

ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*

HUMAN DESIGN
Experimenting
with Ed

KATIE ALLEN

Experimenting with Ed

Katie Allen

Human Design, Book One

A self-professed lab geek, Claire doesn't date much. In fact, she has more contact with the rats at the lab than with human males, not counting her toadlike boss, Gordon. When her coworkers drag her out to a club, Claire ends up fending off her drunk and handsy boss – until she's rescued by Ed, the most beautiful bouncer she's ever seen.

Her tentative, exhilarating relationship with Ed is interrupted when she learns her boss intends to falsify research data to win a grant. When Claire threatens to reveal the truth, she endangers her life, as well as Ed's. Framed and forced to run, it's not long before Claire discovers Ed is hiding a shocking secret of his own.

Through arson, police chases and attempted murder, the two grow closer, the intensity of their lovemaking rivaling that of their harrowing journey. Claire would be worried about the ever-present danger and a grim future as a fugitive...if she weren't so engrossed in her erotic experiments with Ed.

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Experimenting with Ed

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Chapter One

The bouncer was hot.

When Claire's eyes finally stopped watering and the man came into focus, she realized her mouth was hanging open. Snapping it shut, she touched her chin to make sure she wasn't drooling. Despite her best efforts, she just couldn't drag her gaze away from that perfect body.

This was her first time at Club Taboo and the experience was reminding her why she didn't go out very much. The vapor from the dry ice combined with a hundred different perfumes had burned Claire's eyes, and the press of people had made her panicky. Ducking out onto the club's side patio, she'd been relieved to find it relatively empty.

It was blessedly quiet after the heavy techno pulse of the club, even with the chatter from the crowd of people waiting to get in. The line bordered the patio and stretched all the way to the warehouse next door. The bouncer had moved away from his position by the door in order to monitor a group of rowdy guys waiting in line. Claire watched as the foursome bumped each other off-balance and insulted each other in voices so obliviously loud she could clearly hear the unimaginative comments above the noise of the crowd.

With his focus on the line, the bouncer was almost completely turned away from her. She studied him, feeling safe with her oblique angle. All she could see was the back of his head and the sharp edge of one high cheekbone, the corner of his no-nonsense mouth and the hard plane of his cheek. The cold November wind blew off the lake and ruffled his jet-black hair, but even in just his shirtsleeves, he didn't seem to feel the chill. The crowd waiting to get in, however, hugged their elbows and shivered, noses turning pink as they stomped their feet and huddled against their dates.

Watching the crowd reminded Claire of her own bare arms and thin skirt. With an involuntary full-body shudder, she moved closer to the shelter of the building. She

hesitated a few feet from the door, not wanting to go back inside yet. Instead, she studied the heavy curve of the bouncer's shoulders and the outline of his back muscles beneath the dark fabric of his shirt. He appeared relaxed, calm, but she imagined she could see the tremor of readiness dart through his muscles.

"Claire!"

Gordon's voice brought the bouncer's head around. She managed to hold his gaze for a full second and a half before the intensity of his stare, the sheer breathtaking beauty of his face and body was too much. Ducking her head, Claire turned to Gordon.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked, a slight slur blurring the edges of his words. "It's freezing!"

"Just getting some air." Forcing a smile, Claire lied, "I was just about to go back in."

"Good." He gave her a sloppy grin. "Let's go dance."

Claire had to force herself not to recoil. Only a sharp mental reminder that he was her boss, and definitely not drunk enough yet to forget the evening, allowed her to keep her face expressionless. She even managed a small smile. "I'm not much of a dancer," she demurred. "In fact, I probably should get home soon."

"Don't be silly." Gordon brushed off her words, grabbing her by the arm and tugging her toward the doorway. "It's a celebration!"

Gritting her teeth against the urge to punch him in the balls, Claire couldn't help but jerk back against his grip. "No!" she snapped.

He blinked at her, surprised, dropping his hand from her arm.

"I mean," Claire backtracked, "that I'm...um, not feeling well. I'd better stay out here a little while longer."

"There a problem?"

The smooth, masculine voice brought both Claire's and Gordon's heads around in surprise. The bouncer must have hurdled the waist-high patio fence, as he was standing just a few feet from them, close enough to make Claire's stomach churn.

"We're fine," Gordon snapped, his lips drawn in a tight, prissy knot. This close to the gorgeous bouncer, Gordon looked even more unappealing than usual. The sparse goatee circling those wet, too-red lips of his always made Claire think of pubic hair, an image that brought both suppressed giggles and a shudder of disgust.

The bouncer ignored Gordon, all his focus on Claire. "Miss?" he asked.

She cleared her throat. The combination of his beauty and that smooth, golden voice robbed her of her ability to speak.

"Huh?" she finally managed to grunt. *Smooth, Claire*, she commended herself. Obviously she had been locked in the lab for too long. "I mean, I'm okay," she managed to squeak out, staring at him.

The bouncer didn't move, didn't blink. Claire swallowed.

"She said she's fine," Gordon repeated, reaching to take her arm again but dropping his hand at the last moment. "Come on, Claire, let's go inside."

Barely managing to look away from the bouncer's perfect face, Claire finally turned her head to look at Gordon. As his words penetrated her fog of instant infatuation, she shook her head.

"No," she said firmly. "I have to go home. I want to get into work early tomorrow."

Gordon rolled his eyes. "Don't be silly. I'll give you the day off."

Irritation rushed through Claire. "I need to get some things done," she clipped out, quickly losing her grip on her façade of patience and good humor.

Ignoring her protests, Gordon grabbed her wrist. "Let's go in," he insisted, but Claire barely felt the tug before his face froze and his hand dropped away.

The bouncer's fingers were wrapped around Gordon's arm just above the elbow. Whatever he was doing must have hurt, judging from the pastier-than-usual color of Gordon's face.

"You. Go," the bouncer said evenly, and Gordon gave a short nod and a wince. As soon as the larger man released him, Gordon turned on his heel and stalked to the side door of the club.

Claire watched his stiff back leave. She sighed. Work would definitely be uncomfortable for a few days. Gordon slammed the door behind him and Claire flinched. *Make that a few weeks*, she amended mentally.

"How are you getting home?"

She turned toward the bouncer, startled. She'd been distracted enough by Gordon's annoying behavior to forget the mountain of hotness still standing next to her.

She smiled at him. "Thanks for your help. He's had a few too many and was being really persistent. He's my boss, you know, so it wasn't like I could kick him in the balls, although I did think about it. Punching him in the balls, to be exact." *Shut up, shut up, shut up!* Claire's brain screamed, but she couldn't stop the babbling flow of words. "So it was really nice of you to take care of it so I didn't do any damage to his man parts and get fired."

He brushed off her thanks with a small shrug and a raised eyebrow.

"What?" she asked, before she remembered his earlier question. "Oh, getting home. Right. I'll probably walk—I live five blocks away."

The bouncer turned on his heel and gave a sharp whistle. Another burly man in a black shirt stuck his head around the corner.

"Going on break," Claire's bouncer called, his voice cutting easily through the chatter of the waiting crowd. "Watch those four." He pointed at the loud group he'd been monitoring earlier. The four guys looked back at him with expressions of offended innocence until one wobbled and fell off the curb, to the great amusement of his three companions. The other bouncer nodded and waved a hand in a "go ahead" gesture.

The gorgeous man turned and walked toward the door to the club. Bemused, Claire just stared at his broad back.

Holding the door open, he turned back and raised the same eyebrow. Claire figured just that one eyebrow probably saved him a couple hundred words a day.

"Let's go," he ordered, and she blinked at him, startled.

"Where?"

"Your house." Although the *duh* was left unsaid, it was very much implied.

"Aren't you going on break?" she asked.

"Yes. Let's go."

Comprehension dawned. "Oh," she hurried to say. "You don't have to walk me home. I'll be fine. I have a whistle." Claire dug in her small purse. "It's in here somewhere..."

Her fingers found the silver whistle and she yanked it out, grinning triumphantly. Her smile slowly faded when she saw the bouncer's expression. The eyebrow was now appalled.

"What?" she asked defensively but he just shook his head.

"Hurry up." He jerked his head toward the open door.

She gave in and followed him into the club, protesting. "Well, if you're sure you want to. I mean, I don't want to take up your break. I'm sure there are lots of things you would rather do than walk someone home — get a snack, pee..." She trailed off when she realized he couldn't hear her through the club noise, even though they were only a few feet apart.

Claire followed his broad back through the press of people, appreciating the way a path just opened up for him, either his size or his presence making even the drunkest reveler duck out of his way. She glanced over her shoulder and saw her small group of colleagues clustered at a table. Claire sighed. Gordon still looked pissed.

Without realizing it, she slowed her steps. When she glanced back, expecting to see the bouncer's wide shoulders, Claire found she was caught in a mass of strangers. She tried to wiggle through the crowd, but without the bouncer's magic path-making ability, people refused to give way.

Standing on her tiptoes and cursing her short stature, she tried unsuccessfully to see over the press of bodies. With an irritated grunt, she fought her way in the direction she thought the door was located, using her elbows liberally.

She had only made a few feet of progress when the bouncer appeared in front of her. Grabbing her by the hand, he towed her to the main door and then they were in the blessedly cool air. Claire gasped a breath, relieved to be out of the crush of people, and then shivered.

"My coat," she groaned, glancing back at the entrance with dread. She really did not want to go back in there.

"I'll get it," the bouncer told her, before shoving his way back into the mass of people.

"Wait!" she called after him, but he didn't stop. "I didn't tell you where it is," she finished under her breath. Claire waited for him to come back and ask for directions – or for a description of the coat, at least – but was surprised to see him reemerge with her jacket clutched in one huge fist.

"Thank you," she told him, holding out an arm. After a tiny hesitation, he helped her put it on. "How did you know which one was mine?"

He gave one of his small shrugs. "Just did. Which way?" Claire pointed left and he strode down the sidewalk.

"Hang on," she told him with a breathless laugh, struggling in her heels to keep up with his quick pace. "Can you slow down just a pinch?" she panted.

Although he looked surprised, he did slow his steps until she didn't have to run to keep up with him.

"Thanks," she said gratefully. "I'm Claire, by the way."

"I know," he grunted. At her curious look, he added, "Heard your boss call you that."

"Oh." She nodded and waited. And waited. "And you are..." she finally prompted.

"Edward." As she continued to look at him, he added, "Edward Astor."

"So what do you go by?"

He slanted a look at her. "Edward Astor."

Claire laughed, although she wasn't sure if he was kidding or not. "Ed? Eddie? Ned? Big Ed?"

Shrugging, he told her, "Whatever you like."

"That's a little dangerous," she warned, still grinning. When the eyebrow went up again, she explained. "Letting me call you anything I want. There're so many unpleasant possibilities – Wally, for example. Or Scooter. How about Sprinkles? Or Giggles? Or –"

"Fine," he interrupted. "Call me Ed."

She made a face. "But I was just getting into it. You sure I can't call you Sprinkles?"

He answered with a look.

"O-*kay*, Ed it is. Mr. Astor if you're nasty."

Both eyebrows went up at that and Claire thought she saw a spark of heat flare in his eyes, turning them silver for just a moment before they cooled to their original gray. An answering shiver clenched her lower belly.

Claire shook her head, brushing away his reaction as a figment of her imagination. *Her* reaction, now – that was a result of too many hours spent in the lab, where the only males in sight were Gordon and some of the rats. It had been a long time since she had been this close to a guy, much less such a big, gorgeous, muscular specimen. Not only was she staring again, Claire realized, but now she was drooling too. Glancing away with an effort, she saw they had almost walked past her street.

"Oh," she pointed across the intersection, "turn here."

He did the same thing he had at each crossing, holding her back with a hand against her arm as he checked for traffic before ushering her across. Something about this careful gesture melted her insides into a ball of goo. Claire swallowed.

"That's my building," she rasped. Clearing her throat, she tried for a tone that was a little less...lustful. "I'm fine from here. You'd better get back. Your break must be almost over by now."

Ed dismissed that idea with a single shake of his head.

She shrugged, hiding her pleased grin by digging in her purse for her keys. The whistle kept getting in her way until, with a frustrated growl, she yanked it out and tilted the purse so random coins, breath mints, a tampon and her key ring slid to one corner. She grasped the keys and held them up like a trophy.

With a gentle tug, Ed pulled the keys from her fingers and opened the door for her. As she stepped into her building in front of him, Claire felt the first stirrings of anxiety. Was he planning on staying? Despite rescuing her from Gordon and walking her home and the sweet way he'd held her back until he was sure the street was clear, Ed was still very much a stranger.

"Don't be scared." The way he said the words, like a command, made her heart beat even faster, although she wasn't sure if that was from arousal or fear.

"I'm not," she threw over her shoulder mock-carelessly as she climbed the stairs to her second-floor apartment. The elevator was temperamental at best, so she preferred to take the steps and not risk a couple-hour stop between floors while the handyman thumped and swore in Russian above her. Being trapped in the elevator with Ed, though... She cut off that train of thought. Her heart could only take so much.

"I won't hurt you," Ed said from behind her, obviously not believing her protestation.

Claire glanced back again, this time meeting his eyes. "I know," she said.

She did know. At least, she was pretty sure. Kind of sure?

Turning back to climb the last few steps, she rolled her eyes at her worries. If this was how she acted when she was around a hot guy, she really needed to get out more.

"This is my place," she said, her eyes darting around.

Should I invite him in? she wondered. Her body was screaming "Yes!" but her mind was more cautious and the words didn't leave her mouth. She stepped back as he unlocked her door with one of the keys he still held and pushed the door open, holding it for her as he remained in the hallway.

“Thanks,” she said in an embarrassing squeak as she turned toward him. “For walking me home, I mean. And using up your break, when I’m sure you have a ton of things you needed to do—”

She broke off, her mouth still open and her eyes wide, as he moved toward her. Taking her hand, he placed her keys in her palm and gently folded her fingers around them. After staring dumbly at her hand for several seconds, she looked up at him.

“Lock the door,” he ordered.

She could only nod, giving him a dorky half wave as she backed into her apartment and gently closed the door. She twisted the deadbolt and let her weight sag against the painted metal, feeling as if she hadn’t taken a breath in the past fifteen minutes.

“Oh boy,” she sighed. Her knees quivered and she sank to the floor. If this was her reaction to a simple touch on the hand, what would she have done if he’d kissed her? A grin stretched across her face at the thought. Shaking her head, she pushed herself to her feet.

It was official. She really, really needed to get out more.

Chapter Two

He was waiting for her.

As Claire skipped down the few steps to the street, she saw him standing in front of her building. She stopped and stared at him.

"Didn't you leave last night?" she blurted.

"Came back."

"Um, okay. Why?" Her feet began working again, and as she got closer, she saw Ed had indeed shaved, so he must have been home at some time.

"Walk you to work."

Claire blinked. "Not to be repetitive, but...why?"

"You're little. It's not safe." He hadn't moved since they began talking but stood still, watching her carefully.

"It's seven in the morning. What could happen to me? And how did you know I walked to work?"

"Guessed."

She cocked her head. "Uh-huh. How did you know what time I go to work?"

"Didn't."

"So how long have you been out here?"

Ed shrugged. "'Bout an hour before the sun came up."

"Six?" she asked incredulously.

He gave an affirmative shrug.

Shaking her head, Claire hitched her computer bag up on her shoulder. "Is this weird? Should I be worried?"

She thought he might have flinched a little at that.

"I can walk behind you," he offered. "You don't have to talk to me."

"Uh, no." Claire almost smiled at that. "That would definitely be weird. And uncomfortable. Well, come on then—you want to walk, let's walk."

When Ed held out a hand, she stared at it for a second.

"Computer," he said.

"Oh! Right. You sure?" When he nodded, she grinned. "Cool. You might change your mind when you feel how heavy it is. It's like the thousand-pound laptop."

"It's fine." He shouldered it easily.

"Well, wow." Claire spun in a circle before striding down the sidewalk with Ed easily keeping pace. "I feel so light and free with just my purse. You should walk me to work every day."

"Okay."

She darted a quick glance at his face and saw he was serious. "That's all right. I don't really need my own Secret Service agent. I've taken a self-defense class and everything."

His grunt sounded a little amused.

"Hey," she protested, trying to hold back her smile. "Don't knock a good poke to the eye. I have every confidence I could get myself out of a tight situation with this," she held up an index finger, "and maybe a well-placed knee to the groin."

This grunt was annoyed. "Shouldn't be walking by yourself. You're tiny."

"You keep saying that." Claire made a face. "You make me sound like I'm five years old."

"No. You're not a kid." His eyes flicked up and down her body in a way that made heat pool in her belly. He nodded once. "A mouse."

"A mouse?" She stopped to glare at him, fists on hips.

For the first time since she'd met him, he looked uncertain. "A pretty mouse?"

Claire shook her head. "Nope. Not much better."

"A beautiful mouse?"

At that, she let her fists relax and started walking again. "Maybe."

He kept pace with her. "You're just...well, brown hair and big eyes and you're soft— I mean, *look* soft..."

Hiding a grin, Claire felt any remaining indignation slip away. If she could reduce the mighty bouncer to practically stammering, it was worth being compared to a rodent.

Ed must have missed her smile, since he was floundering on. "And I saw last night how guys look at you. All hungry and predatory."

"Really?" She couldn't keep the pleased note out of her voice at that one, although disappointment quickly set in. "Oh, you mean Gordon. Yeah, he's not a cat — more of a toad."

"No." Ed gave a single, short shake of his head. "Just walking through the club. They were all watching."

"Oh." She was smiling again.

"You hadn't been there before." The way he stated that, so certain, as if she couldn't have been in or he would have noticed her, was more flattering than any kind of attention she could have gotten from a club full of other men.

"No. I'm not really a party girl. We were just out last night because Gordon found out he's a finalist for a big endowment, so the whole lab — well, all four of us — went out. It's a pretty big deal. If he gets this, he won't ever have to scrounge for grant money again. Just the interest would pay his salary and fund his research for the rest of his career," she explained. "That's a pretty big 'if' though."

"Research?"

"Cancer research." She sighed. "That's the part that makes it hard for me. I believe in the research but working for Gordon..."

"Didn't care for him." Ed's even, understated words made her laugh.

"Exactly," she agreed. "He is, as I mentioned before, a toad of a man. I've started sending out my résumé, actually. And it's not just working for Gordon, it's also...well, I'll show you." They'd reached the low-slung limestone building that housed the lab. "Do you want to come in?"

At Ed's short nod, she unlocked the door and held it open for him. Claire led the way, flicking on the fluorescent lights as she went. She passed Gordon's office and

then the one she shared with Nadine and Joelle. Both rooms were dark. Claire doubted any of her three coworkers would be in much before noon after their late night.

She stopped at the third door, automatically tapping the security code on a small keypad. A small green light next to the door blinked and Claire heard the lock click as it released. She pushed open the door and reached for the row of light switches just inside.

The lab was divided into two sections, separated by a wall made mostly of glass. Through it, Claire could see the rats stirring in their cages as the lights flickered to full brightness. She dropped her purse on a table by the door.

"I don't like this place," Ed stated.

Claire glanced at him in surprise. "Sorry – do you not like rats? I know a lot of people don't. I should have asked before I dragged you in here."

He gave a short shake of his head, staring through the glass at the rows of cages. "No. Rats are fine."

"Sure?" When he nodded, Claire grinned. "Want to meet Wilma, then?"

He gave her a sideways glance and shrugged. "Sure."

Yanking off her coat, she hung it in the closet and grabbed a couple of white lab jackets, tossing one to Ed. He caught it but didn't put it on. His face was strained.

"You don't have to wear it," Claire assured him. "It's just to keep your shirt clean."

He handed the coat back to her. "Do you have to?"

Stopping with the white jacket halfway on, she looked at him in surprise. "No, I guess not. I just have my scrubby clothes on anyway – no meetings today." She grinned. "Don't care for the mad scientist look?"

Although she was joking, she thought he might have flinched again. Letting the coat slip back down her arms, she tossed both of the jackets over a chair.

"Better?" she asked.

He still looked uncomfortable but his nod was relieved. "Thank you. I had a...bad experience with doctors."

Now Claire was incredibly curious but it seemed a little early to be starting a game of twenty questions about a traumatic medical incident. After all, she'd only met him the night before. She figured she should wait until she had known him at least twenty-four hours before demanding a full medical history. She hid her grin, not wanting to have to explain to Ed what was funny.

"Come on then," she said, leading the way into the other room. Ed placed her laptop carefully on a table and followed her. Flipping the latch on the wire top of Wilma's cage, she reached in to lift out the rat. Holding the small animal in her hand, Claire performed the introductions with mock formality.

"Ed, meet Wilma. Wilma, this is Ed."

To Claire's amusement, he extended one index finger toward the rat. Wilma curled her tail around Claire's wrist for balance and sat up, her nose and whiskers twitching as she sniffed him.

"Pleasure to meet you," he said solemnly. Wilma rested both front paws on his finger and Claire laughed. It looked as if they were really shaking hands.

"This is the other reason," she admitted. "Why I'm looking for another job, I mean. I know it's a worthy cause and Wilma and the others are just rats, but..." Embarrassed, she looked down at the rodent. Wilma was busy examining a loose string on Claire's sweatshirt cuff. "I just like them too much." She gave a quick glance up at Ed, who was regarding her seriously. "Is that crazy?"

"No," he told her. "Just human."

She smiled at him, a wide grin of relief. "Thanks. I figured you'd think I was some crazy rat lady – doesn't that sound awful? It's just all the injections and the cages and they die so quickly... I'll be better off doing cellular-level research. Can't get too attached to a cell." She watched as Ed stroked the rat's head with one finger. "I think it'd be easier if the treatment was working."

"It's not?" he asked, looking up, and Claire shook her head.

"The celebration last night was a little premature," she told him with a grimace. "Wilma here is part of the treatment group, and look." Claire held the rat under her forelegs so she stood on her hind legs, belly exposed. "The original mammary tumor just keeps getting bigger – see that lump?" When Ed nodded, Claire continued, "Two new masses showed up in her last MRI. It's the same with the entire treatment group. The injections are supposed to fool their immune systems into attacking the cancerous cells but nothing's happening – nothing good, at least."

"How's he a finalist for the endowment then?" Ed asked curiously as Claire gently lowered the rat back into the cage.

"Oh, the idea behind the research is brilliant," she explained, latching the cage. "It's just not working." She shrugged. "When the board of trustees sees the results – or lack of results – Gordon will never get that money and his original grant is almost completely spent." She led the way over to a stainless steel sink, throwing a wry grin over her shoulder. "I won't have to worry about quitting then – my job will just disappear."

They washed their hands and left the room in silence. As Ed ushered her down the hall with a wide hand on her back, all thoughts of rats and research flew out of Claire's head. The heat from his palm warmed her skin through the fabric of her sweatshirt and just that simple touch was enough to prickle her arms with goose bumps and dampen her pussy.

Ed's head turned and he snagged her gaze. Her breath caught. It wasn't her imagination this time – his eyes were molten silver, his face tight with desire.

"You want me." His words were so certain, as if he could read her mind.

What do you say to that? Claire wondered in a panic. "I – ah, what..." She stammered to a halt, at a complete loss for words. With a mental shrug, she gathered up her courage and met his eyes. "Yes," she said baldly.

Before she could take another breath, Ed had her pinned against the wall and was kissing her – hard. He took over her mouth as desire crashed over Claire, rendering her oblivious to everything except his lips and tongue, the press of his body along

hers and the cup of his oversized hand behind her head, cushioning her skull from the rough surface of the wall. He surrounded her, enveloping her in his heat and urgency.

As quickly as the kiss had begun, it ended. Claire groaned at the loss. Grabbing her hand, Ed tugged her down the hall, trying each doorknob as he passed. Claire stumbled after him, her brain unable to focus on anything except her body's desperate need to have Ed's mouth on hers again, his hands against her skin.

A door finally opened under Ed's impatient hand and he pulled her inside, flicking on the lights as he swung the door closed behind them. She had a blurred glimpse of the familiar office supply closet, stocked with reams of paper, boxes of highlighters and binder clips, before he was kissing her again, one hand gripping her hip, holding her hard to him so the bulge of his erection pressed against her belly.

The rigid edge of a shelf dug into her back and she flinched away, trying to move without breaking the kiss, not wanting to sever that incredible connection of mouth on mouth, tongue against tongue, but Ed raised his head and the contact was gone. Before she could do any more than groan her disappointment, Claire felt the ground disappear from beneath her feet as Ed lifted her to sit on the shelf.

From her new position, they were almost an even height. Claire caught a quick glimpse of narrowed silver eyes before he brought his mouth to hers, and once again she was caught in a kiss. Her fingers tangled in his hair, slid over his head and lower so she could massage the thick strength of his neck. As her hands explored his shoulders, she tugged impatiently at the fabric of his shirt until he pulled away from her to yank the offending garment over his head.

As soon as his shirt sailed across the closet, Claire yanked his mouth back to hers. He came willingly, finding her lips with eager urgency, nipping and tugging with his teeth before soothing the imaginary hurts with his tongue.

Her hands caressed the hard curves and hollows of his shoulders and upper arms, her fingertips digging for purchase but not finding any in his unyielding flesh. As he kissed and licked his way down her throat, Ed unzipped her sweatshirt and the quiet

rasp of the zipper pulled a shiver down her spine. Feeling suddenly boneless, Claire let her head fall back as the point of his tongue traced her collarbone.

When he dragged the neckline of her tank and the cups of her bra down, and cool air brushed her painfully tight nipples, Claire didn't hesitate. She arched her back, wordlessly demanding his mouth on her breasts. Ed took what she offered, his lips closing on a nipple, drawing a low moan from her throat.

He sucked at the tip and Claire melted. His mouth was so hot, so wet, and she could feel each pull of his lips all the way to her pussy. Needing an anchor, she buried her fingers in Ed's hair, closing her fists and giving a sharp tug. At the pull, his teeth closed on the tip of her breast, hard enough to snap her head forward.

His head came up too. "Sorry!" he rasped.

After the initial shock of the pinch passed, hot pleasure flowed in to take its place. Claire smiled at him. "I'm not. Do it again."

Those heated silver eyes held hers for several seconds, as if he were checking her sincerity. Tugging at his head, she urged his mouth down to her other breast and he closed his lips around the stiff point. Despite her request, his mouth was relentlessly gentle, his tongue soft against her skin.

"Please," Claire begged, lightly tugging on his hair. "Do it again?"

He hesitated, looking up at her, and she held her breath, her fingers working against his head, massaging his scalp. His teeth closed lightly, a tiny press she could hardly feel.

"Harder," she insisted. Flicking another quick glance at her, Ed obeyed, nipping her sharply. Claire sucked in a breath as pleasure rippled across her skin, arousal shooting through her body and tightening every muscle. "Yes!" she hissed and he growled, giving her nipple another pinch with his teeth before pulling his head back.

Before she could protest, his hand was working the button on her jeans and lowering her zipper. Both hands moved to her back and, pushing up her sweatshirt and tank, dived down the back of her jeans. Latching her legs around his hips, Claire seized his shoulders so she could support her weight and lift her body off the shelf.

His fingers plunged beneath the waistband of her panties, working lower until his hands cupped her ass. He squeezed and massaged her cheeks as Claire buried her face against his shoulder, every nerve in her body sharply aware of the proximity of his fingers to her pussy. She was desperate for Ed to lay her on the floor of the closet and strip off her jeans and panties, frantic for his tongue or fingers or cock to ram inside her.

Ed stiffened and his hands slid out of her jeans. After a disbelieving second, Claire tried to raise her head and ask why he had stopped when she really, really wanted him to continue, but he pushed her head back into his shoulder. All that came out of her mouth was a muffled but indignant, "Wffffh?"

"Shh," he warned.

As her lust-clouded brain began to clear, Claire realized he had probably heard someone else in the building. She lifted her head and strained her ears but all she could hear was her thudding heartbeat.

"What?" she whispered again.

He gave a shake of his head and touched his ear, as if to say *listen*.

She tried. Even as her heart slowed to a more normal rate, all she could hear was silence. Just before she was going to tell Ed he was imagining things, she heard the muffled thump of the front door swinging shut and then the rustle and squeak of someone walking down the hall.

How did he know? Claire wondered, amazed. He'd heard whoever had interrupted their hot-and-heavy session in the supply closet long before that person had even entered the building.

He must have ears like a bat, she marveled.

A door closed. It sounded right next to them, so Claire guessed it was Gordon who had unwittingly interrupted them.

"It's him," Ed murmured, confirming her thoughts.

"Well, shit," she sighed. Belatedly realizing what she had said, Claire clapped both hands over her mouth.

Ed smiled, the very first smile she had seen from him, and her stomach spun in a dizzy loop. Her hands fell away from her mouth as she stared at him, marveling. In her first glimpse of him at the club, she had thought he was the most beautiful thing she had ever seen but now... *now* he was positively unearthly.

The smile disappeared. "What?"

Shaking her head, Claire had to smile at his defensive scowl. "This," she told him, framing that gorgeous face with her hands. "The mind...it boggles." She couldn't help it—she had to lean in and kiss him.

With an almost soundless growl, Ed wrapped his hand around the back of her head, deepening the kiss. His other arm snaked around her hips, flattening her against him. They knocked against the metal shelf and it rocked back, rattling against the wall. They both froze at the noise.

After a few seconds, the ridiculousness of their situation struck Claire and she felt giggles bubbling up. She buried her face against Ed's bare shoulder to stifle any sound that might escape.

"Claire?" Gordon's voice echoed down the hallway.

She almost choked. "Put me down," she whispered in Ed's ear and he complied, slowly lowering her to her feet. Claire steadied herself with a hand flattened against his chest and glanced down to see her sweatshirt gaping open, her tank top pushed down below her pointed nipples, still swollen and damp from his mouth.

"Eep," she squeaked, pulling her shirt to cover her breasts, feeling a red flush creep up her neck and across her cheeks. She fumbled with the zipper until Ed gently pushed her clumsy hands aside and zipped her up himself.

A flash of jealousy hit her as she watched those confident hands, so assured and capable. Claire wondered how many times he had done something like this, how many women had yanked him into the nearest supply closet or back room or Porta Potti, too dazzled by his size and beauty to care that their boss was in the office right next door.

Ed cocked the questioning eyebrow. She realized she was glaring at him for his imaginary offenses and all because he had zipped her sweatshirt. Rolling her eyes at her silly fit of insecurity, she just shook her head at his unspoken query and wiggled around him to the closet door. After a final check to make sure all her critical body parts were securely covered, Claire took a deep breath and opened the door just far enough to stick her head out into the hall.

Gordon, standing in his office doorway, looked at her in surprise.

"Are you okay?" he asked. "I thought I heard a crash."

Giving him a bright smile, she chirped, "Sure! Just looking for some...uh, paper clips."

He looked at her curiously. "Aren't they right on top of the three-ring binders?" Moving toward the supply closet, he offered, "Here, I'll show you."

"No!"

When Gordon jerked back, startled, Claire realized she had been a little...strident.

"What I mean," she amended with forced calm, "is I've found them – right where you said they were. I just caught my...um, sweatshirt on the...ah, shelf and so...hmm. Yeah, so I'll be right out." She made herself stop babbling and gave him another toothy smile. "Just need to grab those...staples," she muttered as she pulled her head back into the closet.

"I thought it was paper clips." Gordon's voice was still audible through the barrier of the door.

Claire sighed in exasperation, rolling her eyes at Ed, who she was sure would have been grinning if he did that sort of thing. To her disappointment, he'd put his shirt back on, hiding the awe-inspiring view of his chest.

"I need both," she yelled, not bothering to open the door.

Even muffled, the skepticism in Gordon's grunt came through loud and clear. "Whatever," he called back, sounding annoyed. "Come see me when you've found your way out of the supply closet. I have to talk to you." The door to his office slammed.

"Now I just want to stay in here all day," Claire whispered.

"Bad liar," was Ed's only softly spoken comment.

Blowing her hair off her face, she gave a small shrug. "Aren't I though? I could never be a super-spy."

"No."

She scowled at him. "You don't have to agree quite so quickly. Just because you're able to operate a zipper under stressful circumstances —"

Ed stopped her tirade by kissing her again. When he finally pulled back, she couldn't remember what she had been saying. Actually, she couldn't remember her own name. Claire blinked at him.

"You've already figured out how to shut me up," she whispered, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of her mouth.

"Doesn't last long," he replied.

She stared. "A joke? Did you just make a joke?"

His scowl snapped back into place. "No."

"Uh-huh."

"Didn't."

"Right."

"I'm serious."

"I know you are." She gave him her most innocent look. She might have even batted her eyelashes.

He switched topics suddenly. "I'll walk you home tonight."

Shaking her head, she told him, "It's perfectly safe. You don't have to —"

"What time?"

She opened her mouth to argue but closed it when she saw Ed's implacable expression. Besides, Gordon was still waiting in his office for her to come out of the closet. "Fine. Come by a little after five. I really don't need a bodyguard, though."

His grunt was skeptical.

Claire stuck her head out into the hallway.

“All clear,” she whispered, stepping back and glancing over her shoulder at Ed. As he slipped by her, he brushed her cheek with the backs of his fingers.

“Goodbye, little mouse,” he murmured.

Claire hid her excited shiver at his touch by rolling her eyes, although she couldn’t stop the smile that peeked out. “We really need to think of a better nickname for me.”

He didn’t bother responding to her comment, except for a final shake of his head. With that, Ed was gone.

Sagging against the door, Claire let her body weight swing it closed, barely having the presence of mind to catch the doorknob before it slammed shut.

“Whoa,” she breathed. The previous few minutes seemed unreal. Had she really been making out in a supply closet with an unnaturally gorgeous man she had just met the night before? And at eight thirty in the morning?

Blowing out a breath, she forced herself to focus on listening for the quiet thud of the front door closing behind Ed but there was only silence. She frowned. In fact, she hadn’t even heard his footsteps. He wasn’t still waiting outside the closet, was he?

Claire peeked out but the hallway was empty. “Wow, he’s stealthy,” she muttered to herself as she stepped from the tiny room. Now that Ed was safely out of the building, there was no reason to hide. She allowed the door to shut behind her with a solid thunk. There were also no more ways to avoid Gordon’s little “talk”.

With a resigned sigh and a final brush of her hands over her hair, Claire knocked on Gordon’s office door.

Chapter Three

To Claire's surprise, the talk wasn't about the previous night.

Gordon stared at her in silence for a long time. She forced herself not to squirm, although horrifying thoughts began spinning through her brain. Could Gordon tell? Was the make-out session with Ed somehow showing on her face? Did she have whisker burn? A hickey?

"As you know," Gordon started, making Claire jump. She had been so caught up in her paranoid thoughts she had almost forgotten the reason she was in his office. Gordon was still talking and she forced herself to pay attention. "The research results could be more definitive," he was saying.

Claire stared at him. "They *are* definitive," she stated. "The injections aren't working."

His mouth drew into a tight knot. "The hypothesis is sound," he defended. "We just need to tinker with the research method, that's all."

"You don't have time for that," Claire said, confused. "The presentation to the board is in less than two weeks. Even if we changed something today, we wouldn't have time to see any results, much less write them up."

"That's the thing." His words were slow, as if he were thinking as he spoke, his fingers stroking down the lines of facial hair that ran on either side of his mouth. Claire was, as always, reminded of pubic hair and she shuddered, grossed out at the image. She wished he would stop touching his goatee – the picture of Gordon's fingers petting any woman *there* was just nauseating. Now, if it were Ed's fingers instead... Claire swallowed hard, crossing her legs to squeeze away the urgent flare of need.

"Yes?" she asked, finally realizing he had trailed off.

"Joelle, Nadine and I were discussing this last night, after you...left." He paused a moment, obviously waiting for Claire to jump in with explanations and apologies. She remained silent, merely borrowing Ed's favorite expression and raising one eyebrow.

With an irritated grimace, Gordon continued, "We decided that, well, it would be for the greater good if we presented the results in such a way the board would see the potential of this research."

After a second of stunned silence, Claire asked, "You're going to falsify the data?"

"No!" Gordon jumped in quickly – too quickly. "Of course not."

"Uh-huh," she said skeptically. "That's good. Because that sounds like a great way to ruin your reputation and end your career."

"You –" He snapped his mouth shut, his face flushing a deep red. After several deep breaths, he began again, his voice deliberately patient enough to set Claire's teeth on edge. "You need to understand a lot is riding on this grant."

"I *know* a lot is riding on this grant," she answered, mimicking his condescending tone. "My *job* is riding on this grant. That doesn't mean we should lie about the success of the treatment. Besides, it would be impossible – the CT scans tell the true story."

Gordon waved a dismissive hand. "Scans can be redone. After all, one rat looks just like another."

"You're serious." She stared at him, overcome by a new level of disgust. "You're actually going to fake positive results."

"Claire!" His false patience apparently gone, Gordon slapped both palms on the top of his desk as he lurched to his feet, glaring at Claire across his desk. "This is my last chance. I don't have a choice!"

Although her knees were shaking, she stood up to face him. "You *do* have a choice. So do I – I quit."

"Then go," Gordon spat. "But remember you signed a confidentiality agreement. You tell anyone anything about this research and I'll sue you."

"I don't think that agreement covered fraud," she shot back. "I won't say anything unless you lie about the results. You fake that report, I *will* find out and I'll be making my very own presentation to the board."

His face was purple with rage. Matching him glare for glare, Claire hid the fact that she was pants-wetingly terrified.

"Get the fuck out," he choked, and she did, leaving his office with a straight back and shaking legs.

* * * * *

She was halfway home before the full impact of what had happened hit her. Her legs gave out and she plopped down on the sidewalk. No one else was around, for which Claire was grateful – she really didn't want to answer the inevitable, "Are you okay?" if a passerby were to see her sitting in the middle of the sidewalk.

The wind cut through her sweatshirt, undoing the efforts of the morning sun, and Claire realized she'd forgotten her coat when she'd grabbed her purse before she left. That was the only thing she owned at the lab – even the laptop she'd used wasn't hers. She shivered and hugged her knees. So, what now?

Ever since she'd gotten a paper route at age twelve, she'd been earning money. In the past fifteen years, she had never quit a job without having another lined up, a definite way to pay for handy things like rent and food and electricity. This was the first time she had quit in the heat of the moment, been unemployed so suddenly and without warning, and Claire did not like the sensation one bit.

"I'll be okay," she told herself out loud. *I will*, she decided, forcing a firm nod. She had a small balance in her savings account, enough for a couple months if she was careful, and she'd already applied to a few other labs.

Maybe I'll even get a call for an interview today, she thought with determined optimism, pushing herself to her feet.

It wasn't as if she hadn't known this was coming. It was just...not today. Today was for marveling over Ed, for walking by the supply closet more times than necessary just so she could smile secretively at the door, for watching the clock impatiently as five o'clock approached and he arrived to –

Oh shit, she thought as she stopped in her tracks. Ed was supposed to walk her home. Claire realized she couldn't even call him, since she hadn't gotten his number.

Shaking her head at her stupidity, she resumed walking toward home. She'd figure that out later. Now she needed to get to the library and start searching on the internet for a new job.

* * * * *

Who says I'm not a super-spy? Claire thought with a snort of laughter, tugging the brim of her baseball hat lower on her forehead. She sipped her coffee and pretended to read the newspaper in front of her, but her eyes were focused out the café window on the lab across the street.

She was feeling more cheerful after a day at the library, perusing the help-wanted sites. A feeling of relief had crept in, happiness to be gone from under Gordon's thumb and away from any involvement in the research scam. Even if she couldn't get a lab job right away, she could always wait tables again to make ends meet. Not getting a reference from her last job might be a problem — she grimaced when she thought of what Gordon might say to any potential employer who called asking about her qualifications — but she could call up her last boss from two years before.

Her musings were interrupted as, across the street, the lab door opened. Joelle and Nadine spilled out, their heads close together as they walked to where their cars were parked. Shaking her head, Claire absently made circles on the tabletop with her coffee cup.

How can they be so willing to fall in with Gordon's idiotic plan? Their hero-worship of him had always baffled Claire. To her, he had always been a horny little toad.

"Am I late?"

The smooth voice made her jump two feet in the air. "What are you doing in here?" she asked Ed, who was standing next to her table, looking more gorgeous than she remembered.

He gave her a questioning look, sliding into the booth next to her. " *You're* here."

His heat lit up her entire body and she had to swallow hard before she could talk. "How did you know that?"

He shrugged. "Saw you."

“You did? From outside?” At his nod, Claire pouted a little in disappointment. “But I’m in disguise!”

Ed didn’t even bother to raise a mocking eyebrow at that, since his eyes were fixed on her protruding lower lip. He cupped her jaw in his hand and brushed the object of his focus with his thumb. Claire’s breaths shortened to pants.

He leaned in, staring at her mouth, and she was sure he was going to kiss her. Instead, he dropped his hand and sat back.

She blinked. *Obviously, I’m misreading his signals*, she figured, and then glanced down at Ed’s lap. *Or not.* She stared at the huge bulge fighting to escape his jeans.

“Stop,” he grunted.

Claire’s eyes flew to his face and she flushed guiltily at being caught looking at his crotch. “Sorry,” she mumbled, glancing down at her coffee.

“No control.”

Her gaze jumped back to his in surprise. “What?”

“Around *you*. I don’t have any control,” he explained but she still stared at him, confused. “If I look or touch or...kiss.” His voice lowered to grit on the last word. “Just your smell makes me crazy.”

She squirmed a little with embarrassment and pleasure. “I smell?” she asked, intentionally misunderstanding, whether to break the heavy, urgent, overwhelming mood or to fish for more compliments, she wasn’t sure.

“Good,” he amended hastily. “You smell good. Makes me want to fuck you right here.” He looked almost uncertain for a moment. “Sorry – that okay?”

“Ah,” Claire stuttered, unsure what he was asking permission to do. “Okay to say or okay to do?” His eyes, already hot with arousal, narrowed to silver slits. A rush of damp heat between her legs erased all caution. Without thinking, she added, “It doesn’t matter. Either way, the answer is yes.”

With a growl, he lurched toward her. For a second she thought he really was going to do it – he was going to fuck her right in that booth in front of all the people innocently sipping their lattes, unaware of the show that was just moments away.

Ed halted, as if he had hit an invisible wall, pulling back and swinging around to the other side of the booth, putting the safety of the table between them. His eyes still held her transfixed.

"Am I late?" he finally asked. His voice, normally so liquid and smooth, was rough, scraping against her nerve endings. She shivered and swallowed, her brain refusing to process his question.

"Huh?" was all she could manage.

"You're here," he clarified.

"Oh!" The light finally clicked on. "No, you're early. I'm here because I quit."

His eyebrow shot up.

"Gordon wanted me to..." She hesitated, searching for the words to explain without saying too much. "Um, to do something I'm not comfortable doing."

"I'll kill him." Ed's eyes went flat and he was halfway out of the booth before Claire caught his wrist.

"No, no," she hurried to reassure him. "Nothing like that. Something I'm not *professionally* comfortable with."

Slowly easing back down, Ed gave a short nod. "Wants you to lie about the research results?"

"How did you—" Claire broke off and winced. "I'm not very discreet, am I?"

"Makes sense." He shrugged. "He won't get the money unless he has the results. Doesn't have the results. Faking it is the only way to the money."

"Well, yeah. Pretty much." She bit her lip. "He said he won't go through with it but..."

"He will."

Heaving a sigh, Claire propped her chin on the heel of one hand and looked ruefully at Ed from beneath the brim of her baseball cap. "Probably."

Almost smiling, he reached over and pulled the hat from her head. Her hair tumbled down around her shoulders.

"Want me to talk to him?" he asked. His voice was even but the infinitesimal pause before "talk" made Claire wince even as she laughed.

"No. Thanks but no," she told him. "Now give me back my hat. You've taken my disguise."

"No." Ed touched her temple, as if he couldn't help himself, and smoothed a strand of her hair between two fingers. "Could tell it was you anyway."

Rolling her eyes, she said, "Yeah but Gordon doesn't have your Spidey senses."

All humor disappeared from his eyes, turning them a flat pewter. He dropped his hand from her hair and sat back. "What?"

"I just...I mean..." she stuttered, startled by the drastic change in him. "I meant you just have really good hearing and you spotted me in here when you thought I'd be at the lab and you're totally quiet when you walk around – although I guess walking silently isn't really an official sense. I didn't mean it as a bad thing at all. I just..."

She glanced hopefully at Ed but his impassive expression didn't change. With a groan, she let her head fall back against the booth with a thump. "I'm such a socially impaired lab geek," she sighed. "I introduced you to a *rat*, for God's sake."

That brought a slight lightening of his scowl. "I like Wilma."

"You like the rat," she said, making a face. "Great."

"Like you better."

"Yeah?" A smile tugged at her lips. "Well, I like you too."

"Yeah?" The corners of his mouth turned up and Claire's heart stopped.

Yeah, she thought, *too much*.

* * * * *

"Gonna be okay?" he asked as they arrived at her building.

"Job-wise, you mean?"

He nodded.

"Sure." She shrugged, looking at her feet as she climbed the front steps. "I had a minor freak-out this morning but I think it's for the best. I've been looking anyway."

Sending a sly glance toward Ed, she added, "If I can't find a lab position, I can always be a cage dancer at Taboo."

"No," he grunted, scowling.

"Why not?" Claire gave him an innocent smile. "Don't you think it would be fun to work together?"

With a growl, he pinned her against the front door. Her laughing squeak was cut off as his mouth caught hers, kissing her with such hunger Claire forgot where she was. She grabbed his head with both hands, pulling him into her, desperate for the contact of their lips and tongues, the press of his body against the length of hers.

"Can I *please* get by?" The voice broke them apart. Claire turned dazed eyes to her upstairs neighbor standing behind them. From his irritated expression, it wasn't the first time he had asked them to move.

"Oops – sorry!" Claire ducked to the side of the door, pulling Ed with her, allowing the other man to stomp past them into the building.

She grinned up at Ed. "Want to take this out of traffic? We could go upstairs." It wasn't until the impulsive invitation was out that she felt a flutter of nerves. When he didn't answer immediately, her stomach clenched. "If you don't want to..."

"I want to," he interrupted. "Never wanted anything so much."

"But?"

"You don't know me," he explained.

Claire flushed. "I don't normally do this. I mean, I don't just take guys home –"

"I know." He cut her off. "I don't mean that."

"Oh," she said, confused. "Then what do you mean?"

Although the intensity in his eyes made her want to drop her gaze, Claire didn't look away. It was Ed who finally broke eye contact, glancing over her shoulder and shaking his head.

"Can I see you again?" he asked.

She blinked in surprise. "Of course."

"Tomorrow?"

"Sure." She gave a humorless laugh. "My schedule is completely free now. Although technically, since it's Saturday tomorrow, it would've been free anyway, even if I still had a job. Wait...have I told you 'yes' yet?"

"Lunch?"

"Sure."

Walking backward, Ed began to descend the steps without looking away from her. "Could have a picnic."

"A...picnic?" she repeated faintly. *In November?*

His brows drew together. "Is that stupid?"

"Of course not," she told him, shaking her head firmly. "I was just...surprised. I don't think I've ever been on a picnic."

Ed lifted his hand in a stilted wave, uncertainty looking strange on him. She waved back, sure she appeared twice as awkward as he just did, and slipped through the front door of her building.

As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, she puzzled about the odd conversation. He acted as if he wanted her but, if he did, why hadn't he accepted the offer to come upstairs? God knows she was desperate for him. Her skin still buzzed with excitement from that kiss against the door. The memory drew hot moisture from her pussy and she gave a soft groan as she unlocked the door to her apartment.

He might be able to wait until tomorrow, she thought testily, *but I'm not*. An idea popped into her head and a small, catlike smile touched her lips.

It was a good thing she knew where he worked.

Chapter Four

The dress was a mistake.

In the warmth of her apartment, it'd seemed perfect. The dress had been an impulse buy over a year ago. Even as she'd been pulling out her credit card she'd had no idea where she would wear it. It definitely wasn't lab attire.

Tonight, as she'd dug desperately through her closet, trying in vain to find something even the slightest bit sexy, she'd found the dress. Claire had pulled it out, marveling over the fact she'd almost forgotten it was there. It was a tiny wisp of a thing, red and backless. As the silky fabric slid through her fingers, she'd known she had to wear it.

Now, however, as she walked to the club, she wondered what she'd been thinking. She still hadn't retrieved her coat from the lab and the wind cut across her exposed skin. Although it was well after midnight, the streets were busy and her dress, or lack thereof, was drawing attention.

She increased her pace, moving as fast as she could in her heels, trying to ignore the whistles and shouted come-ons. When Club Taboo came into sight, Claire gave a silent sigh of relief. She spotted Ed towering over the crowd gathered in front of the building. Even this late, there was a line. She hesitated, not sure if she should wait her turn or take advantage of knowing the bouncer.

"Claire!"

Her head whipped around to see Ed striding toward her. As he got closer, her welcoming smile fell away as she saw his scowl.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, looming over her.

Claire had to stop herself from taking a step back. "I—"

Ed cut her off. "Did you walk over? By yourself? Where's your coat?"

Caught between dismay at his reaction and surprise that he had actually interrupted her with more than his usual two words, Claire tried again to explain. "I wanted to see —"

"You shouldn't be here," he said, cutting her off again.

Now she was getting pissed. "I can go wherever I want. Tonight, I wanted to come here."

"Have to get you home," he muttered, almost as if to himself.

"No," she stated. "I'm staying. And dancing. If you don't like it, then you can just...just suck it." Although she held his gaze, Claire winced inwardly at her weak comeback.

"No," he told her. "I don't want you in there alone."

"Too bad. You can't stop me," she said. Only after the words were out did she realize he *could* stop her. In fact, that was his job.

"Fine." She turned abruptly and stepped out into the street. "I'll just find another place. One that will let me in." She heard a growl behind her as she headed toward the other side of the street. Headlights from down the block caught her attention and she walked a little faster.

When she was halfway across the street, she heard the engine rev.

Turning her head, she barely had a chance to register that the oncoming SUV was heading right at her, going much too fast, before she was snatched off her feet and flying through the air.

Although she didn't hit pavement, Claire landed on something that felt almost as hard. Her breath left her in a whoosh as Ed's arms banded around her, tight enough to make her panic. A crowd was gathering around them, voices running together into a jumbled babble as Claire fought for air.

"Whoa, are you guys okay?"

"That dude didn't even stop!"

"You just grabbed her right out from in front of that car — that was amazing!"

"Never saw anyone move that fast before!"

"Did someone call the cops? That driver's probably drunk. He drove right at you like he was *trying* to hit you or something!"

“Hey, man—you might want to loosen up your hold a little. I don’t think she can breathe.”

Claire felt an extreme rush of gratitude for the observant person making the last comment. She felt Ed’s arms relax a fraction and air rushed into her lungs.

“Okay?” he asked as he stood up, pulling her to her feet.

Words were beyond her, so Claire just nodded. Her legs wobbled beneath her, making her thankful Ed held her upright. Someone pushed her small clutch purse into her hand and she gave the woman a shaky smile, grateful the stranger had retrieved her bag from where Claire must have dropped it in the street.

“You two okay?” the other bouncer asked, pushing his way through the crowd. “I called the cops. Whoever that was shouldn’t be driving.”

“Yeah,” Ed told him. “I need to take her home. You good here?”

“Well, sure.” The big man looked surprised. “Aren’t you going to wait ’til the cops get here, though?”

“No.” A path opened up as Ed began shouldering his way through the crowd, almost carrying Claire.

“It’s okay,” she finally managed to say as they left the still-buzzing group of people behind them. “I can walk.”

He allowed her to support a fraction more of her weight, although his arm stayed locked around her.

“Thank you,” she added after a short pause. “Sorry I got all snippy with you before. I was just,” she shrugged a little, embarrassed, “disappointed.”

He gave her a questioning look.

Now she could feel her skin heating with a flush. Her face probably matched her dress. “I just thought you’d be more, well...happy. To see me.”

“I was,” he rebutted. “Then I was worried. Then pissed. Then worried again.”

“Oh.” She considered this. “I *am* a fully functioning adult, you know. I’ve survived for twenty-seven years before meeting you. I’m capable of walking around on my own.”

"Where's your coat?"

Right, there was that. Walking around in the November cold without a coat was probably not the best indicator of self-sufficiency. "Um, I left it at the lab. I'll go back to get it—I just didn't want to see Gordon again so soon."

Ed stopped and pulled his arm away. She looked at him in surprise as he pulled his long-sleeved knit shirt off over his head.

"Are you joining me in chilly solidarity?" she asked, starting to smile.

He ignored her question and ordered, "Hold up your arms."

"What?" She shook her head. "I'm not taking your shirt."

"Arms."

Heaving a sigh, she gave in, allowing him to slip the top on over her dress. It was blissful, the fabric still warm from his body, smelling like fall and clean male.

"You'll freeze," she protested weakly, hugging the shirt against her. The sleeves fell over her hands, even warming her chilly fingers.

He just shook his head and wrapped his arm around her again. Her knees, which had finally stopped shaking from almost being run over by a drunk driver, now grew rubbery from being held so close to his bare chest. She couldn't pull her eyes away from the hard, exposed planes of his body.

"You must work out *all* the time," she marveled.

"Not really," he said dismissively. "Sure you're okay?"

With enormous strength of will, she ripped her gaze from the hypnotic motion of his ab muscles and looked up at his face. "Absolutely. Not a scratch. Do you think we should have waited for the police to come? Whoever that was shouldn't be driving. They could really hurt someone."

"Lots of witnesses." He glanced down at her. "You see anything?"

"Just headlights." She shivered at the blurred memory. "Thank you again—you probably saved my life."

Ed grunted in response and then asked, "What's your ex-boss drive?"

"Gordon?" Claire stared at him. Was he suggesting...? "I'm not sure what he drives. I don't think I've ever seen his car. He lives pretty close to the lab, so he just walks to work. Why?"

"Seems the most likely suspect," he told her. "Unless you've pissed off someone else recently?"

She shook her head. "Of course not but Gordon wouldn't do that, would he? I mean, try to kill me?" Her stomach churned at the idea. She preferred to think it was an anonymous drunk driver, not someone she'd known and worked with daily for two years. "No." She shook her head briskly. "He's an ass but he's not homicidal."

Although Ed's grunt was skeptical, he didn't contradict her as he helped her climb the stairs to the front door of her building. He held out an expectant hand. Claire didn't argue, just dug her keys out of her bag and handed them over.

When they reached the door to her apartment, he opened that as well. Instead of stepping back like he had the night before, he followed her in, swinging the door shut behind them and twisting the deadbolt. Claire gave him a quick surprised look.

"I'm not leaving you alone," he stated, his face set. "I can sleep on the couch."

"No." After the word left her mouth, Claire flushed a deep red but held his eyes fiercely. There was no way he could stay the entire night and not be in her bed – in *her* .

"I'm staying," he insisted.

"Fine," she agreed, clearing her throat when her voice cracked. "But not on my couch."

She saw his throat move as he swallowed. His eyes had heated to silver again. "You don't know me," he said hoarsely.

She scowled. "I hate it when you say that. It makes me feel like such a slut. I don't drag every strange guy I meet into my bed, you know."

He flinched, the muscles in his face tightening so slightly Claire wondered if she imagined it. Shaking his head, he told her, "I didn't mean that."

"Then what's the problem?" Her voice grew husky as she took a step closer to Ed.

His hand lifted, as if to touch her face, but froze before making contact.

"What if, after..." He dropped his hand.

"What?" she asked in almost a whisper.

"You find out things about me."

Despite the urgent desire licking beneath her skin, Claire had to smile. "Isn't that the point of getting to know someone?"

He didn't return the smile. "What if it makes you not like me anymore?"

"That's just the risk you take," she answered thoughtfully, catching his hand in hers and kissing the palm. She felt him shudder, a barely there vibration, and thrilled in the knowledge she could affect him so strongly. "I have all sorts of bad habits you don't know about—I drink out of the milk carton and I love trashy reality TV shows and sometimes I fart in bed," that one surprised a snort of laughter out of Ed, "but we just have to find out if something's a deal breaker. There's no guarantee we'll be together forever but I just know, right now, I really, really want you. You married?"

"No."

"Then what's the problem?"

Ed tugged his hand from hers so he could cup her face. "Little mouse," he said, so gently she felt the prickle of tears behind her eyes and nose.

She masked the rush of emotion with a mock frown. "You know, that nickname falls under the little annoying things that—"

He cut her off with a kiss. It started off sweet and slow, but the instant rush of heat made Claire gasp against his mouth. His tongue invaded as his arm wrapped around her hips, lifting her feet clear of the floor in order to pin her body against his.

He nipped at her lips and she moaned into his mouth, so distracted by the feel of his tongue and teeth she barely noticed he was moving to the couch. The world tilted as he tipped her backward, following her down until his weight pressed her into the cushions, his erection throbbing against her thigh.

Wrapping her legs around his hips, Claire ground against him, desperately needing the pressure against her pussy to assuage the ache that had been building

since her first glimpse of him. He groaned at the contact and rolled, tumbling them both off the couch.

They landed with Ed on the bottom and Claire had a momentary flash to earlier, when he had pulled her out of the way of the SUV and she had toppled onto his hard chest. Now, however, his chest was bare and there was no crowd watching. Flattening her fingers against his lightly furred pecs, she pushed herself up until she sat straddling his stomach, her tiny, soaking-wet panties the only barrier between his skin and her pussy.

Her fingers flexed, digging into muscle, and his head tipped back against the floor, his eyes closing, the muscles in his face pulled tight as she rocked against his hard belly. Ed's hands caught her hips, holding her tightly against him for an excruciating second before he released her to grab the hem of the shirt she was still wearing.

He pushed her back until she straddled his hips so he could sit up. He pulled the shirt up and off as Claire raised her arms obediently, leaning her shoulder blades against his up-drawn knees.

"That dress is hot," he growled, staring at her with hungry eyes.

She wriggled in pleasure and then groaned as hot spikes of sensation shot through her pussy at the movement. The slightly rough fabric beneath her was almost as arousing as his bare stomach had been. "Didn't think you'd noticed," she tried to purr, although it came out more as a gasp.

"I noticed."

The room blurred as Ed reversed their positions, flipping them both over so she was on the bottom. One arm was wrapped around Claire's waist as the other supported them both in a sort of one-armed, two-person push-up while he slowly lowered them until her back touched the floor. She marveled again at his strength. No matter what he said, she knew he must work out for *hours* every day.

He kissed her again and all rational thought disappeared. His mouth was purposeful, intent, claiming ownership of hers. Claire grasped his head, pulling him

into her, wanting him inside her — tongue, cock, everything. She wrapped her legs around his torso and he grasped her thigh, his fingers slipping across her sensitive skin until he touched the edge of her panties.

She froze, all sensation focused on the fingertips slipping beneath the damp fabric, tracing the outline of her pussy before pushing into her. As the thick digit penetrated, Claire unthinkingly sank her teeth into his bottom lip. With a snarl, he yanked his mouth away and thrust his finger deep, parting the tight muscles with inexorable force.

She came, twisting against his hand, her body clamping around his finger, trying to hold him inside her. Her head thrashed against the floor as heavy waves of pleasure broke over her.

Ed yanked the neckline of her dress down, exposing her breasts, and caught an erect nipple in his mouth. He withdrew his finger to catch her clit in a gentle tug. Still caught in the final shivers of her orgasm, Claire jolted at the double assault on her senses, the pulling suction of his lips on her breast and the squeeze and flick of his fingers.

Fighting for control, she moaned as the sensations began to build again. The pleasure radiating through her body had taken over, whipping her into another climax, this one even stronger than the first. Digging her nails into the clenching muscles of his shoulders, Claire cried out as she toppled over the edge again.

She drifted, eyes closed, floating on the lingering threads of her orgasm, the heat and weight of Ed's body blanketing her. Her legs relaxed, her ankles sliding down the length of his thighs until she let them slip to the floor.

It's nice , she thought sleepily. I hope he stays.

"Claire?" The concern in Ed's voice pulled her back to reality and she opened her eyes to meet his silver gaze. She offered him a sated smile.

"Okay?" he asked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, and she nodded.

"Oh yes," she purred, running her fingers along the dips and planes of his muscled back. "Never better."

He watched her uncertainly and she realized his erection, still barricaded behind his pants, was as rigid as ever. The bulge pressed against her hip. With a small smile, she traced his waistband around his sides and into the small of his back, sliding her fingers between his pants and skin. Burrowing beneath the elastic band of his underwear, Claire dug her fingers into the hard globes of his ass.

His eyes closed as if he were in pain. He pulled her hands free and turned, making the world spin around her as he rolled them both over once again so she was on top. Eager to wrap her fingers around his erection, Claire pushed herself back until she straddled his thighs and fumbled to unfasten his pants, carefully easing the zipper over the straining bulge. She tugged his pants and underwear past his hips and off his legs, pulling off his shoes and socks as she went. Ed allowed her to strip him naked and she felt a pulse of power and arousal that this powerful man would let her do what she wished to him.

Her dress was still tangled around her middle and she pulled it off impatiently, leaving her in only a tiny pair of panties. His molten gaze was locked on her as she knelt above him.

That heat fueled her confidence. With hands that trembled only a little, she touched her stomach, feeling the muscles jump beneath her skin. She trailed her fingers over her ribs to the small mounds of her breasts, pinching the hard points of her nipples, unable to hold back a moan as pleasure shot through her.

At the husky sound, Ed surged up, catching her around the waist and yanking her down to him. His impatient hand stripped her panties down her thighs and over her knees. Claire kicked the small scrap of fabric off her feet, relieved the final barrier was gone, and pressed her naked pussy against his stomach.

He froze.

"What?" she gasped, already desperate for him again.

"Condom," he grunted. "Don't have any."

Claire blinked at him. Didn't every guy carry at least one in his wallet? Wasn't that one of the man rules? "None?"

He gave a short shake of his head. "Didn't know I'd see you tonight."

The implications of that statement made her catch her breath. "But what if you'd found another woman you needed to walk home during your break?"

Ed just looked at her as if she were crazy. "No."

Any condom Claire had in the house would be scarily past its expiration date. "Guess we'll just have to improvise."

The eyebrow was questioning her again.

She smiled. "Just leave it to me, Eddie."

His grunt was suspicious but she ignored it and kissed his mouth. When his hand cupped the back of her head, trying to pull her harder into the kiss, she squirmed free. She had a plan now.

Claire planted a trail of kisses across those hard planes of his chest she'd been admiring during their walk home, working from the indentation above his breastbone to his nipple. Flicking the point with her tongue, Claire could feel the shockwaves echoing through his chest. He barely seemed to move but that just made every slight quiver, every tiny vibration, so dramatic.

It became a game for her, to see if she could draw a reaction from him, a movement or a sound. Claire used her whole body, allowing her hair to brush his chest, her breasts to drag across his rippling belly, while she caught his nipple in her teeth, closing just hard enough to confuse the pain with pleasure. The memory of how it'd felt when he'd lightly bitten her in the supply closet made her squirm against him. His hands found her head, his fingers burying themselves in her hair. He didn't direct her movements but just held her lightly.

Claire moved to his other nipple and sucked it between her lips, using the tip of her tongue to tease it to a sharp point. She was gentle, licking and sucking, and his fingers tightened.

"Harder," he rasped, echoing her words from earlier, and she raised her head to look at him in surprise. Ed had been so quiet up to this point.

“Yeah?” she purred with a slow smile. “Like this?” Lowering her head, Claire nipped the straining nub sharply and felt his muscles contract beneath her. She glanced at him. “Did I do that right?”

“Yeah,” he growled. “Again.” His hands on her head grew more insistent as they urged her back toward his chest. Claire was happy to oblige, alternating between gentle tongue and rougher teeth until sweat began to slick his skin. Deciding she had to taste, she lapped at the salty moisture, drawing a line down his abdomen with her tongue.

As she slid down his body, her nipples brushed against his skin until the tips were tight and almost painfully sensitive. The wet tip of his cock bumped her chin and she turned her head, allowing her cheek and lips to touch his straining erection. It burned against her skin, almost hot enough to brand her as his.

He shuddered as her hair brushed against his cock. Delighted she’d drawn such an obvious reaction from him, she hid his erection in the silky fall, dragging the strands along his length just to hear him gasp.

Although she was tempted to tease him some more, the rigid cock in front of her was too hard to resist. Claire licked the head, decided she loved his taste and probed the slit with the point of her tongue. She smiled at his almost silent groan, knowing the quiet sound was equal to a shout from any other man.

His fingers worked against her head, tightening and then easing, and she could almost read his mental battle just from that movement of his hands. He was dying to take control, she could tell, but he resisted the urge, allowing her to have her way with him instead. As a reward, Claire cradled his balls in one hand as she closed her lips around the head of his cock.

His hips bucked and he swore. She smiled around the tip of his erection and then swallowed half his length. Giving his sac a gentle squeeze, Claire drew back until she could tease the head with her tongue. Releasing his balls, she wrapped her fingers around the base of his cock and took him in her mouth, deeper and deeper, until her lips met her hand.

Her fist followed her mouth as she raised and lowered her head, pressing her tongue against the underside of his cock. She took him deeper, swallowing the blunt tip to the back of her throat.

With a guttural sound, Ed tightened his hands around her head and he took control, holding her still as his hips thrust up into her mouth. She took him eagerly, licking and sucking as best she could. The ruthless way he fucked her mouth excited her and she moaned, her grip tightening on the base of his cock.

"Close," he gritted, pulling out, but Claire tugged free of his hands and followed him, closing her lips around his cock again. With a shout, he came, filling her mouth with hot cum. She sucked at him eagerly, taking everything he could give her, loving the taste and intensity of him.

His hands were back on her head, stroking this time instead of clutching. His tense muscles relaxed and Claire pulled off, giving his cock a final lick as she did so. He shivered and growled, making her smile. She rested her cheek on his stomach, wanting to crawl up to kiss his mouth but feeling oddly shy. Catching her under the arms, Ed hauled her up his body so she was lying on top of him.

Tucking his cheek against hers, Ed exhaled, sending a warm, damp draft against her ear. She shivered.

"Cold?" he rasped.

Claire shook her head, bumping gently against his cheek, enjoying the sweaty heat of him, the rough drag of stubble against her skin. "Just..." She trailed off, not knowing how to explain the feeling that had washed over her, the sensation of something new, exciting, life changing, all happening in one moment. She gave up trying to explain. "Yeah, a little."

Twisting around, he rolled to his feet, somehow managing to scoop her up in his arms as he stood.

He's freakishly strong, Claire thought, bemused and turned-on – again.

"I'll get you to bed, little mouse," he growled. "You won't be cold anymore."

She bit her lip, her breath stalling in her chest. The inflection in his voice had made the words sound like a promise, as if he was going to personally make sure she was never cold again—ever.

Chapter Five

"Wake up."

The words were almost inaudible, less than a whisper, but they brought Claire to immediate consciousness. Her eyes flew open, giving her a sideways view of her room. She sat up with an inhaled gasp.

"Shh," Ed hushed as he leaned over her. His chest was still bare but his pants were on. "Get dressed. Need to get you out."

Obediently pushing herself out of bed and to her feet, she blinked at him, trying to make sense of the situation. "Wh—"

He silenced her with a shake of his head, grabbing her hand and pulling her into the living room.

"I can't go anywhere," she protested in a whisper. "I'm naked!"

Glancing back at her, Ed gave a short nod and scooped her crumpled dress off the floor. Bemused, she allowed him to tug it over her head. The urgent way he was moving as he dressed her was scaring her. When her dress was pretty much in place, she glanced around for her panties but Ed seized her hand again and towed her toward the door, almost yanking her off her feet.

"What's going on?" she hissed.

He eased the door open and checked the hallway. "Fire," he grunted over his shoulder.

"But..." Claire shook her head, still not sure if she was awake. "There's no smoke."

"It's not lit yet," he said, and pulled her out of the apartment.

"Wait," she yelped, grabbing at the doorframe as he yanked her through. "Keys!"

"Got them," he whispered impatiently. "Let's go."

After quickly snatching up her purse from the table next to the door, she allowed him to haul her into the hallway. He closed the apartment door soundlessly behind

them before moving toward the stairs. Claire, her hand still caught in his, had no choice but to follow.

"But there's no fire," she whispered, stumbling down the stairs after him.

"There will be – soon," he told her without slowing.

She stared at the back of his head. "What? How do you know?"

He barged through the front door of the building and into the biting wind. Ed didn't stop but towed her across the street to the entrance of another building. He tucked her into a corner of the recessed doorway, running a hand over her bare arm.

"Forgot a blanket." He frowned at the goose bumps lifting on her arms.

"Ed, what's happening?" she asked. "You're freaking me out. Why do you think there's going to be a fire?"

"I heard him. Then I smelled the gas," he explained. "Stay here." With that, he turned and shot back across the street, disappearing into the shadows draping one corner of her building.

"Wait!" Claire whisper-yelled into the empty darkness. "Damn it, Ed, enough with the super-smeller Spidey senses. Get your ass back here and tell me what's going on!"

Her quiet tirade did not get a response. Sliding down to sit on her heels, she wrapped her arms around herself and shivered. She was tempted to go back into her apartment but Ed had the keys. Besides, as crazy as he had sounded, talking about a fire that hadn't started yet, there was something about him that made her trust him, urging her to obey when he told her to get out of the apartment.

She sighed and hugged herself tighter. It wouldn't hurt to hang out here for a while, she figured. Just in case. Claire made a face. She hated feeling helpless. Pulling her cell phone from her purse, she stared at the lit screen for a second before dialing.

"9-1-1. What's your emergency?"

Claire hesitated for a second, not able to bring herself to report an as-yet non-existent fire. "I...um, I think I smell smoke."

When she first saw the movement, Claire thought it was her imagination. After stammering out the address of the building, she pretended to lose the cell connection and hung up, turning her phone off. As her head came up after slipping the phone back in her purse, she saw a shadow shift.

Claire strained her eyes and saw it again. Something – someone – was easing around the front of the building, bent low, scurrying around the pools of light created by the streetlights.

“That you, Ed?” she asked in a tiny voice, knowing it wasn’t even as she asked the question. The figure was too slight.

The person began crossing the weedy vacant lot next to Claire’s building, moving more casually, as if he was confident in his undetected escape. Claire bit her lip, glancing around for Ed but there was no sign of him. If she didn’t do something, this guy – who may or may not have just set fire to her home – was going to get away. With an almost inaudible groan of terror, Claire hurried across the street after the disappearing shadow.

She jogged across the lot, stifling a squeak of pain as her bare foot came down on a buckthorn. Her eyes watered as she yanked out the tiny burr and set her foot down again tentatively. Thoughts of broken beer bottles and rusted nails chased through her head but she forced herself to keep moving.

Reaching the edge of the weedy lot, Claire peered into the alley that bordered it and spotted the figure. He was almost to the cross street and Claire felt a bolt of panic, worried he would turn the corner and disappear. She started running down the alley, her bare feet silent on the pavement. Small stones and debris scattered around the Dumpsters dug into the soles of her feet. She ignored the biting pain, forcing herself to concentrate on the dark silhouette in front of her and the narrowing distance between them.

The figure darted left as he exited the alley, hurrying to a dark-colored van parked on the side of the road. He swung into the driver’s seat and the vehicle roared

to life a second later. With a final burst of speed, Claire shot behind the van, hoping to at least get the license plate number.

Only two of the letters were visible — the rest were obscured by dirt and darkness. The van pulled away from the curb as frustration and panic flooded Claire. Without thinking, she sprinted to catch up, grabbing a door handle and yanking herself up to stand on the back bumper.

What are you doing?! the sane portion of her mind shrieked. Clinging stubbornly to the door handle as the van accelerated, Claire bracketed the tow hitch with her bare feet, intensely glad the cargo van didn't have rear windows. She realized she still clutching her small purse in her other hand and gave a small sob of relief. On their walk home the previous afternoon, she had finally gotten Ed's cell number.

Holding the purse between the van door and the side of her bent knee, Claire managed to open the bag. Her fingers just touched her phone as the van hit a pothole and her whole body bounced, only her one-handed grip on the door handle keeping her from flying off onto the pavement. The purse slipped, falling until she trapped it against the van with her free hand and the side of her calf.

Breathing so hard she was almost sobbing, Claire pulled the bag up and pinned it with her knee again, her fingers shaking so much it was hard to grab the phone. She finally managed to grip the cell in her sweating hand, fumbling to push the button to pull up Ed's number.

Putting the phone to her ear, she struggled to keep her balance as the van turned right and accelerated again. They were on Walnut Street now, which Claire knew had a thirty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit, but they were only a few miles from the interstate. She flinched at the idea.

The phone was ringing in her ear. Claire almost cried in relief.

"Where are you?" Ed barked. It was the most wonderful sound she had ever heard. Emergency sirens wailed in the background of the call.

"I'm on his van," she said as softly as possible, not sure if the driver had his window rolled down or not.

“Where exactly?”

Claire blinked. She had expected more demands for explanations. “Walnut and...” She strained to see the cross street as they flew past the sign. “Thirty-Second. Heading north. I...um, think it’s north.”

“Hold on.”

With a hysterical choke of laughter, Claire glanced at her fingers, tight around the door handle. *Not much choice with that one*, she thought.

“Okay.” There was only silence on the other end. “Ed?” She heard her voice trail upward with a ring of hysteria and she forced herself to calm down. He would come get her. Even though the roads were empty of cars or pedestrians, the van would have to stop at a red light or stop sign soon, wouldn’t it? Pressing back another surge of panic, Claire worked her phone back in her bag and grasped her purse in her free hand.

It was freezing cold and she couldn’t feel her fingers. She stared at her hand to make sure she hadn’t accidentally let go of the door handle. The van began to slow and Claire’s stomach jumped in excitement but her relief was short-lived. The vehicle picked up speed again and they barreled through the intersection.

“Stupid synchronized traffic lights,” she muttered, shifting on the bumper. Her arm ached from the strain of the bumps and turns, and she was pretty sure one of her feet was bleeding, because the bumper was growing wet and slick beneath her.

There was a faint sound. She cocked her head, unsure if she was really hearing the noise over the grumbling roar of the van engine. It was definitely there – a high-pitched buzz, growing louder. Looking behind her, Claire saw a single headlight behind them, coming up fast. The motorcycle flew around the van, giving her just a glimpse of Ed before he was past.

She wondered what he was doing for a split second before the van screeched to a complete halt, flattening Claire against the door. She bounced off onto the pavement as the van started forward again, swerving to the right.

Scrambling to her feet, Claire saw Ed leap off the motorcycle. He'd swung right in front of the van, forcing it to stop. As the driver accelerated, maneuvering around the bike, Ed ran to the side of the van and ripped the driver's side door completely off.

Grabbing the arsonist and pulling him out of the vehicle, holding the man with a fist knotted in his coat, Ed reached into the still-rolling van and shoved the gearshift into park.

Claire stared, stunned. He'd peeled off the van door as if it'd been made of aluminum foil. That just wasn't...normal.

"Put me down, man!" the guy yelled as Ed pinned him against the side of the van, forearm to throat.

"Why'd you start the fire?" Ed demanded, increasing the pressure against the other man's neck. The trapped arsonist gasped for air, his hands scrabbling at Ed's impervious arm. Ed let up fractionally and the man inhaled sharply.

"What're you talking about?" the man wheezed. "I don't know nothing about a fire—" The rest of his words were choked off as Ed's arm pressed down, squeezing against his throat.

Jerking out of her frozen trance, Claire took a step toward the two men, wanting to protest but only managing a small, strangled sound. Ed tipped his head toward her, giving her a small shake of his head. His arm must have lightened, though, as the other man was able to take a long, wheezing breath.

"Why?" Ed asked again.

The man's eyes were wide with panic and a continued need for air. "Wait!" he shrieked as Ed made a tiny movement, as if to press on his throat again. "Wait, I'll tell you! It ain't worth it—not for ten thousand bucks."

Ed didn't blink. "Who hired you?"

"Some prissy little shit—I don't know his name. Works in that yellow building on Fountain and Broad Street."

"Gordon?" Claire gasped.

The man glanced over at her but Ed grabbed a handful of his lank hair and wrenched his head back around.

“Don’t look at her,” Ed growled. “This guy – short, goatee, brown hair?”

“Yeah.” The man tried to nod and winced when Ed’s fist held. “Last week, he wanders into Captain’s – you know, that bar on Fourth?” He paused expectantly, but when Ed’s rigid expression didn’t change, he hurried to continue. “Anyway, this guy needed something – easy to tell he wasn’t there for a game of pool. I’m always looking for...new business opportunities, so I take a seat and start talkin’. Turns out this guy has a problem,” his eyes slid toward Claire again before quickly darting back to Ed, “and he has cash for the guy who can solve it. Said he might not need my help but he was back at Captain’s yesterday. Told me where she lives, said it was a firetrap just waiting for a spark, and took off. It’s not like I’m suspicious but I figured it’d be a good idea to follow him, get an idea of where I could find him if he doesn’t come through with the cash. That’s when I saw where he worked.”

A police siren wailed faintly through the night and the arsonist looked simultaneously panicked and hopeful. Ed hauled the man to the back of the van and opened the door, glancing around the cargo area before pulling out a roll of duct tape.

Shock after shock had rendered Claire numb and she was surprised to find herself mildly curious. “How’d you know that was there?” she asked, stepping closer as Ed proceeded to hogtie the other man with the tape.

“There’s always duct tape in a van,” Ed answered matter-of-factly, reaching into the other man’s coat pocket and pulling out his cell phone before picking up the arsonist by his bound wrists and ankles and tossing him into the back of his van. Slamming the door on the man’s protests, Ed punched in three numbers, waited several seconds and then clipped out, “The man who set fire to the Carrendine Apartments is in the back of his van on Walnut Street, just east of Barrel Park.”

He wiped the phone off on his shirt and let it fall to the ground. The police siren was growing louder and Claire could see the flashing lights, still several blocks away but approaching fast. Ed grabbed her hand, towing her to the motorcycle and tossing

her onto it. She straddled it automatically, her dress pulling up around her thighs as he mounted in front of her.

As the bike peeled away, Claire was thrown backward and she grabbed for Ed's waist. Pressing her cheek against his bare back, she wrapped her arms around his chest. The heat radiating off him burned her skin. She clutched him tightly, hungry for his warmth, especially as the early dawn air tore at her exposed legs. As the numbness began to wear off, deep shudders racked her body, vibrating through her and making her teeth chatter uncontrollably.

The shivers had still not abated when Ed slowed the bike, turning it into a narrow alley and easing the motorcycle to the door of a detached garage. He swung off the bike, supporting it with one hand while punching a code in the keypad by the door with the other. The garage door opened quietly. As soon as the door was high enough, Ed rolled the bike into the dark, empty space.

Even after the motorcycle was parked and turned off, Claire sat where she was, knowing it was useless to stand up – she would just fall down anyway. Ed seemed to understand this as he wordlessly picked her up and carried her out of the garage through a side door, across the dimly lit yard to the back porch of the house.

The effortless way he shifted and held her in one arm while unlocking the multiple deadbolts on the door reminded Claire of the way he had wrenched the van door off its hinges.

"Put me down," she ordered.

Ed ignored her, shouldering his way through the door and into his kitchen, switching her to one arm again as he deactivated the security system.

Panicked now, Claire twisted in his hold and shoved at his shoulders. "I said, put me *down* ." It was like pushing against a marble statue – he didn't even flinch at her struggles.

"No," he told her evenly. "Your feet are cut."

She froze. "How do you know that?" Her voice had a shrill edge. "And how did you smell smoke when there wasn't a fire? And hear Gordon at the office when he wasn't even in the building? And how did you rip off the van door?"

Instead of answering, Ed carefully set her on the kitchen counter and reached over her head. She flinched as his arm came up and he paused, his face blanking of all expression, before pulling a white box out of the cupboard. Claire recognized it as a first-aid kit and flushed, embarrassment adding to her anger and confusion.

"How can you do these things?" she demanded. "How?"

He shrugged, focused on the bottom of her foot. "I work out."

"No," she insisted, shaking her head, pressing back the hysteria that threatened to overtake her. "I saw you tear that door off. It wasn't normal. *You're* not normal."

That brought his head up. "'Course I am. It was just adrenaline," he said, his voice gruff.

Claire just shook her head, exhaustion and fear and anger swamping her and sucking away her energy. "How strong you are, how sharp your senses are – it's like you're not even human."

He dropped her foot and took a step backward, looking as if she had kicked him in the gut. "I'm human."

"Then how can you do those things?" Claire asked plaintively, almost crying, she was so tired and confused. Her feet were throbbing now and her legs and arms stung as the warmth of Ed's house thawed her numbness.

Ed's jaw clenched, his mouth held tight as he stared over her shoulder into nothingness. The strangeness of the situation, the craziness of the night, rushed over her and she began to shiver, despite the burn of her exposed skin.

"I should go," she mumbled, pushing off the counter.

He stepped forward, catching her before her feet could touch the floor. "You can't."

Fear instantly caught her and she stiffened as she stared at him. "*I can*," she protested, hating how her voice wavered. "I'm going home." As soon as the words

left her mouth, she remembered that her home was most likely currently on fire. Plus, since her face had been buried against his back for the whole trip to his house, Claire had no idea where she was. She realized with building panic she was completely dependent on Ed to get her home. She didn't even know what his address was.

"Don't be scared," he told her, and his harsh command only made it worse. At her flinch, he shook his head. "I meant you can't walk. I'll take you to a hotel. Just let me take care of your feet first."

Her racing heartbeat slowed as the logic of his words penetrated and she eased back onto the counter. "Thank you," she said quietly, and he gave a short nod, his jaw muscles tight as he cleaned the blood from her feet.

There was a thick silence in the kitchen as he worked and Claire chewed her lip. Now that the flash of panic had eased, she felt silly and a little guilty for how she'd acted. The guy had saved her life *twice* now and he was, at this very moment, wiping blood off her feet. How could she be scared of him?

"I'm sorry," she said, reaching to touch his bent head.

He looked up, meeting her eyes for a long moment. Finally, he nodded and shifted his gaze as he picked tweezers out of the first-aid box. He crouched and, holding her foot still with one hand, yanked something out of her heel.

The sharp pain made her gasp and easy tears filled her eyes, blurring Ed and the object caught in the tweezers. She blinked rapidly, determined not to be a baby and cry over such a small hurt.

"Okay?" He stood, watching her face closely.

"No," she told him, her voice wavering. "I lost my job, my boss tried to kill me and my new boyfriend is... I don't know *what* my new boyfriend is!" She ended with a wail, giving up the effort to be brave and hold back the tears.

He stared at her, a touch of panic in his eyes. Putting the tweezers and whatever had been embedded in her foot on the counter, he reached a hand toward her but hesitated before his fingers touched her face.

All her doubts and fears about what he could do — what he *was* — were shoved aside by her exhaustion and pain and overriding misery. Throwing her arms around his neck, she buried her face in his hard shoulder and sobbed. Her feet hurt, she was tired and she just wanted to cling to Ed and cry, so she did.

“Mouse.” He patted her back awkwardly. “It’s okay. Don’t cry.”

That just made her wail louder. “Bu-but I wa-want to cry!”

“Okay,” he said, definitely sounding panicky now. If Claire hadn’t been bawling, she would’ve laughed. “Okay, you can cry.” He patted her again.

Gradually, her tears eased off and only the leftover hiccupping sobs remained. She kept her face against his shoulder.

“I need to put antiseptic on your feet,” Ed said a little tentatively. Claire just shook her head against him, not wanting him to see her face. After that kind of crying, she knew she’d be puffy and red-eyed and pathetic looking.

He cleared his throat. “I don’t want the cuts to get infected.”

Claire sighed. “Fine.” Pulling back, she dropped her arms from around his neck and stared at her bare knees. He crouched again and dabbed something on the soles of her feet that stung like hell. She stared fiercely at where the hem of her dress lay against her thighs, determined not to even flinch at the pain. She’d already acted like enough of a crybaby for one night.

Ed finished and quickly cleaned up, tucking the first-aid kit back in the cupboard. Standing in front of her, close but not touching, he looked at her, his jaw muscle working again.

“Did you want to go to a hotel now?” he asked.

She shook her head. At the offer, the final dregs of her fear faded. Besides, the last thing she wanted was to get back on that motorcycle right now. “Can I...?” Her voice cracked. “Can I stay here?” When he didn’t answer right away, she hurried to continue. “Just ‘til morning, I mean. Then I’ll get out of your hair. I could sleep on the couch—”

He kissed her. Cupping her face in both hands, he let his lips cling to hers. When he pulled back she gave him a shaky smile.

"Best way to shut me up?"

The corner of his mouth twitched. "No. I like hearing you talk. Just...wanted to kiss you." His stroked his thumbs across her cheeks.

The tears were rising again. Claire fought them back. "Can I sleep with you?" She flushed. Her question sounded so pathetically needy.

Ed didn't seem to mind but lifted her off the counter and carried her out the kitchen, flicking off the light as he went. He brought her through the house and up the stairs to a bedroom dimly illuminated by the city lights.

As he sat her on the bed, she looked up at him. "I hate to ask for one more thing, but can I borrow a t-shirt to sleep in?"

"Course." He pulled a shirt from one of the drawers in the dresser and brought it over to her. "Socks too. To protect your feet."

This'll be a sexy look. "Thanks," she told him and pulled on the socks. "Where's your bathroom?" As she slid toward the edge of the bed, Ed moved as if to pick her up again.

Claire shook her head. "Thanks, caveman, but I can make it on my own. Bathroom?"

He frowned at her but she just waited, giving him her own lifted-eyebrow look. Finally, he jerked his head toward the hallway. "First door on the right."

"Thanks." As she stood up, he hovered, as if preparing to catch her if she fell over. Although it hurt to stand, Claire kept her face expressionless, worried he'd snatch her off her feet if she showed any sign of pain.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't completely hide her limp as she walked toward the door.

"Let me—" he started to say but she gave him a look over her shoulder.

"No. I'm fine."

"But—"

"Zip it." She pointed a warning finger at him.

His mouth twitched. "Zip it?"

"Exactly." Claire turned down the hall. Away from Ed's watchful eye, she let her face contort into the pained grimace she'd been holding back since she first stood up. She also quit trying to hide her limp. Shuffling into the bathroom, Claire swung the door shut and sat down on the closed toilet seat with a relieved exhale.

"Okay?" Ed called through the door and she rolled her eyes.

"Fine!" she yelled back.

He was quiet but she knew he was out there, waiting. With a sigh, she forced her tired body to stand up. She probably only had a few minutes before he started knocking on the door.

* * * * *

When she yanked open the door a short time later, Claire expected to find Ed lurking outside. To her surprise, the hall was empty. She made her slow, painful way back to the bedroom.

Ed was leaning next to the window, staring out. He looked over when she came in but didn't move.

"Sorry I'm being so cranky," she told him, easing onto the bed, utterly relieved to sit. "Thanks for the t-shirt." She smoothed the cotton fabric over her knees. The shirt hung on her, swamping her form. "It's a little small but..." Claire gave him a tentative smile.

Although he didn't smile back, he crossed the room to stand in front of her. "I don't mean to be so..." Letting the sentence trail off as his gaze shifted away, he shrugged.

"Hover-y?" she filled in, pulling back the covers and climbing beneath them.

"I guess." He frowned. "Is that even a word?"

She shrugged. Nestled beneath the covers with her head on a fluffy pillow, she didn't really care whether it was or not. Ed was still standing next to the bed.

“Aren’t you going to sleep?” she asked. Her eyelids felt weighted and she struggled to keep them open as she waited for an answer.

He nodded, his hands going to the button on his pants. The zipper sounded loud in the hush of the bedroom. Despite her exhaustion, Claire fought to stay awake. She didn’t want to miss Ed taking his pants off.

It was worth the effort. The fabric pooled around his ankles and he stepped clear of them. His boxer briefs were fairly snug, creating an interesting outline in his crotch. Claire watched as he bent to pick up his pants. Shaking them out, he walked over to a chair next to the door and tossed them over the back.

All urge to sleep was gone, replaced by fascination and desire. Her mouth suddenly dry, she swallowed as Ed approached the bed. He lifted the covers and slid in next to her. Although he didn’t touch her, she could feel the heat of him along the whole length of her body.

She waited for him to pull her against him but he lay still. Biting her lip, Claire called herself all kinds of idiot. After the way she’d freaked out on him in the kitchen, how did she expect him to behave? Right here, with a mostly naked Ed a few inches away from her, Claire didn’t care about super-smelling skills or crazy-strong muscles. She just wanted him to touch her and that didn’t appear to be happening.

Unable to resist, she eased her hand toward him until her fingers bumped his. She explored his hand blindly, tracing the rough palm and the curl of his fingers. Except for an occasional twitch of reaction, Ed kept his hand unmoving, allowing her to do as she wished. Just as it had before, this excited her — this implied permission to do whatever she liked with him.

Turning her palm against his, Claire laced their fingers together. Ed did move then, squeezing her hand. She rolled toward him, not able to stay away any longer. Her free hand flattened against his chest and she felt his groan vibrating through her fingers.

His arm snaked beneath her and pulled her against him.

Claire snorted a laugh. "My pillow was softer," she told him, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

"Sorry," he grunted, turning as if to put her back where she was. Claire stretched an arm around his chest and clung.

"I'm teasing," she said as she hung on, refusing to be dislodged from his side. "I'm good here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Chapter Six

Claire woke in the exact position she was in when she'd fallen asleep. The only difference was the daylight streaming in the window. The events of the previous night and early morning seemed fuzzy and dreamlike, although the hard shoulder beneath her cheek and the broad hand on her ass were real enough.

She squirmed a little as she realized her improvised nightshirt had ridden up and was now bunched high on her thighs – *very* high. While she was sleeping, his hand had worked its way beneath the t-shirt to her bare skin and her wiggle made his fingers tighten on her ass cheek.

Lifting her head, she sneaked a quick peek at his face. He was wide-awake, looking stubbly and bed rumpled and delicious.

Claire smiled. He looked – and felt – so good, so warm and comforting, she was embarrassed by her earlier fears. Sure, Ed was strong – really strong – and his senses were sharp, but it was silly to think he was some kind of...mutant superhero-ish being. The multiple shocks of the previous day must've knocked her brain loose or something.

"Good morning."

"Morning," he responded, giving her ass another squeeze. When she pushed back into his caress, his eyes narrowed. She loved that intent, hungry look he got when he was turned-on – when *she* turned him on. With an excited shiver, she lowered her head back to his shoulder.

His fingers began to explore, sweeping across the globes of her ass and then delving between them. "Do your feet hurt?"

"No," she lied, not wanting his hand to stop its explorations.

His grunt sounded like he didn't believe her.

"Okay," she amended. "A little." Claire immediately regretted admitting it when he released her and sat up, throwing the covers back. He pulled off her socks so he

could examine the bottoms of her feet. "Ed, I'm fine." When he ignored her protest, she flopped onto her back and let him look.

"Should've stayed where I put you last night," he grumbled.

With a snort, she pushed herself up on an elbow. "Maybe you should buy a blow-up doll then. She wouldn't go anywhere – unless there was a stiff breeze or something." He just gave her a look and turned back to her feet. "Do most of the women you date stay where you put them?"

"I don't –" He cut himself off abruptly. "I need to put some more antibiotic cream on some of these cuts. I'll be right back. Stay here."

Claire stared after him as he disappeared into the hall. "Didn't we just have the 'stay' discussion?" she muttered, although she did remain in the bed. She sat up, propping pillows behind her, and pulled her borrowed t-shirt down.

When Ed came back in, she smiled sweetly. "You didn't finish what you were saying before. You don't what?"

He shook his head as he sat down by her feet. "I can't remember."

"Really?" She didn't believe that for a second. "I'd asked if the women you date stay where you put them and you said, 'I don't', and then changed the subject. You can't just start something that interesting and then not finish."

He didn't look up, just continued dabbing cream on the soles of her feet.

"C'mon, Eddie, you can't leave me hanging!" she wheedled. "I'm curious now. I have an inquiring mind, you know. I *will* get it out of you." He finally glanced at her, looking so exasperated Claire laughed. "Fine," she told him, ready with the big guns. "We don't have to talk about this. Why don't we talk about how you pulled that van door off with your bare hands last night?"

"I was going to say I don't date women."

Claire wasn't sure what she'd expected but that definitely wasn't it. She blinked. "You're gay?" *How'd I miss that ?*

"No." He was concentrating much too hard on closing the tube of antibiotic cream.

"But..." She shook her head, confused. "I don't get it."

"I just...haven't dated much. Lately."

"Lately as in weeks?" she pressed, leaning forward. "Months?" He didn't respond. "Years?" He slanted her a quick glance and Claire sat back, stunned. "Holy cow. *Years?* "

A slight flush darkened the skin along his cheekbones. "Been busy," he muttered.

"Too busy to get busy?" she asked skeptically. "You work in a bar. You look like," she waved a hand at him, " *this* and you're telling me you're too busy?"

"Only worked there a couple months."

"Where'd you work before? A monastery?"

He actually smiled a little at that, although it didn't appear to have much humor in it. "Pretty close."

"Where was that?" she asked curiously.

"Hungry?"

By the set of his mouth, Claire was pretty sure she'd gotten all the information she was going to get out of the guy. Besides, she was starving. "Yes."

"Not much here," he told her, looking a little more relaxed now that they weren't discussing his baffling lack of a sex life. "Want to go out?"

She made a face and plucked at the front of her t-shirt. "In this? I think my dress is looking pretty rough. Besides, it's not really Denny's attire."

His eyes fell on her legs where they emerged from beneath the t-shirt. "I could pick up some food and bring it back here." His gaze flicked up to her face. "You gonna be pissed if I tell you to stay?"

"Yes," she told him, shifting onto her knees in front of him so she could kiss his prickly cheek. "But not if you *ask* me."

"Stay here?" He turned his head so his mouth brushed hers.

She gave a low laugh. "I'd be happy to. See? It's all in the inflection."

* * * * *

Taking advantage of Ed's absence, she took a quick shower. It was an intentionally cool one, since he'd gotten her all hot and bothered with that one tiny kiss and the sizzling look he'd given her. Claire wouldn't have objected to a delayed breakfast if it meant some fun in bed, but he'd pulled away too soon, yanked on some clothes and taken off. With a sigh and a shrug, Claire turned her face to the spray. Maybe the guy was just really hungry.

After toweling off and finding another pair of Ed's socks and a fresh t-shirt to wear, she limped around, exploring the house. It was pretty basic, with nothing to tell her much about the guy, except that he was freakishly neat.

Padding into the living room, she turned on the TV, flipping around the channels, past cartoons, a talk show, a cooking show — where she paused for a few seconds before realizing it was just making her hungrier — a news station.

She froze. The scene shown in the video footage was uncomfortably familiar. It had obviously been shot earlier, since the scene was dark except for the red and blue from the police cars and the floodlights set up by the news crews. A dark blue van was centered inside the crime-scene tape — the same dark blue van Claire had been hanging off the night before. She arrowed up the volume.

"As you can see behind me," the reporter was saying, "the door was actually ripped off the victim's van before he was pulled out and violently beaten, tied up and locked inside the back of his van, where he was found by police. It is unclear what was used to remove the door." The camera zoomed in on the door that rested on the pavement, looking like a capsized turtle. "Police have released a sketch of his alleged attacker, who is also believed to have stolen a motorcycle just minutes before this brutal attack." The video was replaced by a drawing that looked remarkably like —

"Shit," Ed said behind her.

Spinning around, Claire stared at him. "Why do they have your picture on the news? It was him — the van guy! He admitted it!"

"Admitted it to *me*," he clarified, taking the remote from her numb hand and turning the TV off. "Not the cops. Plus I did steal that bike."

"But—" she started.

He cut her off with a sharp shake of his head. "Get dressed. We have to go."

"Go?" Claire protested. "Go where? To the police station?"

"No. Now hurry."

She didn't move. "Why should we go? All we need to do is explain to the police —"

"It won't be the police," he interrupted again. "Feds'll take over soon."

"Feds?" she repeated faintly. "Why would the Feds..." Swallowing hard, she stared at his impassive face. "You're wanted by the Feds?" When he didn't answer, Claire took that as a yes. "W-what did you do?"

Ed finally looked at her. "Don't be scared."

"You keep telling me that," she said, a quaver running through her words, "and it never helps. You can't just order me not to be afraid."

"I just—" His jaw tightened. "I don't want you to be scared of me."

"So quit doing scary things!" The words burst from her in a flash of anger that masked her fear for a second. It quickly faded and the shake returned to her voice. "What did you do?"

"Nothing!" he bit out. "I left. That's all. They want me back."

Her eyes widened as her stomach dropped. "You...broke out of prison?" *Oh shit, oh shit, oh shit!*

"No!" It was the loudest Claire had ever heard him get and she flinched back. "Sorry. Don't be..." He didn't finish the sentence but turned away, every muscle in his body tight. "I *worked* for them. They didn't want me to go. I *was* a prisoner but I didn't commit any crimes—least not ones I wasn't ordered to commit."

She stared at him. Everything he was saying just confused her more. "Who're 'they'?"

"There's no time!" Taking a step toward her, he lifted a hand as if to touch her face but then dropped it again before he made contact. "I'll tell you but not now. We have to go." When she hesitated, Ed closed his eyes for a moment. "Claire, please."

She wanted to go. Logic told her she didn't know this man. He was probably lying or delusional or both. Despite knowing this, she trusted him — she couldn't help it. In the thirty-six hours she'd known him, he'd saved her life at least three times. "I can't get dressed," she finally said. "I don't have anything to wear."

A flash of relief crossed his face before the usual expressionless mask fell back into place. "I'll get you something," he told her, already moving toward the door. "Stay?" The order was as close to a plea as Claire figured he'd get. At her nod, she could see a little of the tension go out of his face. "Good. Eat something. I left food in the kitchen."

The thought of food made her stomach churn but she nodded anyway, just to pacify Ed. He disappeared through the kitchen and presumably out the back door, although Claire didn't hear the door close.

Her knees were shaking. Lowering herself to sit on the edge of the couch, she stared at the blackened TV screen for a while. Her thoughts spun around, refusing to settle. How had she gotten herself into this situation? Claire liked to plan, to schedule, to organize — running off with a wanted man was none of these things.

No, it's just plain nuts. The logical portion of her brain was not helping. Desperate for distraction, she got up to get the remote and turned on the television. The same footage of the van was shown.

"In a bizarre twist, it appears the suspect in the motorcycle-jacking and violent attack on the owner of the van has an alleged accomplice," the reporter said.

Claire's picture flashed on the screen and she stared at it, mouth open. It was a picture Gordon had taken of her in the lab. She'd always hated that picture.

The reporter continued, "This woman, Claire Dunlop, is suspected of starting the fire at Carrendine Apartments last night in order to incriminate her former boss, Dr. Gordon Black. Allegedly, Dunlop was fired yesterday after attempting to sabotage Dr. Black's cancer research."

"*What?!*" Claire screeched as her photo was replaced by video footage of Gordon's smug, goateed face.

"It was unfortunate," he said. "I'm afraid Claire had a bit of a crush on me. When I discovered what she'd done, I had to let her go. The fire," he shook his head sadly, "I can only assume was a misguided attempt to incriminate me — or at least get my attention. I don't really know what goes on in such an emotion-driven, irrational mind."

"You *bastard*!" Claire hissed, tempted to throw the remote at the TV screen. She made herself put it down gently. Nadine was interviewed next and her wide-eyed parroting of what Gordon had just said — mainly that Claire *loved* Gordon — drove Claire to turn off the television.

"That fucking asshole!" Claire felt tears of rage and embarrassment burn behind her eyes. She was dying to go straight to the nearest police station, in just Ed's t-shirt if she had to, and inform everyone Gordon was a liar and a would-be murderer. The worst part was not the world thinking she was an arsonist — it was everyone thinking she had an unrequited crush on gross, disgusting, pube-faced Gordon!

What kept her sitting on Ed's couch was a niggling uncertainty — what if they didn't believe her? She could go to prison. And Ed... Although she'd not intentionally give the police any information about him, it was possible Claire would accidentally let something slip. When she was nervous, she tended to babble. A police interview would definitely make her nervous. Since she'd met Ed, he'd only been nice to her and helped her. She couldn't throw him under the bus to salve her pride.

Besides, despite her brain's rational objections, all her instincts were telling her to listen to Ed. Claire sat back on the couch and blew out a shaky breath. Following her gut was a new experience for her.

"You'd better be right," she muttered at her stomach, giving it a poke. "Or it's jail baloney sandwiches for you."

* * * * *

She was still on the couch, trying very hard not to think about what her prison roommate would be like, when Ed returned with several bags.

He'd bought her jeans and a long-sleeved t-shirt, socks and athletic shoes. There was an oversized zip-up sweatshirt too. They'd obviously been purchased at a discount store but Claire was just so happy to have clothes, she would've worn a nun's habit if he'd brought her one.

At the bottom of the bag was a pink, lacy bra and matching pink panties. When she pulled them out, she sent a teasing glance at Ed, who was concentrating very hard on the wall over her shoulder. The tops of his ears reddened, which sent a shot of affection through Claire. This big guy acting shy over a pair of panties was kind of adorable.

"Thank you," she told him sincerely as she attempted to pull the tags off the bra.

He shrugged off the thanks. "Here," he said, pulling out a pocketknife and making short work of the plastic cord holding the tags. He removed all the tags as Claire watched, wondering if she should go into the bedroom to dress or if that was just silly. After all, he'd seen her naked – and touched her naked and kissed her naked and licked her... With a sharp shake of her head, she cut off that string of thoughts. That would just get her hot and excited and now was definitely not the time.

"I'm on the news too," she told him.

His hands stilled on her new sweatshirt and he raised an eyebrow.

"Gordon was on." She made a face. "He was telling everyone I'd sabotaged his research because I was in love with him. Asshole." Telling the story brought back a surge of anger. "I didn't even *like* the guy. He said he fired me and I set fire to my building to get his attention. Do you think the cops believe that?"

"Doesn't matter," he said.

"What?" She glared at him. "The world thinks I was lame enough to love *Gordon* and it doesn't matter? He's saying I committed arson and tried to destroy his research out of spite, and that doesn't matter?"

"It doesn't matter," he repeated in an annoyingly rational tone as he watched her carefully, "because the police are not the problem."

Claire shook her head. "So if I shouldn't be worrying about my potential cellmate, then what *is* the problem?"

"I'm the problem." The hand still holding her sweatshirt tightened until the knuckles glowed white. "I have to run because my cover's blown. You have to come with me because I won't leave you."

The words registered in Claire's brain a second later, stalling her heart. That sounded a little obsessive for a guy who'd known her less than two full days.

"Um...what?"

"Gordon Black's trying to kill you. You can't stay here alone, unprotected," he explained, and Claire relaxed a fraction.

"Won't the police protect me?" she asked.

He was shaking his head before she finished her sentence. "They might not even believe you. Besides," his jaw tightened, "the people looking for me might...use you."

"To get to you?"

"Yes." Ed met her eyes. "I'd have to come back if they had you." The matter-of-fact way he stated it, as if there was no possible alternative to rescuing her, even if it meant endangering his own freedom, made her skin prickle. Claire was torn between being impressed and completely freaked out. She couldn't say anything, just stared at him.

"You didn't eat," he finally said, slicing off the last tag.

"Stomach," she told him vaguely, gesturing toward it.

"Sick?" He was giving her the intense laser eyes again, as if he could see through her skin to the inner workings of her digestive system.

"No. Just a little...distracted." She almost laughed at that understatement.

He nodded. "We'll stop later." Thrusting the sweatshirt at her, he ordered, "Change. We need to leave."

"Right." Reminded of the urgency of the situation, Claire dropped the bra she still held and yanked the t-shirt off over her head. Ed's sharp inhale made her pause and

glance at him. He was staring at her naked body, his face tight and his eyes hot enough to sear her skin with just a look.

"You..." he rasped, reaching toward her. "You are so..." To the disappointment of Claire's most shallow part, Ed bit off the rest of his words and turned away without touching her. "Dress," he told her harshly, his back to her.

She fumbled to obey, her hands clumsy and shaking. This was the first time a man had ever affected her like this—so strongly she forgot everything but her need for him. Claire was pretty sure she didn't like it. It took away her reason and made her stupid with lust. She had to be stronger than that. If she wasn't, she knew she'd get them both in trouble.

"I'm dressed," she told him as she zipped the sweatshirt. When he turned around to face her, she added, "And I'm sorry. I'll try not to distract you like that again."

The corner of his mouth twitched. "I won't mind if you do." Leaning toward her, Ed gave her a fast, hard kiss.

She gave a startled laugh. "Was that another joke, Eddie?"

Without answering, he caught her hand and towed her into the kitchen. Her feet felt much better, especially in the shoes, and she followed him with just a slight limp.

"Here." He tossed her a coat draped over a chair.

Claire caught it. The leather was soft beneath her fingers. "You'd didn't have to buy me such a nice coat."

He shrugged. "Didn't. It's mine."

"You're giving me your coat?" she asked as he helped her pull it on. It hung on her, the sleeves covering her hands. "I can't take your coat. It's freezing!" He ignored that and zipped her up, making Claire smile a little. He seemed to be making a habit of taking over her zippers.

"I've got another one." Ed held it up to show her before he pulled it on. "Let's go."

Claire yanked the sleeves up so she could grab her clutch purse off the counter where she'd dropped it the night before. It was small enough to jam into one of the coat's oversized pockets. "Where are we going?"

"Away," he non-answered as he ushered her out the back door. Keeping a hand against her back, he scanned the neighboring yards before hurrying her toward the garage. She rushed to keep up, her heartbeat accelerating in response to his urgency as well as the fast pace.

He slid his hand up over her shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "Shh," he soothed and she shot him a look, using his own raised-eyebrow expression against him.

"I'm not a nervous horse," she muttered, reluctantly amused.

Ed gave her a sideways glance. "Okay."

Choking back a laugh, she gave him the best glare she could manage, which was probably pretty pathetic. "No treating me like spooked livestock *and* no humoring me, okay?"

"Sorry." Punching the security code into the keypad, he frowned. "Don't really remember how to do this."

Blinking at him, she asked incredulously, "You don't remember your garage code?"

"No." As if to prove his point, the overhead garage door began to rise. "Don't remember how to..." Ed pointed at her and then him and made a squiggly circle with his hand.

"Sorry." Claire's forehead bunched and she gave a helpless shrug. "Still not getting it."

"Forget it." Ducking under the still-moving garage door, he headed for the motorcycle.

With a sigh, Claire mumbled to herself, "Can't really forget it *now*, can I?" and followed him into the garage.

"Here." She reached to take the helmet he was offering but he ignored her outstretched hands and put it on her himself. "Okay?"

"Except for feeling like Darth Vader in here, sure."

Ed's lips quirked up at that before he pulled on his own helmet.

"So," she said as casually as she could manage, knowing her flare of jealousy was completely inappropriate to their life-and-death situation but not able to resist asking the question. "Whose helmet am I wearing?"

"Yours."

She gave an impatient huff. "No, whose was it before me? Girlfriend? Wife? Dog?"

With a shake of his helmeted head, he wheeled the bike out of the garage. "Just got it for you."

"Oh." Now she felt an extra dose of embarrassment for her petty thoughts. "Thank you."

"Welcome. Get the door?" He jerked his head toward the keypad.

"Of course." Claire hurried out and punched in the code she'd watched him enter. Swinging a leg over the motorcycle to straddle it behind Ed, she couldn't hold back a shiver. Was she, lab-rat Claire, actually going on the run with a fugitive? The bike rolled forward and she wrapped her arms around him.

Guess that's a yes.

Chapter Seven

Riding a motorcycle looked a lot more glamorous than it felt. After hours on the bike, Claire's entire body was numb from the vibrations. Somehow, though, she retained enough feeling to be aching from cold. She was thankful Ed wasn't taking the freeway — just the thought of speeding along at seventy-five miles per hour made her cringe. Instead, they were winding through the countryside on county roads and highways, cutting through the small towns and passing a tedious amount of stubbly, harvested fields.

On the outskirts of one of the many homogenous towns, Ed pulled into a gas station, stopping next to a pump as far from the building as he could get. Pulling a card from his wallet, Ed reached to swipe it through the pump's credit-card reader. Claire caught his arm.

"Can't they trace you with that?" Claire asked under her breath.

He shook his head, tilting the card so she could read it. "Different name."

"Michael Patchin," she read out loud, her stomach tightening into a hard ball.

"How'd you get someone else's credit card?"

"It's mine," he corrected her. "I pay the bill."

"But..." Claire trailed off as a disturbing thought occurred to her. "Is your name not really Ed?"

Concentrating on pushing the buttons on the pump keypad, Ed — or whoever he was — told her, "Yeah, it is. As far as I know."

Claire frowned. As answers went, that one really sucked. "What does that mean?"

"Tell you later," he said gruffly but then his tone softened. "Okay?"

She sighed. "Fine." It wasn't as if they could have a heart-to-heart right there at the gas station. "I have so many questions, I should probably start writing them down."

As he pumped the gas she was quiet, walking in small circles next to the bike in order to get blood circulating through her legs again. Her feet felt better, just aching a

little, although she wasn't sure whether that was a good sign or just because her feet were numb. Claire's brain felt fuzzy, as if all her channels were coming in through a bent antenna. She also really had to pee.

"Okay?" Although they both had kept their helmets on to minimize the chance of someone recognizing them, she could tell Ed was watching her closely.

"I'm fine," she said, even as she realized she was shaking her head, contradicting her own words. "Just a little lightheaded. Guess I should've eaten breakfast like you told me to." Her laugh was halfhearted. "Plus I have to go to the bathroom."

Clicking off the nozzle, Ed returned it to its resting place on the pump and closed the tank. "Five minutes," he said, swinging his leg over the motorcycle.

With a sigh, Claire mounted behind him, muttering, "Five minutes what? I don't know why you bother saying anything when what you *do* say is pretty much impossible to understand." The engine roared to life, drowning out her mumbles, but she kept talking anyway. After hours of worried silence, it made her feel better. "It's like you were raised in a family of cave-people who only communicated through grunts and eyebrow wiggles, or you're following some strange religion that only allows you seventeen words a day. Don't ask me why I picked seventeen. It just seemed like a number a weird, word-limiting cult would like. Good thing I don't follow this religion. I'd use my words in the first five minutes after I woke up. Actually, I'd probably talk in my sleep and use them without knowing it, and then wouldn't be able to say 'good morning'."

Her babbling continued as they passed through town, the words falling from her mouth in an inaudible, nonsensical, unstoppable torrent, until Ed slowed the bike and turned onto a gravel road. Cutting herself off midword, Claire looked around, trying to figure out where Ed was headed.

He turned again, this time onto a barely visible path leading into a wooded area. They drove slowly through the trees until they reached a small clearing — just big enough to allow Claire to hop off the bike without impaling herself on a branch.

"Here." Ed pulled something from his jacket pocket and held it out. It was a protein bar, Claire saw as she accepted it. Her stomach clenched at the thought of eating but she knew she'd be useless pretty soon if she didn't. After all, she was already performing monologues for herself on the back of a moving motorcycle. Obviously low blood sugar was setting in.

"Thank you." She tucked the bar in her coat pocket before removing her helmet. "I'd better take care of something first, though." She handed the helmet to Ed and headed deeper into the trees.

"Where are you going?"

She paused, looking back at him over her shoulder. "The ladies' room."

"That's far enough," he told her.

Claire frowned again. "Fine, but you have to look the other way." Even though the tinted visor on his helmet made it impossible to see, she could tell by the tilt of his head he was giving her the eyebrow-raised, don't-be-a-dummy look. "I don't care if you *have* seen me naked," she said stubbornly. "I haven't known you long enough to pee in front of you — especially out here." Making her way toward a good-sized tree trunk, she muttered, "Even if I'd known you for ninety years, I *still* wouldn't want to pee on the ground in front of you. It's just not attractive. Plus it's awkward."

Crouching behind the tree, she peeked around the trunk to make sure Ed wasn't watching and she was relieved to see his head was turned away. He'd taken his helmet off and she was distracted for a second by his oblique profile. No wonder she was running off to who-knows-where with an alias-using fugitive when he looked like *that* .

The nip of chilly air on her bare skin motivated her to get things done quickly. To her delight, she discovered she'd tucked a tissue in her purse at some point in the past. With a slight pang of guilt, she left it behind the tree after using it, her distaste for littering overcome by the thought of cramming the used tissue back in her pocket.

"Don't suppose you have any hand sanitizer?" she said as she emerged. "A wet wipe maybe?"

Ed shook his head. "Sorry."

With a rueful grimace, she pulled out the protein bar and tore it open, careful to keep the wrapper between the food and her fingers. "This is a good reminder for me of exactly why I hate camping. You did promise me a picnic, though. Since we're outside and there's food, I guess this qualifies. Bite?" She held the bar toward Ed.

With a curl of his mouth and nod, he gestured her closer to where he sat, still straddling the bike. Claire took the two steps necessary to bring her close to him and offered the bar again. As he bent his head to take a bite, she shivered a little.

"Cold?" he asked around his mouthful.

She shook her head. With all her layers, she was actually a little warm now that she wasn't on the speeding motorcycle. Ed was eyeing her suspiciously, as if he didn't believe her, but she just shrugged and took another bite of the bar, not knowing how to explain it was the odd sensuality of feeding him that had caused her tremor, not the cold.

Peeling down the wrapper, she held it out to him again. He held her gaze as he bit off a piece and Claire suddenly found it hard to swallow.

"Water?" she croaked.

As he turned to pull a bottle from the small pack attached to the bike, she jammed the last of the protein bar into her mouth. This whole "feeding the wild animal" thing was going to get her into trouble and it was too freaking cold to be stripping off clothes out here.

Ed handed her the bottle, raising an eyebrow as she struggled to chew the wad of food in her mouth.

Gah ! Claire thought, internally rolling her eyes at her utter dorkiness. *Hot guy, motorcycle, private location – can't you be a little cool for once?* With a sigh, she crammed the protein-bar wrapper in her coat pocket. *Obviously not.*

By the time she managed to swallow the last of the bar, the moment had passed. She took a drink of water, only spilling a little down her chin, and handed the bottle back to Ed.

"Don't you have to use a tree?" she asked as he stowed the water back in the pack.

With a short nod, he swung off the bike. "Stay right here," he ordered, and Claire rolled her eyes.

"Think I'm going to head back to the highway to hitch a ride?" she teased. When he just frowned at her, she sighed. "I'm staying! I'm staying! Now shoo. Go find a tree."

Turning away to give him privacy, Claire wrapped her arms around herself and looked through the mostly denuded branches. She couldn't hear anything – not his footsteps in the fallen leaves or the snap of a branch or even the sound of liquid pattering against a tree.

He even pees stealthily, she thought and giggled.

"What's funny?" Ed's voice was right behind her and she jumped, sucking in a startled breath.

"Nothing," she told him, turning around to face him. He was standing very close to her. "I'm just punchy."

"We should go," he said, his eyebrows meeting in a frown. "You'll be okay?"

"Sure," she said with a casual shrug, even though her brain groaned a protest at the thought of getting back on the motorcycle. When his frown intensified, Claire dropped her eyes. "Where are we going?" she asked, more to change the subject away from her discomfort than anything.

"A friend's house," he said, to Claire's surprise. She'd just assumed they were running away, not toward anything or anyone in particular. "North of here."

"A friend?" she probed, intensely curious. He said so little about his mysterious past, she seized on every nugget of information he revealed, no matter how tiny.

He nodded. "We can stay with him while we figure things out."

"Was he," she paused, not sure how to put it when she didn't really know what had happened, "in the same situation?"

His face smoothed of all expression. "Yes."

So many questions were bouncing around inside Claire's head. She was tempted to push for answers, explanations, but she knew they needed to get back on the road. The sooner this uncomfortable road trip was over, the better.

She forced a smile. "Let's go, then."

That startled a blink out of Ed. "Okay," he said a little tentatively, as if he'd expected something else. Ducking his head, he kissed her quickly but thoroughly.

It was Claire's turn to blink at him. "What was that for?"

He shrugged and grabbed her helmet. "You keep surprising me."

She snorted. " I surprise *you* ?"

"Yeah." Ed put the helmet on her head. "In good ways."

"Oh." Claire wasn't sure how to respond, so she just watched in silence as he put on his helmet. When he straddled the bike and started the engine, she forced herself to climb on behind him. She could do this. It was only temporary — a few hours out of the rest of her life.

As Ed turned the motorcycle around and headed back toward the gravel road, Claire sighed and wrapped her arms around him. At least her front would be warm.

* * * * *

When clouds dimmed the early evening light and it began to rain, Claire wanted to throw herself off the bike and bawl. Instead, she gritted her teeth and held on to Ed, determined not to be the weak link of their twosome. She could hold up while fleeing from authorities as well as anyone.

But why does it have to be raining? her mind wailed.

The motorcycle slowed as they passed the first few buildings of yet another scrubby-looking town. After a few blocks, he turned into a motel parking lot. Claire wanted to cry again — from relief this time. Ed rolled to a stop in a dark corner of the lot.

"Hold this," he said, pulling off his helmet and handing it to her. She accepted it awkwardly, keeping her hands tucked up in her coat sleeves. Many miles back, her

hands had disappeared into her sleeves and she was reluctant to expose her fingers to the cold.

Pulling a stocking hat out of his pack, Ed yanked it on. "Stay here. Leave the helmet on. Anyone bothers you, yell."

"Okay," she agreed, stumbling a little as she dismounted the bike. He caught her arm to steady her. "Thanks."

He released her slowly and walked backward for a couple steps, as if watching to make sure she didn't fall over. When she managed to keep standing, he jogged toward the motel office, shooting glances over his shoulder to check on her.

Raising her hand in a floppy-sleeved wave, Claire watched as he disappeared into the office. She glanced around. The motel looked fairly new, actually. There were a few cars scattered around but otherwise the place was deserted. She figured the rain was keeping everyone inside.

Everyone with sense, she mentally amended, watching droplets work their way down the visor of her helmet. *Everyone not on the run from some mysterious "them" people or ex-bosses with a grudge.* Shoving rage-filled thoughts of Gordon to the back of her head, Claire shifted from one foot to the other, wanting to walk in circles but not wanting to appear insane on the off chance someone was watching.

After endless, damp minutes had passed, she saw Ed heading toward her again and she took a relieved breath. Not only was it soggy but the parking lot was also a bit spooky in the dim, rainy light.

"Success?" she asked when he got close enough to hear.

He nodded and pulled the now-wet hat from his head, holding out his hand for the helmet. Claire gave it to him and climbed onto the bike behind him. The rain picked up as they drove to the far end of the building and parked. Ed grabbed the pack and they both dashed for the door, huddling against the building as Ed inserted the key and shoved open the door.

Yanking off her helmet while kicking off her shoes, Claire looked around the room. It was a basic motel room with two double beds, but it appeared clean and new

and was surprisingly inviting. "Mind if I shower?" she asked, pulling off her wet coat and hanging it in the closet across from the bathroom. She put the helmet on a shelf above. "I'll be quick."

"Go ahead," he told her, shedding his own coat.

"Thanks." Shooting him a grateful smile, she ducked into the bathroom and turned on the shower before stripping off as fast as she could with numb fingers. She hung her shirt and jeans on towel bars to dry and brought her panties, bra and socks into the shower with her so she could rinse them out.

The water was wonderfully hot, although she yelped when the first blast hit her numb skin. The painful tingling eased and, so happy to be warm, she hummed as she rinsed her underwear.

The curtain was yanked open and she shrieked, instinctually covering herself. When she saw Ed, she started breathing again. "You scared me! If you wanted the shower first, you should've said," she told him.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine." She kept an arm across her breasts as she reached with the other hand to tug the curtain shut but Ed didn't budge.

"Heard a noise," he told her.

"The water was hot," she explained. "I'm *fine* ." She pulled at the curtain again. "C'mon, Ed, in or out. You're letting in the cold air."

His eyes heated and she swallowed as she realized what she'd just said. Ed stepped back and pulled the curtain shut. After a long second, Claire turned back to her underwear, stupid tears stinging her eyes because he hadn't taken her up on her offer.

"Stupid," she muttered under her breath as she squeezed water out of her panties and flung them over the curtain rod. "Why are you feeling all hurt about this? You didn't even mean to ask." Her bra and socks followed, lined up across the rod next to her panties. "Just because —"

Her words ended in a startled gasp when the curtain was pushed aside again to reveal a naked Ed – naked and extremely aroused.

“Wow,” Claire breathed. “Guess that’s an ‘in’ then.”

Her heart fluttering against her ribs, she backed up as he stepped into the shower, tugging the curtain closed behind him. Just the way he looked at her with those molten silver eyes started a heavy pulse of excitement in her pussy. He touched her shoulder, his fingertips skating over her wet, flushed skin, across her collarbone and down to her breast. Ed circled her nipple with his fingers, a tighter and tighter spiral until he caught the tip and pinched it sharply.

Claire moaned as pleasure shot through her, a direct line of sensation from her breast to her pussy. His other hand ran down her stomach, his fingers delving between her thighs. When he caught her clit in a gentle tug, her knees went watery, threatening to give way beneath her.

“Not to be a shower-sex spoilsport,” she gasped, “but I’m about to fall down. Can we maybe move this to a bed?”

“Sure,” he said, although his fingers continued to play with her nipple and clit.

She couldn’t stop her eyes from drifting shut and her legs wobbled again. “Ed,” she reminded him. “Moving? To bed?” His hands fell away and her eyes opened reluctantly.

“Right, then,” she said briskly, hiding her illogical disappointment that he’d stopped. “We should probably wash up. You know, since we’re in here.” She concentrated on peeling the paper from the tiny bar of soap.

“Shampoo?” Ed offered as she reached out of the shower to toss the soap wrapper into the garbage. The air was chilly and she quickly pulled back into the steamy warmth of the shower.

“Sure,” she answered belatedly, holding out a cupped hand. Instead of pouring some shampoo from the tiny bottle he was holding, Ed was staring at her chest. Glancing down to follow his gaze, Claire realized the cool air outside the shower had hardened her nipples to even sharper points. Although she would’ve loved to feel his

hands on her breasts again, she knew they'd never get out of the shower if he did. Turning around, she glanced over her shoulder at him.

"Would you mind washing my hair?" she asked, and he nodded, pouring some shampoo onto his palm and working it into her already soaked hair. "I don't suppose there's any conditioner where that came from?" she asked, not very hopefully.

"It's in it," Ed told her, showing her the bottle. "Two-in-one."

She made a face. "Suppose that's better than nothing," she said. "Besides, I'll just be covering up my head with a helmet. No one will even see my flyaways."

He grunted, both of his hands massaging her head now. Closing her eyes, Claire leaned into his touch.

The guy has a future in professional shampooing, she thought and then swallowed back a groan of protest when his hands left her head too soon. Ed turned her around so the water rinsed away the suds as he stroked her hair back away from her face. As she reluctantly opened her eyes, Claire realized she still held the soap.

"Here." She handed it to him and picked up the tiny shampoo bottle. "Let me do your hair now." Eyeing his towering form and the hair sitting way up top, she tried to figure out logistics. A solution occurred to her – a practical *and* somewhat naughty solution.

"Pick me up," she told Ed. After putting down the soap, he lifted her easily until they were face-to-face. "Higher," she ordered.

Although his eyebrow shot up, he did as she asked, hoisting her up even more.

She nodded in satisfaction. "Perfect." Wrapping her legs around his torso, Claire emptied the remainder of the shampoo on his head and then tossed the bottle toward the ledge. It bounced off and skittered around the tub, but Claire was too far off the ground to worry too much about it. She massaged his head, working the shampoo through his hair until it stood in white, sudsy peaks.

Ed made a low noise, a rumbling groan deep in his chest, and she glanced at his face, grinning when she saw his eyes were half-closed in bliss. Using her short nails, she gently scratched at his scalp, front to back in wavy lines. He groaned his approval.

As she soaped his ears, Claire could feel his hands kneading the globes of her ass. With an appreciative murmur, she wiggled in his grasp. The movement made her realize how her position opened her pussy against him. Running soapy hands down his neck and over his shoulders, she tightened her legs, rubbing against him.

He squeezed her ass harder as he kissed her neck, nuzzling her wet skin. One hand shifted, his fingertip finding her tight rear entrance and brushing across the puckered hole.

Claire whimpered, her hands trying to find purchase on his slick, tightly muscled back, using her nails to score faint lines across his skin. He growled and plunged his finger into her ass. The invasion made her gasp and clench around the digit as her body fought to adjust. No one had done this to her before and she wasn't sure if she liked the sensation or not. As he pulled out, she realized she missed the intruder and nudged her hips back toward Ed's hands, asking for more.

Instead of complying, he turned around so his back was to the spray. Tipping his head back, he rinsed the shampoo from his hair. Claire helped, wiping the suds from his forehead and finger-combing his saturated hair.

When the shampoo was rinsed away, she kissed his upturned mouth. "Do it again."

"What?"

She frowned at him. By the quirk of his lips, it was obvious he knew perfectly well what she was talking about. "The thing with your finger," she told him, feeling her cheeks heat with embarrassment. "Please?"

"Thought you wanted to go to bed." Despite his words, a fingertip ghosted over her eager back hole.

"That was before you did *that*," she said, wriggling beneath his touch. "Plus, when you're holding me, I'm not in any danger of falling over."

He smiled, although his eyes burned as fiercely as ever. Holding her with one hand — *he's so strong!* Claire marveled for the fiftieth time — he picked up the soap with the other. "Wash me," he ordered, handing the bar to her.

She obeyed eagerly, putting aside her desire to have his thick finger up her ass for the opportunity to touch him. She soaped his chest and arms as far as she could reach.

"Down, please," Claire said, untangling her legs from around him. He reluctantly lowered her to her feet. As she washed his belly, running her sudsy hand across the solid hills of his abs, she was careful not to brush against his erect cock and instead crouched down to soap his feet and ankles.

She worked her way up his calves, knees and thighs, and then she moved behind him and started from his feet again, moving up his legs. Her soapy hands slid over his ass and she marveled at the hard perfection of Ed. His body was like an anatomy lesson, with every well-developed muscle standing in relief.

With a wicked smile, she ran her thumb down the crevice between his cheeks. He clenched, trapping her hand for a second, as if he anticipated her next move. Brushing her thumb over his rear opening, echoing his teasing move of just a few minutes before, Claire pushed inside, burying her soapy thumb in his ass.

He hissed out a breath but didn't move away. The grip of his body was oddly arousing, this feeling of being the penetrator for once. After pulling almost free, she couldn't resist another plunge before withdrawing completely.

Soaping his back, she continued her explorations, tracing the diagonal lines of his back muscles from his spine to his hips and all the way around his sides until she could wrap her soapy hands around his erect cock. Ed jerked at her touch, groaning as she tightened her fingers, sliding first one fist and then the other up the length of his erection and over the tip.

"Turn, please," she asked, her voice husky. He obediently rotated to face her, his cock standing stiffly. After lathering up her hands again, Claire handed him the bar. Using both hands, she soaped his balls.

With an audible intake of breath, Ed widened his stance as far as the tub would allow, giving her better access. She took full advantage, sliding her fingers across the sensitive skin behind his sac. As one hand closed around his cock, her other found his tight hole and she pushed the tip of one finger inside him.

He stepped back, pulling away. "Can't," he gritted out.

"What?" Claire reached for his cock again, missing the heat and hardness, but he caught her wrist with a short shake of his head.

"Too close," he explained roughly. Every muscle in his body and face was held tightly and his eyes were narrowed to silver slits. "Told you – no control."

Overwhelmed by the desire radiating from him, Claire just nodded.

"Turn around," he ordered, and she did. His hands soaped her back briskly, almost impersonally, until his fingers dropped to her ass and lingered. Claire pushed back and his touch disappeared. She gave a disappointed murmur and the hands returned, on her calves this time. They slid up her legs and her breath caught as they neared her inner thighs, but then his hands dropped away again.

She almost cried. Opening her mouth to protest, Claire gasped instead as he slipped his hands around her body to stroke across her belly. Ed pulled her back against him, so his cock burned against her spine. Leaning back, she closed her eyes as he smoothed slick hands up her sides, bracketing her breasts without touching, and ran his fingers down her arms.

Squirming back against him, she reached behind to seize Ed's hip and pull him even harder against her. His hands finally slid over her breasts, his fingers tweaking her nipples sharply before sliding down to the apex of her thighs.

Her disappointment at the cursory attention her breasts had received dissolved as his fingers slipped between her thighs. Mimicking his earlier move, Claire widened her stance. Slick fingers traced her folds and she gasped, wrapping her hands around his arms to help hold herself up as her knees threatened to collapse yet again.

"Bed." His voice was so rough as to be unrecognizable. Claire nodded mutely and he moved them both beneath the spray, rinsing off any remaining bubbles. Shoving the curtain open, he grabbed a towel and started drying her off.

Claire stepped out of the shower and shivered, from inner heat or cool air, she didn't know. It made Ed frown, though, and he rubbed her more briskly.

"Okay, okay!" Holding her hands up, she had to laugh. "I sort of need that skin, thanks."

"Sorry." He pulled the towel away, looking almost stricken.

"Don't worry about it. No harm done." Grabbing a fresh towel, she smiled at him as she dried his chest. "Now it's my turn to cop a feel."

Catching the back of her head, he yanked her in for a hard kiss. When he finally let her go, she was gasping and little tadpoles of light swam in her vision. Tugging the towel from her loosened grasp, Ed dried himself roughly.

A trickle of water down her back brought Claire back to reality and she wrapped her hair in a towel. Her stomach growled.

Ed paused and looked at her. "Hungry?"

"Starving."

"Should've told me," he rebuked.

"I was a little distracted," she teased. The heat in his eyes flared to life again.

"Another protein bar okay?" Ed asked gruffly, already through the bathroom door.

Although she made a face, Claire forced out a cheery, "Sure." Wrapping his abandoned towel around her, she followed him into the room.

He dug into his pack and pulled out two bars. "We'll get real food tomorrow," he promised, holding out one of the protein bars to her. "Should get to D's in five hours."

"D? That's your friend?" As she unwrapped the bar, Claire swore mentally she'd never eat another protein bar after all this was over. She forced herself to take a bite.

"Yeah. Darwin."

Swallowing the food in her mouth, she asked, "First or last name?"

"Only." Ed's bar was already gone. He'd eaten the thing in two bites and was now reaching for a water bottle.

"Huh." She bit off another chunk, saying around it, "Like Cher."

He choked a little on his drink of water. "Right."

"Or Fabio."

Ed laughed and Claire stopped in midchew to stare at him. He sobered quickly, shooting her an uneasy look.

"What?" he asked defensively.

She shrugged and popped the last bit of protein bar in her mouth. "You're just really pretty when you laugh."

"Pretty?" His look of disgust made her grin.

"In the most manly way, of course," she teased as she took the water bottle from him. "Is beautiful better?"

"No."

She laughed again. "Gorgeous?"

His arched eyebrow answered this time.

"No?" Claire pretended to think as she capped the water bottle and put it on the desk. "Super fine?"

With a growl, Ed lunged for her and she shrieked, darting away. He missed her but managed to snag her towel, pulling it off her as she dashed for the bathroom. His second grab caught her around her waist and he hauled her against him. His cock, as hot and hard as ever, was nestled in the small of her back and she made sure to rub against it as she pretended to struggle against his hold.

Containing her easily with one arm, he pulled the towel from her hair with his free hand, so the damp strands fell over her bare shoulders.

"Bad girl," he rasped in her ear and then nipped her lobe. The words and tiny bite melted her and she gave up all pretense of struggling. He didn't release her as she relaxed against him but instead kept his arm banded across her middle like an iron bar. Claire didn't mind – she liked being caught against him.

His mouth explored her neck as he cupped her breast, his hand gentle until he caught her nipple in a quick, tight pinch. She couldn't hold back a mewling sound as she writhed against him. That touch of roughness drove her wild. When he tugged at the tip, moisture from her pussy slicked her inner thighs.

Claire felt his chest rise at the same time she heard his harsh inhale. "Smell so good," he groaned and she flushed, a little embarrassed and a lot turned-on by the fact that he knew exactly how excited he made her. Turning her head sideways, she tried to hide her face against his chest.

He gave a huff of laughter at her motion. His arm fell away from its grip around her waist and he scooped her up. Ed carried her to the bed, holding her with one arm as he yanked back the covers. Although she knew he could easily support her weight, Claire still locked her arms around his neck to help hold herself up.

As he lowered her to the bed, she clung, attempting to pull him down on top of her. Instead, he untangled her arms and stood up.

"I'm going to start working out," Claire told him with a mock pout as she turned onto her side, facing him. "Start tossing *you* around for a change."

His eyebrow thought that was amusing. Ed headed back to the pack and pulled something out.

"Another protein bar?" Claire guessed teasingly. "Are you still hungry?"

"Yeah," he shot back over his shoulder but the heat in his eyes told her exactly what kind of hunger he meant even before he held up the wrapped condom.

Another tingling rush of arousal spread through her body and she turned onto her stomach so she could press her nipples against the sheet. It wasn't enough for her desperate body and she moaned.

"Fuck, you're hot," he rasped. Claire turned her head to see him standing right next to the bed again.

"And you're stealthy," she told him with a sultry smile. "And quick," she added, noticing he'd already put on the condom.

"Not always quick," he said, kneeling on the bed. "I hope."

She gave a breathless laugh. "Another joke! What's that make — three? Four?"

When his hands touched her, stroking down her back, all thoughts of teasing flew out of Claire's head, replaced by sheer pleasure. He shifted to straddle her calves and

kneaded the cheeks of her ass. With a blissful murmur, she pushed back into his touch.

He tugged at her hips and she obediently tucked her knees beneath her, raising her ass in the air. With a low, hungry sound, Ed nudged her knees farther apart, until her inner thighs began to burn from the stretch. The sensation just added to her arousal and she arched her back, pushing her ass even higher.

His hands massaged her thighs as his lips touched her ass cheek, drawing a shiver from her. Ed used his tongue next, slick and soft, followed by the hard edge of his teeth closing in a gentle bite. She moaned, pressing her face into a pillow as she lifted her chest just enough to drag the sensitive tips of her breasts against the sheet.

Her breathing quickened as his mouth neared her pussy and she spread her knees another impossible inch, opening for him. When he moved to her other ass cheek instead, she whimpered, the sound muffled in her pillow. The kissing and licking and nipping were repeated on this side until she was squirming with desperate need.

"Please," she begged. "Ed, please?"

He paused close enough that his breath touched her wet folds and then he licked her, dragging his tongue the length of her pussy.

With a cry, Claire jolted under the touch she so badly needed. His tongue speared into her pussy and then withdrew so he could suck gently on her clit. She couldn't stay still under the assault but had to arch and writhe, shoving her hips back toward that tormenting, wonderful mouth.

Holding her still with his hands on her thighs, Ed fluttered his tongue across her clit before diving back into her pussy. He thrust and withdrew before retreating to lick the moisture spread over her inner thighs.

"Ed," she whimpered, almost delirious with need. "Please!"

"What do you want?" he asked, his words brushing her damp skin.

She shuddered at the sensation. "You."

His mouth left her inner thigh and his hands clamped on to her hips, his grip purposeful enough to make Claire shiver with pleasure again. Anticipation swamped her as the head of his cock nudged into her pussy, but then he pulled back.

With a protesting moan, she thrust her hips toward Ed. Shifting his hands to her waist, he turned her over onto her back and hovered over her, his weight braced on his hands.

“Want to see you,” he explained roughly before leaning in to kiss her. With a needy whimper, Claire wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled his head down, deepening the kiss as she bracketed his hips with her knees.

The head of his cock nudged the entrance of her pussy and she made a hungry sound against his mouth. When he didn’t enter her but waited, the tip of his erection grazing her labia, Claire couldn’t stand it anymore — she closed her teeth on Ed’s bottom lip.

With a snarl, he slammed into her, driving his cock deep inside. She cried out at the sudden entry but the stinging stretch of her pussy quickly warmed to pleasure. Ed went still, watching her face closely, so she gave him a tiny smile and contracted her muscles, catching his cock in a tight squeeze.

It was Claire’s turn to watch, to see his face transform with desire. His jaw tight and his eyes narrow and hot, Ed eased almost completely out and then plunged deep, filling her again. She gasped and arched, attempting to follow him with her hips as he withdrew from her body.

His next thrust was harder, rougher. She moaned, tangling her fingers in his hair. The strands were slick with moisture and hard to grasp, so she clung to his neck and wrapped her legs around his hips to anchor herself.

Over and over, Ed drove his cock into her. She hung on, loving the wildness, the relentless hammering that sent her higher and higher, until Claire’s orgasm was ripped out of her. Her body convulsed around his, her arms and legs tightening until she lifted herself off the bed and flattened her body against his, her face buried in the slick, humid curve of his neck.

She cried out against his skin as she came. The pleasure crashed over her, wave after wave, and she heard Ed's groan as her muscles tightened around him. As her climax ebbed, her arms and legs relaxed their grip, her body lowering until her back returned to the bed.

Ed followed her down, his cock still throbbing huge and hungry inside her. An echo of pleasure shivered through her and her muscles gave his cock a final rippling squeeze. With a feral sound, he pounded into her lax body, his strokes short and fast and hard. A second orgasm took her by surprise, shuddering through her body without warning.

The final clutch of her pussy drove him over the edge as well. Claire watched his face as he came, his expression as blind and ferocious as a wild creature under attack. Every muscle was tight, his tendons taut and raised, making them appear as if they were going to explode from his skin.

She stroked his neck and shoulders as he climaxed, buried deep within her. Her body gripped him tightly as his hips jerked against hers. An uncivilized part of her wished he could be naked inside her, that she could feel him filling her with cum.

With a final shuddering groan, he collapsed, turning onto his side before he crushed her. His cock slipped free of her in the process and Claire couldn't hold back a disappointed murmur.

As he rolled onto his back, Ed snaked an arm around her and pulled her against him. "Okay?"

She smiled at the rusty sound of his voice and settled her cheek on his shoulder. "Very well, thank you."

He grunted—or laughed, she wasn't sure which. Giving her a glancing kiss on her temple, Ed eased her off his shoulder and got out of bed. She watched as he tossed the used condom in the trash. As he walked back to the bed, she gave a small smile. He looked good both coming and going.

Crawling back into bed, he hauled her against his side again. Curling into him and resting her cheek on his shoulder, she closed her eyes. To her surprise, despite the

hectic pace of the past couple days and the previous sleep-deprived night, Claire felt wide-awake.

She slid a hand across his slick chest, outlining his pecs until he flattened her hand beneath his. Tossing a leg over Ed's, she shifted until her thigh touched his cock.

This time, his grunt definitely sounded like a laugh as he hauled her on top of him. "Looking to start round two?"

Propping her chin on her fist so she could look at his face, Claire didn't answer. Instead, she asked, "Are you ever going to tell me what happened?"

The humor cleared from Ed's expression. He stared silently at the ceiling, a muscle working in his jaw.

Disappointed, Claire moved her hands so she could lay her cheek against his chest.

"Don't remember much."

Her head popped up again. "Why not?"

His shrug almost toppled her sideways. "Side effect of the surgery, maybe. More likely, they wiped our memories to keep us...compliant."

So many questions raced toward Claire's mouth she had to pause for a moment to sort them out before she spoke. "Okay, first off — who are 'they'?"

"A private research group contracted by the military."

"You were in the military? Which part?" When he looked at her with the questioning eyebrow up, she clarified. "Army? Or were you Navy?" She couldn't repress a grin. "A seaman, maybe?" When he didn't smile, hers faltered a little. "Get it? Seaman? Semen? No?"

"Army, they told me." He turned his head and looked at the wall. "Don't remember."

"Sorry," she said, feeling intensely guilty for trying to joke around about what had obviously been a traumatic event for him. This was apparently not the time for a semen joke.

He looked at her and tucked a few strands of hair behind her ear. "It's okay, mouse," he said, his expression lightening a little. "I like it when you're funny."

She made a face. "Since you're actually telling me what's going on, I'll let that 'mouse' thing pass," she told him. "But picking out a new nickname is going on a list of things to do when we're not running from the cops and...military researchers."

The corner of his mouth quirked as he nodded. "On the list. Got it."

Claire snorted. "Whatever. I'll believe that when I see it — or *hear* it, I guess." Settling her chin back on her fist, she prompted him, "So you were what? A subject of a research project?"

"Yeah."

"What was the project?"

He was quiet for several moments. "Enhancements."

"Enhancements," she repeated. "Sorry to break it to you but you're not getting *any* grant money with that kind of presentation. What kinds of enhancements?"

"Enhancements to create a better soldier."

She sighed. "Seriously, it's like pulling teeth here. What *kinds* of enhancements? Body armor? Weapons? Better boots? What?"

"Reinforcing biological tissue and cranial microprocessor implantation," he told her flatly.

She blinked, opened her mouth and then closed it again. "They stuck a computer in your brain?" she finally asked, staring at him.

His wince was just a slight twitch of his facial muscles. "Yes."

"What does it do?"

He flicked a quick look at her face and then resumed staring at the ceiling. "Stores data. Processes...um, data."

"Don't you have, you know, a *brain* to do that for you?" she asked, still trying to get her mind around what he was telling her.

"This does it better. Faster."

She nodded. "Your Spidey senses?"

He gave a short nod.

"Why are you so strong? Is that the...what did you call it? Reinforced tissues?"

"Yes."

"Whoa."

"Yes," he said again and she laughed, a breathless, sort-of-stunned laugh.

Her thoughts were out of control again. Despite the crazy sci-fi sound to his explanation, it was actually a huge relief to hear. His abnormally strong body and keen senses had freaked her out because they hadn't made any sense. A research experiment, though—now that was something she could understand. Sort of. "How many...um, research subjects were there?"

"Five."

She nodded, even though she wasn't sure if she really did understand, and he wasn't even looking at her to see her nodding. "But you escaped."

"We all did." He met her eyes. "Together. Darwin's one too."

"Five super-soldiers with computer brains."

"Yes."

"Kind of a robot mini-army."

His eyes flashed. "I'm not a robot!" he snapped so fiercely she jerked her head back a little.

"Sorry," she told him quickly and then grimaced. "Sorry. I know you're not." She wiggled against him and gave a small, suggestive grin, trying to tease him out of his anger. "Nothing robotlike about you." *Except for the computer brain.*

As if he could read her mind, he told her, "Everything in my head is still there—well, everything except my memory. They just...added a few things. It's like having a leg brace or an artificial hip or false teeth. I'm still human."

The way Ed looked at her after he said it, as if checking to see if he should believe his own words, made her want to kiss him, so she did. As she pulled back, he cocked a curious eyebrow at her and she shrugged.

"I just felt like it," she answered his unspoken question. "And I *don't* think you're a robot. You're just...Ed." That reminded her of another question. "Is that your name from before the," she paused, searching for the right term, "um, experiment, or did the scientists name you?"

"My official lab name was 5674E," he said.

"That's warm and fuzzy."

Ed's mouth quirked. "Yeah. The guys and I named ourselves one night – real names, I mean. Since I was E, they decided I should be Edward."

For some reason, this struck her as really sad. "You don't remember *anything* from before? Not even your name?"

"Not really." His eyebrows drew together in thought. "Sometimes I'll almost remember something but not quite, like it's right at the edge of my peripheral vision, but when I turn my head, it's gone."

"Wow," she said. "Have you tried hypnosis or something?"

He shook his head. "Don't think it'd work. They made us resistant to hypnosis, suggestion, things like that."

"Huh."

"You're taking all this calmly," he said. "That mean you don't believe me?"

"Nope." She traced the line of his mouth with her fingertip. "Just means I've had the craziest couple days you could imagine with almost no sleep, so my mind has given up being shocked. Plus I think the vibrations from the bike numbed my brain. It's still buzzing." Claire tucked her head under his chin. "Give me a few hours to sleep and process and I'll get back to you." She yawned. "Maybe I'll go ape-shit tomorrow over everything."

His chuckle rumbled beneath her and she smiled. Wrapping his arms around her, Ed gave her a hard squeeze. "Go to sleep, then."

"I'm going," she told him, nestling closer. Despite everything that'd happened – that was *still* happening – she fell asleep smiling.

Chapter Eight

When she woke, it was dark and she was warm. Sleep tugged at Claire but the hands massaging her naked ass were an incentive to stay awake. She tried to do both, floating in a sleepy haze with her eyes closed, but a sharp pinch popped her eyes open.

"Hey!" she protested, staring accusingly at Ed's amused face.

"Thought you were going to sleep forever," he told her.

Struggling to keep her scowl, she peered at red numbers on the bedside clock.

"Forever? It's freaking five in the morning!"

He shrugged. "Really? Thought it was later."

Claire didn't believe that for a second. Mr. Computer in His Brain knew perfectly well what time it was. "Sadist," she grumbled, and then squeaked when he pinched her again.

"You going to go ape-shit today?" he asked in the tone of voice he'd use to ask if she were going to the store.

"Haven't decided," she told him. "Wasn't going to but then some guy woke me up in the middle of the night and abused my bum."

His fingers dived between her ass cheeks, zeroing in on her rear entrance with unerring accuracy. "Abuse your bum?" he repeated. "Okay."

"I meant the pinching..." Her words ended on an indrawn breath as Ed wiggled the tip of one finger into her tight hole. Pleasure radiated out from her ass and she finished with a breathless, "Okay."

He rasped a laugh. His good humor was catching and she found herself chuckling until another push buried his finger deeper. That cut off her laughter and she was forced to concentrate on breathing.

As quickly as his finger had plunged into her ass, it disappeared, pulling out and away as Ed rolled her over, leaving her on her back as he climbed out of bed. She sat

up to turn on the light. By the time her eyes had adjusted to the brightness, Ed was back, standing next to the bed.

Claire rolled to her knees. "Let me," she said, holding out her hand for the condom. He dropped the packet in her hand, along with a small bottle. Holding it up, she gave him an amused look. "Lube? That's a necessity? You couldn't have filled that space in your pack with...I don't know, another flavor of protein bar or something?"

He actually grinned – an out-and-out, full-teeth-showing, big-ass grin. "If you don't want to use it..." Ed reached for the bottle but she clutched it against her chest with a laugh.

"Might as well use it," she said with a deep sigh. "Since you already brought it and everything."

His laugh rumbled from his chest. Forgetting her reluctant act, she stared at him, amazed at the way laughter transformed his face.

"Well?" he prompted her. When she looked at him in dopey confusion, he gestured at the condom she was holding.

"Right." Claire shook her head. Dropping the bottle on the bed, she tore open the wrapper and pulled out the condom. She moved to put the protection on but hesitated, eyeing the erect cock so temptingly close. Unable to resist, she lowered her head and licked the tip.

His hips jerked in reaction and she stole a glance at his face. All laughter was gone, his expression now intent. Hiding a small smile, she rolled the condom over his cock. When she reached the base, Claire allowed her hand to slip down and cradle his balls. Ed grunted in reaction and, happy she'd gotten an audible reaction from him, she gave him a squeeze.

"Christ," he hissed out and she looked up with eyes wide as her hands fell away from him.

"Is there a problem, sir?" she asked sweetly, batting her lashes. Casually, she picked up the bottle of lube and played with it.

"No problem," he said hoarsely, his eyes on her fingers, which were rolling the cap back and forth, loose and then tight again. Taking off the cap completely, she squeezed some lube into her hand and rubbed both together until her palms were slick. She reached toward his erection and then paused.

"Sure?" she asked and couldn't hold back a laugh at his narrow-eyed growl. Grasping his cock with both hands, she ran them over his length, base to tip, over and over until he grabbed her wrists and gave her a short shake of his head. Leaning in, Ed kissed her, the force of it toppling her backward. He followed her down, straddling her body on his hands and knees.

His lips left hers and he nibbled his way down her neck, the sting of his teeth melting her insides until wet heat trickled from her pussy to drench her thighs. Kissing his way down her breastbone, he brushed his lips across her nipple, teasing the stiff nub with the lightest of touches until she grabbed his head with both hands.

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't force his mouth to her desperate nipple. Ignoring her tight grip on his head, he leisurely explored her breasts, licking the underside, kissing the top slope, burying his face between the two mounds and turning his head so his stubbly cheeks and chin prickled her sensitized skin.

"Please," she moaned, tugging handfuls of his hair. He looked up, mimicking her innocent look from moments earlier. "Please suck it."

His mouth closed around her nipple and she groaned, this time not from frustration but from the utter delight of it, so hot and slick on her flesh. Claire quickly realized he wasn't done teasing her yet when his mouth and tongue remained gentle, barely pulling at the straining tip.

"Harder," she demanded. "Suck it harder."

He didn't. Instead, pulling his head back, he barely touched her nipple with the tip of his tongue.

"Please?" she begged, twisting beneath him, and his mouth latched on, pulling strongly. Her back arching, Claire cried out. *Please really is the magic word* flashed

through her mind and then all thoughts were gone, swallowed by pain-edged ecstasy as he lightly closed his teeth on her nipple and tugged.

Switching back and forth between her breasts, Ed sucked and nipped, all his teasing softness gone, replaced by the edge of roughness that drove her wild. Her hands kneaded his scalp and neck, her nails barely scoring his skin, just enough to make him shudder and suck harder on the tip of her breast.

With a final tug of his teeth, he released her nipple and sat back, flipping her over onto her front before she realized what had happened. Seizing her hips, he lifted her to her hands and knees. Claire felt the blunt head of his cock nudge her puckered rear opening.

A touch of apprehension shivered through her at the unfamiliar sensation and he paused, still except for the soothing brush of his thumbs against her skin.

“Don’t be scared,” he told her.

She gave a breathless huff of laughter. “Still doesn’t work.”

“What?”

“Ordering me not to be frightened.” Claire paused. “Not that I am – scared, I mean.”

“No?” His hands slid up her sides.

This time, her shiver wasn’t from fear. “No.” The word came out in a croak. Clearing her throat, she tried again. “Of course not.”

His grunt sounded skeptical but Claire couldn’t really concentrate on that, since his hands were now cupping her breasts. As he pinched and tugged at her nipples, the slippery head of his cock touched her rear entrance, not pushing in but just touching lightly. His fingers played with the tips of her breasts, teasing gently one moment and then closing in a sharp squeeze the next.

Pleasure shot through her, from nipple to pussy to ass, until her skin was vibrating with it. Arching her back, she pressed against the cock behind her, her previous nervousness swept away by desire. Although she heard Ed’s indrawn

breath, he didn't plunge into her ass. Instead, he plucked at her nipples and rolled them between his fingers.

With a small, impatient sound, Claire shoved her hips back. The more he played with her breasts, the emptier her ass felt. All her earlier reservations had disappeared and she wanted his cock filling her — now.

"Please," she pleaded. "Fuck my ass!"

He froze at her words and then his fingers closed in a hard pinch as he drove his hips forward, burying the tip of his cock in her hole. The dual sensations, painful enough to set sparks off in her brain, made her moan and arch into his touch.

At her eager reaction, Ed thrust again, wedging his cock another inch into her ass, stretching her around him. The pressure, the heat, the shock of sensation that merged pain and pleasure into something more intense than either one — all were incredible, stealing her breath. Claire couldn't stay still, pushing her hips back and clenching around the head of his cock.

Releasing her nipples, he grabbed her hips, holding her still as he drove into her. She fought his hold, not because she wanted to escape but just to feel the security of his grip. The dig of his fingers into her flesh was even more arousing than his hands on her breasts and she struggled against him just to feel his grasp tighten.

He swore, a guttural, unintelligible sound, and plunged into her, burying his cock in her ass, filling her. Panting for breath, she gripped him with her body, loving the stretch of his penetration, the dark pleasure radiating through her. Leaning over her back, he kissed her shoulder and she turned her head to catch his mouth with hers.

Ed kissed her as his fingers rediscovered her breasts. One of his hands slipped across her stomach to her pussy, tracing her opening before his finger landed on her swollen, aching clit, pressing it down and moving in a tiny circle. When sparks flared in her vision, Claire was forced to turn her head away from his drugging kiss in order to suck in a gasping breath.

His hands returned to her hips as he withdrew, pulling out slowly before sliding back in. Each time he filled her, Claire tried to hold him with her body, fighting his

abandonment. His thrusts sped up until he was hammering into her, his hips slamming against her ass with each stroke, his balls slapping her soaked pussy, driving her closer and closer to orgasm.

Leaning forward, he gripped her muscle sloping from neck to shoulder with his teeth. The bite, combined with his cock pounding relentlessly into her ass, set her off. Pulling away from the grip of his teeth to bury her face in the mattress, Claire screamed as she came, her body bucking beneath his continuing assault. Pleasure coursed through her, vibrating beneath her skin until every muscle contracted.

With a snarl, he buried his erection inside her and came, his hips jerking in short thrusts, driving his cock so deeply it felt as if it filled her entire body, huge and hard and vital. Ed shuddered, collapsing over her back. His chest was heaving and soaked with sweat.

Her knees unfolded, straightening until she lay flat on her stomach. Ed came with her, his body blanketing hers. He supported most of his weight, allowing just enough to press down on her so she felt warm and secure without being crushed into the mattress.

Giving her shoulder a gentle kiss where he'd bitten her, he slid free of her body. Claire caught her breath, a leftover tremor of pleasure rocking her. The bed lurched as he got up, leaving her for only a few seconds before the mattress sank under his weight again. Ed kissed her back between her shoulder blades and she smiled without opening her eyes.

"We need to go," he told her and the contented curve of her lips fell away.

"Now?" she asked, rolling onto her side to face him. "Can't I have five minutes to sleep? Please?"

When he hesitated, Claire pressed back a triumphant grin. She had him now.

"Just five minutes?" she pleaded, peeking at him. He seemed to be undecided, so she decided to push a little. Tipping forward, she brushed her lips against his biceps.

"I want to get out of here before people see the morning news," he protested, but his voice was strained and his hand reached out to slide over the rounded hill of her hip.

Claire pushed up so she could see the bedside clock. Making a face as guilt scratched at her, she flopped back down. It was too easy to forget they were on the run, not having their first vacation together. "Is there time for a shower first?"

"If you don't wash your hair," Ed told her with a short nod. "You go first. Five minutes."

She pouted a little. "Don't you want to join me? It'll take half the time as two showers."

Ed snorted. "No, it'll take five times as long."

Dropping her pout, she grinned. "Probably." Sighing, she crawled over Ed toward the edge of the bed, taking the opportunity to drag her nipples across his chest. His arms locked around her as he yanked her down for a kiss.

When he finally let her go, she could only blink at him, any thoughts of teasing kissed right out of her.

"Go," he growled.

"Going." Claire knew kissing his mouth would start them right off again, so she pecked his chin instead before rolling off the bed and onto her feet. As she headed toward the bathroom, she couldn't resist glancing over her shoulder at Ed.

He was watching her walk away, his normally impassive face stripped of its usual stoic mask. Claire blushed, flustered by the naked longing in his gaze. In a second it was gone, leaving her wondering if she'd imagined it.

"What?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing." Darting into the bathroom, she closed the door and leaned back against it. Blowing out a hard breath, she pushed away from the door. Her five minutes of shower time were ticking away. She'd have to stew over this later.

* * * * *

The sky was just one shade lighter than charcoal when they left the room.

"I'll never be able to follow a protein-bar diet after this," she told Ed as they mounted the bike. "I don't know if there *is* such a thing as a protein-bar diet, but if there is, I definitely don't want to do it. In fact, I never want to eat another protein bar again."

Instead of starting the motorcycle, he turned around to stare at her. "You don't need a diet. You're tiny."

"I'm just saying that I never *could* —"

Ed cut her off with a hard, short kiss.

She blinked at him for a few seconds. "You did that to shut me up, didn't you?"

Instead of answering, he just smiled as he pulled on his helmet.

Claire scowled. "Don't misuse your power, little grasshopper." Lifting her helmet, she was about to put it on when the door to the neighboring room opened. A balding, sleepy-eyed man emerged, tugged from the room by a tiny leashed dog. She smiled in greeting but the man just stared at her, his mouth open a little.

With a shrug, she put on her helmet and Ed started up the bike. It was probably too early for the guy. If she hadn't been woken up by a wild bout of ass sex and a shower, Claire probably would've been too sleepy to respond to some stranger's greeting too.

Shifting, she grimaced. *Liking it rough is all well and good in the moment*, she thought, *but it's a different story after straddling a motorcycle shortly after*. She frowned, wrapping her arms around Ed's middle as he turned out of the parking lot. As far as philosophical sayings went, that one probably needed a bit of work before it would catch on.

Despite her soreness, though, and the excess of protein bars *and* the cold, Claire felt a strange sense of contentment. A big part of that, she knew, was because Ed had pulled out two brand-new toothbrushes earlier that morning from that magical pack of his. She'd squealed her delight and thrown her arms around his neck.

"You found room for both toothbrushes *and* lube?" she'd asked, impressed. "The man knows how to pack!" He'd given her a sweet, almost bashful smile and she hadn't been able to keep from kissing him.

Running her tongue over her now minty-fresh teeth, she gave him a squeeze of thanks. His confession from the night before fluttered at the back of her mind but she pushed it away. She wasn't ready to think about what he'd told her. She was already sore and cold and hungry – there was no reason to add confusion to her list of complaints.

Ed said something she couldn't understand, since the wind snatched away what wasn't muffled by his helmet.

"What?" she yelled.

"I said, 'shit!'" He turned onto a paved county highway and accelerated.

Uh-oh. "What's wrong?"

"Cops."

Her arms tightened around him. Her heart beat a fast rhythm, making it hard for her to catch her breath.

"Don't be –"

"Scared," she finished for him. "I know. Don't worry about me. Just concentrate on driving fast and not killing us. I'll...meditate back here or something."

The bike kicked up another notch as he rounded a curve.

"Fuck!"

Claire heard that one just fine. Peering around him, she saw the pavement ended, changing to gravel. Squeezing her eyes closed, she ducked back behind Ed, wishing she hadn't looked.

The bike hit the gravel, shooting rocks and dirt up behind it. Gritting her molars together, Claire hung on. Barely slowing, Ed made a turn, leaning so the ground came terrifyingly close to their knees. With a tiny moan, she clamped her eyes closed again.

After only a few seconds, she had to open them again when she realized it was worse not knowing what was going on than guessing how close to death they were.

The harvested fields on either side of the gravel road blurred as they flew past, making her realize just how fast they were traveling, so Claire concentrated on the back of Ed's coat.

Unable to resist, she twisted her head to look behind them. Through the dust cloud kicked up by the bike, she could see the distant flicker of red and blue lights. Claire bit her cheek to hold back a whimper.

"Hang on," Ed ordered, and she tightened her arms even more. If *Ed* was telling her to hold on, she knew this was going to be rough. He whipped the bike into another turn, left this time, and she choked back a scream when she couldn't see a road – pavement, gravel, dirt – it was just weeds.

Her body was tossed forward as they dived into the roadside ditch and then immediately back as Ed steered up and out, speeding along the edge of the field.

"Oh help," Claire breathed as the bike hit a rut, tossing her up. She hit the seat again with a pained gasp. The field ended and they sped into a farmyard, swinging around a barn and across the mown grass of the yard toward the dirt driveway. Cows bunched in a muddy lot stared as the motorcycle whipped by them.

"No barbed wire. No barbed wire. No barbed wire," she babbled, squeezing her eyes closed again. When the bike went over a bump and accelerated, she opened her eyes to find Ed was on the driveway, headed toward the gravel road running in front of the farm.

Claire exhaled, so happy to be on an actual road that was intended for vehicles again, she didn't even mind how the speed of the bike turned the pine trees to her right into a solid band of deep green.

Her relief was short-lived. Ed took a sharp right into the trees. With a yelp, Claire gripped him tighter and tucked her knees in closer to the bike.

"This is not a road," she muttered as branches slapped her arms and legs, whisking against her helmet in a way that made her happy her head was covered by something hard. "This is a deer path. Motorcycles should not be on deer paths. *We*

should not be on— Ow!” A dip in the path dropped the bike out from under her. She followed a half second later to land hard against the seat.

By the time they emerged from the trees, they’d bumped over enough tree roots and protruding rocks for Claire to be swearing she’d *never* have sex again, just in case she’d have to go on another run-for-her-life motorcycle ride afterward.

“I don’t care where he wants to stick it,” she growled under her breath as the bike rolled through the weeds toward yet another gravel road. “The answer’s no. Even if he *is* so incredibly hot it hurts to look at him. I don’t care. Funville is closed. This hurts too freaking much.” As if on cue, the back tire hit the edge of a rut, slamming Claire’s abused crotch onto the bike seat yet again. “Ow.”

Once they turned onto the gravel road, it was much smoother than their cross-country jaunt had been. It led to a blessedly paved county road, which, ten minutes later, brought them to a state highway. Only then did Claire relax a little, exhaling for the first time in what felt like hours.

“Nice driving,” she told Ed, giving him a squeeze. He just nodded in response and switched lanes to pass a semi.

* * * * *

They didn’t stop until they’d reached a bullet-pocked sign pronouncing they’d reached Deer Pines, population sixty-seven and a half.

“Who’s the half?” Claire wondered out loud and felt Ed shrug in response, slowing the bike to a crawl. He passed an ancient gas station and a squatty, salmon-colored building proclaiming itself to be “The Pink Store”, before turning onto one of two parallel gravel tracks choked with the brown remains of the past summer’s weeds.

The driveway, if it could be called that, stretched between two houses before disappearing into a stand of evergreens and birch trees. Ed followed the tracks into the shadows of the trees as Claire tried to peer around him to see where they were headed. She managed to see past Ed’s bulk and get a glimpse of the cabin before he passed it, pulling to the far side of a pole barn.

Pulling her helmet off, she looked around but couldn't see much from this location—just trees and the dark green side of the shed. With a huge effort, she slid off the bike and onto her feet, her knees wobbling beneath her. She hurried to grab Ed's arm before she collapsed in a heap.

"Okay?" he asked. She noticed sourly he didn't seem to have a hard time standing.

"Just give me a second," she told him.

"Took you long enough." The stranger's voice snapped Claire's head up and she took an automatic shaky step toward Ed.

"Had to detour," Ed told the enormous blond man who was leaning against the corner of the pole barn, watching them. "Cops. Someone saw her."

"Oh!" Claire didn't know why she hadn't put it together before this. "That guy at the hotel—sleepy and bald—he recognized me!" She frowned. "Jerk. Can't believe I smiled at him and he called the cops."

Ed scowled at her. "Quit smiling at people."

"Can't help it." She grinned. "See?"

With a sigh, he turned back to the blond man. "You have room in there for the bike?" Ed asked, jerking his head at the pole barn.

"Do I have room?" the stranger scoffed. "Of course there's room. What kind of sloppy packrat do you think I am?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and disappeared around the front of the building.

"Better now?" Ed asked as she released her hold on his arm and stood on her own.

"Yeah," she told him, taking a couple tentative steps. It was true. Although she was still walking like a drunken sailor who'd just finished an all-night horseback ride, she didn't feel as if her legs were about to collapse beneath her anymore. Each step was steadier than the one before until, by the time she rounded the corner to join the blond man at the barn door, Claire felt relatively normal.

She stepped out of the way so Ed could roll the bike inside before ducking in after him and looking around. There was a pristine workbench in one corner and an older model pickup on the other side. The rest of the building was empty and eat-off-the-floor clean.

"You're definitely not messy," she told the blond. "Or a packrat."

"Thanks?" he said, and she grinned. Next to Ed, the guy seemed positively chatty.

"Thanks for letting us stay for a few days," she continued. "I'm Claire and you're Darwin, I'm guessing?"

"Yep."

"Nice to meet you, Darwin." She eyed the glossy paint job on the pickup. "I like your truck."

"Thanks." He actually grinned at that and Claire hid a smile. Obviously, the truck was the path to his heart.

"Helmet." Ed held out his hand and she handed it over, extremely happy to see the last of the helmet—and the bike—for a while, at least. Her hands flew to her hair. After going to bed with damp hair and no brush to speak of, plus a major case of helmet hair, Claire didn't even *want* to know what was happening on top of her head right now.

"Sorry," she said to Darwin, trying to smooth down the strands. "I must look really scary right now. I didn't have time to pack after my apartment building started on fire. Actually, before my apartment building was *about* to start on fire, I mean." She made a face. Her looks were one thing, since she really couldn't control that, but there was no reason she had to sound like an idiot.

When Ed tossed his pack over one shoulder and steered her toward the door with his other hand, she went willingly, grateful for the interruption. If there'd been another two seconds of silence, she knew she would've started babbling again. Claire decided to blame everything stupid that had just emerged from her mouth on her lack of sleep.

"Hungry?" Darwin asked, sliding the door closed and pushing a button on the keypad next to the doorframe.

"Starving for anything except protein bars," Claire told him, her eyes on the keypad. "What's with you guys and your electronic locks? Is there something wrong with the traditional chain and padlock?"

He gave her an are-you-crazy look. "Too easy to cut."

"Huh." She chewed this over for a few seconds and then shrugged. "Guess that's true. Well, at least you know your bike's not getting stolen," she told Ed.

There was another keypad lock on the front door of the cabin. Darwin entered the code and then pushed the door open. Pulling off her coat, Claire followed him in with Ed close behind her.

"It's cute!" she exclaimed, looking around the main room, which seemed to serve as both living room and kitchen. The log walls were a light gold, lit by the windows set high in the walls. An open loft stretched half the length of the cabin, with a spiral staircase curling up to it. The stone fireplace was central, squatting between two doors, one of which Claire desperately hoped was a bathroom. She'd had enough of peeing behind trees.

"Could I use your bathroom?" she asked, wanting to hug Darwin when he nodded and gestured toward the door on the right. Hanging her coat on one of the hooks by the door, she hurried into the bathroom. She swung the door closed behind her and muffled a shriek when she saw her reflection in the mirror above the sink.

The door swung open. "What's wrong?" Ed asked, looking around the small room.

"You should've told me my hair was this bad!" she moaned, trying to finger-comb it away from her face but only managing to get her hand caught in the tangled mess. "Darwin must think I'm a freak."

"That's why you screamed?" His eyebrow chastised her. "Your hair?"

She shrugged, a little sheepish. "I didn't really *scream*," she told him. "It was more of...um, an exclamation of horror. Your supersonic hearing just made it sound screamier than it actual was."

"It was a scream," Darwin called from the other room.

Claire frowned. "Well it's not like you're part of the normal-hearing control group, Darwin."

"Control group?" Darwin joined Ed in the doorway. "You a scientist?" The way he said "scientist" was in the same tone she would've used for "cockroach".

"Not anymore," she sighed. "I quit, then my boss tried to kill me and, like that wasn't bad enough, he accused me of sabotaging his research and lighting my own apartment building on fire, so the cops are after us. So I'm not a scientist anymore. I'm more of a jobless fugitive now."

Darwin seemed to take the whole rambling explanation in stride. "Did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Sabotage his research?"

She shook her head. "No."

With a grunt that sounded disappointed, Darwin disappeared from the doorway.

Claire turned her head and caught another glimpse of herself in the mirror. "This is really bad." She tugged on a handful of her hair. "Darwin, can I use a brush or comb? I don't have head lice."

"Yeah." His voice floated in from the other room.

"Thanks." She glanced at Ed. "Now that you know I'm not dying, could I...?" She made shooing motions at him.

"I could stay," he offered, not moving, "if you need help."

"I'm good," she assured him. "I'm just excited about using that toilet over there that's indoors *and* isn't a tree."

He backed reluctantly out of the room and she swung the door shut again. Avoiding looking in the mirror and scaring herself again, she pulled open Darwin's freakishly neat drawers and found a brush.

“Here we go,” she muttered before attacking that beast that was sitting on her head.

Chapter Nine

"So how'd you know we were coming?" she asked Darwin through a mouthful of the best-tasting sandwich she'd ever eaten.

Before he answered, he shot Ed a glance. When she followed his gaze, Claire saw Ed give a tiny nod. "He sent me a text," Darwin explained.

"Text?" Claire repeated. "When?"

"Yesterday." It was Ed who answered this time. "While shopping for supplies. Bought a disposable phone, sent the text, disposed of the phone."

"Oh." She chewed on another bite of sandwich. It really did taste amazing. "How'd you know where he lived?"

"We all emailed our addresses to each other," Ed told her. "Soon as we got settled. That way, Cal knew where to send our...paperwork."

"Paperwork?"

"New IDs."

"Ah," Claire said.

"Plus it gives us some options when the shit hits the fan."

Nodding glumly, she swallowed the food in her mouth. "And hit the fan it did. Sorry about that, by the way."

He shrugged. "Not your fault."

Although she didn't think that was quite true, she let it pass. "How'd you know how to get here? Especially after our cross-country detour?"

Ed tapped his temple. "Built-in GPS."

"Handy," she said, impressed. "So what's next?"

The men exchanged glances. "Next?" Ed asked.

"There's a drawing of you – an eerily accurate sketch, by the way – and a picture of me on the news. We'll be recognized if we leave the cabin and then the police will show up and throw me in jail and you back in the lab, so what's our plan?" she asked with exaggerated patience.

"She's not dumb," Darwin commented, sitting back in his chair.

"Nope," Ed agreed. "D's heading to town to pick up a few things."

"Things?"

"To make us less recognizable," Ed elaborated.

Claire nodded. "Gotcha. Good idea. What about the long-term plan?"

"Long-term?"

She sighed. For two guys with computers in their brains, they weren't too quick on the uptake sometimes. "We can't just hide for the rest of our lives. What about a job? I have a little savings but I probably can't access it without the cops tracking me down. Besides, I can't let that bastard Gordon get away with this! He tried to *kill* me, for God's sake! And he told the whole world I was in love with him!" Just the thought made her sick to her stomach.

"Hiding *is* our plan," Ed told her after a few seconds of silence. "There's no other plan. If they find us, they'll bring us back."

"Can't you..." Claire frowned, trying to think as she spoke. "I don't know, come out to the media or something? You can prove it—you're so strong and they could do body scans to see all the hardware they stuck in you."

Darwin snorted. "Sure. They'll just let millions of dollars worth of research literally just walk away."

"Someone's going to want to use us," Ed added. "If not them, then some other government branch or private group. They'll figure if we're not working for them, we're working for someone else."

With a nod, Darwin said, "Either we're fighting for someone or we're lab rats to stick with needles and keep in a cage. Compared to those options, hiding sounds fucking wonderful."

Playing with the remaining crumbs on her plate, Claire frowned in thought. "I shouldn't have dragged you into my mess, Ed," she told him. "I'm sorry."

"You didn't drag me," he said. "I just showed up. Remember?"

Although she smiled, it dropped away quickly. Claire knew she couldn't just let Gordon get away with trying to kill her and faking the research. She was also sure she couldn't depend on Ed to help her. He and Darwin had so much more to lose than she did if they were captured. She couldn't drag them back into the open with her.

"What?" Ed asked and she jumped, glancing at him guiltily.

"What?" she echoed, trying to look guileless but knowing her poker face sucked. As Ed had told her just a couple days ago, she wasn't cut out to be a spy.

"What're you planning?" he elaborated.

"Nothing," she said too quickly. Claire made a face. "Is mind reading part of your super powers?"

"No." He sat back in his chair, his gaze locked on her. "I'm starting to know you. You're plotting something."

"Claire reading, then." She smiled. "Does that mean you're Claire-voyant?"

Darwin groaned but Ed rewarded her pun with a quick grin. "Pretty much. Yeah."

"Okay," she said. "I'm going to go back but I'm going alone."

"No."

"Yes," Claire insisted, holding up a hand when Ed's eyes flared with temper. "What are they going to do if they catch me? Maybe the cops'll arrest me but they can't convict me of anything. Where's the proof? There is none because I didn't *do* anything."

"I'm not worried about you getting arrested," Ed told her, his voice tight. " *They* know we're...together. They'll use you as bait to get me to come back."

"Tie me to the railroad tracks, you mean?" she teased, but his expression didn't change. "It's easy. Just don't take the bait. What're they going to do, kill me?"

"Probably." It was Darwin who spoke. Ed was staring at her, his expression darker than she'd ever seen.

Glancing away, she tried another tactic. "I'm just going to run into the lab and grab my old laptop. With all the excitement yesterday, I'm sure no one bothered to do

anything with it. I have all the original research data on it. With that, I can prove Gordon faked the results." Claire realized her tone was bordering on pleading and cleared her throat. "This is my decision. I'm an independent adult and I don't need your permission."

Ed's furious gaze didn't waiver. "How're you getting into the lab?"

"I'll just go in the morning, after Nadine or Joelle arrives. The front door will be open and they usually prop the lab door open when they're in there since it gets really warm. I'll just wait until they go to the bathroom or something and the lab's empty."

He was frowning more fiercely than ever. "It won't work. You'll get caught."

"Not necessarily," she objected, a little miffed he thought she was so incompetent. "I can be sneaky."

Ed's eyebrow didn't believe that for a second.

"We'll go with you," Darwin said, drawing both their gazes to him. "Get in, grab the laptop and get back here."

"But what if you're caught?" she protested. "You'll be sent back!"

"Should be simple." Darwin pushed to his feet. "I'll get those supplies. You two stay here and keep your heads down." He turned and strode to the front door.

"Darwin," Claire called after him. "Why are you doing this? You don't even know me."

He gave her a surprisingly sweet grin. "Been doing construction. I'm bored out of my fucking skull. Could use a fun little B and E."

"No breaking," she told him. "Just entering and then exiting, so an E and E."

"E and E, then." With a mocking salute, he left and the door closed behind him, beeping as the lock engaged, leaving a heavy silence.

Claire couldn't look at Ed. Her gaze hopped around the cabin until she couldn't stand it anymore and met his eyes. His fury was hidden, his face stony, all expression locked down tightly.

She had to do something. Standing up, she reached for Ed's plate but before she could grab it, his fingers closed around her wrist. Startled, she looked at him. He

pulled her toward him, reeling her in with a steady pressure. Claire allowed herself to be drawn, caught by his hand and something in his gaze, something she didn't want to define or even think about too much, since she had a feeling it would seriously freak her out.

Her knee bumped his thigh. Without thinking about it, she straddled his lap, sitting facing him like they were kids playing spider on a swing.

"Why won't you let me protect you?" he asked, his voice low and gruff.

"Why won't you let me protect *you*?" Claire countered.

Ed frowned. "Because you're tiny."

"And you're in greater danger than I am."

Bending his head, he buried his face in the side of her neck. Surprised, she raised a hand, resting it uncertainly on his hair. "Even if they wiped my memories again," he said, the air from his words making her shiver, "I'd still remember how you smelled."

Claire's fingers closed convulsively on a handful of his hair. "They won't wipe your memories," she told him fiercely. "They're never getting hold of you again. I don't care if you have to hand me an Uzi and post me outside the front door."

With a choked laugh, he kissed her neck, bringing goose bumps up on her skin. He trailed his lips across her throat as her grip on his hair softened. Burrowing her fingers through the strands, she massaged his scalp, scratching gentle lines across his head.

His lips grew more urgent and his teeth touched her skin in a light threat as he kissed his way along her jaw. Reaching her ear, Ed sucked at her earlobe and she gasped, gripping his head with both hands now.

Shifting forward, she ground against the bulge beneath his jeans and he grabbed her hips, holding her there. By the time he released her, Claire was panting, so overheated she nearly cried out in relief when he unzipped her sweatshirt.

With a final nip to her earlobe, he pulled his head away, grunting, "Up!"

After a few hazy seconds, she realized he meant her arms and she hurried to comply. As soon as she raised them, Ed dragged her shirt and sweatshirt over her head, pulling them off and tossing them aside, leaving her in just her bra.

He kissed her as he worked the back clasp free, his lips hard and his tongue demanding. Claire gave in happily, moaning as the pressure from the kiss tipped her head back. She was so enthralled, she didn't even notice when her bra fell away. Only when the air brushed against her bare breasts did she realize she was naked from the waist up.

Dying for the pressure of Ed's chest against hers, she pulled away from his mouth so she could work the buttons loose on his shirt. Impatiently, he pulled his shirt over his head before she could get it completely undone.

Grasping her beneath her ribs on both sides, he lifted her high enough to catch a nipple in his mouth. She cried out as he sucked, pulling almost painfully on the eager nub. Ed switched back and forth, licking and kissing both breasts, lightly biting her nipples until she was mewling with need.

When he finally lowered her back onto his lap, her hands went immediately to the button on his jeans. She frantically fumbled to unfasten his zipper but his hands covered hers, stilling them. She looked at him in confusion through a fog of lust.

"You said..." he started before dropping his eyes to the side. "You said you didn't want this."

Not want this? Is he crazy? Claire stared at him. "I said what?"

"You're too sore," he explained. "You said it's not worth it."

When it finally occurred to her what the holy hell he was talking about, she almost laughed. "You mean when we were on the bike, going through those trees?"

He nodded.

Now she did laugh, although it was a slightly pained sound. "You weren't supposed to hear that. I was just sore. I'm good now." She twisted her hands beneath his, trying to grasp the zipper. "Very good. Very, very good."

His eyebrow doubted that.

"Ed," she told him, stretching up to give him a hard kiss. "If you don't fuck me within the next five seconds, I'm not responsible for what might happen, okay?"

"Sure?" he asked, sliding his hands up her forearms.

With a rush of relief and excitement, Claire tackled his zipper again, managing to work the fastener down. "Yes. Now lift up." He raised his hips and she yanked his jeans and boxer briefs down around his thighs, barely waiting until his ass hit the chair seat again before closing her fingers around his erection.

Their groans emerged in stereo. Claire was torn between watching the cock trapped in her grip and keeping her gaze on his ecstatic face. Both views were utterly arousing.

"Shit," Ed muttered. "Pack's in the bedroom."

She gave him a smug grin. "You're not the only prepared one around here." Reaching into her back jeans pocket, she pulled out a wrapped condom.

He blinked at it and she smiled again, proud she'd managed to surprise him. Tearing the packet open with her teeth, she rolled it down the erect shaft in front of her. It was his turn to urgently unfasten her jeans. She stood up so he could shove her jeans and panties down over her hips.

Grasping her around the waist, he lifted her to sit on the edge of the table. She grabbed for a handhold as he yanked her jeans and panties down her legs and over her feet. Her shoes and socks slid off as well, caught by the denim, and Claire was left fully naked and clinging to the table.

Her heart racing, she watched with wide eyes as Ed lifted her again. He lowered her slowly onto his cock, the thick shaft impaling her, forging its way into her soaked and swollen pussy. When Claire sucked in a breath, he froze, his erection only halfway inside her.

"Sore?" he rasped.

"No," she lied. His entry was causing a twinge or two, but it was the kind of hurt she liked, the intense sensation that lit her whole body until she couldn't tell the difference between pleasure and pain. "It just hurts when you're gone."

“Claire,” he gritted out, his eyes silvered with heat. His hips surged up as he pulled her down, sinking the final inches of his cock into her, parting her swollen flesh with a ruthless thrust. She gasped, her head falling back as his fingers dug into her sides, lifting her up, almost off his erection, before dropping her back down again.

Her hands grasped his shoulders as she struggled to hold on, to find her balance, but he was merciless, driving deep with each thrust. She ached — with pleasure and need and desperation. She clung to him, gripping him as he withdrew, forcing him to drag his cock through the vice of her pussy with every stroke.

He slammed her down onto his cock again and she came, crying out as her body convulsed. His cock felt huge when it speared into her, rubbing against her sensitive tissues, driving the broad head deep within her body. Ed groaned as her pussy rippled around his erection and his thrusts became harder, faster.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, Claire buried her face against the hard slope of his shoulder. Still flying on the tail end of her orgasm, she struggled to anchor herself, finally closing her teeth on his muscle, in the same place he’d bitten her that morning.

With a final, rough thrust, he came. Holding her hard enough for his fingers to bruise her hips, he groaned, his cock buried impossibly deep inside her. She clutched him tightly as he shuddered in climax.

Gradually, his tense muscles eased and he released her hips, wrapping his arms around her back instead and hugging her close. She squeezed him back, pressing a kiss into his neck.

“You know,” she said, stretching up to give him a kiss behind his ear in a spot she knew would make him shiver. “You shouldn’t believe everything I say.”

His eyebrow was amused. “Have you been lying to me?”

Claire laughed. “Of course not. I do tend to talk a lot, though...”

“Hadn’t noticed,” he interjected, grinning when she gave him a look.

She immediately forgot what she was saying, since full-on-happy Ed was distractingly gorgeous. “Wait, what?”

"You tend to talk a lot," he prompted.

"Right." She nodded. "And sometimes things come out that are...um, influenced by the moment. So when I say things like...oh, that I don't ever want to have sex with you again, for example, I probably don't really mean it."

"When should I believe you, then?" Although the grin had disappeared, his eyes were positively *twinkling*.

Claire kissed him. She couldn't resist. "When I give you this look," she said, giving him her sternest glare. He laughed and she couldn't hold the expression any longer.

"Got it," he told her, mock-seriously.

"You'd better," she warned. "There'll be a test later." With a sigh, she stood up, regretfully allowing his softening cock to slip free of her body. "Better get cleaned up and dressed before Darwin gets back."

"Can I shower with you?" he asked, kissing her collarbone.

"You going to keep your hands to yourself?"

"No."

"Okay then."

* * * * *

"I'm not comfortable with this," she said, squeezing her eyes closed. "No offense, but I just don't think you know what you're doing."

"Quit flinching," Ed told her, a trace of exasperation in his voice. "I can't do it right if you keep jerking away."

"He's right," Darwin chimed in. "You should trust him. He did a good job on the color."

"Fine." Keeping her eyes closed, Claire gritted her teeth and tried to ignore the sound of the scissors snipping away at her hair.

"Besides," Darwin added, "It's just hair. It grows back. Now, if he took off your ear by accident..."

She opened one eye to glare at him. "Darwin. Not helping."

"Not really trying to help," he told her with an unrepentant shrug and amused tilt to his mouth. Muttering under her breath, Claire closed her eye again.

A few minutes later, the snipping sound ceased and Ed announced. "Done."

She shook her head. Her hair felt lighter, although it still swung to her shoulders. "Can I go look?"

"Sure," he told her. "D can do me."

"Definitely." Darwin grinned wickedly, holding up the clippers.

"Hang on," Ed caught her arm as she darted toward the bathroom door. "You're covered in hair bits." He brushed at her shoulders, knocking the tiny pieces of cut hair to the floor. When his hand moved to sweep at her shirt where it covered her breasts, his fingers lingered.

"Think you got it," she told him drily.

He looked at her with wide, innocent eyes. "Missed a piece." His fingers pinched her nipple and she yelped, jumping away.

"Evil man," she accused, trying not to laugh as she headed for the bathroom. Her trepidation returned as she approached the mirror. She peeked at it, only allowing the side by one ear to show in the reflection. The little she could see looked...blonde.

Taking a deep breath, Claire stepped directly in front of the mirror.

"Huh," she said, turning her head back and forth. Even though it was still damp, the haircut actually looked...nice. She'd never colored her hair before but the dark blonde color with the lighter streaks suited her, brightened her features from mousey to softly pretty. The cut framed her face, giving it a better shape and making her eyes appear even larger.

She walked back into the main room where Ed was sitting in the kitchen chair she'd just vacated and Darwin was shaving all his hair off. Ed flicked a glance toward Claire without moving his head.

"You like it?" he asked.

Bending down in front of him, she kissed him. Pulling back a little, she said, "Nope. I *love* it. If you get tired of being a bouncer, you could have a career as a hairdresser."

He gave her a quick smile. "Glad you like it."

Sitting in the chair next to him, she watched as Darwin ran the clippers across Ed's scalp, only leaving the barest stubble behind.

"Is that where they inserted the microprocessor?" Claire asked, gesturing toward a scar now visible on his head.

He lifted a hand but caught himself before he touched the mark. "Guess so."

She frowned. "They didn't do a very neat job of it."

His hand jerked up again and then dropped into his lap. "Guess they figured hair would cover it." He stared straight ahead, his impassive expression firmly in place.

"Sorry," she told him, reaching over to put her hand on his knee. "I wasn't very tactful, was I? It doesn't look bad or anything. It's just...a reminder, I guess. That they did things without your consent. To your *brain*, especially. Just pisses me off."

Darwin huffed a laugh and Ed's mouth twitched up as he covered her hand with his. "We get that. Being pissed off."

Claire wanted to climb in his lap but hesitated to put herself under the shower of hair tumbling from the path of the clippers. She flipped her hand over so she could squeeze his instead.

* * * * *

Claire couldn't believe they were actually planning on retracing their steps. She and Ed had just finished their grueling motorcycle ride six hours earlier and here they were, ready to hop back in the truck and do it all over again. She sighed. The worst part was she couldn't blame anyone else, since it'd been her idea.

Besides Claire's hair color, Darwin had also gotten her a stocking hat and a pair of glasses with plastic lenses. She tried them on.

"How do I look?" she asked the guys.

"Nice," Ed grunted, giving her a quick kiss as he jammed the restocked pack under the pickup seat.

"Smarter," was Darwin's comment. "The blonde hair dumbed you down a few notches. This brings you back up a little."

She laughed, tugging off the glasses as she climbed into the truck. Ed swung into the passenger seat next to her and Darwin took the driver's seat. "This is great. Not that I don't like your bike," she gave Ed a conciliatory pat on the knee, "but there's something to be said about a heater." A horrible thought occurred to her and she turned toward Darwin. "The heater works, right?"

He gave her a scornful look and slid his hand caressingly over the steering wheel. "Of course it works," he told her. "The truck's perfect."

Claire hid her laugh in a cough. "Right."

They rolled down the driveway in silence.

As Darwin stopped at the intersection with the main road through town, Claire asked, "Anyone want a sandwich?"

"We just left," Ed told her.

"So?"

"It's a thirteen-hour drive."

"So?"

He shrugged. "Okay, hand one over."

"Me too," Darwin said.

After the sandwiches were eaten, Ed tucked his arm around her and she leaned against him, more relaxed than she'd been in days. So far, this trip heading back was much better, in Claire's opinion, than their journey to Darwin's house had been. The truck was warm and the vibrations were minimal—enough to make her sleepy but not enough to numb her entire body, like the bike had done.

The setting sun lit the clouds out Darwin's side window to a pinkish orange. Smiling a little, Claire let her head rest on Ed's chest and closed her eyes.

Better sleep while I can , she decided. *It'll be a busy day tomorrow – lots of felonies to commit.* A snort of laughter escaped and Ed's arm tightened against her. Claire let the just-right vibrations of the truck rock her to sleep while she marveled at how content she felt.

Chapter Ten

Darwin's muttered curse woke her.

She opened her eyes, confused by the darkened truck for a moment. Ed pulled his arm from around her shoulders and reached beneath the seat for his pack. He unzipped a front pocket and yanked a cell phone out.

"What's going on?" Claire asked as Ed turned on the phone.

"Cop," Darwin growled. "Just pulled out behind us."

Ed didn't say anything. He just started pushing buttons on the phone.

"Who're you texting?" Claire blinked, trying to shake off her just-awake disorientation.

"Cal," Ed told her, hitting the send button. "We need a social for you."

"Right," she said, although she was still confused. Glancing at her watch, she hit the backlight button and saw it was almost five thirty in the morning.

"We're heading to work at NorTech," Darwin snapped out as red and blue lights flickered behind them, lighting up the truck cab. "The six-to-two shift. It's twenty minutes away in Harriston, got it?" Pulling off onto the shoulder, he brought the truck to a halt.

He seemed to be waiting for a response from Claire, so she said, "Yes."

"We're car-pooling. The three of us live in Moose River, which is fifteen miles north. We just moved there three weeks ago. Ed and I are stepbrothers. You're his girlfriend."

The phone in Ed's hand beeped. "You're Delia Marie Snow, birth date December 19, 1985. Your driver's license is out of Georgia. Here's your social security number." He rattled it off as Claire grabbed his hand and pulled the phone over so she could see the screen.

"Let me read it—I memorize numbers better that way," she told him, muttering the nine digits over and over. "Got it," she announced with much more confidence

than she actually felt. Ed turned off the phone, dropping it between the seat and passenger-side door as a flashlight flickered through the cab.

Darwin rolled down his window. "Morning, Officer," he said, sounding completely relaxed. Claire gulped in a breath as she turned to look at the cop, hoping desperately she didn't look as terrified as she felt.

The cop flicked his light over their faces and Claire squinted into the brightness for several endless seconds before he redirected his attention to Darwin. "Do you know the speed limit along here?"

"Fifty-five?" Darwin guessed.

"Yes it is. Do you know what you were going?"

"Fifty-five?"

The cop didn't crack a smile. "No. Sixty-one. License, proof of insurance and registration, please."

"Course," Darwin told him, leaning forward and pulling his wallet from his back jeans pocket. Tugging out his license and insurance card, he handed it to the officer before leaning over Claire to open the glove box. She assumed the slip he pulled out was his registration. She watched the cop examine the license while repeating her fake social security number and birthday over and over in her head.

"You two have ID on you?" the cop asked, directing his flashlight at them again.

As Ed reached for his wallet, Claire quavered, "No, sir."

"What's your name?"

She had a split-second panic. She'd been concentrating so hard on the numbers, what if she biffed the name? Even as her stomach clenched, the name popped into her head. "Delia Snow," she told him, even remembering to add a Southern drawl to her words. "Delia Marie Snow."

The cop was young. Although he maintained his expressionless mien, Claire was pretty sure she saw a spark of interest. For some crazy reason, this calmed her down more than remembering her fake name. She gave him a shy smile.

"Your social security number?"

No problem. She rattled off the numbers and then her birthday when he asked. "Just a month away," she added, giving the cop a flirty look. Ed cleared his throat as he leaned across her to hand the officer his driver's license.

"You have a driver's license?" the cop asked Claire.

"Yes, sir. From Georgia."

He made a note on the pad he'd been scribbling on. "Sit tight," he told them before walking back to his car.

"Watch it," Ed muttered, giving Claire a nudge.

"What?"

Even in the dim light, she could see his scowl. "Don't get too friendly with the cop."

"Hey, I almost forgot my freaking name, okay?" she hissed back. "I was *relieved*, that's all." She shrugged. "And if a little flirting helps..."

"It *doesn't* help," he growled. "We don't want him to remember you. Quit being memorable."

"Fine!"

"Shut it, you two," Darwin ordered, low-voiced. Claire craned her neck to see the cop approaching their truck again.

"So where're you headed so early?" the cop asked.

With an amused grimace, Darwin told him, "Work. We all do the six-to-two at NorTech. Since we're all living in Moose River now, we drive together. You know, split the cost of gas."

The cop moved the light to Claire and her heart hiccupped. "What about you?"

"Me?" Her voice was just a squeak.

"It's a long way from Georgia."

"Yes, sir," she said, thankful for the drawl that slowed down her words, giving her a tiny amount of time to think. Darwin hadn't covered this in his rapid-fire background invention. "I...I needed to make a change."

"Why Moose River?" The cop's gaze was a little too probing for her comfort.

"These two told me about NorTech," she improvised. "They said I could stay with them until I found a place."

"How'd you all meet?"

"Church." She almost cringed but caught herself in time. "It's an online chapter. I...um, I can't lie to you, Officer." She racked her brain to come up with a believable story. "In Georgia, I was a...a stripper." She ducked her head in pretend shame. "I knew I had to leave or I'd just keep going back...because of the money." She peeked up to see whether he was buying the story but his face was impassive. "But I knew Jesus hated to see me up there on stage, naked except for that tiny G-string."

The cop cleared his throat.

"I'd been chatting online with these two for a while." She gestured at Darwin and Ed, realizing she didn't even know their pretend names. "They'd been so supportive, praying with me, helping me come to the decision to leave the stripping life and Georgia for good. I got a bus ticket to Moose River and haven't looked back."

"So you...live with both of them?" the officer asked.

She nodded. "But it's not like we... *live* -live together. There's no sex. I've rededicated my life to Jesus. I won't have sex again until I'm married." She bit her lip and shot him another quick look. "Well, maybe I will if I really, really love someone. I'd hate to marry someone and then find out too late he's," she waved a hand, searching for a word, "um...you know. He's not very... *proficient*."

He coughed. "Um, good luck with that." Handing Darwin and Ed their cards back, he told them, "Better get going so you're not all late for work. Watch you keep your speed down, though."

"Thank you, Officer," Darwin said, tucking his ID back in his wallet.

Pulling a business card from his pocket, the cop scribbled something on the back and then held it out to Claire. "If you need anyone to," he cleared his throat again, "show you around, here's my cell phone number."

Taking the card, she smiled at him. "I'll do that, sir. Thank you. You've been very kind."

He nodded seriously. "Drive safe."

She gave him a small wave before he turned to walk back to his car. Darwin cranked his window back up and eased the truck back into the southbound lane. They were quiet for a solid minute.

"So, Delia," Darwin said casually. "How's your buddy Jesus doing? Haven't heard from him in ages."

"He's good," Claire told him, a little giddy with relief. "He asked about you, actually."

"He's going to show you around Moose Lake?" Ed said in disgust. "Moose Lake? What the fuck's he going to show you in Moose-fucking-Lake?"

Claire blinked at him. "Who's going to show me Moose Lake? Jesus?"

Darwin apparently thought that was hilarious. "I know what Officer Hard-On wants to show Delia in Moose Lake. I'll give you a hint — it lives in his pants."

"Why'd you have to say you'd sleep with him?" Ed demanded.

"I didn't say I'd sleep with him specifically!" she protested. "I was just talking about waiting until I was married and thought that didn't seem very practical and since Delia's not a total idiot, I just wanted to qualify the whole no-sex-before-marriage rule."

"Delia *is* an idiot if she calls up Officer Asshole for a date," Ed scoffed.

"She's lonely, okay?" Claire fired back. "She doesn't know anyone in Moose Lake except the two of you, it's freaking freezing here, plus she has to get up at four every morning to go to a job she hates. The cop was nice and kind of cute."

Ed sounded offended when he asked, "Lonely? What's wrong with me or D? We gave you a place to live, helped you find a job, talked to you about Jesus — what's the problem? What does Officer Fuckwad have that we don't?"

"Um, guys," Darwin interrupted. "Did you just have simultaneous psychotic breaks? You do know you're arguing about imaginary people, right?"

"Of course," Claire told him quickly.

"Yeah," Ed snapped.

Silence filled the truck cab until Claire giggled. "Oh Jesus."

"Him again?" Darwin asked, grinning.

Feeling around for Ed's hand, Claire found it and linked her fingers with his.

"That was scary. I didn't even know what names you two were going by."

Giving her hand a squeeze, Ed bent his head to give her a glancing kiss on her temple. "You did great, mouse."

"Yeah?" Claire grinned. "Do you take back that whole thing about me being a terrible spy?"

"I never said that," he protested.

"Did too!" she protested. "In the supply closet. Or maybe it was at the coffee shop."

Darwin glanced at them. "What were you two doing in a supply closet? Like I even need to ask."

"Never mind." The steel in Ed's voice ended that subject. "Listen, Claire..."

His hesitant tone immediately piqued her interest. "Yes?"

"What were you hoping to do after we got the laptop?" he asked.

"Bring down my bastard of an ex-boss," she said. If both her hands had been free, she would've rubbed them together like an evil genius. "I thought I'd put together my own presentation for the board of the foundation. Send them all their very own CDs a few days before he's supposed to present his research proposal. Thought I'd send a few extra copies to other people who might be interested – the police, some people in the media – and I might even blog about it. It'll be fun."

"And after that?"

"Well..." She trailed off, sneaking a glance at his face. From what she could see from the dim light of the truck's control panel, his jaw was set, his face tight. Claire chewed on her lip. What she really wanted was to stay with him but that seemed pretty ballsy to announce after only knowing a guy for what? Three and a half days? She took the chicken's way out. "Why? What were you thinking?"

“One of the other guys—one of us, I mean—has been doing some research of his own, trying to figure out exactly what they did to us. He’s hoping to get some of our memories back, maybe even...” He paused and Claire didn’t dare move, not wanting to distract Ed from whatever fascinating thing he was going to say next. “Maybe figure out who we were. Before, I mean.”

“Is he having any success?” she asked when Ed fell silent.

He shook his head. “It’s early still. I was just thinking you might be able to help, if you’re interested.”

“Definitely!” She bounced up and down on the seat in excitement. She hadn’t expected to get a job offer on the truck ride back to her former place of employment where she was going to steal her ex-boss’s research findings. “Where is he?”

“Colorado,” Ed told her, and she stopped bouncing as a sobering idea occurred to her.

“Will you...” She trailed off, not sure how to ask without coming off as completely desperate. “Would you be...” Her second try wasn’t any more successful.

“She’s trying to ask if you’ll come with her to Colorado,” Darwin stated.

“Yeah?” Ed turned his head to look at her and she stared at her shadowed lap, swamped in equal doses of humiliation and relief that the question was out there and she didn’t have to ask it.

“Um...well, yeah,” she muttered, still not able to look at him.

“Sure, I’ll come,” he said, his voice casual. When she glanced up at him, he had a huge grin. “Might as well see if I like snowboarding.”

Darwin snorted. “Please. He’d have gone whether you asked him or not. He’s in *loove*.” His voice went up to a high-pitched falsetto on the last word. Ed reached over Claire’s head to give the other man a shove. Darwin just laughed.

As for Claire, she couldn’t stop smiling.

* * * * *

Later that morning, parked a half block down from the lab, Claire wasn’t feeling quite so content.

"You should stay here," Ed told her for the fiftieth time.

"We talked about this," she said, also for the fiftieth time. "It's all set. Don't change the plan now."

He frowned. "I don't like it."

"I know." She squeezed his hand but he still scowled. "Still, you're just going to have to cowboy up and accept the fact that I'm going in there."

His response was a wordless rumble.

Claire sighed. How was she supposed to reason with a growl?

"That her?" Darwin asked, nodding at a woman walking toward the front door of the lab.

"That's Joelle," Claire confirmed, her heart beating faster as she watched her former coworker unlock the front door. This was it.

"I don't—"

Claire interrupted him. "Zip it, Eddie. I'm going. Now let me out."

Jerking the truck door open, Ed slid out and held out a hand to help Claire hop down. She leaned against him, stretching up to kiss his chin.

"Don't worry," she reassured him. "I'll be fine."

He just grunted, bending to press a hard kiss on her lips.

Claire turned back toward Darwin. "You'll keep an eye out for Gordon, in case he comes in early?"

"And delay him. Got it," Darwin said.

"Great. And you'll know him if you see him?" Claire didn't know why she was asking. She'd described her ex-boss to him over and over.

"Pubic-hair face?" Darwin drawled. "How could I miss that?"

She laughed, although it had a nervous edge, and swung the truck door closed. Taking a deep breath, she looked up at Ed. "Ready?"

Although he still scowled, he gave a reluctant nod.

"Let's do it, then." She turned and resolutely walked toward her former workplace. It was strange how different it looked, how...ominous it appeared now,

when only a few days ago it had been just an innocuous lab. Stepping through the front door, she couldn't hear anything, since her heart was thundering so loudly in her ears. She held the door for Ed, turning to look behind her when he didn't take the weight of the door from her.

No one was there.

She stuck her head back outside and looked around. There was no sign of him. Darwin's truck was still parked in the same spot but she couldn't see inside it, only the reflection of the morning sun off the windshield. Biting her lip, she hesitated, unsure whether the plan had changed.

Turning to face the hallway, she eased the door closed behind her. There were no sirens, no cops, no men in lab coats to snatch Ed and Darwin away, so she was going to follow the plan. Taking a shaky breath, she pulled off her stocking hat as she walked down the hall toward the lab.

The door was closed. Through the window she could see Joelle at one of the lab computers. The other woman's back was to her. Pretty sure Gordon had changed the key code two minutes after Claire had quit, she didn't risk setting off an alarm by entering the wrong combination. Instead, she raised her fist and knocked.

Joelle jumped and spun around. When she saw Claire, she flinched and her eyes shot to a spot next to the door. Claire guessed she was looking at the phone mounted on the wall. Joelle was thinking of calling Gordon—or the cops. Either one would be bad.

"C'mon, Joelle," Claire said, raising her voice so the other woman could hear her through the window. "I just want my coat."

Joelle hesitated, her gaze flickering back and forth between Claire's face and the phone.

"You know everything Gordon's saying about me isn't true," Claire pushed. "I'm not going to *do* anything. I just want to grab my coat."

The other woman took a hesitant step toward the door and then stopped.

Shoving back a snarl of frustration, Claire forced a smile. "We worked together for more than a year, Jo! You know I wouldn't hurt you or the research. I'll just grab my coat and leave. Gordon won't even know unless you tell him." She tried to make her face as pitiable as possible. "It's cold out there, Jo, and I can't afford another coat right now. Please?"

"You'll be quick?" Joelle asked, moving to the door, and Claire nodded, choking back a triumphant exclamation. "Okay." Joelle pressed the release bar on the door, shoving it open. Claire grabbed the edge of the door and slipped in quickly, before the other woman could change her mind. As soon as Joelle glanced away, Claire dropped her hat onto the floor, nudging it back with her heel against the doorjamb before carefully closing the door. The hat propped the door open a couple inches, just enough to keep it from locking again.

"Thanks, Jo," Claire told her. "Is it still in the closet?"

"Yeah. Hurry up," Joelle told her, watching as Claire moved toward the closet. As she walked, Claire darted a glance over to the table where her laptop had sat the last time she had seen it. The table was empty. Her stomach dropped.

"Do you get to use my laptop now?" she asked as she pulled her coat off the hanger.

"No." Joelle shifted uneasily. "Nadine will. Gordon said he has to clean it up first though."

The words "clean it up" sent a bolt of panic through Claire. "A little canned air on the keyboard?" she asked, trying to sound casual.

"I don't know. It's in his office. She'll get it when he's done with whatever he needs to do to it. Can you hurry?"

"Got it." Claire held up her coat and walked to the door. She paused with her hand on the door. "I have to ask. Why are you going along with faking the data, Jo?"

Joelle flushed a deep red. "You need to go."

"He's going to get caught," Claire warned. "You should get out while you still can. Look how things have escalated already. Faking results, lying to the police, helping Gordon cover up attempted *murder* ..."

"Shut up!" Joelle snapped furiously. "You don't know what you're talking about. You have your coat, so get out before I call the cops!"

Claire pushed the door open. "Wreck your life if you want," she said. "Personally, I don't think Gordon's worth it." She slipped into the hall, pulling the door shut behind her until it bumped against the hat. Although there was no reason to prop the door open now, she couldn't grab the hat without Joelle noticing, so Claire just left it stuck between the door and the jamb. As she hurried down the hall, Claire tried to think of a new variation on the plan. How were they going to get the laptop out of Gordon's locked office? *He* surely wasn't going to let them in.

An arm locked around her waist at the same time a hand clamped over her mouth. Terror shot through her as she was dragged backward into the supply closet and the door yanked closed. As her back was pulled against a familiar chest, her panic faded.

"Really?" she whisper-yelled into the darkness, as the hand dropped from over her mouth. She elbowed Ed in the stomach and immediately regretted it. "Man, your abs are hard. Was scaring me half to death really necessary? You couldn't have just tapped me on the shoulder?"

"Shh," he hushed her. "Stay here." He released her and moved to the door.

"The laptop's not in the lab," she told him in a whisper. "It's in Gordon's office."

"I heard," he murmured back. "Now stay."

"Ha," she muttered. "Not going to happen." Even though it was pitch-black in the closet, Claire could feel his glare. "Your laser-beam eyeballs aren't going to work this time," she whispered. "I'm coming."

Although she couldn't make out whatever he was grumbling under his breath, Claire could guess what he was saying. Despite his inaudible tirade, she stuck close behind him as he slipped out of the closet into the empty hallway.

Still clutching her coat, she watched as he punched in a series of numbers on the keypad attached to Gordon's office door. To her amazement, the lock clicked and the light turned green, allowing them access.

"How'd you know that?" she hissed after they slipped into Gordon's office and the door had clicked shut behind them.

"Heard it," he explained, his voice low. "When we were...in the closet. The first time, I mean."

"Are you blushing?" she whispered in amazement.

"No. That the laptop?" He pointed at the computer bag.

She hurried over to where it leaned against his desk. "Looks like it." She unzipped the top and pulled it out far enough to see the scratch marring the top from when she'd accidentally tipped it off her desk a few months before. "This is it." Yanking the zipper closed, she shouldered the bag and moved toward the door, but Ed held up a warning hand.

Her heartbeat accelerated until she thought her heart would shoot right out of her chest. "Gordon?" she mouthed.

Ed shook his head. "Joelle," he said so quietly Claire was surprised she heard it. After a few seconds, Ed nodded and shoved open the door. "She's in the bathroom," he whispered in Claire's ear. "Take the computer to the truck. I'll be right out."

"But..." she started to protest but then snapped her mouth closed. With Joelle about to emerge from the bathroom at any moment, she knew now was not the time to argue. She darted toward the exit and through the front door, not allowing herself to look back.

The truck was only a half block away but it felt like miles. Claire forced herself to walk, although she felt horribly exposed in the morning sunlight. Her steps sped up until she was almost running, the laptop bumping heavily against her hip.

She sucked in a breath of relief when she reached the truck. Yanking the door open, she climbed in, twisting the computer bag around so it lay across her lap. Moving to pull the truck door closed after her, she hesitated.

"Should I leave this open for Ed?" she asked Darwin, who shook his head.

"Shut it," he told her. "An open door attracts attention. Where is he?"

"Still in the lab." She realized she was shaking. "I don't know why he thought he had to —"

"Get down," Darwin hissed, interrupting her.

She ducked down, crouching in the space in front of the passenger side of the seat. "What is it?" she whispered. Her heartbeat, which had just begun to calm down a little, took off again.

"Pubes-face is here." Darwin opened his door. "Stay down." Then he was gone.

Breathing in quick pants, Claire huddled out of sight. She wiggled around so she could shove the laptop beneath the seat next to Ed's pack and then jammed the small cooler in front of it. Wadding her coat into a ball, she shoved it into the space above the laptop, hoping that would hide the computer bag from a casual search of the truck, just in case she was discovered.

She strained her ears, trying to hear something — anything — besides her harsh breaths but there was nothing. When the passenger-side door opened, Claire jerked her head up, slamming it on the underside of the dash. Biting off a gasp of pain, she twisted her neck to see Ed climb in and pull the door shut.

He sat with his legs pressed against the door so his feet would fit in the only spot not taken up by Claire. Wrapping her arms around his knees, she gave his legs a hug, so relieved he'd made it out of the lab in one piece.

The driver's-side door jerked open and she whacked her head on the dash again. Once the spinning stars from the blow faded, she had a good view of Darwin pulling his door closed and twisting the key in the ignition.

"Did Gordon see you coming out?" she asked Ed quietly as the truck pulled away from the curb.

It was Darwin who answered, while giving her an offended glance. "Give me a little credit, would you? He was too busy scheduling an interview with *Great Day, USA!* to talk about his obsessed, murderous, research-wrecking ex-lab assistant."

Claire frowned. "Great what?" She clung to Ed's knees to keep her balance as Darwin made a left turn.

" *Great Day, USA* ? The number-one morning news show? With Chip McClean?" Darwin offered with exaggerated patience.

"Never heard of it – or Chip," she admitted. "I don't watch much morning news, though."

Darwin shook his head, looking disappointed, but Ed patted her hair. "He made it up."

"He made it..." Claire trailed off with a laugh, reaching over to smack Darwin's knee. "And he believed you were this Chip guy?"

"Of course."

Claire looked at his flannel shirt and worn jeans. "Really?"

Darwin shrugged. "Told him I was on my way to do a story about the secret life of construction workers and the station manager demanded I wear this."

"Good thinking."

"Thanks."

"Aren't you tired of driving?" Claire asked. "I could take a turn while you sleep."

"I can drive too," Ed offered.

"Let me get a few miles between us and the lab before we stop." He glanced down at Claire. "Though it should be safe for you to get up now."

With a hand from Ed, she uncurled her body and sat on the seat between them. "You!" She punched Ed in the shoulder. Once again, she regretted it the moment her knuckles connected with unyielding muscle. "Ow."

"What?" His look was so full of offended innocence, she hit him again.

"Ow!" she yelped, scowling at him as she shook her stinging hand. "You *know* what. We already had the laptop. Why didn't you leave when I did?"

"I had to get something," he told her, reaching into his jacket pocket.

"What?" she demanded. "What was so important you had to risk..." Claire trailed off as he pulled a small, white-furred animal from his pocket. "Wilma?"

“Figured Gordon wouldn’t keep her around long,” Ed told her as she reached out to take the rat from him. “Since the treatment didn’t work on her.”

“What is that? A rat?” Darwin snorted a laugh. “Figures. E’s always been a sucker for little soft things.”

Cuddling Wilma against her chest and blinking away tears, Claire stretched up to kiss Ed. “Thank you.”

“Welcome,” he said, shrugging off her thanks as a touch of red darkened his cheekbones. “Now put on your seat belt.”

Ignoring that, she kissed him again. “And I’m sorry.”

“For what?”

“Hitting you. Twice.”

Ed laughed out loud. “Don’t worry,” he told her, his smile making her heart jump. “It didn’t hurt.”

Chapter Eleven

Claire sighed. "I miss Darwin's truck."

"Just be glad we're not on the bike."

"Oh, I am. This car isn't so bad. There's plenty of room for Wilma in the back. I just really liked that truck." She turned her head to look at Ed. The light from the control panel of the station wagon cast odd shadows on his face, turning his features into those of a harsh stranger. Feeling silly for letting her predawn imaginings get away from her, she still reached out and touched his arm. His muscles jumped beneath her fingers and the feel of him, even through his sleeve, reassured her tired brain that he was warm and alive and familiar.

He caught her hand, entwining their fingers and resting them against his thigh. "Darwin would've shot us if we tried to take his truck."

With a laugh, Claire settled against the seat, resting her cheek against the upholstery so she could continue to look at Ed. She never seemed to get tired of watching him, despite the distorting glow of the instrument panel. A thought occurred to her and her smile fell away. "Will he be okay?"

"Darwin?" He glanced at her quickly before returning his gaze to the road. "Yeah."

"Maybe we shouldn't have stayed with him after we got the laptop back." Claire chewed on her bottom lip.

"It was only for a couple weeks," Ed reassured her, giving her hand a squeeze. "We barely left the cabin. Besides, wouldn't matter if someone *did* recognize you — you're free and clear now."

"That I am." Claire gave a satisfied smile. Her short time as a fugitive made the transformation to whistle-blowing hero so much more satisfying. "Gordon's going to prison. How great is that?"

Ed grunted. "He deserves it. Bastard tried to kill you." His voice went icy cold on the last words and his fingers tightened until they squeezed her hand almost painfully.

"Um...Ed?" When Ed looked at her, she smiled at him. "Ow?"

With a grimace, he released her hand. "Sorry."

"No worries." Claire kept her hand on his leg, turning her palm over to stroke the denim over his thigh. "Not to be vindictive, but I wish Joelle and Nadine had gotten more than a slap on the wrist. I mean, they just stood by as Gordon threw me to the wolves."

In the dim light, Claire saw the rise and fall of his shoulders as he shrugged. "Be hard for them to find work."

"That's true," she agreed a little more cheerfully. "Maybe those bitches'll have to turn tricks to make money."

Ed gave a choked laugh.

She made a face. "That sounded harsh, didn't it?"

"Little bit," he told her. "They deserve it, though."

"Yeah," Claire said doubtfully. "Still, they did used to be my friends."

"Makes it worse." When she glanced at him curiously, he clarified, "What they did."

"True." She considered it for a moment. "How about if I wish for them to be strippers? That's not quite as bad."

"Claire."

"Yes, Edward?"

His hand flattened hers against his thigh. "Can't drive when you're doing that." He sounded as if he were talking with his jaw clenched.

Claire realized she'd been absently massaging his thigh while she'd been talking. "Oops. Sorry."

His grunt was skeptical. "Uh-huh. Then why are you still doing it?"

She was. Even with the pressure of his hand over hers, she still managed to squeeze the hard muscle of his quadriceps. "Because you're irresistible?" she guessed.

This grunt sounded equal parts amused and breathless. "Hang on," he warned her, and turned sharply onto an exit ramp. Deciding to take his words literally, Claire dug her fingers into his thigh in a tight grasp. He turned right onto a two-lane county road and pulled onto the shoulder as soon as they were out of view of the interstate.

As he cut the headlights, Claire peered into the predawn darkness. "You know," she warned him as he unfastened his seat belt. "This is the beginning of every teen slasher flick ever ma —"

Her words were cut off as his mouth covered hers. As always, her brain was reduced to pudding the instant his lips made contact. Without breaking the kiss, he unbuckled her seat belt and hauled her onto his lap. Claire knew it was the cavewoman in her talking, but the ease with which he moved her snatched away her breath.

As she straddled his lap, her knee banged against the door. In a fuzzy corner of her brain, she realized that the bruise would hurt later but, for now, she was too caught up in Ed's kiss to care. Yanking off his stocking hat, she ran her fingers over his shorn skull, pulling his mouth even more tightly against hers.

He took over her mouth, thrusting his tongue against hers before pulling back far enough to nip at her lips. When she made a frustrated sound and tugged on his head, trying to make him stop teasing and kiss her again, he closed his fingers around her wrists and moved her arms behind her back.

"Keep them there," he told her.

"What did I say about giving me orders?" she asked, although her tone was more breathless than chastising.

"Do you want to get fucked?" Ed asked.

"Yes, please."

"Then do what I say."

Her belly melting at his bossy words, Claire kept her hands behind her back and squirmed against him. "Yes, sir." At his rough groan, she pressed back a smile. There was more than one way to torture Ed.

Grabbing the hem of her sweater, he yanked it over her head, leaving her arms still twisted in the sleeves. The way the knit bound her arms turned her on even more, and she whimpered, grinding against his lap. The steering wheel was pressing into her forearms but that was just a minor annoyance, since Ed's fingers were brushing against her stomach.

He unbuttoned her jeans and worked the zipper down before slipping both hands under the loosened denim and beneath her panties to cup her bare ass. Gasping at the heat of his palms against her sensitive skin, Claire leaned forward to press her face against his neck. She moaned as he massaged two handfuls of flesh.

Licking and kissing his neck, she pushed her ass into his grip. With a growl, Ed pulled his hands free and lifted her, twisting around so he could lay her on the seat. Confused, she opened her mouth to tell him to get his hands back to the lovely things they'd been doing and then snapped her mouth closed when he yanked her jeans and panties down over her hips. Claire tried to help as he pulled her clothes down her legs, tugging her shoes off in the process.

"Okay," she puffed, her head mashed against the passenger-side door and her legs pretzeled to prevent her from kicking him in the head. "Next road trip, we're buying an RV."

Ed's answer was an indistinguishable groan that she chose to take as a yes. He tugged his shirt over his head and let it fall before straddling her on his hands and knees.

"Or at least a van. I mean, this does have this bench seat, thank God, but it's still like a travel game of Twister. Dirty travel Twist—" His mouth came down on hers again, ending the stream of words. Claire was okay with this.

The kiss didn't last nearly long enough before his lips were trailing across her throat, his tongue dipping into the notch above her breastbone. From there, he kissed

and licked his way down to the edge of her bra, which, she decided, felt very much in the way. Claire squirmed, trying to free her sweater-bound hands enough to unhook her bra.

Sliding a hand beneath her back, Ed lifted her up far enough to pull the sweater off, freeing her arms. Although she almost missed the restraint, Claire eagerly explored the unyielding columns of his arms, rigid as they supported his weight. Trailing her hands over his shoulders and across his chest, she could feel the sweat glazing his skin and the press of each quick breath against her palms.

Claire couldn't hold back a smile. This hot, sweet, perfect man, with his incredible strength and endurance, trembled when she touched him. It was amazing.

Ed dipped his head and caught her nipple with his teeth. Despite the lacy barrier of her bra, she could feel every pinch, every soothing stroke of his tongue, every sucking pull of his mouth all the way down to her toes. Arching her back, she moaned, wrapping her fingers around Ed's stubby head and pulling him against her.

Despite her eager sounds, he didn't linger on her breast. Instead, he traced a line to her bellybutton, dived in once and then kept moving down. Since she had a pretty good idea where he was headed, Claire didn't try to stop him but just continued cupping his skull in a gentle grip, guiding him.

As he moved lower and lower, Ed pushed her thighs higher until her feet brushed the ceiling of the car. Her breath caught as he nipped at her thigh. Moisture gathered in her pussy, which was feeling emptier by the second. Claire released his head and grasped her legs behind the knees, opening herself even wider, aching for his fingers, his mouth, his tongue – anything to soothe the almost painful ache growing in her pussy.

He kissed her thigh, trailing his tongue along the seam at the top of her leg, running parallel to her needy center, tantalizingly close.

"Please!" she begged, tilting her hips up, pulling her legs even closer to her chest. To her utter relief, he kissed her pussy, his tongue stroking into her desperately hot depths. The caress took all her words away and she could only moan as he teased her

clit with tiny flicks of his tongue. His rough cheeks scraped against her inner thighs, the prickling burn only sharpening the pleasure his lips and tongue created.

Catching her clit between his lips, he sucked gently as she twisted beneath him. The awkwardness of the narrow seat and the dig of the door handle against her scalp didn't matter anymore – every nerve in her body was focused on the wonderful things Ed's mouth was doing to her pussy. Nothing else in the world existed.

Leaving her clit, he plunged his tongue into her, withdrew and plunged again, his tongue fucking her like a small, slippery cock. This made her hungry for more – hungry for *him* .

"Ed," she managed to gasp and she could see the dark outline of him as he raised his head. "Fuck me!"

He groaned and went to his knees, smacking his head on the ceiling as he did so.

"Shit!" he swore, his hands working at the front of his jeans. "An RV next time. Promise."

Claire's laugh was more of a desperate gasp as Ed shoved his jeans and underwear around his hips. She heard a crinkling sound.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked breathlessly.

"I'm the prepared one this time," he told her.

"Yay!" she cheered, squirming impatiently against the seat. "Now hurry up!"

With a growl, Ed bracketed her body with his arms and entered her in one smooth thrust. She cried out, not in pain but in total completion. When his mouth met hers, she arched into the kiss, pressing her lips hard against his. His hips retreated and then he slammed his cock into her again, over and over, each thrust filling her, stretching her. With one hand, he cupped the top of her head, protecting her from the hard surface of the door.

His rhythm grew faster and he plunged deeper with each stroke, his balls slapping against her, driving her higher and higher until she came, her body gripping his cock, holding him buried inside her as her orgasm crashed over her.

She gasped for breath, oblivious to everything except the sparklers of pleasure fizzing inside her. Gradually she became aware of Ed, still incredibly hard and still buried within her body. When she tightened around him, he gasped, quickening his thrusts and then slowing again. It became a game, Claire squeezing his invading cock with her inner muscles, trying to drive him over the edge.

"You feel so good," she gasped, watching as his face, usually so expressionless, contorted in pained ecstasy. Encouraged, she gripped him with her body and tried again. "I love how you fill me up. You're so hard and hot and *huge*."

Ed gave a ragged groan as he came, driven into orgasm by either her words or the tight squeeze of her body...or both. Claire watched his face, enthralled by his expression—by all of him, actually. His arms shook as he lowered himself to rest just a portion of his weight against her, enough to keep her warm without squeezing the air out of her. She smiled and kissed his ear. Even in the darkness, she could still make out his features and her stomach dipped as she realized how much this big, kind, quiet, sexy-as-hell man meant to her.

His eyebrow quirked, sleepy yet curious.

"I'm enthralled," she explained.

He raised his head.

Claire shrugged. "You're enthralling. What can I say?"

Ed smiled, the openly happy grin that always knocked her sideways.

"Up you go," she told him, giving his shoulder a poke. "I'd better get some clothes on before a state trooper comes knocking on our," she glanced up and laughed, "steamed-up windows. Aren't we a cliché?"

"Your fault," Ed told her, kissing her thoroughly before shifting back and helping her sit up.

It took a few seconds for his words to register, since Claire was still hazy after his kiss. "Wait. My fault?"

She could see the gleam of his grin in the dim light. "Sure. You're that hot." He tossed the condom into the empty fast-food bag that now served as their garbage before pulling his jeans over his hips.

Claire snorted, fishing around on the floor for her clothes. "Please. In a hotness contest, you'd win hands-down. I'd say eighty-six percent of this condensation is your fault."

He actually chuckled at that and she grinned. It always felt like such an accomplishment to make Ed laugh.

Once they were more or less dressed again, Claire gave his arm a tug. "Shove over, Eddie. I'm driving for a while."

"Sure?" he asked. "You've hardly slept."

"Definitely. I'm wired." As he shifted into the passenger seat, climbing over him, she tugged his stocking hat down over his eyes. He gave a halfhearted growl and she laughed. "I think it's the thought of meeting your friends."

"You'll like them," he assured her as she clicked her seat belt into place.

"I'm not worried about *that*," she said. The engine turned over smoothly and she smiled. Despite the rude things she'd said about the station wagon, it was completely reliable and she was developing fond feelings for its front seat. "What if they don't like *me*?"

Ed snorted.

Making a U-turn and heading back toward the interstate, she shot him a mock glare. "You were supposed to say that they'll love me."

"Course they will."

"You think?"

"Yep." He already sounded half-asleep and they weren't even on the entrance ramp yet. "They won't be able to help it."

Claire grinned. "Are you saying I'm irresistible?" She chose to take his grunt as an affirmative. "Oh good. But it's not just meeting your friends. I've never been to Colorado before. I wonder what the town will be like. Will it be cold *all* the time? I

mean, I see pictures of these people in the mountain towns who have to dig out their whole fricking front door because the snow is up to their *roof* and, even though that might be kind of cool once, a whole winter of that might get old, don't you thi—"

A snore from Ed cut her off. She glanced at him and smiled. The sun was beginning to come up and she could see him clearly. His big form was slumped sideways, his head resting against the window. Another snore escaped and her grin widened. If she could look at him like this and still feel her stomach contract with happiness and excitement and affection, it really must be love. Honestly, she wouldn't have even cared if there'd been drool.

Yep. Definitely love.

Humming happily, she focused on the road. The mountains were just barely visible in the distance, looking more like a painted backdrop than the massive piles of rock they actually were. She drove toward them in the pink dawn light, with no idea what her future held but truly not caring. Ed would be with her.

That was enough.

About the Author

Katie Allen grew up in the Midwest with a horde of sisters (five) and one beleaguered brother. After an enjoyable four years working on her creative writing/art degree, and two not-so-pleasant years struggling toward her MBA, Katie somehow ended up as a mechanical engineer in Denver, Colorado. When her job disappeared during the recession, it was the kick in the rear she needed to head back to Minnesota and jump into writing full-time.

When she's not writing (many books are necessary to pay for her unfortunate equine addiction), Katie rides horses, reads (of course), does gymnastics and looks for new (and occasionally insane) ways to research her books (cop school, anyone?).

Katie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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