dowells before he was offed." *Offed? Who do you think you are, a gang member?*

"Not necessarily if the *kidnapper* hoped to get all the ransom money. He might decide to play along with Dowells. Hell, maybe he did in the guy we found as a way of demonstrating his loyalty. Carlin, these people operate in ways I don't expect you to understand."

*But you do because you've been in the world of people like them. "It sounds as if you haven't come to any conclusion about what we're going to encounter when we find whoever is still alive."*

*"I. I'll find them, not you."*

On the brink of telling him she wasn't about to let him take all the risks, she shut her mouth. Was she crazy! She wasn't being paid to put her life on the line. Lonato got off on that, not her. He knew the risks and had faced them before. But what if it turned out to be two, or more, against one?

*"Ah, so you think there is going to be a ransom demand?"*

*"Has to be. This is all about money, money the board has to cough up."*

*"But how is Dowells going to get his hands on it? He's in the forest." With us.*

*"He only needs to stay here until he's sure they've bought his story. Then he'll escape. The money will have been to some place where it can't be traced. It'll never be found, just like the kidnappers."*

*"You're sure of that?"*

*"It's my best guess."*

*"But how —"*

*"The details aren't important, and I don't intend to explain any more to you than I have to. My plate was full before you came on the scene. Now I have to factor in your safety."*

For a moment she was tempted to tell him she'd rethought her position and agreed that he needed to remain a sole warrior as he'd originally intended. But one man had already died in this forest. She couldn't leave him, she wouldn't!

*"Carlin? Are you listening?" he prompted.*

*"Loud and clear. But if you wanted me to ride off into the sunset, you shouldn't have fucked me."*

*"You wanted it."*

"And you should have known our having sex would change the way I look at you."  
*And the way I hope you think of me.*

"Yeah," he whispered. "I should have."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Damn, damn, damn!*

Cursing himself, Lonato turned onto his back. Although he'd set up Carlin's tent, he hadn't bothered with one for himself. Figuring she'd be too sensitive for more sex and not trusting himself around her, he'd insisted they sleep separately. She'd agreed, making him think he wasn't the only one who needed distance.

*Damn, damn, damn.*

As if hearing him, Rio scooted closer. Instead of pushing the Doberman away, he lightly stroked the dog. "You're going to need to earn your keep," he whispered. "Let us know everything you pick up, not just what she tells you to. Put your mistress's life first. And second."

*First?* Although he lived by the code that placed a client's needs ahead of his own, if he'd ever truly contemplated risking his life to save someone else before, he couldn't remember. It was one thing to live by a "protect and serve" mentality. It was quite another to feel that code in his pores, his heart.

*His heart?* No, damn it! He was being influenced by the setting, danger's siren call, an attractive and sensual woman. What red-blooded man wouldn't be turned on by a broad with the skills and competence she did, let alone her quick-to-excite nature and mature, enticing body? He'd been called brave and courageous—and a damn fool—more than once. No wonder he was drawn to the same in the opposite sex.

But once this assignment was over, he'd be on to the next. One last roll in the hay and he'd suit up and be on his way. It had been like that for as long as he'd been working for Recovery, even longer. He didn't want or need ties.

*Just you, Wolf, he acknowledged as he tried to find the door to sleep. You're all I ever need.*

## Chapter Five

Thunderclouds were building on the horizon as they reached the top of a rocky hill the next afternoon. Studying them, Carlin's only thought was that she didn't mind being rained on. She just didn't want to be in the woods while lightning flashed.

Then Lonato turned and looked at her, and she amended her thought. She cared about him too, specifically his undeniable impact on her nerves, skin, bones, tendons, fingernails, and other body parts. "What?" she said when he continued to stare.

"We've been walking for hours. How are you holding up?"

"I haven't given it much thought." She indicated Rio whose entire attention remained riveted on the ground. "The way he's been acting—"

"We're getting closer," Lonato finished for her. He walked the few steps back to her, dark eyes seemingly even darker than before. "Can you release him from the scent for a while?"

"Of course but why?"

"Because I don't intend for us to walk into something I'm not prepared for."

Mulling over the use of *us* and *I* in the same sentence, she nevertheless gave Rio permission to relax. The dog gave her a puzzled look that reminded her of when he'd been a puppy and she'd stopped him from tearing into her mop. Then perhaps figuring he'd done enough work for a while anyway, he sank to the ground.

"I'm going on ahead for a while," Lonato said. "We've been heading northwest and I'll continue in the same direction."

She nearly argued that she had no intention of being left behind, but this was hardly a childish game. He was the one who understood danger in all its forms and functions, not her. Bowing to a brand of expertise she never expected to equal, she

nodded. But when he slipped off his pack and readjusted his pistol so it was closer to his right hand, she impulsively reached for him.

"Be careful." She didn't care how hackneyed the term sounded, only that she meant it with all her heart.

"I will." His answer was soft, his attention split between meeting her gaze and acknowledging her hand on his arm. "I'm not leaving you here alone."

He could have pointed out that he was determined to fulfill his mission, but he hadn't. Instead, he'd put her first. Not fully understanding either his words or her reaction, she slid her arms around his neck and stood on tiptoe. Sighing, he bent down to meet her upturned lips. He began by barely brushing his mouth against hers, but when she impulsively and needfully arched her pelvis forward, the kiss turned hot. He clutched her to him, his mouth savage, the embrace inescapable. In a heartbeat, she ceased to exist beyond him. She felt heat and desire but something else as well, something deeper. Frightening.

Perhaps he experienced the same intensity because he abruptly released her and stepped away. "Stay here," he ordered. "I'll be back."

"When?" Her voice shook. Her cheeks felt inflamed, and she'd dampened her panties.

"As soon as I can."

"Be careful," she repeated before turning away so she couldn't see him leave.

\* \* \* \* \*

Had time stopped? Although her barely moving watch told her otherwise, the afternoon felt endless. If only she'd had something to occupy herself with, but beyond refreshing herself with what little water from her canteen she thought she could spare, Carlin simply sat and studied the miniscule insect life that shared the ground with her. She wished she could sleep the way Rio did but couldn't imagine Lonato returning to a snoring woman.



Besides, although she fought the memories, they won. In her mind she saw the discarded body of the man Rio had found yesterday. When that didn't consume her, she relived her mother's sad final days. But most of all she embraced the times she and this man she barely knew and didn't understand had fucked. She tried to tell herself that by replaying the frenzy and heat, she'd cleanse herself of his body's impact on hers, but it didn't turn out that way.

How could she expect it to be any different? She'd never met a man like Lonato, hadn't even believed that a flesh and blood one existed. Bounty hunters and mercenaries existed only in the movies, right? Real men didn't put responsibility and honor ahead of their lives. No code existed which said the target must be met regardless of danger.

But those things existed inside Lonato, at least she now believed they did. He lived with a recklessness she would call suicidal if he hadn't imprinted her with proof of how much he embraced life, or at least life's carnal elements.

*Carnal. Raw. Real.*

That's what he was, those things and more. In her mind he became the Lone Ranger, Batman, maybe even Indiana Jones. Adventure and danger brought him to life and fulfilled him. Without those things, he'd simply exist.

Or would he?

Exhausted from trying to figure him out, she settled her back against a tree. She was trying to find a smooth place to plant her ass when, in no more than a blink of an eye, Rio went from a prone to alert position. His hackles rose. Although he'd never been a growler, he did so now. Jumping to her feet, she strained to hear. Rio's growls turned to a whine, and he gave her a puzzled look.

"What is it?" she more mouthed than spoke. "What do you hear?"

Once again the dog resumed staring in the direction Lonato had gone. The hair along his back continued to stand up. If reading the Doberman's body language hadn't

become second nature to her, she would have thought he'd caught the scent of some creature he was dying to chase. But because she knew him, she understood.

*Something's happening that shouldn't,* Rio said. *I don't understand the message but I need to. We both do.*

Wishing for the first time in her life that she carried a firearm, she gave Rio permission to follow his instinct. Without waiting to see if she intended to follow, he trotted off in the direction Lonato had gone. Grabbing up both backpacks, she hurried after her animal. As she concentrated on her footing and keeping Rio in view, she struggled to keep dark images at bay but couldn't.

Something had happened to Lonato. Maybe Rio had heard sounds of fighting or even worse, a gunshot. Had Lonato cried out? Was he all right? Alive?

The last thought stole the air from her lungs, leaving her weak. Feeling both numb and electrified, she managed to get her pack on so she now clutched Lonato's to her breasts. He couldn't be dead! He couldn't.

But if he was, what would she do?

*Kill whoever had killed him.*

The uncivilized response expanded inside her. Some part of her insisted that she couldn't take the law into her own hands, but a stronger voice, one imprinted with what Lonato had done to her body and soul, overrode it. If someone had killed Lonato, that beast's blood would saturate the ground.

Both because she was accustomed to walking in the wilderness and because she'd studied Lonato's stealthy, silent progress, she managed to trot all but soundlessly, and Rio made no noise. He seemed delighted to have a task to accomplish, and she envied his ability to simply do his job without emotion. She preferred working with search and rescue dogs to those law enforcement used. Police dogs' value came in part because they'd charge into danger. If they understood life and death, the concept didn't get in the way of what their humans commanded them to do.

"Rio," she hissed after they'd gone maybe a quarter of a mile. "Here."

The Doberman spun around and trotted back to her side. If he'd heard something, which she had no doubt of, it couldn't have been much further than they'd traveled. Besides, she had no intention of letting the beloved and valuable animal blunder into danger.

"Stay," she ordered and dropped the packs to the ground. Rio shivered and looked crestfallen but did as ordered. After removing her utility knife from her pack and putting it in her waistband near her canteen, she struck out alone. Now that she was moving at a slower pace, she noticed an unusual number of birds. At the same time, the trees ahead of her seemed less invasive as if something up there wasn't capable of sustaining their growth.

A lake.

Wouldn't someone wishing to have a remote cabin build it near a lake?

Carefully choosing each step before she took it, she bent low and crept forward. She felt for all the world like a wolf stalking prey. The only difference was she didn't know her prey's identity while a wolf would never make that mistake.

*Mistake!*

Something flashed to her right. She started to turn in that direction, but before she could complete the movement, a force crashed into her and sent her sprawling on the ground on her belly. *A man!*

Desperate to free herself, she struggled against the warm and living weight, but even as she fought, instinct told her not to cry out. Obviously her attacker didn't know what she was thinking because he clamped his hand over her mouth. At the same time, he straddled her waist and hips and even her legs, pinning her to the earth.

"It's me," the man whispered against her ear. "Don't speak or move."

*Lonato!*

Relief so intense it brought tears to her eyes rushed over her. Although his palm continued to press on her lips, she managed to touch his flesh with her tongue. She ordered herself to relax, to simply accept his larger body on and over hers.

"You understand?" he asked, his voice more of a rumble than spoken words.

She nodded and remained limp.

Taking her response as her answer, he rolled off her and helped her sit up. Ignoring the pine needles and other debris on her shirt, she snuggled against him.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he whispered. He stroked her neck.

"Rio heard something. I had to —"

"An axe," he interrupted. "They were chopping wood." He jerked his head in the direction she'd been heading. "The sound echoed."

"They?" Like him, she kept her voice low and knew not to risk being seen by standing.

"Yeah. There's two of them."

\* \* \* \* \*

Although he had his arms around her and her heart beat against his chest, Lonato still struggled to accept that she was here. He wanted her just as she was. Hell, thoughts of what might happen between them once he was free to return to her had distracted him from the need to turn into a tracking machine. But he'd told himself that those mental and sensual images weren't about to become reality any time soon and he'd better get rid of them. He'd succeeded when he spotted the lake and cabin and become the wolf he patterned his actions after, focused on his goal, put his mind fully on what he needed to do to accomplish that goal.

Then something, his nerves maybe, had told him that she'd found him.

Holding her close, both so they could carry out a whispered conversation and because—hell, because he needed to, he told her what he'd learned. Robert Jacob Dowells was here all right along with a man he'd never seen before. The two had been outside when he arrived. He'd been alerted to their presence by their argument. Although he'd been too far away to hear most of what they were saying, Dowells was

obviously berating someone he considered his inferior. The other man hadn't called Dowells on his attitude so much as he'd continued to insist that he was right.

"I needed to understand the dynamics between them," he told Carlin. "That way I have a better idea how to deal with them."

"There's no doubt? Dowells isn't the other man's captive?"

"Hardly. And from the description I got, I'm positive the other one is one of those who *kidnapped* Dowells."

"Why is that other man dead?" she asked. "Which of these two killed him?"

"The only way we're going to have the answer to that is by asking them."

"How are you going to do that?"

*The \$64,000 question.* Before Carlin had shown up, he'd decided to wait until the men had separated and then disarm and disable them in turn. He hadn't worked out the details, but that hadn't worried him because he'd dealt with uneven odds before. Surprise always worked, surprise and stealth and a predator's mindset. He saw no reason to change his plans, but now he had to factor in her safety, make it his priority.

"Go back," he whispered. "I need to concentrate on what I'm doing, not you."

"I can't leave," she told him, her voice husky. "Worrying about you has already driven me half crazy."

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

"Don't be." She positioned his hand so it rested on a breast.

"What the hell are you doing?" *What the hell am I doing running my fingers under your blouse and bra so I can feel your warmth?*

"There's more than sex between us, Lonato, a lot more."

Much as her earthy words pushed buttons in him, he knew she was right. He didn't understand how it had happened or how he'd come to care, really care about her. And now wasn't the time to try to figure that out.

When he looked into her eyes, they seemed a little clouded. "Those men are murderers," she said. "At least one of them is."

"Yes."

"They *have* to be brought to justice."

"That's what I was hired for."

"And now you have an assistant."

No, he wanted to yell, but he knew how useless that would be.

"What are we going to do?"

He told her that he didn't want to risk getting trapped by going into the cabin and had been intending to wait until he'd isolated one man at a time outside before making his move. It wouldn't be dark for hours. He could afford to be patient.

"So can I," she said.

"You aren't taking them on." Although he didn't mean to hurt her, he closed down on her nipple to get her attention. She arched her back but didn't try to move away. "You aren't trained in this business," he pointed out. "You'll be more of a hindrance than help."

"I told you, I'm not leaving. I can't."

*I can't.* He meant that much to her?

\* \* \* \* \*

One hour rolled into two and still the cabin door hadn't opened. At Lonato's insistence, she'd moved away from him, but although he'd gestured for her to increase the distance between them, she'd set up what she thought of as her own surveillance where she could still see the cabin, not that the expensive-looking structure could be considered a cabin. How Lonato had managed to fade into his surroundings puzzled her but then couldn't a wolf conceal himself until he was ready to attack?

Her mind played with a number of scenarios, each ending with Lonato having overwhelmed and overcome the two men. Refusing to allow the possibility that he might get hurt or worse to slip past her subconscious, she mentally pictured him tying the defeated men's hands behind them. Then he'd secure their ankles and check them for hidden weapons before calling the authorities.

Or maybe he'd have to kill them.

Memory of how the dead man Rio had found looked should have repulsed her, shouldn't it, but she also ran through the conditions that might force Lonato to use deadly force. If it turned into a case of two against one or he believed she was in danger, he'd fire his weapon.

And maybe he wouldn't need a reason, an excuse to kill.

She tried to bury that thought, but like her, it refused to leave. She didn't know him, not really, so how could she say what he was capable of or what code he lived by. These men were murderers—what about an eye for an eye? And if the killing took place out here, who would know more had been involved than self-defense? With the men dead, Lonato wouldn't have to concern himself with responsibility for them.

*A wolf. A predator and a killer.* And when he'd finished with his deadly task, he'd turn to her, his woman.

She'd begun to imagine Lonato morphing from man to beast when a sudden sound caused a chill to race down her spine. Blinking, she watched the front door open. After a few seconds, a man emerged from the shadows and stood on the stoop that led to two redwood steps. She imagined Lonato at attention, his mind racing with plans and possibilities.

"No matter what happens, you will *not* get involved," he'd ordered. "I will *not* have you hurt."

*Not have your presence endangering me,* she'd mentally translated. But could she live up to the curt nod she'd given as response?

The man stretched and made his way down the stairs before starting toward the lake. Going by his body language, he was bored. No wonder. He'd probably been here for at least a day with no contact with the outside world. How long did he intend to hide out here? Did he have any idea how precarious his situation was now that Lonato had found him?

*I want to take them one at a time,* her lover had said.

Anticipating and half sick at the same time, she strained to make out Lonato's form but couldn't. She began to sweat and for some insane reason, she felt sexual excitement.

The man was now heading purposefully for the sturdy dock that reached over the lake and held a new fishing boat she'd concluded had to have been flown in by helicopter. With every step, he was putting distance between himself and where she believed Lonato was. If he didn't act soon—

When the new sound came, her brain was slow to register its meaning. Then, chillingly, it did. Rio. Rio emerging from the trees and slinking toward the man, his every move that of a search and rescue dog who has found his target.

*No!*

"What the hell?"

Disbelieving, she stared as the man turned to confront Rio. For several seconds man and animal studied each other, neither moving. Then Rio again started walking toward him. Every line of his body spoke of his single-minded purpose. He looked magnificent, a large male Doberman in his prime, teeth exposed, paws silent.

The man didn't back away. Only his right hand moved. To her horror, she realized he was reaching for something tucked in his waistband. Even before he pulled out the pistol, she knew what she'd see.

"Who's out there?" the man demanded. "Listen. Whoever the hell came with this dog, you've got five seconds to show yourself or I'm going to shoot."

*No! Not Rio.*



Driven by love for the dog who'd become her constant companion and friend, she stood up. The man turned in her direction but kept the weapon aimed at Rio.

"Rio," she said. "Down."

Rio dropped to his belly, head high, eyes intent on the man. To the uninitiated, his body language might not mean much, but she understood. He didn't trust.

"A broad?" The man shook his head. "Get your ass over here."

Although she now heard only the wind and a solitary bird, she imagined Lonato's voice. She didn't believe he'd curse her for trying to save her dog's life, but what would he do now?

"I'm sorry," she said when maybe ten feet separated her from the man. Thinking fast, she injected as much fear and confusion into her voice as possible. "I didn't mean— He isn't vicious."

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"I-I'm hiking. That's all. Just hiking." She shrugged and then let her arms drop to her side, the picture of naïveté. "Please, don't hurt my pet."

"*Just* hiking?" He wagged his gun at her. "You expect me to believe that shit? Lift your arms. Turn around."

This man was accustomed to giving orders, she decided as she complied. Although she desperately wanted to look for Lonato, she carefully kept her gaze unfocused. By the time she'd completed her circuit, she'd calmed enough that she could start thinking again. She had no doubt that her life was in danger, hers and Rio's and Lonato's. Thank goodness she didn't have more than her utility knife on her. If she'd shown up armed, it would have set off red flags. Now if only she could keep the man from realizing Rio's true purpose in life.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said, careful to stare submissively at the ground. "I knew I shouldn't be here. I didn't expect to come across a cabin. I-I was just curious, that's all."

His grunt said he wasn't about to believe her out of hand. "This is the middle of nowhere. What the hell are you doing here?"

"I told you, hiking."

"Mitch!" he yelled. "Mitch!"

A few moments later, the cabin door opened and another man stepped out. This one was at least fifteen years younger with broad shoulders and a long upper torso but short legs. His dirty-looking hair stuck to his neck, and like the man she took to be Dowells, he hadn't shaved for several days. He carried a rifle cradled in his arms.

"I heard you," Mitch snapped. "Been watching through the window since you yelled the first time." He came to stand near Dowells. "Pretty little piece, isn't she?"

"Stop thinking with your cock and act as if you have half a brain!" Dowells ordered. "Shit, I've never seen such a one-track mind."

Mitch glared at the older man. His clenched jaw told Carlin things she needed to know about their relationship. Despite his whiskers and less than clean clothes, Dowells had the air of a man used to spending money on himself, a man who understood what money could accomplish. She was close enough to see that his nails had been manicured, and his hair had that professionally styled appearance. She'd already noted his perfect teeth, and the skin around his forehead and eyes had a tightened quality, probably the result of plastic surgery. He looked like he was in his mid-thirties but had to be older.

"Let me get this straight," Dowells said to her. "You want me to believe that you just happened to be traipsing clear out here with just the dog to keep you company? That you just happened to stumble upon this lake? It's a two-day hike from the highway, sweetheart."

"I didn't start out alone," she replied, thinking quickly. Somewhere, somehow Lonato would do what he had to. In the meantime, she had to quiet the men's suspicions. "My boyfriend and I, we wanted some time to ourselves."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know, and I don't care." She shrugged and took a chance on lowering her arms. She didn't like the way Mitch kept staring at her breasts. "We had a fight this morning. I left. I hope he's lost."

"And the dog?"

"He's my boyfriend's," she improvised. "My *ex*-boyfriend. That's what we fought about, part of it anyway. Rio kept chasing after rodents instead of staying with us. That bastard started kicking him. I wasn't about to leave Rio with him." She worked up what she hoped passed as a smile. "Besides, Rio likes me better."

"Where are your belongings?"

Because she'd anticipated the question, she was ready with an explanation that in her rush to put distance between herself and someone who now disgusted her, she'd left her pack behind. "At least I'd already strapped on my canteen." She indicated it at her waist. "And I have this knife, for what it's worth. But I haven't eaten since last night. I thought, when I saw the cabin, I thought there might be some food in there."

"You were hoping it'd be empty so you could break in."

About to protest, she shoved her personal code aside and became who she believed she needed to become in order to survive. "It was worth a shot, but 'cause you're here, I'll come out and ask. But, please, put that gun away. It's making me nervous."

Mitch chuckled and aimed the rifle barrel at her crotch. "That's what it's supposed to do, bitch."

Dowells stared at Mitch. Something crossed over his features that might have been wariness. Unable to comprehend the complex relationship between the two, she struggled to find her way through her limited options. She had no doubt that Lonato was taking in the scene, planning his moves, whatever they might be. If only she knew how to be the most use to him.

*Disarm them.*

When Mitch came closer, she forced herself not to back away. Instead, she stood as tall as she could. Eyes hooded now, he shifted the rifle so it rested under his right arm. He clamped his free hand under her chin. "Coming up roses, bitch. Roses for me. You want something to put in your belly? First you let me in your pussy."

"You can't—"

"I can and I will." With that, he hooked a leg behind her ankles and shoved, causing her to lose her balance. She landed on her ass, arms behind her to catch her fall.

"Damn it, you bastard!" Dowells bellowed. "What the hell are you doing?"

"We can't let her live." Mitch didn't take his attention off her. "But she doesn't have to die yet. Not until I'm done with her."

After assuring herself that Rio had only gotten to his feet but was waiting for a signal from her, she concentrated on controlling her heart rate. This wasn't a game. They were going to kill her.

"You're right," Dowells said at length. "Get some rope."

"Get it yourself." Mitch extended a boot toward her, prompting her to slide back a few inches.

"Now!" Dowells ordered. "Don't forget who's paying you."

Cursing, Mitch turned from her. As the larger man stalked toward the cabin, she turned her attention to Dowells who positioned himself a few feet away. The pistol aimed at her didn't waver. She imagined him using the same self-assurance to take charge of board meetings. He might not be accustomed to having those he considered his inferiors, like Mitch, stand up to him, but he knew how to put them in their place. Wasn't he using his commanding presence to do just that to her?

"You should have made up with your boyfriend," he told her almost conversationally. "If you had, you wouldn't be in this fix."

"I didn't mean anything. Please, don't let him—"

"Shut up."

She did. Whether the real Carlin or the dim bulb she was trying to present herself as had obeyed she couldn't be sure. *Lonato, I don't know what I'm supposed to do. How to help you.*

"You aren't the one in control here, young lady," Dowells informed her. "You've stumbled into something you shouldn't have. Unfortunately, it's too late to do anything about it. I'd explain, but in a little while it won't matter to you." He indicated the cabin. "In the meantime, the goon in there needs to be pacified. He'll be more manageable that way. And I intend to get as good from you as he does."

"Anything. I'll do anything. Just don't hurt me." Because she hadn't been given permission to stand, she remained where she was. No need to push him.

"Oh, we'll *do* all right. As for hurting you—" He smiled, giving her a leisurely look at his perfect teeth.

Just then Mitch slammed open the door and stomped back with a goodly amount of rope coiled in the crook of his elbow. He'd exchanged the rifle for a handgun. Ignoring his *employer*, he closed in on her before shoving his boot against her chest and knocking her onto her back.

"Every man's fantasy," he proclaimed as he held her in place. "At least mine. This is going to be good. Damn good."

"Tie her," Dowells ordered. "And gag her."

*No! This isn't happening. No!*

"I know what I'm doing," Mitch barked. "Where I come from a man knows how to keep a bitch in her place."

"We aren't there," Dowells shot back. "And I'm calling the shots, not you. Hands behind her."

Leering in a way she'd never forget, Mitch tucked his gun in his waistband. At the same time, Dowells positioned himself so he stood over her. His weapon covered her. When Mitch lowered himself onto his knees beside her, she forced herself not to try to get away. At the same time, she glanced at Rio, briefly lifting her hand with her palm

down, ordering the Doberman to remain where he was. Teeth bared, he reluctantly complied.

By the time she looked at Mitch again, the man, who reminded her of a seedy bit-player in a mobster movie, was reaching for her shirt. It took every bit of willpower she possessed not to scratch, bite, and kick as he ripped the buttons free. If she struggled, Rio and Lonato might try to come to her rescue, and it wouldn't take an instant for Dowells to fire.

Although hatred for Mitch nearly consumed her, she remained passive as he pulled her arms out of her blouse and flipped it aside. She'd never felt ropes on her, never imagined having her wrists bound could be so terrifying. *Don't lose it. Don't!*

Once he'd secured her, Mitch yanked her into a kneeling position and forced rope between her teeth. He tied off the ends in such a way that she couldn't close her mouth. She made no attempt to see whether she could still make a sound. Unshed tears burned her eyes when he reached behind her and unsnapped her bra. Looking pleased with himself, he yanked at the straps, freeing her breasts. Feeling less than human, she had no choice but to remain on her knees in the dirt, all but naked from the waist up.

*Raped. I'm going to be raped.*

*And Lonato will see.*

Fresh fear took her thoughts away from her situation. If she knew Lonato the way she thought she did, he'd lay down his life before allowing her to be violated. But did she truly know him? The distinction between his mind and body might be greater than she could comprehend, and his determination to fulfill his task might make it possible for him to remain hidden until he was sure of success.

Mitch grabbed her hair and hauled her to her feet. Then he used his hold to pull her head back so she stared at the sky. "Soon as I get her inside—" Mitch started.

"No. Are you crazy?"

"Don't you call me that, damn it!"

"Then don't be an idiot," Dowells countered. "You take her in there and she's going to leave hair and who knows what else for the cops to find."

"What we going to do with her once we're done with her?" Mitch asked. "Drown her?"

"No. They might drag the lake. I know I said no one would ever think to look for us here, but when she turns up missing, there's going to be a search. Besides, certain people know about this place. I can't leave anything. And I can't risk burning it down and alerting the Forest Service." Dowells stepped close to her and ran his knuckles almost gently along her cheek. "Once she's dead, we'll take her body deep into the forest. Animals will take care of the rest."

*Any time, Lonato. Please, ride in on your white stallion.*

"Just like they're taking care of Bugger," Mitch said and released his grip on her hair. "What a piece of ass! When I get lucky, I get lucky. Time to see the goodies."

The only way she could deal with her disgust and the fear she couldn't quite master was by biting down on the gag. She was still risking a broken tooth when she belatedly realized Mitch had taken hold of her jeans' waistband. As she shivered, he undid the snap and started to tug down on the zipper. She jerked free and back-peddled.

"Damn it, bitch!" Mitch yelled. He grabbed her elbow and tugged.

She was fighting him when she became aware of Dowells. He'd aimed his pistol at Rio who had once again stood up and was slinking closer. "Get the message, bitch?" Dowells asked calmly. "Fight us and the dog dies first. Play nice, and I might spare him."

Defeated, she stopped struggling. Her head sagged. Whatever it took to spare Rio's life, she'd do it. And she'd endure the rapes she saw as her fate without complaint so Rio wouldn't attack.

Mitch took his time. He began by running his gritty fingers all over her breasts, leaving them feeling not aroused but dirty. Maybe disappointed because he hadn't gotten more reaction out of her, he turned his attention back to her jeans. As he finished

with the zipper, he stuck his tongue out at her. He continued to taunt her with it while he pulled her jeans down as far as her boots allowed. She thought he'd remove her shoes, but he obviously knew what he was doing by leaving the jeans tangled around her ankles. Leg irons couldn't have done a better job of keeping her in place.

"Look at those damn panties." He seemed to be talking to himself. "Belong on an eighty-year-old woman. Well, time to get rid of them." With that, he roughly forced her panties down over her hips so they joined her jeans. He rubbed the heel of his hand against her newly exposed flesh. It took all her willpower not to gag.

Although she knew what he had in mind, bile rose into her throat when he forced his hand between her tethered legs and dipped a finger into her. "Nothing. What's the matter? Need more encouragement?" He grinned his animal-like grin at her, causing her to vigorously shake her head.

"What the hell do you know? Probably never been manhandled before. That's all right. You aren't the first bitch I've worked. Bet you didn't think you'd wind up in the hands of a master today." He laughed.

She would have head-butted him if he hadn't pulled out of her. She swore she would have! But before gratitude over having his finger out of her could take hold, she watched in growing horror as he licked his fingers and came at her again.

"What are you doing?" Dowells demanded. Despite his harsh tone, Carlin spotted something hot in his eyes. He was turned on.

"Priming her. You think you know so damn much. Sit back and take notes while I show you how to handle a bitch."

With that, he again pushed his hand between her legs and forced her to spread herself as wide as the jeans allowed. Doing so put her balance in jeopardy. She felt his fingertips against her cunt, felt them searching for entrance, sobbed.

Laughing, Mitch continued his assault, directing his rough fingers off-center so they pressed against bone, not slipping into her. Pain tore through her. She cried out again.



## Chapter Six

"Get away from her!"

Mitch jerked upright. Moving with a speed that didn't seem possible, the man snaked an arm around her waist and half pulled, half lifted her in front of him. At the same time, he yanked his pistol out of his waistband. Only then did her captor stare at Lonato.

Lonato stood in the shadows of the trees, but she could still see his two-handed grip on his weapon. He took a step and then another, the gun aimed at Mitch. But if he fired, he'd hit her.

"Looks like a standoff," Dowells said almost conversationally. Drawing from Lonato's example, he gripped his pistol with both hands. "She's the only one without a weapon."

"Let her go," Lonato ordered.

"Not going to happen," Mitch retorted. He shifted his grip so he now held her by her throat. "This your bitch? Must be. Macho man coming to save his property, only you're outnumbered."

Sick because Mitch was right, she struggled to breathe and concentrate. Damn those jeans and her bound arms!

Once she'd managed to pull a little air into her lungs, she forced her mind onto the situation. As long as Mitch used her as a shield, Lonato couldn't do anything. Her cry must have forced him out of hiding, but it was a mistake, a deadly mistake!

*I'm sorry. Sorry.*

"Drop your weapon," Dowells ordered Lonato. "Down slow and easy."

Instead of complying, Lonato turned the pistol on Dowells. The two men now had their weapons leveled at each other almost as if they were preparing for a duel. "I know a lot about you," Lonato said in a mild tone with deadly undercurrents. "Enough to know you've never fired a gun in your life. Thought about it but could never work it into your schedule. You might hit me, but the odds are you won't. As for your goon, he's at a disadvantage because he only has one hand he can use. Despite what you see on TV, one-handed accuracy is all but impossible to achieve."

"Shoot him!" Dowells ordered Mitch. "Damn it, blow him away!"

"Think about it." Lonato sounded for all the world like a patient father explaining a simple fact of life to a young child. "He *might* get me in his first shot, but if he doesn't, I won't miss." He lifted his pistol a couple of inches so it pointed at Dowells' throat. "And even if he hits me, I'll still have time to fire. I don't miss. I know my reaction speed. You can take that to the bank."

*I'm responsible. I put you in this position. Lonato, please forgive me.*

"Who the hell are you?" Dowells demanded.

"Your worst enemy."

Something in Dowells' expression told her he agreed. "What about the bitch?" he asked.

Lonato shrugged. "A man gets lonely at night. I hit on her, and she couldn't resist my charms."

"She doesn't matter to you?"

"Two days ago I didn't know she existed. It's her damn fault she tried to hang around after I told her I'd gotten what I wanted from her."

*You can't mean that! You can't.*

Even as she struggled with the denial, memories flashed. He'd told her about how his parents had died and had encouraged her to be open about her mother's end. What

he'd just said had been to throw the men off. It had to be. And yet there was no denying he'd repeatedly ordered her not to get involved with his mission.

"Here's the deal," Lonato was saying. "What's your name?" He indicated her captor.

"Mitch. Mitch McDougal."

"Glad to meet you, Mitch McDougal. I want you to think of me as a hunter, a hired gun. My employers are particular associates of Robert Jacob Dowells." He grinned at Dowells before returning his attention to Mitch. "They're willing to pay me a great deal of money to ensure that Dowells is returned to them safe and sound. You and I can look at this one of two ways. Either I take you out because you represent a threat to someone they consider a valuable commodity, or we join forces to ensure that Dowells sees the error of his ways. I was assured that money is no object. Name your *finder's* fee and I'll make sure you get it."

"He's lying!" Dowells sputtered. "Don't believe him!"

"Shut up!" Mitch retorted. "Why else would he be here?"

The explosion of sound jerked Carlin upright. It took an instant for her to realize Dowells had fired. Her brain registered that he'd missed Lonato. At the same time, she sensed Mitch's sudden tension. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the man's free hand stretch out, the fingers around the gun turning white at the knuckle.

"No!" she screamed into her rope gag and threw her weight against her captor. The two of them started to fall. Another shot shattered her world. *Dowells! Firing wildly. Lonato shooting back.*

She landed mostly on top of Mitch who immediately shoved her off him. Because he wasn't hampered by ropes and clothing, he reached a kneeling position before she did. Dowells was still standing but slumping more and more. Blood coated his chest. He stared at what had been done to him, tried to straighten but couldn't. Almost gracefully he sank to his knees and then pitched forward.

"No!" Mitch bellowed.

Icy fingers touched her heart because Lonato hadn't spoken. Struggling to keep her balance, she forced herself to look over at him. Like Dowells, her lover lay unmoving on the ground.

"No!" she sobbed against her gag. "No!"

"Shit," Mitch muttered. "Shit, shit, shit." He stared at her for a moment, then turned his full attention to the scene before them. She did the same.

Dowells' body twitched. His legs seemed to be dancing against the ground of their own accord, but with each passing second, their movements quieted. His upper body already appeared stripped of life, and his pistol lay just beyond his outstretched fingers. *Dying. Maybe already dead.*

Unable to put any more thought to the man responsible for her meeting Lonato, she focused on the man she considered the embodiment of everything male. Lonato had fallen in such a way that his back was toward her. She thought he hadn't lost his grip on his weapon, but what did it matter? She couldn't see any blood but neither did he move.

"Oh shit," Mitch repeated and stood. Tightly gripping his gun, he started toward Lonato. She lived in terror of him firing. "Goddamn shit."

*He has to be alive! Please, he has to be alive.*

Mitch stood over Lonato for what seemed hours while she struggled to read her captor's body language. If his actions gave off the message that Lonato was dead, she'd die herself. She tried to tell herself he was waiting for Mitch to relax his guard before taking him by surprise, but he wouldn't have fallen if he hadn't been hit. He wouldn't.

Mitch muttered something she didn't understand, then planted his boot against Lonato's back and pushed, forcing Lonato facedown on the ground. Next he walked around him and kicked the gun out of Lonato's hand. Only then did he relax a little. "Damn you. Goddamn you." Mitch's stance left no doubt that he was berating Lonato. "You killed him, you bastard. Killed my meal ticket."

After cursing Lonato some more while he kicked him repeatedly in the side, Mitch left him and slowly walked over to Dowells. Despite his obvious reluctance, he crouched down and placed his hand against the side of Dowells' neck and held it there for several seconds. Looking agitated, he switched to checking to see if Dowells was breathing.

"Goddamn it. Damn, damn, damn."

She didn't care that Dowells was dead. Only one person mattered.

Mitch returned to her and picked up some unused rope. Hope flared in her as Mitch used a couple of strands to tie Lonato's hands and ankles. Because he'd had to move him in order to secure his hands behind him, she finally got a look at her lover's face. Except for the slash of blood along his right temple, he looked unnaturally pale. Despite Mitch's manhandling of him, his eyes remained closed, his body limp.

"There," Mitch said when he was done. He seemed to be talking to himself. "Gotta think. Shit, gotta think."

Returning, he planted himself in front of her so she had to look up at him. "Hell of a mess. Never thought something like this would happen." Then to her surprise, he laughed. "If your boyfriend wakes up, I'll have to tell him he did what I've been wanting to ever since that bastard hired me. Damn fucker thought he could treat us like shit because he waved money under our noses. Bossing us around, calling us stupid, thinking he knew so goddamn much. And when Bugger told him he'd taken all he was going to and threatened to blow the whistle on his scam, Dowells bashed Bugger's head in. Kept pounding long after he stopped breathing."

Mitch frowned, making her wonder if he hadn't expected to say so much. After a moment he opened his mouth but instead of continuing, he reared back. His gaze slid from her eyes to her exposed body.

"You don't know what it's like," he told her. "Wanting to get my shit together but it not happening. Doing whatever I gotta to feed my habit." After glancing back at Lonato, he continued. Despite his disjointed explanation, by the time he was done, she

understood he'd been battling a drug habit since the age of sixteen. He'd dropped out of school and tried to work construction but had lost a number of jobs. His need for drugs had increased, and he'd started stealing. He took pride in having only been arrested twice. Both charges had been dropped. Then he'd made the mistake of breaking into one of Dowells' apartment complexes while high. Instead of calling the cops, the security guards had called his boss. Dowells himself had come to where he was being held.

"He gave me a choice," Mitch finished. "Work for him or learn up close and personal what happens when someone tries to cross him. That's what got me into this shit."

The whole time he'd been unburdening himself, Mitch had continued to stare at her breasts and belly and what he could see of her crotch. Her knees ached from what she was kneeling on, but she believed that learning all she could about her captor might be what kept her alive. Despite the horror clawing at her throat, she knew not to let fear for Lonato strip her of the ability to think.

Behind Mitch she spotted Rio. Although the shooting had taken place several minutes ago, the dog's scruff was still on edge, and his attention remained fixed on Mitch. For the first time since she'd begun working with Rio, she regretted training him to respond to her instead of heeding his instinct. If he had, maybe he would have attacked Mitch—and risked getting killed.

"I'm not going to get no money," Mitch told her. "Thanks to your boyfriend, my meal ticket's dead. Dowells was feeding my habit, did I tell you that? Keeping me mellow and happy. Then when he cooked up this damn scheme of his and we took off for here, he turned on me. No crack, no nothin' until the job was done. He wanted me and Bugger's heads clear and for us to be beholden to him. Withdrawal's a bitch." He pressed his hand against his belly. "But a clean system gets other things working again." He demonstrated by fondling his cock.

"Payback time, bitch," he said and pushed her onto her back.

Rio growled.

\* \* \* \* \*

What felt like a branch dug into Carlin's shoulder blade. Pain from having her arms behind her with her weight on them brought tears to her eyes, but even if she'd been able to speak, she wouldn't have begged.

Even as Mitch unzipped himself, she felt herself closing down, taking her mind and body someplace he couldn't reach. He'd rape her, but in order to do so, he'd have to free her legs. When the opportunity presented itself, she'd kick him where it would do the most good. Her attack might pave the way to freedom, or it might get her killed. Either way she'd know she'd been more than a helpless victim.

*Be proud of me, Lonato.*

With his pants around his buttocks, Mitch knelt before her so he could remove her boots and then her jeans and panties.

"Gotta get to the goodies," he explained. "But I ain't taking no chances on getting myself kicked." He looked around. "Damn. Gotta have more rope." After moving to her side, he clamped both hands over her belly and started stroking. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rio's muscles tense. The dog's gaze never left Mitch. "So damn many decisions. Inside. Yeah, inside on the bed. That way I can spread-eagle you and take my time. Burn down the cabin when I'm done."

*With me in it, she understood.*

Determined not to let that happen, she concentrated on disarming him using the only weapon she had, her mind. She lifted her pelvis toward him as if his kneading had turned her on and moaned. Rio's ears swung forward even more.

"Hot damn. Hot damn." He demonstrated his delight by sliding both hands between her legs and forcing them apart. Despite her revulsion, she didn't protest. Calling on her admittedly limited acting skills, she panted and gave him what would have to pass for a look of appreciation and anticipation.

“Holy shit.” On that note, he tugged his pants down a few more inches. “Here’s daddy. Got what you been waiting for.”

He’d lifted her leg closest to him in preparation for getting in position when she heard a sharp, commanding voice.

“Rio, guard!”

Mitch had barely begun to react when a snarling Rio slammed into him, knocking him away from her and onto his back. Scrambling onto her knees, she watched. Rio, her mild-mannered dog and companion, had turned into a fierce creature she barely recognized. In the past he’d taken aggressive stances in response to her commands, but he’d never attacked before, never buried his fangs in flesh. His eyes seemed to burn.

Screaming, Mitch threw up his arms in an attempt to protect his face. As a result, his hands and forearms took most of the punishment. At the same time he was trying to scoot out from under a still-growling Rio who straddled him much as Mitch had been about to straddle her. Each time Mitch jerked away, Rio followed, paws on his chest or belly or the ground next to him, fangs delivering unrelenting punishment. Blood flowed from numerous punctures. Despite the punishment, Mitch managed to protect his throat.

“Stop him! Stop him!”

Convinced that Mitch no longer represented a threat to anyone and alarmed by Rio’s wild aggression, she tried to order him to stop, but her sounds were muffled and incomprehensible. As the attack continued, she finally gathered her senses enough to look at where the command had come from.

Despite his bonds, Lonato was sitting up. Blood trickled down the side of his head, and he seemed to be having trouble remaining upright. Despite that, his harsh glare left no doubt of what he was thinking.

He’d become as much of an animal as Rio.

“No, no,” she managed. Unable to articulate more, she wildly shook her head from side to side. Lonato turned his attention from the attack to her. Still, she wasn’t sure he



recognized her, didn't believe enough of the civilized man clung to him to care that a man was being ripped apart.

*No! Make it stop!* she said with her eyes.

"Rio." Lonato bit out the word. "Down."

Although it seemed to her that it took a long time for the command to reach Rio's brain, at length the Doberman lowered himself to the ground. He'd positioned himself so the now blubbering Mitch remained within easy reach. Eyes telegraphing his terror, Mitch cradled his wounded arms against his chest. Otherwise he didn't move.

"I'm sorry," Lonato said. "Damn it, so sorry."

Because she believed Rio wouldn't attack again unless Mitch did something stupid, she shifted her full attention to Lonato. He stared back at her, lips pressed together, head tilted slightly to one side as if trying to distance himself from his wound. His nostrils were flared. His muscles strained against his restraints. And his eyes continued to be those of a wild creature.

Despite her fear of him, her concern was even stronger. Knowing what she needed to do, she stood on shaky legs and walked over to Lonato. As she came closer, he studied her unblinkingly. In her mind they'd become animals drawn together for nothing more than survival.

When she dropped to her knees beside him and slid around so her hands were near him, he rolled over onto his belly. It took awhile and a near prone position on her part but finally her searching fingers found his bound wrists. After fumbling some more, she located the knots and started tugging at them. She broke a nail but no more than two minutes after she'd started, she'd freed him.

"Good, good," he said. His voice sounded slurred, and he was slow to sit up and pull the rope out of her mouth.

She didn't speak while he freed her hands and did the same to his ankles. They now sat inches apart, she naked, him maybe not fully conscious.

"I thought you were dead," she finally told him. Tears were so close.

Not responding, he struggled to a standing position. He started to reach down to help her up, but when she saw him sway, she stood on her own. She wanted to put her arm around him and help support him, but the thought of being touched by any man repulsed her. Unable to mentally separate him from her near rapist, she backed away.

He nodded and kept his gaze on her face as if refusing to acknowledge that she had a body.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Alive." He closed his eyes for several seconds. When he opened them, she no longer saw pain in their depths. Some of the savage he'd been remained, making it impossible to determine whether he was clearheaded. He stared at her, maybe seeing things she couldn't comprehend. "I need to make sure he doesn't get away," he finally said.

Because she wanted to make sure Lonato didn't pass out, she waited until he'd gathered the weapons and tied Mitch's legs before looking for her clothes. She could barely force herself to touch what Mitch had taken off her, but knowing Rio had made it impossible for the blubbering man to use his hands helped. She was a civilized woman. Treating Mitch's wounds should matter to her. But at this moment she didn't care.

She just wanted to be left alone, untouched until she'd learned whether she'd ever feel clean again.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lonato waited until Carlin had finished dressing before pulling out his cell phone. As he'd hoped, the relatively flat area around the lake made reception possible. He wanted her to hear everything he had to say so stood within earshot but hopefully not so close that she felt threatened by his presence, his male presence.

He made his call to the man who'd signed his name to the retainer he'd received after agreeing to take on this assignment, but the chairman put him on speakerphone so

he could explain everything to the entire board. News of Dowells' death shocked them, but once they'd expressed their horror, they started interrupting each other in their haste to try to decide how to tell investors and the public. After letting them debate what to put into a press release, he interrupted.

"I need two float planes up here before dark," he insisted. "One to carry Dowells' body and the other man. The second will be for me and a woman and her tracking dog. I'm not having her travel in the same plane as those two. Call me when they're ready to take off, and I'll start a fire so the pilots can locate this place."

As he'd anticipated, the members demanded to know what woman he was talking about. He'd explain everything in his report, he replied. And yes, he trusted her not to let anything leak to the press.

"Can you do this?" he asked her after hanging up. "It'll be a couple of hours before the planes get here."

Her nod lacked the conviction he'd hoped to see, but what did he expect? She'd nearly been raped, seen a man killed and another attacked by her dog. As for her reaction to his wounding...

When she said nothing, he told her he wanted to collect their packs so everything would be ready to go. And he wanted her to accompany him. "If you don't feel up to it yet we can wait," he said.

"No. Let's do it now, if you're strong enough."

In truth his head throbbed, and he felt nauseated. His vision, although improving, was still blurred. Because this wasn't the first time he'd been wounded, he knew the glancing blow his skull had received wasn't serious. Thank god. If he'd been killed—thoughts of her fate made him shudder.

He'd been trying to decide how to make sure Mitch wouldn't try to get away when Carlin pointed out that she could command Rio to guard him. When she directed the Doberman to stand over the wounded man, Mitch whimpered and tried to crawl away.

"I wouldn't do that," she told him. "Movement excites him."

"Is that true?" Lonato asked once they'd begun backtracking. "Along with his other talents, Rio's a guard dog?"

"No, but Mitch doesn't know that." Because there weren't any trees where they were walking, they were side by side which meant he could see her brief smile. The gesture gave him hope that she was coming out of shock. But how long would her journey take, and was his presence making it worse?

*I'm sorry. I'd have given anything to prevent you having to go through what you did.*

The words filled him, but he held back from giving them life. Maybe not talking about what had happened was what she needed. Maybe the best thing he could do was wait until she felt ready to talk, if she ever did.

"I don't understand," she said after a short silence. "If a float plane can land in the lake, why didn't Dowells do that instead of hiking the way he did?"

"My guess, he didn't want to take a chance on anyone seeing a plane. He didn't dare have his pilot drop him off and risk the pilot blabbing."

"Oh." She stared at him. "And you had to come on foot so you could surprise him? You had no choice but to hire me and Rio?"

"I didn't believe I did," he told her. "I didn't know where the cabin was because he'd never brought any board members here. They knew he had a hideaway somewhere in these mountains, but there was no way I could know for sure that that's where he'd decided to hide out. I took a chance. It worked out."

When she nodded, he fought the urge to embrace her and tell her how sorry he was. Much as he wanted to, her body language continued to give out the message that she didn't want to be touched. Maybe she'd never want that from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Mitch was where they'd left him when they returned from gathering their belongings. Because getting the man to tell the board members everything he knew was

essential, Lonato made tending to his wounds the next order of business. After freeing his legs, he helped him to his feet and started herding him toward the cabin.

"Do you want to join us?" he asked Carlin who was on her knees embracing Rio. "This is going to take awhile."

"I'm not sure. The idea of being inside..."

Because he couldn't begin to reach her demons, he left her with her dog, but even as he took in the compact but expensive-looking place, his mind remained outside with her.

Mitch shook but obeyed when he ordered him to sit at the kitchen table and hold out his arms. After drawing water from the well-fed faucet, he selected some antiseptic from his backpack and began cleaning the wounds. Mitch whimpered.

"Shut up," he warned. "You got what you deserved."

"What's going to happen to me? Am I going to jail?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a damn. It's up to the men who hired me to make that decision."

"I knew I should have never agreed to Dowells' fucking plan. The man was crazy, thinking he could get away with—"

"It doesn't matter, does it? He's dead. And because of what you tried to do to the lady out there, I should do the same to you."

That shut Mitch up. For the rest of the time his bites were being treated, he slumped defeated in his chair. Finally he stared at his bandaged arms and started crying. "Shut up," Lonato ordered. "Feeling sorry for yourself's the last thing I want to hear from you."

"I'm sorry, man, sorry I did anything to your broad. Least I didn't hurt her."

Lonato clamped a hand over Mitch's jaw and forced him to look at him. "She isn't *mine*, got that? And she's a lady, not a broad."

"You're right," Carlin said from where she stood in the doorway. "I don't belong to any man."

## Chapter Seven

Long shadows had reached the clearing by the time the small float plane settled onto the lake's surface. Carlin had walked out onto the dock with Lonato but didn't say anything when the pilot introduced himself as the man who'd always brought Dowells here.

"I could tell you things about who and when comes to this place," the twenty-something man said. "Talk about a good old boys' club! I don't know what the hookers earned, but they looked expensive if you know what I mean."

"Tell that to the board," Lonato said shortly. "I asked for two planes."

"Not going to happen, sorry. I'm the only one who can get in here without getting snagged on the trees. Gonna have to make two trips."

"But you can't fly at night, can you?" Carlin made herself ask. The chill she felt had nothing to do with the rapidly cooling air.

"You got that right. But I'll be back as soon as I can in the morning. There's plenty of booze and food in there."

*For just Lonato and me.*

Lonato glanced at her before leading the way to Mitch and Dowells' body. If the pilot was horrified by the thought of having to transport a dead man, he gave no inclination. Instead, his manner was that of someone who'd come to expect anything in his job. His main concern was making sure Mitch wouldn't cause him any trouble.

She deliberately didn't look as Lonato and the pilot deposited Dowells' body in the plane's storage area but watched them secure Mitch in one of the seats. Not until they were done did it register that there was room for four passengers. She and Lonato could have left tonight.

*No, I can't! Can't be closed in with the memories of what happened and nearly happened.*

"Are you hungry?" Lonato asked after the plane had taken off and they and Rio had gone back inside the cabin. "Maybe you'd like a drink first."

"A drink, yes."

As she fed Rio from the rations in her backpack, Lonato poured them each a healthy shot of whiskey. Then while she curled up on the couch, he stoked the woodstove. He sat in the leather chair opposite her. Sipping, she concentrated on the distance between them. Rio settled in front of the stove.

"I don't think you'll have to testify," Lonato said. "My guess is the board is going to explain Dowells' death in a way that will keep everything quiet."

"The police won't get involved?"

"I'd be surprised if they are."

"Good." She savored the burning liquor on her throat. "Good. What about the first dead man and Mitch?"

"Without Rio's help, that body will probably never be found," he told her. He'd turned on a generator-charged lamp, the soft light not reaching the room's recesses or enough of his features for her to read his mood. She hoped the same was true of her. "And I'm willing to bet that Mitch just wants to disappear, unless you decide to charge him."

"With attempted rape." She had to force the words. "No. I'm not going through that."

"Are you sure?"

"He got what he deserved," she said, thinking of the numerous punctures Rio had inflicted. "Do you think there was nerve or muscle damage?"

"Do you care?"

"Not now, maybe later," she admitted. "Right now I just want to forget."

"It isn't going to be possible."



*Don't play shrink with me! You have no idea what's going on inside me.*

"Carlin?"

He expected a response. Damn it, he wasn't getting one! "Don't go there," she warned.

"Sometime you're going to have to talk about what happened."

"Nothing did!" she shot back. If this was booze talking, she was grateful. "I didn't get raped."

"Just about."

He knew because he'd seen everything, watched her humiliation. No wonder he'd left the room in near darkness. Having to look at her would only remind him of what she'd been reduced to, reinforce in his mind why he didn't want to touch a woman who'd been mauled by another man.

Angry and upset, she downed the last of her drink and got up to pour herself some more. He waited until she'd replenished her glass and then did the same.

"You must be feeling all right," she said. "Otherwise I'd think the booze would upset your system."

"I'll live."

*Of course you will. You're macho man.*

"What happens now?" she asked. "What are you going to do when we get back?"

"Make my report to the board and then Recovery."

*Recovery. The group or whatever it was he worked for.* "And after that?" she pressed. "On to another assignment? Maybe you'll take a vacation."

"I haven't decided."

Unable to absorb the emotion in his voice, she listened to burning wood snap and Rio snore.

"What about you?" he asked. "What are you going to do?"

"Cash the check you'll be giving me for Rio's services and use it to buy new tires for the vehicle I haul my dogs with."

"That's not what I'm talking about!"

"I know it isn't!" she snapped. With her outburst, the numbness that had settled around her fell away. She felt so damn vulnerable, naked, helpless. Trapped in memories, she stood and paced the confining space. She would have fled for the outdoors if she hadn't removed her boots. Barely aware of what she was doing, she started opening kitchen cupboards. "What do you want to eat? It looks as if there's canned everything."

"Anything. I don't care."

Irritated because he wasn't being any help, she finally settled on canned clam chowder and green beans. She supposed she should be impressed by how complete and modern the cabin was given its isolation, but the only thing that mattered was that Robert Jacob Dowells' money had been responsible.

Someday she'd have to learn more about the man and his business or businesses, but right now she felt overwhelmed by the question of how she was going to make it until morning. From what she could tell, there were two bedrooms downstairs and a loft. She didn't care where she slept as long as it was alone.

*Alone?*

Just this morning her body would have sprung to life just thinking about spending the night with Lonato, having sex in a real bed, hours and hours of fucking. But although she deliberately focused on that part of her anatomy, she felt dead there. No, not so much dead but as if what made her a woman had gone into hiding. Given the way she'd been manipulated and humiliated, she shouldn't be surprised. Maybe she would need counseling in order to come to terms with what she considered her dehumanization, but if she sought help, she'd be expected to reveal details she couldn't possibly voice.

Reduced her to a sexual object. That's what they'd done by stripping off her clothes, tying her, forcing her body to respond to their cruel probing.

And Lonato had seen.

Sick, she turned toward him. She expected him to be staring at her, his eyes saying he knew what she was thinking about, maybe reliving what had turned Dowells and Mitch on. Instead, he'd placed his drink on the small table beside him. His head had fallen back so it rested on his chair. His eyes were closed, his body limp and vulnerable. At least he was breathing, thank god.

"Lonato?" she managed. "What's the matter?"

Slow, too slow, he straightened a little. "Aftereffects. Guess it's caught up with me."

*I know what you mean. "Can I do something?"*

"No. That's all right." He again let the chair back support his head, and his eyes closed to slits. About to chalk his response up to stupid macho pride, another thought struck her. This man had been alone for so long. His parents' murder-suicide had robbed him of a normal childhood. Maybe that had been stripped away even before he'd lost them.

Given his innate sexuality, she had no doubt that many women had shared their beds with him, and maybe he'd even opened his bedroom door to some of them. But once hungers had been satisfied, he closed those doors and slept alone. Because she'd lost her mother at a tender age, she understood some of his emotions and experiences, but she'd had a support network that had been denied him.

*Alone. Alone because tonight I too am wounded and neither of us knows how to get past that.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Once the aspirin she'd given him had taken effect, Lonato had joined her in a light dinner. He'd made a phone call to someone he referred to as Chief and given him a thumbnail sketch of what had happened. Then, in response to a question she didn't

hear, he said he didn't know when he'd be in. She assumed he was speaking to a fellow member of Recovery, maybe his superior if he had one.

Feeling trapped by her own body, she'd tried to distract herself by going through the reading material and CD collection, but the magazines were all porn. She didn't want to hear what music porn-reading men listened to.

"What's going to happen to this place?" she asked.

"I don't know."

*I don't care*, she translated. *I've closed that chapter in my life.*

Finally she found a men's adventure magazine and struggled to concentrate on what she suspected was a fictional article about the author's confrontation with a grizzly. Sitting had the desired effect. She could barely keep her eyes open.

"Where are you going to sleep?" she asked.

He looked at her, but she couldn't read his thoughts. "I don't care. You're going to be able to sleep? Do you think you might have nightmares?"

"If they come, I'll deal with them. All right. I'll put my sleeping bag on the bed in there." She pointed. It went without saying that she was repulsed by the thought of crawling between those sheets.

His gaze followed her while she untied her sleeping bag from her backpack. "What?" she demanded.

"You aren't all right. You're so uptight I can feel it."

"Do you blame me? The things that were done to me today—tell me something. What took you so damn long to show yourself? What was it? You got off seeing me being handled like a piece of meat?"

He stood, showing no sign of weakness, and quickly closed the distance between them. "No. Damn it, no!"

"That's what it looks like to me."

He reached for her, but she sidestepped and held up her hands, warding him off. "I was hoping they'd stand side by side so I could get a drop on both of them," he said. "And I wanted them so focused on you that they'd let down their guard."

She couldn't decide whether that made sense, couldn't force herself to replay the sequence of events right before he'd barked his order. "But they weren't together."

"You screamed. I wasn't thinking. I..."

Unable to breathe, she waited for him to finish. Instead, he turned and headed for his own pack. "I can't think tonight," he said with his back to her. "And I don't believe you're in a position to listen even if what I said made sense. Maybe in the morning—"

"In the morning we're going home."

"Yeah."

\* \* \* \* \*

*Filthy hands reaching for her. Trying to scream but unable to make a sound. Scared. So scared. And so angry the emotion almost consumed her.*

*She tried to fight the unrelenting presence, but something had hold of her arms. Caught in a world of heavy, dark shadows and the taste of fear in her mouth.*

*Naked. Exposed.*

Gasping for breath, Carlin fought her way free of the nightmare. As consciousness returned, she struggled to remember where she was. No light reached her, but at least her sleeping bag felt and smelled familiar.

"Carlin. Carlin, it's me."

Acting more out of instinct than conscious effort, she turned toward the voice.

"I'm here," Lonato went on. He sounded closer than he had a moment ago. "I heard you cry out. A nightmare?"

"Yes," she admitted because she felt too raw for anything else.

She sensed more forward movement on his part so was ready when he sat on the side of her bed. Darkness felt right. Unable to see him, she could concentrate on her emotions—and his impact on them.

"I've seen people in the aftermath of a trauma before," he went on. He found her and brushed hair off her face. His fingers lingered at the side of her neck. "Nightmares can be a healthy way of dealing with what someone can't talk about. They can serve as a release valve. Don't be afraid of them."

"You weren't the one having it."

When he chuckled, the sound seeped inside her. "Good point. Earlier you said you didn't want to talk about what happened. I respected your wishes, but I'm not sure that was the right thing to do."

He'd become a disembodied voice, an unseen presence that all but took up her world. Needing to put substance to sensation, she began by covering his hand with her own. When she ran her fingers up his arm, she discovered that he was naked at least from the waist up. "It's cold. You should have something on." *Like he needs mothering.*

"It's all right. Do you want me turn on a light?"

"No."

"Do you want to talk?"

"I'm not sure."

Again he laughed. "We're making progress. Carlin, I've been lying there in my bag mentally talking to you for the past hour. I'd like you to know what I've been thinking. And I'd like to hold you while I'm doing it, but I'm not sure you're ready for that."

"Even though I took a shower, I still feel dirty."

"No. Never."

"You saw —"

"I saw someone I care deeply about being manhandled by a couple of monsters." He gripped her hand in both of his. "You did everything right. You didn't panic and you didn't try to fight what would have been useless to fight."

She heard *care deeply*. The rest registered only slightly. The long T-shirt she wore at night had become tangled around her waist and made her feel trapped, but she didn't want to extricate her hand from his.

"I couldn't make sense of what was happening," she admitted. "I've never felt so helpless. When my mother died, I was overwhelmed, but I was still living in my safe and secure world. This time...this time I'd been wrenched away from everything that made sense. Dropped into..."

"A nightmare?"

"Yes." The word was so complex and multilayered and more than she could or wanted to put her mind to tonight.

"It felt the same way to me."

"You? But you've been in situations like this before."

"No, I haven't."

She started to sit up, and he helped her finish. Although she could have balanced herself without help, when he offered his chest for her to rest against, she didn't resist. In part she wanted their warmth to blend. As for the rest of the reason she needed to feel his beating heart—

"You didn't let them know I was there," he said. "I kept thinking you'd give that away, cry out for me. I wouldn't have blamed you. Instead, you took them on all by yourself. Why?"

"I-I'm not sure."

"I think you do."

Because he needed the truth from her and because she needed it herself, she forced herself to relive the unthinkable. "I knew that if I said anything, it would rob you of the

element of surprise. You were my only way out of what was happening. I had to trust, had to give you the opportunity to act."

"You trusted me?" He kissed the top of her head.

"Believing in you kept me sane."

He placed his mouth near her temple. "And fear for you made me insane."

Layers upon layers of complexity lay behind his simple words, but she couldn't put her mind to sorting through them. "You? Insane?"

"It's never happened to me before. I pride myself on my ability to think in a crisis. It's what has kept me alive. But when Mitch tried to —"

"Don't say it."

"At least he didn't finish what he started," Lonato said. "At least I stopped him from doing that." He sighed. "But I got shot because I panicked. Because your life became more important than my own."

"You mean that?"

He squeezed her tight and strong. After a moment he relaxed his grip, one hand stroking her arm as if trying to assure himself of her presence.

"Yes," he whispered. "I do. That's what I couldn't tell you earlier. I needed time to come to grips with my emotions."

The things they'd revealed to each other had exhausted her. At least her mind felt wrung out. In contrast, with each passing second, her body was becoming more and more aware of him. She could tell that he was wearing briefs and the flesh on his thighs was becoming chilled. But if he was aware of it, he gave no indication. Neither did he act like a man who was feeling the aftereffects of a head wound.

He could have been killed! If the bullet had come any closer, she'd be alone tonight. Alone and swamped by what she felt for him.

"I need you," she told him.

"You mean it? Earlier —"



"I know what I said earlier, that I wasn't sure I ever wanted to be touched by a man again. But I'm alive. We both are."

He cupped his hands over her cheeks and lifted her head. Lips parted, she waited. The first contact was slightly off-center, but they corrected, and the resulting kiss quickly resonated throughout her. She let him know by arching her back and pushing her breasts against his chest. The kiss seemed endless, like a fire steadily being fed. Sensation surrounded her. It was most focused in and around her cunt but left no nerve endings untouched. When, finally, he drew back she first tried to keep him with her but then lifted her arms so he could pull off her shirt. He just as quickly dispensed with his shorts before easing her onto her back. Once he'd unzipped her sleeping bag and pulled it open, she raised her hips so he could remove her panties.

The undressing had taken so little time, a wordless but mutual agreement that the time for sex had come.

She opened her legs and gripped his shoulders so she could direct him to her. Instead of heeding her message to hurry the coupling, he lay down beside her. His fingers stroking her thigh nearly drove her crazy. She felt her core heat and dampen in preparation. One hand went to his head so she could run her fingers through his hair. With the other she began caressing her own breast. Her breathing became ragged, and she kept trying to turn onto her side to bring herself closer to him.

"I need you," he muttered. "Need you so damn much. But first..."

When he lifted and bent the leg he'd been stroking, she sensed what he had in mind. Tiny shivers became more pronounced. She increased her grip on his hair, not to stop him but because she could barely contain herself.

She felt the bed shift as he positioned his head between her legs. His warm breath chased over labia and clit. Gasping, she reared back, breasts seemingly reaching for the ceiling. She lifted her hips off the bed as far as she could. Before the strain could become more than she could handle, he slid a hand under her buttocks, exposing her sex fully.

"I did this to you before," he muttered.

"I know."

"You're ready for it again?"

"Yes. Yes."

He kissed her there, his tongue working hot flesh until she thought she'd lose her mind. Gentle, so gentle, he licked her lips and bathed her unbelievably sensitive clit. She sobbed as she spread herself as wide as she could. Her thigh and buttocks muscles felt as if they were clenching. A climax danced just out of reach, forcing her to move her hips from side to side as she sought it. Instead of granting her wish, he briefly abandoned her there to nibble at the inside of her thighs. Then, with her gasps perhaps commanding him, he returned. This time he concentrated his attention on the space between her vagina and anus. He licked, mixed her fluids with his own, licked some more.

She felt herself gather and boldly embraced her climax. Tiny spasms caused her to live fully in the experience. She heard herself sob and gasp as the climax continued. Then, sensitive beyond belief, she tried to free herself, but he wouldn't have it. Despite her thrashing, he again found her clit, blessing and torturing it at the same time.

"I can't— Stop. No more. Please, no more!"

Finally, when she thought she might lose her mind, he let her go. She dimly sensed him sliding up beside her and snuggled into his embrace. Her body continued to throb in the aftermath of the most intense climax she'd ever felt.

"Do you understand?" he asked.

Unable to speak, she nodded.

"My gift to you. My way of letting you think of yourself as a fully sexual woman again."

"Thank you. Thank you," she muttered. "Oh god, thank you."

\* \* \* \* \*

Not that it mattered, but Carlin believed she'd briefly fallen asleep after Lonato had brought her to climax and put her back in touch with her body. She woke to find him stretched beside her with an arm resting on her breasts, his breath on the top of her head, and his naked flesh warming hers. Instead of trying to go back to sleep, she kissed his shoulder.

"I'm here," he muttered.

"I kind of figured that. Something just occurred to me."

"Did it?"

"Yes. You took me over the top, but I haven't returned the favor. Not really."

"You feel like it?"

*Are you ready to put the nightmare behind you?* she heard. "Oh, I feel all right. The question is, do you?"

"You have to ask?" He thrust his pelvis at her.

"No," she told him because his rod left no doubt of his arousal. "I could insist on climbing on top of you and play the dominant role, but it isn't necessary. In fact, I want to be on the bottom."

"Whatever you want."

"For tonight?" Sudden fear of a future without him rendered her nearly speechless.

"No, not just tonight." Even as he spoke, he rose to a kneeling position and leaned over her. "I'm not walking away from you, Carlin. I don't want to, and I don't believe you do either."

She ran her nails down his hard chest. "I think...I think that the possibility of losing you, of you being dead, scared me nearly as much as what we both went through. I'm changed because of you." Taking a deep breath, she went on. "In the short time we've been together, you've touched me in ways I didn't know was possible."

Instead of speaking, he dipped his head and flicked his tongue over first one breast and then the other. Moaning, she clamped her hands around his waist and guided him

between her legs. When he stretched out over her with his arms bracing his upper body, she bent her knees and lifted her pelvis, offering herself to him. He lowered himself, the head of his cock immediately finding her opening.

"I belong here." Awe tinted his words. "Inside you." Thrusting forward, he slid home.

She took him full and deep, pussy muscles closing around him not because she feared he might withdraw but because she wanted him to understand that her body was her gift to him. "This feels right, so right."

Over and over again she alternated between lowering and lifting her buttocks in a series of short, jerky movements. She would have lost him if he hadn't followed her lead. In a few moments she felt the strain in her thighs and back but continued because she sensed him coming closer and closer to release. She'd focused so on giving pleasure that her own took her by surprise. They worked as one, bodies in unison, riding together. Although she couldn't see him, she kept her eyes open as she imagined his expressions, the intensity of a man on the brink of climax, the look of a man in love.

*Love!* The word carried her over the edge.

It was still there in the morning when she woke to find him sitting beside her with the same emotion deep and strong in his eyes.

"Welcome to tomorrow," he whispered. "Our tomorrow."

## About the Author

“Of course I’ve time-traveled to the ancient Everglades, infiltrated bondage strongholds, done wilderness search and rescue, and spent a night trapped in a workout gym with Mr. Universe. How can I possibly write about something I haven’t experienced?”

Although I love telling readers that, the truth is much more mundane. In my “day” jobs, I’ve been a commercial pilot, brain surgeon, worked as a white-water river guide, bee keeper, snake charmer and garbage collector.

And if you buy all that, let me pitch the bridge I have listed on eBay.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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