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# GOING DOWN

SHELLI STEVENS

One man wants her heart. The other wants her dead...

*Holding Out for a Hero, Book 1*

Eleanor Owen needs to get out of Chicago and quick. It's not that she doesn't want to obey the subpoena to testify against her drug-trafficking ex-boyfriend. It's making it to the witness stand alive, should a dirty cop make good on his threats.

Tiny, remote Wyattville, Oregon, looks like the perfect place to disappear, but it's hard to blend into the woodwork when one of the town's infamous namesakes sends her heart racing. Worse, Mr. Tall, Hot and Packing is the town sheriff, which means she should stay as far away from him as possible.

Tyson Wyatt is positive the sexy new girl in town is hiding something. Question is, what? He vows to feel out her secrets—including what she feels like beneath him. Preferably naked. Until then, he's not buying the story she's selling.

Their chemistry is sheet-melting hot, and Ellie realizes *much* too late that the man with the badge is as dangerous to her heart as her ex is to her life...

Warning: A city girl on the run, and a small-town sheriff set to seduce. Explicit sex. Dirty talk. A hint of danger. Oral sex with a cupcake.

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# Going Down

*Shelli Stevens*

# Dedication

Thanks to Becca from the beach and Danielle for your advice on all things legal (and Danielle for being such an awesome beta reader!). To all my family and friends, and of course to my editor, for your support and making me a better writer. And finally a shoutout to the folks I got thrown together with for almost two months, it was great getting to know you and I hope life treats you well.

# Chapter One

She had to get out of here. Leave Chicago and find some podunk town where nobody would find her. She needed to disappear. At least until the trial was over.

Eleanor Owens shoved an unsteady hand through her black hair and swallowed against the knot of anxiety in her throat that seemed to have taken up permanent residence since she'd been served the subpoena two days ago to testify against her ex-boyfriend.

*Like hell that was going to happen.*

Her stomach rolled and she let out a shaky breath. Easy for the court system to just beckon her to the witness stand to testify against James, but she didn't trust their promises to keep her safe. If she'd learned anything from her brutal ex—besides making herself as invisible as possible when he was angry—it was that people couldn't be trusted.

Blinking the sleep from her eyes, she moved the cursor on her laptop over the map of Oregon, scanning the cities. She picked a couple towns and ran a population search for them on a search engine. None felt right.

*Too many people... Too few people.*

And then she found it, a small town near the Oregon Coast called Wyattville. No towns or cities too close by, and it had a population of just over a couple thousand.

Ellie nibbled her lip and hesitated. She was risking everything. Abandoning her apartment, leaving all her yoga classes without a teacher, emptying her bank account, and essentially disappearing. Everyone would be looking for her, but hopefully wouldn't find her.

Was she really going to do this? Go and hide? When she was a witness who could be really effective in helping put James away...?

An image flickered in her mind. Lionel Maliano, a cop, sitting in his unmarked car across the street from her apartment while she'd been served. She remembered the white curl of his cigarette smoke and the dark expression on his face as he'd watched her.

And then, the moment the woman at her door had left, Lionel had come to her apartment and knocked. She hadn't been stupid enough to answer, but he'd gotten his message through regardless. Calling softly through the door, "*You don't know nothing. Just remember that, bitch.*"

An icy shiver of fear slid down her spine at the memory, leaving nausea in its wake. She knew his words were a threat. Knew exactly what her ex-boyfriend and his friends—cops included—were capable of. She bit her lip and printed the map of Oregon.

Maybe leaving town *was* an extreme choice, but it was the only one she had.

Tyson steered the patrol car onto First Avenue and gave a small smile at the familiar scene. Summer was in full swing, with the kids out of school and the tourists trickling into town. Even though it wasn't even noon, a line had already formed at the Coastal Creamery for ice cream.

He cruised down the road, finding no signs of trouble stirring, but then really not expecting any. The sheriff's department in Wyattville was made up of himself and five other deputies. Though the crime rate in town wasn't nearly what it was in the bigger neighboring cities, there were still a handful of calls that came in during the week to keep them busy. Granted most of them were small thefts or trespassing calls.

Scratching the back of his head, Tyson rolled the car to a halt at a stop sign. It was a slow morning. Maybe he should just head back to the station and catch up on some paperwork.

His gaze slid to the left, up the hill toward the residential area of town. Curiosity simmered in his gut and he narrowed his eyes, thinking about the Bakemans' old house that had just been rented out for the summer.

From everything he'd heard around town, the renter was a woman in her mid-twenties.

Maybe he oughtta stop by and introduce himself. Hell, he pretty much did it whenever somebody new came to stay for a while. And the Bakemans' house wasn't too far from his place, just about a half mile up a dirt road—they were practically neighbors. The area was probably one of the more isolated places in town.

Flipping on the left turn signal, Tyson turned and headed up the hill. No reason why he shouldn't drop on by.

Ellie set the book she was reading down with a sigh and lifted her head to gaze out the window. Beyond the hills and trees, there was the faintest hint of blue. The Pacific Ocean.

Longing twisted inside her and she bit her lip. She was so tempted to say screw it all, leave the house she'd rented and go explore the beach. Or the cute little part of downtown she'd only been to once. Good God, *anything* to get outside.

It wasn't that the house was awful or anything, it was wonderfully quaint and cozy. A small, two-bedroom cottage with a great kitchen and nice view. She knew the house inside and out. Had explored every nook and cranny, knew every spot where the floorboards creaked, had discovered that the hot water had a tendency to scald.

It was like she'd lived here for years. When, really, it had only been five days since she'd gotten off the Greyhound bus in the larger neighboring town and then taken an expensive taxi ride into Wyattville.

Five days since she'd emptied her bank account and fled Chicago. She'd paid cash for everything, having hidden her bank and credit cards before leaving. Fortunately, the couple who'd rented her the house had been more than happy to accept cash as her deposit and two months worth of rent.

Hearing the soft bubble of water from the kitchen, Ellie stood and headed for the kitchen to check on her eggs.

Maybe she could go into town today and buy some more groceries, though she really didn't need any, since she'd bought a ton during her one and only trip to the store.

The whole point of her being here was keeping a low profile, not that there was a chance anyone would figure out who she was. How could they? The trial might have been hot news in Chicago, but she was in a small town in Oregon.

As she peered into the pot of eggs, watching them spin over themselves in the water, her stomach growled. Soft-boiled eggs and toast had always been her favorite. She'd grown up on it. It was good old-fashioned comfort food, and right now she needed the comfort.

Ellie pulled the pot from the burner and was about to reach for a spoon, when the sound of crunching tires hit her ears. She stilled and listened carefully, but there was no mistaking the sound. It was a car, and it seemed to be coming down her little dirt road.

With the pot still in her hand, she rushed to the window.



“Oh my God,” she whispered. Her heart slammed against her ribcage and her mouth went dry. “This isn’t happening.”

But the writing on the side of the approaching white car clearly identified it as a sheriff’s vehicle. How in the hell had they found her?

When a tall man unfurled himself from the car, she stumbled away from the window, her empty stomach churning and her hands shaking so badly that the water sloshed over the side of the pot, scalding her hand.

“*Shit.*”

Ellie thrust the pot back onto the stove as her head moved from side to side in denial. There was no way she was going back to Chicago. She couldn’t testify. She was as good as dead if she got on that witness stand.

Terror stretched its cold hands through every inch of her body, and when a knock came at the front door, she completely lost it and fled out the back.

“Well, that’s funny.” Tyson pursed his lips. He could’ve sworn he heard someone inside.

He walked around the porch to peer in the kitchen window and immediately spotted the pot on the stove. Water boiled over the sides and onto the floor.

His brows drew together as his gut tightened with the instinct that something was off. A second later, a door slammed from the back of the house.

Tyson moved quickly to the end of the porch, just in time to see a blur of black hair and bare legs, before the woman headed for the gathering of trees at the edge of the property.

Without a moment’s hesitation, he hopped the porch railing and took off after her.

Was she running from *him*? Why?

He shook his head, reminding himself that he didn’t really need to ask himself why. He knew the answer. He was in uniform and driving a marked car. And when a person ran from law enforcement, it was generally because they had something to hide.

“Stop!” he hollered, increasing his pace.

But, if anything, it spooked the woman even more and she disappeared into the woods.

Tyson didn’t lose speed. Was this the tenant of the house running? Or had someone else broken in? Either way, he wasn’t letting her get away that easily. Not that he thought for a minute she would, the woman was heading right toward the cliffs

above the beach, so she was going to have to stop at some point. And when she did, she'd have some explaining to do.

Even as he gained ground, his frustration slipped away and unease replaced it as they began to approach the break in the trees.

She wasn't slowing down. Jesus, didn't she realize there was barely six feet out of the forest before the cliff's ledge?

"Stop!" he screamed again, almost an arm's length behind her now. "Dammit, lady, stop before you kill yourself!"

The woman burst from the trees without decreasing her speed and Tyson's heart tripped with fear.

Her sharp scream reverberated as she finally saw the cliff. Her toes dug into the dirt as she tried to halt her inevitable fall.

Tyson lurched forward, grabbed her around the waist and spun them away from the edge just as her right foot went over.

Her soft body slammed against his, causing him to stumble backward and farther away from the edge. He hit the ground first, falling on his ass before she fell on top of him. His hands slid to cup the roundness of her bottom, while her soft chest pressed against his face as her arms flailed to the ground beneath them for purchase.

*Jesus.* Tyson let out a strangled groan as his body instantly responded to their intimate position.

Her frightened whimper and trembling body reminded him how close she'd been to going over the cliff.

"Are you okay?" he asked gruffly, rolling them so she fell back onto the dirt and then knelt above her.

Wide hazel eyes stared up at him even as she made the tiniest nod.

He grunted and slid his gaze over her slight frame, taking in her flawless pale skin. Breasts that were small, but looked like they could still fill his hand, pushed against her thin pink tank top. Her stomach was toned and her hips flared just a bit under tiny denim shorts. Her feet were dirty from running bare through the forest, even as her dainty toes shone with a glittery pink polish.

Damn but she was a sexy little thing...and she was also terrified. Whether of him, or nearly running over a cliff, who knew.

But the fear in her eyes reminded him to stop thinking with his dick, and get back into sheriff mode.

“You could’ve been killed if you’d fallen off that cliff, do you realize that?” he said tersely.

Again, a tiny nod.

He narrowed his gaze. “Good. Now would you please explain why you were running from me, ma’am?”

## Chapter Two

*Why she was running from him?* Ellie licked her lips, trying to slow the furious pounding of her heart and the trembling in her body.

Did he seriously not know? Or was this one of those cop mind tricks where he just wanted her to confess first? She stared up at him, her mind spinning with what to say.

She could barely even think, let alone talk, after nearly running full throttle off the edge of the cliff. How had she not noticed it was *a cliff*? She'd been aware of the ocean from the window of the house but assumed the land would have a gradual incline down to the beach. Not a freaking cliff!

*He asked you a question, Eleanor, now think.*

It didn't help that the sheriff was ridiculously hot. Blond hair and blue eyes, with laugh lines around his eyes that made her guess the scowl on his face right now was abnormal.

And when he'd pulled her back from the cliff and she'd fallen on top of him...his face had been right against her breasts, and his breath a hot caress against her skin. The memory sent another shiver through her, but this one had little to do with fear. Her cheeks flushed with warm color, even as the heat spread to other areas of her body, creating a soft ache low in her belly and making her all too aware of her own femininity.

"Ma'am?" the sheriff's tone sharpened.

He was still waiting for an answer. Then again, he was still leaning over her, keeping her firmly between his solid-looking chest and the hard ground. Shouldn't he have pulled her up and handcuffed her or something?

"I don't like law enforcement," she blurted, the only response she could think of that wouldn't give her away.

"You don't like law enforcement?" he repeated, his eyes crinkling with amusement as a smile swept across his face.

The smile transformed him, made him even sexier. Her breath caught and her pulse quickened. She shifted beneath him and averted her gaze.

"No, I don't," she whispered.

“Really? Would you like to tell me why?”

“I don’t trust them.” She shrugged, knowing it was a safe answer, because it really wasn’t that far from the truth. “I saw you coming up the porch and just panicked.”

“So you *are* the tenant at the Bakemans’ place?”

“Yes.”

“All right.” He arched a brow. “A lot of people don’t trust law enforcement, that doesn’t mean they’re going to run like hell when they see one.”

He finally stood up, as if he’d just realized that almost straddling the woman you’d been chasing down wasn’t entirely appropriate.

When he stretched to his full height her mouth went dry and her heart tripped. Jeez, he was tall. And so strong. Not to mention sexy...

*Stop thinking about how damn sexy he is!*

Her gaze slid to his uniform, where the name Wyatt was sewn across the front. Wyatt? As in the town of Wyattville? Whoa. That *had* to be a coincidence.

“No answer?” he prodded and held out a hand to her.

She grudgingly took it, inhaling sharply at the slight tingle that raced up her arm as she allowed him to help her to her feet. Even standing next to him, she barely reached his shoulders, and she wouldn’t classify herself as short.

“Okay,” he said quietly, not releasing her hand. “Well then, why don’t you give me your name?”

He wanted her name? Did that mean he *didn’t* know who she was? Her heart thudded furiously and she silently cursed herself for panicking and fleeing the house. Of course she’d made him suspicious. Running from the police was like waving a red flag at a bull.

Maybe even more so here, being that he lived and worked in a small town. The most excitement he likely saw was responding to cow-tipping incidents. Still, she hesitated to give him her real name. Even if he *didn’t* know who she was, the moment she gave him her real name, it would be all too easy to find out.

Knowing it was her only option, she went for the backup plan.

“Elinamifia Owens.” She hoped her cousin Mimi would forgive her. But, it was the perfect solution. They were close in age, and she could answer any questions if he actually ran the name.

“Eli...” His brows drew together.

“Namifia.”

“That’s...a, ugh, great name.”

"Thank you."

She tried not to let her lips quirk, because it was a bitch of a name and her cousin had threatened to have it legally changed more than once while growing up. They'd spent more than a few slumber parties mourning their parents' penchants for nineteenth-century names.

"Where are you from originally?" he asked.

"Brooklyn."

"And how old are you?"

"Does this matter really?"

"Could you just answer the question, Elin—Ms. Owens."

Ellie ground her teeth together before answering. "Twenty-four. And why are you still holding my hand?"

He grinned again. "Maybe because I like holding your hand."

"What?" Was he for real? She tried to tug free, but his grip tightened and his smile faded as he stared down at where their hands were joined.

"Did you cut yourself?"

"I don't think so." But she looked down and sure enough her palm was scraped and red with almost dry blood. "Oh...I didn't even feel it."

"We should go clean that up. Come on Elin—dammit, do you have a nickname or something?"

First he flirted and now he was swearing? Jeez, the cops in this town were a little...different.

"A nickname?" she hesitated, and thought about it for a second before saying, "My family calls me Ellie."

Which was actually a perfect compromise. It was the nickname she went by instead of Eleanor, and it could work well with her cousin's name.

"All right, Ellie. Let's get you back to the house and clean that up."

She followed him back through the trees with a scowl, trying not to notice whether his butt looked good beneath the uniform. Unfortunately, she did notice, and it indeed looked pretty nice.

"So, Ellie," he began conversationally as he held the door to her house open. "If I go run your name right now, what am I going to find?"

Her stomach rolled and she tried to keep her expression neutral as she stepped past him.

"A twenty-four-year-old chick from Brooklyn with no record."

Ellie bit her lip. *At least, you'd better still be keeping your nose clean, Mimi.*

"Great. If you wouldn't mind spelling out your name for me?"

She turned and found him behind her with a pen and small notebook in hand.

"Of course." Forcing a smile, she rattled off the spelling then turned away again.

Eleanor made a beeline for the bathroom, grabbing a small towel and running it under the water. Before she could tend to the scratch, the sheriff was right behind her. He took the towel from her hand.

"Let me," he said softly and caught her wrist, lifting her palm upward so he could dab it with the cloth.

Her pulse fluttered again as she watched him gently cleanse the small wound, his face crinkled with concentration.

She was way too attracted to him, Ellie realized with unease. Oh, this guy was trouble and in a big way. For the briefest second, she thought about packing up and fleeing town the moment he left—if he left and was convinced that she was some criminal.

But packing up and leaving just wasn't an option, or would have to be a worst-case scenario one. She'd already paid rent for two months on this place. Cash. And she didn't have bottomless funds.

"How's that feel?"

She blinked out of her thoughts to discover he was watching her closely again instead of her wound.

"It's fine," she managed to reply huskily. "Thank you."

He stepped closer, leaning forward to drop the washcloth in the sink, but not moving away after. Their chests almost touched and his face was just inches from hers.

Ellie's body stirred with awareness at his proximity, her nipples tightening beneath her tank top. She licked her lips, acutely aware of the thin cotton covering her bare breasts.

"How long do you plan on being in town?" he asked softly, his gaze on her mouth.

Her heart thumped wildly and she had the craziest urge to lean forward and press her mouth against his.

"Probably just a couple of months. Getting out of the city for the summer..."

"Well then, Ellie," he murmured. "I have a feeling we'll be seeing each other again real soon. So you'd better get over that distrust of law enforcement bit."

Her knees almost buckled when he stepped away without touching her. Disappointment swept through her. *You're an idiot. Being disappointed that a cop you don't know didn't kiss you?*

"I'll, um, work on it." She cleared her throat. "Was there a reason you dropped by in the first place?"

"Just wanted to welcome you to Wyattville and introduce myself." He laughed and shook his head. "Damn, guess I forgot to do both of those, now didn't I? The name's Tyson Wyatt and welcome to town."

She followed him as he headed toward the front door. "So that Wyatt part. Umm, you're not like named after the town or something, are you?"

"Descended from the original founders," he called out as he stepped onto the porch. When he reached his squad car, he turned and glanced back up at her. "And there's a good handful of us Wyatts, Ellie. Just to warn you."

With a wink, he climbed into his car and backed away.

Ellie stood on the porch for a moment, wondering what the hell had just happened and what kind of crazy-ass town this was anyway.

Tyson steered his patrol car back onto Main Street, his brows once again drawn together in consternation.

Well, one thing was blatantly clear. Elina-however-the-hell-you-said-it was one desirable woman. But she was also hiding something, and he sure planned on getting to the bottom of just what that something was. Already he had a call in to Julianne at dispatch to do a check on her.

He hit the brakes as a familiar teenager darted into the empty road and came running up to the driver's window of his vehicle.

He lowered the window and called, "How you doing, Amie?"

"I got into Stanford, Sheriff Wyatt! I'm not sure if you heard already, but I'm totally excited."

"That's great, Amie." He patted her hand, genuinely happy for the shy and smart girl he'd watched grow up over the years. "I knew you'd get in. Congratulations."

Amie's smile widened. "Thanks! And, hey, your brothers are stirring up trouble down at Kate's Cakes, you should totally go check on them."

"I'll drop by." He reached for the wheel again and winked. "Congrats again on Stanford, Amie. Say hi to your folks."

"Will do."



A minute later, he parked the patrol car next to Kate's shop, smiling fondly. God he loved this town. Sure, some of the folks had the urge to leave at some point, like Amie. Whether it was for school, to seek out a more exciting life, or whatever oats needed sowing, but most of them eventually came back. He was the perfect example.

After climbing out of the patrol car, Tyson headed to the shop and then ducked slightly to get his tall frame under the pink overhang that was supposed to resemble the frosting on a cupcake. He entered just in time to hear his brother begging for food.

"Come on, Kate, just one chocolate cupcake," Todd pleaded with his most charming grin. "Besides, have you supported your local firefighter today?"

Tyson rolled his eyes and approached the counter, wondering how many times his brother had used that line to get free food from Kate. Although, it probably didn't help that Kate had been nursing a crush on the youngest Wyatt brother for years now.

And Kate's scowl wasn't convincing, because her cheeks were flushed as she muttered, "*I support my local firefighter* every day of the week! If I give you cupcakes all the time, Todd, I swear to God, I'll be working for free." Still, a moment later, she reached for one of the frosted treats.

"I'll support the firefighters today," Tyson intervened with a grimace. "Just put it on my tab, Kate."

"Ty, when did you get here?" Todd turned away from the counter, cupcake in hand and flirting with Kate forgotten.

"Just dropping in for a few," Tyson murmured, feeling a twinge of sympathy for Kate when disappointment flashed in her gaze. But then she lowered her head and busied herself with something behind the counter.

"Coming in for breakfast?" Trevor, the oldest Wyatt brother, called out from where he sat by the window, reading the paper. He'd driven down for the weekend from Fort Lewis in Washington State, where he was currently stationed in the Army.

"I would, but some of us work for a living." Tyson grinned and scratched the back of his neck. "Got a question for you guys, though. Anyone know anything about the new gal renting the Bakemans' place?"

Trevor shrugged, but didn't lift his gaze from the paper. "Heard she's hot."

"Wait, what's this about a new hot chick in town?" Todd asked, pulling out a chair at the table.

Annoyance had Tyson's smile tightening. Usually the fact that Todd flirted with anyone with breasts amused him, but thinking about his younger brother dropping by Ellie's place wasn't quite as funny this time.

“Don’t know much about her. But I’m planning on remedying that,” Tyson admitted.

Trevor lowered his coffee mug as his brows rose. “Interesting. I do believe our brother just staked claim on the new chick.”

“Suck it, Trevor. I’m just saying—”

“That you think she’s hot and we should back the hell off. We got it, bro,” Todd inserted before taking a huge bite of his cupcake.

Tyson stared at them in disbelief, heat stealing up his neck. Staking his claim on Ellie? Hell, he didn’t even know her. All he knew was she was a stranger in town who ran from law enforcement. Which was *not* a good sign.

“Shit, you guys are impossible,” he grumbled. “Let me know if you hear anything about her.”

Then he turned to leave the shop and head back to his patrol car to see what dispatch had discovered.

## Chapter Three

Ellie sat at the small table in the kitchen while waiting for her steaks to broil. She offered another mutinous glare at the computer in the corner and kicked her foot against a chair leg.

“You can’t tempt me,” she muttered. “You’re probably dial-up Internet anyway.”

But dammit, the computer *did* tempt her. She was addicted to her email—could barely go a few hours without refreshing it. And it had now been *how many days* since she’d last checked her inbox?

It was just too risky, though. She’d watched enough thriller films to be slightly paranoid about that kind of thing. The police knew she was missing now and might be checking her email and cell phone activity. Which was why she’d left her Blackberry in her apartment too—she simply couldn’t trust herself not to give into the temptation to use it.

Oh, God, her Blackberry... Her fingers flexed, itching with the familiar urge to send a text. A groan of self-pity built in her throat as she stood up to check on the steaks.

“Oh, sweet, sweet, Blackberry, someday we’ll be reunited,” she muttered and then nodded at the steaks.

Medium rare. Perfect. One for dinner, and she’d keep the other for lunch tomorrow, saving her from having to cook again. Although, cooking had somewhat become her source of entertainment.

She grabbed a potholder and pulled the steaks from the oven. As she began to set them down a sharp rap came at the door.

Jumping with a curse, she dropped the pan fully onto the stove and placed a hand over her pounding heart.

*Really? Again?*

She moved toward the window, experiencing a sense of déjà vu, which only doubled when she spotted the sheriff’s car outside.

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me.” She shoved a strand of hair from her eyes, ignoring the way her pulse quickened.

And she knew it wasn't just from the possibility that he'd discovered she wasn't who she claimed to be.

She considered putting on a sweater, since she was still in the thin tank top and pants she'd worn to do yoga in. But then another knock came and she muttered under her breath, moving to answer it.

"Sheriff Wyatt." She forced a pleasant expression as she swung the door open. "Something I can help you with?"

Tyson leaned against the doorjamb, a disarming smile on his face and a bottle of wine in his hand.

"Thought I'd drop by and see if you wanted to have dinner."

Ellie blinked, opening her mouth to reply, but then closed it again. Was the sheriff hitting on her?

"Oh, well, I just cooked some steaks..." she protested lamely.

"Great. Steaks. Plural. As in enough for two?" His smile widened as he straightened and stepped through the doorway. "Now there's an offer I can't refuse."

It hadn't been an offer, dammit! She bit back the words and gave an uneasy laugh. "Umm—"

"I promise to return the favor, Ellie," he murmured with a wink, shutting the door and taking a step toward her. "Tomorrow you can come to my place and I'll cook. I make a mean lasagna."

Oh, yeah, he was definitely hitting on her.

Ellie unconsciously backed away from him, completely thrown off balance by his directness. Her butt bumped against the floor-to-ceiling bookshelf and she came to an abrupt halt.

Tyson took another step forward, until his hips brushed hers, pressing her back against the wooden shelf. The smell of soap and woodsy cologne immediately tickled her senses. He'd changed out of his uniform and through his jeans she could feel the thickness of his cock and the heat of his hard body.

Her mind screamed at how absolutely bizarre this was. She didn't trust him—didn't trust any law enforcement officer right now. And yet, having the sheriff's muscled body pressed up against hers sent awareness sizzling through her. Tightening her nipples and creating a throbbing ache between her thighs.

What was it about him that made her want to do all kinds of raunchy, naughty things that would probably have gotten her kicked out of Catholic school eight years ago?

"You know, Ellie, we're neighbors."

"Are we?" And *why* did her voice squeak?

"Yeah. I'm just a couple minutes up the road." His gaze met hers, the pupils in his clear blue eyes dilated. "So if you need to borrow a cup of sugar, or...something, all you need to do is ask."

Ellie swallowed hard and gave a quick nod. "I-I'll remember that."

"You do that." He set down the bottle of wine on the shelf, his face drawing even nearer to hers. "You know what else?"

Mutely, she shook her head, not even about to guess what he was going to say next. Her mouth watered and it had nothing to do with the steaks in the kitchen.

It had been months since she'd had sex, and right now she was on the verge of grabbing the back of his head and kissing the hell out of the slightly loony—or maybe just drunk—sheriff.

He lowered his head, until his mouth was just a breath's away from hers. "I had your name run."

And just like that, her arousal vanished. Drying up as fear closed off her throat. She couldn't reply, even if she'd wanted to. Just lifted one brow and made a small gurgle of sound as she exhaled.

"You were right. Twenty-four-year old from Brooklyn," he murmured, tracing her jaw with the backs of two fingers. "But you weren't entirely truthful, were you, sweetheart?"

Her knees buckled, threatening to give out. *Oh no. He'd figured it out.*

Caught by his hypnotic blue gaze, she found her head moving back and forth.

"I didn't think so," he said, as his thumb made a slow glide over her bottom lip. "But I can see why didn't want to tell me."

"You don't understand." The words erupted from her in a husky plea.

"Oh, no, I do, Ellie." He gave a soft laugh. "An indecent exposure charge is probably something you don't want to brag about."

Ellie blinked, her heart thundering in her chest.

"Indecent exposure," she repeated, relief slamming through her. He hadn't figured it out. "Right."

"I mean, I suppose I can understand. It was Mardi Gras and you probably didn't realize that bus was full of senior citizens when you flashed them."

Holy crap, what had her cousin been smoking?

"Yeah...something like that," she muttered.

"You're a fascinating gal, Ellie." He pulled away and grinned, grabbing the bottle of wine again and heading toward the kitchen. "Do you need some help with dinner?"

Ellie wanted nothing more than to slide down to the floor and bury her head in her hands. Instead she settled on silent scream and face scrunching, since his back was facing her.

"No, it's pretty much ready," she finally answered, her voice surprisingly steady as she moved after him.

When she entered the kitchen, Tyson was already grabbing two plates from the cupboard.

She pulled a drawer open to retrieve silverware. Casting him a sideways look, she couldn't resist muttering, "You're a very...forward guy. Do you realize that?"

"I do." He cast her a wry look over his shoulder. "My whole family seems to have the habit. Sorry if it offends."

Shrugging, she set the table. "I didn't say it offended. It's just different. I don't think I even know my neighbors' names in Chicago. I mean, having the sheriff of town just dropping by for dinner—"

"You mean Brooklyn?"

Ellie froze in the midst of laying down the forks next to the plate.

*Fuck.*

"Right," she said slowly. "Brooklyn. Sorry. I grew up in Chicago and sometimes I just mix them up in conversation."

"Understandable."

His reply was said lightly, so she hoped he hadn't been too concerned with her mistake. Still, her pulse quickened. She'd let her guard down for one moment, got a little too comfortable, and then slipped.

Forcing a smile, she gestured toward the wine. "Is that a white or red?"

"Red. Do you have an opener?"

"I do. And I think there's even some wine glasses around here some place."

"There should be. The Bakemans are wine people."

Ellie hurried back to the cupboard, swinging it open. She spotted the wine glasses on the top shelf and scowled, stretching on her tiptoes to reach them.

Tyson watched her for a moment, before he decided to help her.

"Here let me." He stepped forward and reached past her, grabbing them easily.

"Thanks."

He watched the flush of pink in her cheeks and his gut twisted with disappointment. She was definitely hiding something.

Hell, after getting the reports this afternoon, he'd been relieved to discover she'd been telling the truth about who she was.

Because in a town the size of Wyattville, Ellie was uncharted territory. She was a new body. *And damn, what a body it was.* She was like a brand new toy. And he couldn't wait to figure out what wound her up and what got her gears moving.

Ever since he'd been home, none of the girls in town had managed to catch his interest very long. That wasn't to say he hadn't dated a bunch of them in the past—hell, of course he had. He'd been your average horny teen, lusting after any girl with a pretty smile. His brothers had been the same way.

Fortunately, he and Trevor had grown up a bit. Now Todd, on the other hand, was another story.

He'd come here tonight hell bent on seduction. Her record was clean—well, almost, but it could've been far worse than *indecent exposure*—and he hadn't missed the arousal in her eyes earlier today in the bathroom.

But now, seeing the tension in her sexy little body and the way she averted her gaze, he knew this little bombshell wasn't telling the whole story. Something just wasn't right. And his gut told him that her little Chicago/Brooklyn slip up was at the heart of it.

He located the corkscrew and then opened the bottle, pouring them both a glass of wine while watching her load up their plates with food.

"Do you like steak sauce?" she asked, a little too brightly.

"No, thanks. Just a little salt and pepper will do me fine." He sat down at the table next to one of the settings.

"Great, because those I have. Steak sauce, not so much." She leaned over him, setting a plate down.

For a moment, the smell of steak mingled with roses, and Tyson got a glimpse of the pale curves of her breasts above the neckline of her tank. She wasn't wearing a bra.

A breath slid silently from between his clenched teeth as his cock twitched beneath his jeans.

*Damn.* He might not trust her fully, but he sure as hell wanted her.

Ellie had changed out of her denim shorts and tank top, and was now wearing what seemed to be some kind of workout outfit. Though she didn't seem the least bit concerned by her attire, even if he found it was surprisingly sexy.

The loose-fitting black bottoms fell over the slight curve of her hips, and the skin-tight tank top with thin straps was almost the exact shade of green as the flecks in her hazel eyes.

She moved to sit across from him, reaching to take a sip of wine. "So, Sheriff Wyatt, do you make it a habit of inviting yourself to dinner with all the new ladies in town?"

"I'm out of uniform," he said with a small smile, and picked up his knife and fork, cutting into the steak. "Feel free to call me Tyson."

She set her wine glass down and nodded. "All right. Tyson it is."

"And only the pretty single ones." His smile faded. "Actually, no. To be honest, this is...a first for me."

Ellie watched him for a moment and in her gaze he saw a flicker of awareness, watched her breasts rise and fall a bit quicker.

"So, tell me more about your family. You've mentioned them a couple times." Her request was overly bright and an obvious diversion tactic.

"My family. Well, I've got two brothers."

"Older? Younger? Maybe you're a twin?"

He laughed and shook his head, spearing a piece of steak. "Not a twin, sorry. I'm the middle."

"Ah, you're the middle? I guess I'm not surprised." She took a bite of rice and then asked, "What do they do? Police stuff as well?"

"No. Todd, the youngest, is a firefighter. Trevor, the oldest, has been in the army for fifteen years now."

Her fork stilled as she stared at him, her lips parting slightly. "Seriously?"

He finished chewing his bite of steak and cast her a puzzled glance. "Yeah. Why?"

"It's just..." She cleared her throat and dropped her gaze. "Never mind."

"No, now you've got me curious. What were you going to say?"

"I...well, just that that you're all in careers that are notably sexy and attractive to women." She gave a nonchalant shrug, but the slight pink in her cheeks belied her indifference. "And if they look as sexy as you, I'm guessing the Wyatt brothers are pretty popular in town."



## Chapter Four

So she thought he was sexy?

Tyson's brows lifted with surprise at the confirmation, even as his blood heated and his desire for Ellie stabbed sudden and sharp.

His abdomen clenched and he drew in a slow breath, lowering his gaze to her small, berry-colored lips that had just closed around a piece of meat.

"No more than any of the other guys around, I'm sure," he replied vaguely, his voice gruff.

"Hmm." She rolled her eyes and lifted her glass of wine. "Forget I said anything. I think it was the wine talking."

She'd barely drunk a quarter of her glass. And there was no way in hell he was going to let her back down from that comment.

He turned his attention back to his dinner, eager to have it gone and out of the way. Eager to not have a table between them.

"How about you, Ellie? Any siblings?" he asked, trying to distract himself.

She was quiet for a moment, before she said, "Umm. I have a brother."

"What does he do?"

"He's...a teacher."

Funny, but she didn't sound totally confident on that.

"And what do you do?" He lifted his gaze to her face again, just in time to watch the emotionless shield slide down over her expression.

"I'm a waitress."

A waitress who could afford to rent a summer home on the Oregon coast?

"Are you? Where at?"

"It's in Brooklyn, I doubt you know the place."

"Try me."

"Look, I'd rather not," she finally said, pushing her half-eaten plate away. "We don't really know each other, and there're some things I'd just like to keep private."

Interesting. She completely shut down when he probed too far into her personal life.

"Sure, no problem." To disarm her again, he set down his fork and gave her an easy smile. "Have you seen much of Wyattville? I'd love to show you around."

Her mouth tightened as she looked around the room—everywhere but at him.

Finally, "I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"Why not?"

She moved away from the table, her chair scraping on the tiled floor as she scrambled to her feet.

"Listen, I'm just out of a really bad relationship and I'm not really looking for anything right now."

Tyson cocked his head and slowly slid his chair back as well. "And you think I'm looking for something?"

She swallowed hard and gave a sharp laugh. "Well, you did invite yourself to dinner."

"Being neighborly."

"You said you'd never done it before," she said, obviously flustered as he approached her. Then she blurted, "And you called me pretty."

He backed her up against the sink, until his hips brushed against hers.

"You called me sexy."

Her eyes narrowed. "A tiny confession that I had *no* intention of admitting aloud—until you pretty much forced me to."

"Define force."

"Okay, you need to stop cornering me like this," she said breathlessly.

He slid his gaze over her, took in the hardened points of her breasts beneath the tank top, and her uneven breathing.

"I think you like it when I do, Ellie."

Instead of replying, her tongue darted out to trace over the mouth that was tempting the hell out of him.

His blood pounded harder and he knew he wouldn't be able to stop himself.

"You do like it. Don't you?" his voice dropped an octave as he curled his fingers around the swell of her hips.

"Tyson." His name on her lips was a breathy combination of plea and protest.

But when he lowered his head, there was no protest in her wide eyes. And before his lips could touch hers, her lashes fluttered down in submission as she leaned into him.

A wave of need washed through him, primal and potent. With a low groan, he closed that last distance, taking her mouth.

Her lips, pillowy soft and pliant, moved against his. The warmth of her breath teased him, ripped at his self-control.

He nipped her bottom lip with his teeth, using her gasp of surprise to thrust his tongue inside the hot cavern of her mouth.

He moved his hands around her hips and grabbed the firm roundness of her ass, squeezing, and then lifting her onto the counter.

*Jesus.* He was going to lose it. So much for being professional. But screw it, just like he'd told her earlier, he was off duty. And right now, his only duty was to see how far she'd let him take this.

And if he played his cards right, maybe all the way to the bedroom.

*You need to stop him.*

Ellie ruthlessly silenced the voice of reason in her head and moaned as Tyson pushed her legs wide to step between them. The only thing that mattered now was pleasure, and following the thread of temptation that Tyson had so carefully laid out for her.

The edge of the counter bit into her bottom, the angle and pressure adding to the intensity and spontaneity of the moment.

His tongue danced with hers, rubbing and sucking. Their mouths separated for just a second, giving them both enough time to gasp in air, before once again he claimed her lips.

His hands, confident and knowing, moved to her waist, gathering the tank top she wore and pushing it upward.

Cool air brushed her belly and her pulse quickened. *If you're going to stop him, now would be the time.*

Then it was too late, and she really didn't give a damn as the fabric lifted over her breasts and her nipples tightened.

His head lifted from hers again, and she refused to open her eyes, because she knew he was looking at her body.

"Oh, yeah, sweetheart," he muttered thickly. "You like it."

Wet friction rasped over her bare nipple and she groaned, pleasure rocking through her as she finally let her lashes flutter up.

The vision of Tyson's head bent over her breast sent heat exploding in her belly and a rush of moisture between her legs.

His tongue moved against the tip, teasing and exploring her, making her nipple lengthen and tighten for his touch.

With a soft laugh, he parted his lips and drew her into his mouth, suckling lightly.

So good. It felt so damn good. How could she possibly stop him when this moment was so exquisite? She was only going to be in Wyattville for a couple months...why not indulge in a little harmless sex?

Ellie squirmed on the counter, her breath quickening as she tunneled her fingers into his short, blond hair, holding him against her. Wanting him to suck harder, to use his teeth.

His free hand came up to cover the other breast, squeezing and massaging the flesh. Then he caught the nipple between two fingers and pinched lightly.

She jerked against him, crying out. More, she wanted so much more. Wanted his fingers buried deep inside her, and then his tongue, before finally, his cock.

The image of it skittered through her head, robbing her ability to breathe, making her wetter.

Tyson switched his mouth to the other nipple, sucking fiercely as he eased his hand down her belly. His teeth grazed over the tip over her breast, before he lifted his head.

"I want to touch you here," he muttered thickly, just before he cupped between her thighs. "Feel how hot your pussy is right now."

"Tyson," she moaned, her sex clenching at his erotic words. Jesus, it was like he'd known her thoughts.

"I bet you're nice and slick, sweetheart." He licked her nipple, moving his hand back up to her stomach. "Aren't you?"

Yes. Her heart pounded and her body wept for release. This man, almost a stranger, had aroused her more than any man she'd ever dated before. And more than anything, she wanted him to follow up and touch her like he'd just said.

She issued a husky, "Why don't you check for yourself?"

He lifted his head, possessiveness and desire flaring in his eyes. "No games. I like that."

Without breaking eye contact, he maneuvered his hand beneath the waist of her pants and thong. The brush of his strong fingers at the top of her mound had her biting her lip to hold back a groan.

“No games,” she repeated and caught his wrist, pushing his hand lower. “No teasing either.”

“Ah, but teasing is so much fun, Ellie,” he muttered, before his palm cupped her sex completely. A second later, he curled one finger deep inside her sheath and Ellie’s world went spinning.

With one finger in Ellie’s hot, wet, pussy, Tyson’s throat dried out and his cock jerked against his jeans.

She was so fucking sexy. With just a small tuft of curls above a satiny smooth mound.

Shit. He wanted her. Wanted to pull down her pants and the tiny panties she wore and tongue the hell out of her slit. Suck on her clit and bury his tongue in her pussy, tasting the slippery juices that right now coated his finger.

First though, he wanted to see how fast she’d go over the edge.

He moved his finger, slick with her arousal, up to her clit and rubbed the firm little button slowly.

She let out a low groan and clutched his shoulders, her pink-painted nails digging into his skin beneath his T-shirt.

Tyson lowered his head to her breast again, capturing the tip that was puckered for his mouth. God, she had the sexiest tits. Small and perky, with succulent berry-stained nipples that were the size of half-dollars.

He pressed harder against her clit, using the pressure of her fingers on his shoulders as a guide to how soft or hard to rub her.

Her hips rocked against his hand, as her breathing quickened and grew more erratic.

Tyson caught her nipple with his teeth and tugged gently, while rubbing her clit even faster.

Ellie let out a choked gasp, and then her thighs tightened around his hips and her head fell back.

His nostrils flared with triumph and he thrust his finger deep into her channel again to feel her muscles contract and the rush of her orgasm.

*Hell, yeah.*

Her face twisted and her lips parted to let out breathy cries. Ellie's body trembled and he had to slide his free hand up her back to keep her from falling back against the cupboard.

Her lashes fluttered up, and her hazel gaze, disoriented from her release, locked on his face.

"Whoa," she whispered, dragging in a ragged breath that made her tits lift again. "I...whoa."

"My thoughts exactly." He pulled his finger from her still-shaking body and brought it to his mouth.

Watching her reaction, he licked the shiny juices clean. A primal rumble escaped his throat at the musky and sweet taste of her.

Ellie's gaze darkened and she let out a strangled moan. He wanted to taste her completely. Reaching for the waist of her pants, he started to pull them down when his cell rang.

"You've gotta be fucking kidding me," he muttered thickly, leaning forward to press his forehead against hers.

Ellie's hands smoothed down his back, holding him against her. "Can't you just let it go?"

"It's work. They don't call when I'm off unless it's important." He sighed and pulled away from her.

"Seriously? What, did someone forget to return a library book or something?" she mumbled, her expression grouchy.

Tyson's gaze narrowed on her as he reached into his pocket to grab his phone.

"This is Ty."

He dealt with the call and hung up a few minutes later, pocketing his phone again. Still standing between Ellie's spread thighs, he was torn between his irritation with her, and the need to fuck her senseless—or maybe just fuck some sense into her.

"We may not be a big city, Ellie, but we're honest, good people who aren't immune to bad things happening," he said quietly. "And as sheriff of this town, it's my job to take care of them when they do."

Her cheeks flushed and she lowered her gaze. "You're right. I'm sorry. That was a *really* lame thing for me to say."

Tyson placed a finger under her chin and lifted her head to look into her eyes again.

"You just need to get out more. See the town and get to know the people here."

She swallowed visibly and the smile she gave him was strained. "I should, yeah."

"Great." He pressed a light kiss against her mouth and then stepped away from her. "So then I'll pick you up at ten tomorrow."

"Okay—wait, what? Pick me up?"

"I've got the day off, so we should get started on that showing you around bit."

Ellie trailed after him. "Oh, but I—"

"No buts." Tyson grabbed the handle of the door and turned, giving her one last, lazy smile. "You're getting out of the house, Ellie. And I'm a damn good tour guide, so consider yourself lucky."

"Lucky. Right."

Because there was unease in her eyes, and her cheeks were still flushed from her orgasm, he couldn't resist lowering his head for another kiss.

She gripped his shirt, swaying toward him and parting her lips to accept the demands of his mouth.

He nibbled and sucked, wanting to leave her weak in the knees and dreaming of nothing but him when she slept tonight.

When he lifted his head, Ellie's body was pressed snug against his and her eyes were once again closed.

"Save that thought, sweetheart. And next time, I'll make sure there's no interruptions."

With a wink, he turned and left her house, wishing like hell his dick wasn't rock hard.

Tomorrow morning couldn't get here soon enough.

## Chapter Five

Pacing the living room, Ellie plucked at the fabric of the black and white sundress she wore. Why the hell she was dressing up to tour Wyattville was beyond her.

Then again, how she'd let Tyson Wyatt—*Sheriff of Wyattville*—talk her into going out in the first place was also a mystery.

*Stupid, stupid, stupid.* So much for keeping a low profile, Ms. Smarty Pants.

She glanced at the clock. Fifteen minutes to ten. Maybe he wouldn't show, or would change his mind about today.

Disappointment had her stomach sinking and she blinked in dismay at the realization.

She wanted to go. Being inside day in and out was driving her crazy. The idea of wandering around Wyattville, enjoying fresh air and the summer sunshine was like being offered a trip to the Bahamas right now.

Her gaze slid to the clock again. Thirteen minutes to ten. Walking to the antique mirror on the wall, she checked her appearance.

A scowl slid across her face as she pinched her cheeks to bring color into them. Why hadn't she packed any makeup?

*Because this is not a vacation where you're out bar-hopping to meet guys. You're here to hide.*

Well, at least she'd had some lip-gloss to apply. Though that almost didn't count as makeup in her book.

Sighing, she walked into the kitchen and glanced at the computer. She'd caved and turned it on early this morning, but had just barely stopped herself from logging into her email or any social networks.

Still, it was up and chugging along—she'd been right about it being dial-up—and sitting on some recipe site.

She pursed her lips as curiosity kicked in her gut. Maybe she could check out the *Chicago Tribune* online and see if there was any information about the trial.



Jerking the chair away from the computer desk, she slid in and quickly typed in the website. The little browser spun in circles while the computer made little chugging noises as it struggled to change pages.

*Damn dial-up.* She glanced at the clock. Shit, it was already seven minutes until ten.

The website slowly popped up and she scrolled the mouse down over the headlines. Lower, lower. There it was.

Her gut clenched and fear slammed into her, dampening her palms and drying out her mouth.

She clicked on the link and waited for the article to open. Her gaze slid to the clock again. *Five minutes.*

The article blinked onto the screen and she quickly scanned the content. One week until the trial...and shit, they mentioned a key witness was missing. Her. Though, thank God they didn't give her name.

Guilt twisted in her gut. What if by some chance James went free?

*Tap. Tap. Tap.*

Ellie jumped in the chair, her heart rising to her throat. Tyson was early.

"Just a minute," she yelled hoarsely as she fumbled to shut down the computer, but the damn browser kept freezing.

With a curse, she turned off just the monitor, not wanting to risk hurting the computer by powering off the hard drive.

Drawing in a deep breath, she grabbed her purse and went into the front room, opening the door.

Tyson stood on the porch, thumbs hooked in the loops of his jeans as he smiled that impossibly sexy grin.

Her stomach flipped and her pulse kicked up a notch. Good lord, she'd almost forgotten how sexy he was. But unfortunately she *hadn't* forgotten how that mouth had felt on her breasts, or how those talented hands had brought her the best orgasm ever last night.

Oh, wow, suddenly a trip to the bedroom sounded almost more appealing than a trip into town.

She lifted her gaze back to Tyson's face and found his smile had faded. Instead his gaze smoldered with heat as it slid over her body.

"You look mighty sexy in that dress, sweetheart."

Her cheeks warmed with the compliment, and she gave a small smile, far more pleased than she should've been at what he thought of her appearance.

"Thank you."

Tyson cleared his throat and scratched the back of his neck. "Maybe we should get out of here? Because if I step inside the house, we're not going to be leaving anytime soon."

Ellie bit her lip and gave him a slow smile. So they were on the same wavelength. "Hmm. I suppose we can always come back afterward."

"I like how you think." He grinned again and took her hand, pulling her through the doorway.

Closing the door behind her, Ellie tried to smother the ache of arousal, wondering if maybe she should've tried a little harder to convince him to stay.

## Chapter Six

“Did you eat breakfast?” Tyson asked when they were in the car a few minutes later.

“Yeah. I’ve been up since six.”

“Morning person, huh? I like that in a girl.”

He slung an arm over her seat and turned to glance over his shoulder as he backed down the drive.

“Yes, well, it’s more out of habit. I’m up doing yoga at seven a.m. every morning.”

“Ah. So you must work afternoons? Evenings?”

Both. Whenever they’d needed her to teach. But that was teaching yoga classes, not waitressing like she’d told him.

“Right. I’m the swing shift.”

“Italian?”

Her lips curved in amusement. “Why are you so determined to figure out where I work?”

“It’s my nature, sweetheart.”

“I guess it must go with the job.” She hesitated, and then figured if she told him, it might tide him over for a bit. “Yes. Italian.”

He grinned and cast her a sideways glance. “Nice. I love me some Spaghetti Carbonara.”

“Tell me about it. It’s my parents’ favorite, actually.”

Which was another truth. She smiled wistfully, thinking back on her parents’ penchant for good wine and Italian food.

Her smile faded and her stomach clenched. God, they must be worried sick. By now, they probably suspected she’d fled town, versus being the victim of foul play.

Though, if she’d stayed in Chicago, her chances of the latter would have gone up... Even though it was warm in the car, a cold shiver racked her body.

“You look like someone just walked over your grave,” Tyson said softly.

She blinked rapidly, trying to dispel the unease as she forced a small smile.

"Sorry. Just a bad thought mixing with the good ones for a moment," she admitted honestly, and it felt good.

It felt good not to lie, and it felt good to admit there were dark, terrifying thoughts running through her head. Though it would have been nicer to confess to the full extent. To be able to confide in *someone*.

But, for the last year, there'd been no one. No one who knew just how much she'd gone through with James. The mental and physical abuse she'd suffered at his hands.

Unconsciously, she reached up and touched the small, faded scar on her left cheek. The night James had given it to her would probably be forever branded in her mind.

Tyson caught her hand and smoothed his thumb over the inside of her palm. "Do you want to talk about it, Ellie?"

*Talk about what?*

James's red face, twisted with fury, flashed through her head. Him storming toward her.

*"I told you to mind your fucking business, bitch."*

And then his fist had slammed into her cheek. The bruise had faded, but the money clip he'd been clenching had forever left its mark.

Ellie shook her head, her throat tight with emotion, as once again she found herself lying. "It's nothing. Really."

Tyson didn't buy it for a second. Whatever had been going through her head hadn't been *nothing*. Her expression had been taut with whatever demons she was silently fighting.

He finally had to drag his gaze away from her to watch the road, turning the car onto Main Street a few minutes later.

Ellie let out a small gasp. "Oh, wow, it's so pretty and picturesque. Like something out of a painting..."

Tyson let his gaze slide over the street, trying to let himself see it through her eyes. Most of the buildings spanning the street were over a hundred years old. Though many had been remodeled and recently painted white.

At the end of the street was Sage Park, where the trail led down to the beach. Wyattville was centered around an inlet of the Pacific Ocean, so you had to hike a half mile to get directly to the beach. But, this time of year, the call of the ocean seemed to be in everyone's hearts.

He braked to let Mrs. Avery and her toddler cross the street. All over town, people were out socializing and enjoying the summer.

"Yeah, this town is really something," he murmured. "Careful now, 'cause it'll grow on you."

She gave a soft laugh. "I'll be sure to remember that."

Tyson pulled his truck into an open spot and climbed out, hurrying around to open Ellie's door. She already had it half open and one leg out when he got there.

"Oh, wow, sorry." Her cheeks tinged pink and her eyebrows rose. "I've never had a guy actually do that before...you know, open my door for me."

He scowled and took her hand, helping her down from his truck. "You've been hanging out with the wrong kind of guys, sweetheart."

Her fingers clenched around his for a moment, before she gave a strained laugh. "Apparently. I'll try to do better."

Not caring that anyone walking by would see them—and no doubt be curious who the sheriff was flirting with—Tyson pulled her to him and caught her chin, lifting it so she met his gaze.

"While you're here, I'll personally see to it that you do, sweetheart."

He brushed his lips against hers, making the gesture soft and unthreatening. Keeping his control rigidly in check, even as her lips parted on a shaky breath.

When he lifted his head, her eyes almost seemed to have a gleam of tears, then she blinked and it was gone.

Tyson's gut kicked with tenderness and an unfamiliar protectiveness for this woman.

"Let's go walk around town," he said softly and caught her hand, giving it a small squeeze.

She nodded and her hand even seemed to tighten around his as they stepped onto the sidewalk and moved down the street.

"These buildings are so quaint. Like little old houses people put shops in," she said, shaking her head. "How old are they anyway?"

"Late nineteenth century. They've had good upkeep though. 'Bout every five to ten years they get a fresh paint job." He gestured to the store they were passing. "Mrs. Carty owns the Yarn Barn here, she's been around almost as long as these buildings."

Ellie gave an amused laugh and glanced up at him. "And I'm sure she'd love being referred to as over a century old."

Tyson gave a playful scowl. "Give her another twelve years and she'll be a century."

“Wow. And she still can run a business?”

“Her granddaughter mostly runs the shop now, but Mrs. Carty still comes in a few days a week to make sure things are in order.”

“That’s incredible.” Ellie sighed. “I can’t knit. Or sew. Or anything along those lines.”

“But you can cook. That steak last night was pretty darn amazing.” Tyson rubbed his belly as it growled. “Getting hungry just thinking about it.”

“Thank you. Didn’t you grab breakfast?”

“Course I did. But I’m always hungry. Which is why our first stop is going to be Kate’s Cakes.”

“Cake? For breakfast?”

“They got more than cake.”

Tyson steered them to the side as a younger man carrying a couple of grocery bags walked by.

“Morning, Sheriff.”

“Morning, Chip. Wife at home?”

Chip stopped walking and shifted his bags, grinning. “No, Sally ditched me with the grocery list, and went to a scrapbooking party with friends.”

“Nice of her.” Tyson grinned and glanced at Ellie, pulling her forward. “This here is Elin—well, just call her Ellie. She’s staying at—”

“The Bakemans’ house. Right. Welcome, Ellie. I’d shake your hand but my arms are a bit tied up. I’m Chip.”

Ellie gave a small smile and nodded. “No problem. Nice to meet you, Chip.”

“Will I see you at poker tonight, Ty?”

Tyson hesitated, his thumb sliding over the softness of Ellie’s inner wrist. Poker on Saturday night was a tradition, and even though he and Ellie didn’t have any official plans, he intended to remedy that.

His plans tonight had nothing to do with getting lucky in cards, and everything to do with getting lucky in bed.

“Don’t think I’ll be able to make it tonight,” he said lightly. “But say hi to the boys.”

Chip’s grin turned knowing. “Will do, Sheriff. Well, I’d best get these groceries home. You two have a good day.”

“Chip and Sally are newlyweds,” Tyson explained as they continued down the sidewalk.

“That’s sweet.”

“Yeah. I hope you don’t mind if I just introduce you as Ellie for now. Unless you want me to try the Eli—”

“Ellie is perfect. I know my full name can tend to tie the tongue in knots.” She cleared her throat. “So, does everyone pretty much know everyone in town?”

“For the most part, especially if you live here long enough. Though, there’s always some folks who prefer to be left alone.”

“That sounds kind of nice. The knowing your neighbors bit...”

When he glanced down at her, he caught the amazement and wistfulness fading from her expression.

“Though I suppose it’s harder to just fade into obscurity in a small town.”

*Fade into obscurity?* Tyson’s brows drew together at her interesting choice in words. He kept his gaze straight ahead and decided not to reply to her comment, since she seemed a bit lost in her own world.

“There’s Kate’s Cakes,” he said instead, pulling her toward Kate’s shop.

“Where? Oh! *Look* at that. It’s like...pink frosting melting over the doorway. This place is so original.”

“Wait until you try her stuff. Prepare for a sugar orgasm.”

She looked up at him, her lips curving into a tempting smile as her eyes flashed with heated challenge.

“A sugar orgasm, hmm? I wonder how that compares with a regular one.”

Tyson’s cock twitched and his blood thundered through his veins. He tugged on her hand, stopping her before she could step into the shop.

“Well, you had one last night,” he drawled softly. “After you try a cupcake here, you can let me know.”

She licked her lips and placed one pink fingernail on his T-shirt, tracing it over his chest.

“And what if I needed a reminder of last night’s orgasm? You know, in case I forgot and want to compare?”

Tyson drew in a ragged breath as every muscle in his body strained to jerk her against him and let her feel exactly what her question had done to his cock.

“I think a reminder can be arranged.” He caught her finger and traced it with his thumb. “Especially since I’ll be at your place tonight.”

Her brow arched. “Hmm. It seems you were so entirely confident on that fact, that you bailed on poker tonight.”

“Pretty confident.” His mouth curved into a half smile. “More so now that you’ve requested a reminder.”

She moistened her lips with her tongue. “Will that be a hardship for you?”

“Oh, it’ll be hard, Ellie. You don’t need to worry about that.”

A tremble racked her body and she seemed at a loss for words after their seductive verbal sparring.

“Come on, before curiosity gets the better of Kate and she comes outside to get us.”

He reached for the door handle, but before he could grab it, the door swung inward and a woman stepped out.

“Tyson!”

She watched as Tyson bit back a sigh and pasted a wide smile onto his face, before drawing the woman into his arms for a hug.

“Hey there, Mom.”



## Chapter Seven

Mom? *Mom?*

Ellie's cheeks burned scarlet and she knew her eyes had to be the size of half dollars.

Jesus, how much had she seen? They hadn't done anything too scandalous had they?

She took a second to look over Tyson's mom. The woman appeared early-forties, though must have been at least close to sixty, going by what Tyson had told her. And she was still absolutely beautiful.

Dark hair was pulled back in a loose ponytail, and familiar blue eyes watched her with open curiosity. She was tall, probably five ten at least, and thin.

The woman pulled away from Tyson and glanced curiously at Ellie.

"Forgive me for being so rude, I'm Sharon Wyatt, Tyson's mother. You must be the new girl in town. It's nice to finally meet you."

*Finally* meet her? She hadn't even been in town a week and had only known Tyson the past two days.

"Mom, this is Ellie. We were just stopping by Kate's to grab something to eat."

"It's nice to meet you, Mrs. Wyatt," Ellie replied and reached out to shake the other woman's hand.

"Oh, we're not real formal here in town, honey. Give me a hug." Sharon scoffed and then drew Ellie into a tight embrace "Aren't you lovely. I can see why Tyson's keeping you to himself."

Ellie's heart skipped a beat, before she pushed aside the initial warmth and happiness the comment it had evoked.

"Now, I heard you go by Ellie, but how do you pronounce your full name?"

*Eleanor*. She bit back her instinctive response, even as guilt pricked that she had to lie. Again.

"Elinamifia."

"Well, that's a...lovely name." Sharon glanced between the two of them and frowned. "I was just picking up some cupcakes for dessert at the barbeque this afternoon. You're coming, aren't you, Tyson?"

Barbeque? Ellie's stomach flipped and she shot Tyson a narrowed look. He wouldn't have tried to blow off a family barbeque for her, would he?

"Actually, Mom, I probably won't make it today."

*Shit! He had!*

"What?" His mother's face fell as he she looked between the two of them. "You both have other things to do?"

*Oh, the hell was she getting blamed for this!*

"Actually, no," Ellie said quickly. "Tyson just volunteered to show me around town, but I really should get back to the house soon anyway. I've got some work—"

"Nonsense." Sharon adjusted the box of cupcakes in her hand. "Go see the town, Ellie. And then why don't you both swing by the barbeque later? It's not for a few hours yet. Your brothers will be there, Tyson, and your dad is looking forward to seeing you."

Panic shot through Ellie and she felt her brows lifting. Going into town alone with Tyson was one thing, meeting all of his family was another.

"Oh, no, I..." *Decline politely.* How the hell could was she going to pull this off? "I don't... I wouldn't want to intrude on family time."

"Not intruding at all, dear. We'd love to have you. Unless you don't want to come, of course."

*Going from bad to worse here.* "Oh, no...we'd love to come."

Tyson cleared his throat. "Mom, we—"

"Great, then we'll see you both at two." Sharon grinned and kissed Tyson on the cheek, before waving and continuing on her way.

"I can't believe you did that," Ellie hissed. "You tried to blow off your family barbeque off for me!"

"Ah, hell, I was going to call her later. I didn't mind skipping it, Ellie." He sighed. "Look, I can still call her in a bit and let her know you're not comfortable. We don't have to go."

"Oh no. You're not making me the bad guy here. We'll go to the barbeque."

"Lovely. I'm sure my brothers put her up to this."

"Your brothers?" she repeated. "How could they have anything to do with this?"

"You're the talk of the town, sweetheart. And since they know I'm with you this morning, they probably told Mom to invite you. I'm guessing we would've gotten a phone call, even if we hadn't run into her. Everyone wants to meet you."

Ellie shook her head and glanced back into the cake shop. "Oh. Well, thanks for the warning."

"That and my brothers want to check you out."

Ellie nearly choked and shot him a look of disbelief.

"Just a little joke." He winked and opened the door to the coffee shop, muttering not quite under his breath, "Sort of."

Great. So she not only had to lie to Tyson, but his family as well. At this rate, she may as well have stayed in Chicago and just lied on the witness stand.

Tyson gestured for her to enter first and she did, giving him another quick glare. Her frustration faded, however, the moment she inhaled.

The shop smelled heavenly. Vanilla, sugar, and cinnamon all tickled her nose, and Ellie's mouth started to water.

"Hey, guys! Good morning!" A perky voice called out. "Or, oops, probably close to afternoon now, huh?"

Ellie discovered the shop owner standing behind the counter. The pretty, plump blonde watched them with blue eyes full of inquisitiveness.

"Probably is closer to afternoon." Tyson grinned and stepped to the counter. "How are ya today, Kate?"

"Doing good, Tyson. Thanks."

"Glad to hear it. Kate, I'd like you to meet Ellie, she's staying up at the Bakemans' house. And Ellie, this is Kate, the owner of this place."

"Nice to meet you, Ellie." Kate's smile widened as she reached over the counter to shake her hand. "You're the talk of the town."

"I am? Really?" Ellie struggled to keep her voice even. She'd thought Tyson had been kidding earlier.

"Well, you know how it goes. New girl in town. Pretty. All the boys are curious." Kate's cheeks turned red and she gave a nervous laugh. "Anyway, what can I tempt you both with?"

All the guys? Talk of the town? Maybe picking a smaller town wasn't the best idea...

Ellie kept her smile pinned on as she lowered her gaze to the case of sweets. And then her thoughts did a one-eighty.

"Oh God..." she said fervently. "Umm...I'm going to need a minute."

“Sure, just let me know when you’re ready.”

Carbs. Lots and lots of carbs. Cupcakes, large and small round cakes, cinnamon rolls, doughnuts... God, when was the last time she’d indulged in something so sinfully decadent?

Back in Chicago, she’d always avoided the hell out of sugar. Eating as healthy as possible and teaching her hot yoga classes at least five times a week.

In Wyattville, she still managed to practice yoga, though instead of a sweltering studio, it was on a cold floor in a quiet house early in the morning.

“Live a little,” Tyson murmured against her ear. “The cream puffs may just make you cream your panties.”

Ellie choked, her cheeks burning even as her pulse quickened. Her gaze darted up to see if Kate had heard, but the other woman had walked to the other end of the counter and was scribbling on a pad.

“You’re terrible,” she muttered, elbowing him in the stomach and mock scowling up at him. “What if she’d heard you?”

Tyson grinned. “Kate grew up with us. She’s more than used to the Wyatt brothers by now, sweetheart.”

“Are your brothers as depraved as you are?”

“More so. Well, at least Todd is.” His smile faded a bit. “Trevor is just a little...darker.”

Ellie bit back a groan. The Wyatt boys sounded like trouble all around—and she’d only met one of them so far.

“So, anything look good to you guys?” Kate called out, setting down her pen and walking back their way.

“Anything? Try *everything*,” Ellie said and then groaned. “Oh...why don’t I try one of the chocolate éclairs.”

“Good choice. They’re pretty popular.”

“Definitely good choice,” Tyson echoed and leaned forward again. “That custard filli—”

Ellie jammed her elbow into his stomach again and held her bright smile for Kate. This time the other woman’s eyes did widen a bit and her lips quirked.

“And how about you, Tyson? What’ll it be?”

“I’ll have the vanilla bean cupcake, Kate.”

“All right. I’ll get those ready for you both. Here or to go?”

“To go,” he answered.

When Kate went to fill their order, Ellie couldn't resist turning her body toward his and whispering, "You're a vanilla kind of guy, huh? I have to say I'm a little disappointed, Sheriff."

He arched a brow over dancing eyes. "Somehow I don't think you're referring to cupcakes anymore?"

She made a non-committal murmur and bit back a giggle.

His head dipped and his lips brushed her ear. "I'll have you know I go from vanilla to red velvet in under ten seconds."

Her amusement died as all kinds of images flickered in her head. Being tied to the bed. Spankings. Handcuffs...

*Oooh, that's right, the sheriff probably has a nice pair of handcuffs.*

"Here you go, guys. Thanks for coming by." Kate came holding out a plain white paper bag. "It was nice to meet you, Ellie. Have fun while you're in town, and hopefully I'll see you again."

"I'm sure you will," Ellie replied, ruthlessly shoving aside any images of Tyson and just how *not* vanilla he might be.

Tyson winked at Kate, before turning away from the counter. "She'll be back. I'll see to it."

"Don't you have a reputation or something to uphold?" Ellie grumbled, stealing the bag from his hand. "What if she tells everyone how perverted you were in there?"

"Nah, Kate's not a gossip. If it had been Lisa Thompson, I might be a little worried."

"Still. I mean, as sheriff, aren't you supposed to set an example, Tyson? Not run around making lewd comments to the new girl in town."

He laughed softly. "Was that lewd?"

"Totally." Pulling her éclair from the bag, she lifted it to her lips and took a bite.

*Oh. My. God.*

"Sugar orgasm, huh?"

She nodded and licked a tiny bit of chocolate from the corner of her lip.

Tyson's gaze followed the movement. "You know, I think you might like lewd."

She swallowed the bite and glanced up at him. "You know...you're probably right."

He held her gaze as he pulled out his cupcake, then ran his tongue over the fluffy white curves of the frosting.

Ellie couldn't drag her gaze away from his mouth, from what his tongue was doing to that damn cupcake. And then he thrust his tongue straight into the middle of the frosting. When he pulled it free again, white cream clung to the tip.

God, it was like he'd just gone down on a cupcake. It's what she'd wanted him to do to her last night. What she was hoping he'd do tonight.

Her pussy clenched as his tongue disappeared back into his mouth and his gaze flickered with pleasure.

"Sugar orgasm?" she choked out, mimicking his question from a minute ago.

"Definitely," he said quietly, his voice a bit raspy now. "Sweet and moist. But not quite as decadent as that taste of your pussy I sucked off my finger last night."

Holy hell! Had he really just said that? Ellie's knees wobbled and her panties grew damp. The way he spoke to her was so damn erotic. So shocking. And she loved every minute of it. Loved it so much she wished they weren't in the middle of the damned street in a small town.

But two could play at this game. She caught his wrist and pulled it forward, dipping her head to swipe her tongue over the swirl of frosting on his cupcake. Dragging the sweetness off with her teeth and closing her eyes and moaning.

"Ellie," he growled.

She laughed and opened her eyes again, meeting his smoldering narrowed stare. "You started it."

Tyson scowled. "You're right. And now I'm going to end it before I do something on Main Street that'll have me arresting myself." He caught her hand with his free one and started them walking again. "Come on, let me show you the beach."

Another giggle escaped her throat as they walked toward the end of the street.

*Giggling.* It was such a weird concept—she'd never been the type to giggle with boys. Definitely not with James.

Though, James had made her pulse race too. He'd given her the butterflies in her stomach. But they were nothing like what she experienced with Tyson.

And, after the fact—or even late into her relationship with James—she knew any pulse racing and butterflies had been more fear based.

She'd been drawn to James because he was the ultimate bad boy. She just didn't realize *how* bad until later.

"You've gone miles away, Ellie."

"What do you mean? I'm walking right beside you," she said lightly, and took another bite of the amazing éclair.

"You know what I mean."

"Guess my mind went off into left field. It does that sometimes."

"What was in left field?"

For a moment, just a split second, she had the craziest urge to tell him everything. The impulse hit so hard that she had to bite down on her tongue to keep herself from blurting it out.

And then it was gone again, replaced with the realization that Tyson was first and foremost an officer of the law. Once he heard her story...

"Nothing important," she finally answered and pulled her hand away. Giving herself a bit of emotional, as well as physical distance to try to give herself a better perspective of the situation.

Tyson bit back a curse as he watched her do it again. Watched Ellie bring down the shutters on whatever she was hiding. But she couldn't quite mask the unease in her eyes.

His gut twisted and he bit back a sigh. Dammit, for a while there he'd forgotten he didn't completely trust her. She'd just been an intriguing woman with whom he could be himself and have fun. And who he just happened to want to fuck until her eyes crossed.

He didn't want it to be more complex than that. Why the hell did it have to be? But his cop instinct told him it was, and that whatever she was hiding made *her* not trust *him* much either.

They stepped onto the trail that curved around a small inlet that would ultimately drop them on the beach.

"You know," she said suddenly. "I've never actually seen the ocean before."

Tyson's gaze jerked to her, his brows shooting up. "Never? You serious?"

"Yeah, kind of crazy. But...until Wyattville, I never really traveled anywhere that was close to the ocean."

"How far is it from Brooklyn to the Atlantic? Surely not that long of a drive."

Her lips parted and something that looked an awful lot like disbelief flashed in her eyes, before her lips flattened into a tight smile.

"Well...no, it's not too long of a drive." She hesitated and then seemed to relax a bit. "There was this one time, when my cousin and I had just turned twenty-one, we got in her Mustang to head to Atlantic City. Her back tire blew out not even a quarter of the way there. It was late at night anyway, so we took it as a sign that it just wasn't meant to be and headed back to Brooklyn."

"And you never tried again?"

"I...my cousin, moved around a lot. I didn't see her all that often and she was always the adventurous one." She offered a stiff shrug.

Again Tyson had to wonder how many half-truths were in the story she'd just told. Her body language clearly indicated she was lying about something. But it was a conversation about the *ocean*, why the hell would she have to lie about that?

"It's so pretty here." Ellie gestured to the pool of water that flowed in from the Pacific to form the small inlet. "Do people swim in it?"

"Yeah. It's real popular this time of year. The inlet is a little calmer than the ocean, with all the waves, so lots of parents bring the little kids," he replied. "In fact, the place will probably be packed by noon."

"I'll bet. Well, we got here just in time then."

A few minutes later, the trail emptied onto the soft sand of the beach, and beyond that lay the blue sprawl of the ocean. He tossed their empty bakery bag into a garbage can and slowed down as Ellie paused.

He heard her catch her breath and then let it out a moment later on a soft sigh.

"Oh my God. It's more amazing than anything you see on television." Her voice trembled a bit. "Sorry, but I have to."

Tyson was still trying to figure out what she was apologizing for, when she grabbed the bottom of her dress and took off running down the beach. Straight toward the ocean.



## Chapter Eight

His mouth curved into a wide smile and his chest bounced with laughter as he watched her. She squealed and then laughed, as she waded out into the water.

“It’s cold!” she yelled, turning to look at him. “And it feels amazing.”

Tyson didn’t reply, just started after her again, making his way down the slippery slopes of sand to the ocean’s edge.

“Come in!” she cried, playfully kicking a spray of water toward him. “Take off your shoes and come in.”

For the moment, he was content to just watch her. Watch Ellie tilt her head back and suck in a breath of sea air as she stumbled through the shallow waves.

She was beautiful. He traced her body with his gaze. Starting with her pale shapely calves sparkling with water, to the thrust of her breasts against her dress, and the huge smile of delight on her face.

He wanted her at this moment more than he had since they’d met. Because this was the real Ellie. No pretenses. Real. Honest. Uninhibited.

It didn’t matter that he had on his leather sandals or was wearing jeans, he wanted to share the moment with her. Her never having seen the ocean was obviously one thing she hadn’t lied about.

A moment later, with his sandals off and his jeans rolled up, he took his first steps into the water. He let the coolness swirl around his feet as he breathed in the salty ocean air. He felt what she felt. Smelled what she smelled.

Ellie’s eyes opened again and her hazel gaze, alight with wonder and happiness, fell on him.

“I love it,” she said softly. “Can you feel the power of the ocean? The energy and life? The way it sucks the sand between your toes as it pulls back out.”

Hearing her words and watching the joy in Ellie’s face, it was as if he were experiencing the ocean for the first time too.

“I feel it,” he murmured, wading closer to her.

Her smile faded a bit and awareness flickered in her eyes. She'd figured out he wasn't referring to the water anymore.

He cupped her cheek and gave her a gentle smile. "You're incredibly beautiful. Do you realize that, Ellie?"

She ran her tongue over her lips, while she shook her head in a tiny gesture of denial. Of his words, or of this moment, who knew.

"I can't stop touching you. Watching you," he confessed. "You've captivated me, Ellie. Whoever the hell you are."

Guilt slid over her expression. "Tyson..."

"Tell me."

"I can't."

The two words were barely audible, but they were the admission he'd been waiting to hear.

She might not have been able to say more than that right now, but it was a start.

"You will," he said quietly, but firmly. "When you're ready. You can trust me, Ellie. You know you can."

Her lashes fluttered down, hiding the trace of fear that had flickered in her gaze.

He cupped her other cheek, so that he was cradling her face and they stood just inches apart. "But for now..."

Lowering his head, he allowed his lips to catch whatever response she'd been about to make. Her mouth opened on a breathy sigh as she leaned into him.

Hunger built inside him, burning his gut and racing through his blood. It took all his restraint to keep the kiss light, and not let the intensity of the moment rip away his control.

The beach was already scattered with a handful of town folk and there were some kids wading not too far away. The last thing he wanted to do was give the people even more to talk about. As it was, taking Ellie around today would already make them a juicy topic.

With a sigh of regret, he lifted his lips and pressed his forehead against hers. "I probably shouldn't have done that."

"I don't know, felt pretty nice to me."

"Me too. A little too nice." He glanced over her shoulder, wincing as his hypersensitive cock pressed against her hip. "I'm tempted to take a few steps farther out and dive under the water...cool myself off a bit."

She laughed softly. "It might be a bit cumbersome swimming in jeans though, don't you think?"

"You're probably right." He lifted his head again. "Why don't we walk a bit on the beach before we head out to my parents'."

"That sounds great."

He took her hand again, threading his fingers through hers in a gesture that he hoped implied he had no intention of letting her back away emotionally again.

But Ellie made no effort to free herself, instead her smaller fingers tightened around his and she gave a soft sigh as they headed out of the shallow waves and back to the beach.

*He'd gain her trust. No matter what it took.* He needed to convince Ellie that he wasn't the bad guy. Whoever that might be in her life...

Each minute they spent driving to Tyson's parents' house, Ellie got a little more nervous. She sat staring out the window at the cute houses they passed. Some literally had white-picket fences, flower gardens, kids and dogs running free.

This town was surreal. The *people* were surreal. But in a good way that she hadn't known existed outside of the sitcoms.

And now she was going to meet the rest of Tyson's family. It seemed so overwhelming and, well, soon. They weren't even dating—though pretty soon they'd most likely be sleeping together.

"You have nothing to worry about," Tyson said softly, glancing her way with a reassuring smile. "It's just a barbeque, Ellie. Seriously."

"Oh, I'm fine," she said a little too quickly. "Was just thinking maybe we should've brought a potato salad or something."

Damn. Now that she'd mentioned it, she realized they probably should have.

"Nah, mom makes enough food to feed an army."

"Do a lot of people come?"

He hesitated. "Not too many. Depends if the cousins, aunts and uncles show up."

Cousins. She bit her lip and wondered if these cousins were as much trouble as Tyson and his brothers seemed to be.

Her gut clenched. When was the last time she'd met a guy's family? Probably a few years ago, when she'd been in college, and that had been after almost seven months of dating.

What would Tyson's family think of her? What would his parents be like? Or the now infamous brothers she'd heard so much about. And apparently cousins to top it off.

"Here we are."

She blinked as Tyson turned the vehicle onto a dirt road. The property was massive, with an old wooden fence running along the open land.

"Wow, that's a lot of green. Do your parents have horses or something?" she asked.

"A few, actually. We all grew up riding."

"Do you still ride?"

His expression turned reflective. "Not as much as I'd like. Trevor's the big rider in the family. But I do hop on Jimmy every now and then. Riding's a great way to de-stress."

Ellie's lips twitched. "Jimmy?"

"Mom named the horse after Jimmy Buffett. She loves the guy."

Her smile widened. Something told her she was going to like Tyson's mom quite a bit.

A few minutes later, they parked in front of the large, sprawling ranch house. It was painted white with a green trim, and of course had pretty flowers aligning both sides of the front door. It was almost too lovely.

"You grew up here?" she asked softly.

"Sure did." He turned off the engine and opened his door. "My parents have been married for almost forty years."

Wow, that many years was pretty amazing nowadays. Her parents had just hit twenty-seven and she'd always been impressed by how long they'd made it.

Though she sometimes wondered how much her parents really loved each other. They bickered constantly and slept in separate rooms. It had crossed her mind more than once that they both just didn't want to deal with the hassle of a divorce.

"Ready for this?" Tyson asked when he opened her door a moment later.

"As ready as I'll ever be." She gave him what she hoped was a confident smile. "I mean, it's just a barbeque, right?"

"Tyson Gerald Wyatt!" Sharon's voice called out. "Will you stop your stalling and bring your girl in so everyone can meet her already?"

Ellie's brows shot up and a barely audible whimper slipped past her lips.

"Sorry about that," Tyson muttered under his breath as he shook his head. "She gets excited if we bring a girl over."

“Totally a mom thing. I get it.” And she did. But still, it didn’t make it any easier as they walked up the pathway to where his mother stood in the doorway.

“Nice to see you again, Ellie.” Sharon took a step back and waved them inside. “Go on in, everyone’s out back.”

Ellie stepped over the threshold of the doorway and into the house, one ear still open to hear the greeting between mother and son behind her as they continued to stand outside.

But their friendly exchange faded from her mind as she gave a wistful sigh. What a great house—a comfy layout, with plush furniture and cream-painted walls.

Pictures covered most of those walls. Pictures from twenty years ago, when the brothers were obviously kids, wedding pictures from Tyson’s parents, and current photos.

Ellie picked up a framed picture of Sharon and a man she assumed to be Tyson’s dad. They were in a fishing boat, arms around each other, smiling, and holding up a salmon they’d caught.

*So sweet. Something she’d never had...but, God, wouldn’t it be nice to find some day?* For a moment, the image of her and Tyson flickered through her mind, but she snuffed it out, her stomach clenching.

“Damn. I can see why Ty staked his claim on you.”

She dropped the picture with a startled gasp, then fumbled to pick it up again as she cast a glance over her shoulder.

Another ridiculously hot male stood behind her, arms folded across his wide chest as he glanced her over with an appreciative smile.

One of Tyson’s brothers, without a doubt. His T-shirt with the firefighter logo gave that away. Not to mention he had the same hard, chiseled face and body as Tyson’s, but darker coloring. His hair was brown, almost black, and his eyes a rich chocolate.

Oh, yeah. She knew without a doubt by his words and his appearance alone that this guy must have a trail of broken hearts a mile long.

“Have I been claimed?” she asked lightly, turning fully to face him with a smile. “Because that would be news to me. I’m Ellie.”

“I’ve heard. Todd Wyatt.”

“Nice to meet you.” She held out her hand for him to shake, and then immediately wondered if he would try to hug her like his mom had.

Instead, Todd caught her hand between his two, and lifted it to his lips to brush a kiss across her knuckles.

"I see you've managed to corner the one single woman in the vicinity," Tyson's amused voice drawled from behind her, but there was the faintest hint of warning in his tone.

She felt the heat of Tyson's body just behind her, before his hand settled possessively on her lower back.

Todd's grin widened. "Are you surprised?"

"Not at all." Tyson stepped forward again to hug his brother, pounding him on the back with a closed fist. "I think I've got you pretty much figured out by now."

"Jeez, you boys are going to scare her off." Sharon swept through with an exasperated sigh and caught her arm, pulling her away from the two. "Come on, honey, you've still got two more to meet."

Two more. Well, at least that meant the extended family hadn't shown up today. Ellie gave a small laugh of relief and let Sharon lead her out of the house into the backyard.

## Chapter Nine

The smell of wood chips and barbeque hit her first and her stomach growled, even though they'd eaten the treats from Kate's Cakes not too long ago.

With the glare of the sun, Ellie couldn't see much as they stepped out onto the patio. But then a few more steps led them to a shady tree and, once again, the details of the backyard came into perspective—folding chairs, lots of green lawn.

"There they are," Sharon murmured. "The other two men in my life."

The two men in question were standing by the grill, deep in discussion. Everyone was tall, she realized, the entire family.

She approached as they finally glanced up and noticed her.

The older of the two was still quite handsome, with his full head of white hair, twinkling blue eyes, and big smile on his face. He was exactly what Tyson would look like in forty years, she thought.

"You must be Ellie!" he called, coming around the barbeque. "Glad to meet you. I'm Dan."

"Nice to meet you, Dan." And he *did* shake her hand. No hugs, no knuckle kissing.

Not sure what to expect from the last member of the Wyatt's family, she turned her gaze to the man who could only be Tyson's older brother.

He looked similar to Todd, with the dark hair and eyes. But, unlike the rest of the family, his expression wasn't quite as animated. He wasn't scowling, but there definitely wasn't a big welcoming smile. Lifting his bottle of beer, he took a long, hard draw on it while keeping his gaze on her.

His lukewarm demeanor was a bit of a jolt and her smile faltered.

He made no move toward her, but gave a slight nod of his head. "I'm Trevor. It's good to meet you, Ellie."

Well, his words certainly sounded sincere, and some of the tension slipped away. Besides, hadn't Tyson warned her about him?

"Likewise." She brightened her smile again, then turned her attention away in search of her lifeline, the only person she knew here.

Tyson was just stepping out of the house into the yard. His gaze was on her, the knowing grin on his face a welcome relief.

He came to stand by her, holding a beer in his outstretched hand. "You meet everyone?"

"Thank you. I think so." Ellie took the beer gratefully, even if she rarely drank the stuff. She went to twist the cap off and found he'd already done that for her. "Unless there's more hiding that I haven't seen?"

Tyson watched as she tilted the beer bottle back, wrapping her lips around the rim and taking a sip. Jesus, she looked sexy sucking on a Budweiser.

"No, unfortunately my nephews and nieces couldn't be here today," his mom said, moving next to her husband, who promptly draped an arm around her shoulder. "But they send their love to everyone."

"Now that's too bad. I have a serious hankering for some of Ryan's jambalaya." Tyson rubbed his belly and winked down at Ellie. "My cousin went to college down in Louisiana. He makes a mean jambalaya."

Her eyes light up with amusement. "I swear, you have a hollow leg. You always seem to be thinking about food."

His dad chuckled, brushing a kiss across his wife's forehead. "All the boys are like that. You wouldn't have believed the grocery bill when they were teens."

"I can only imagine," Ellie said. "You have my sympathy."

"Speaking of food, how's that salmon coming, Pops?" Todd asked, crossing the grass toward the barbeque. "I'm starving. Didn't quite wake up in time for breakfast this morning."

Trevor snorted and glanced at Ellie. "That's code for he was sleeping off a wild night at some girl's house."

"Why you jealous bastard," Todd yelled, taking a playful swing at the back of his brother's head.

Trevor ducked and countered with a light jab to Todd's shoulder.

"Are you guys always like this?" Ellie asked in an amused whisper, leaning into him.

"What do you mean?" Tyson caught her hand and stroked the inside of her palm, then couldn't resist teasing, "We're on our best behavior today."

She laughed as her fingers curled around his. "I highly doubt you guys are *ever* on your best behavior."



Tyson smiled at that. She was pretty much dead on.

When he glanced at his parents, he found his mom watching them with a considering expression, her mouth curved into a tiny smile.

Don't get your hopes up, Mom, he warned silently. Ellie wasn't in town for long, and he wasn't thinking beyond a summer fling. Even as the thought flickered through his head, the denials came rushing up behind it.

*Well, shit.*

"So, Trevor, I hear Megan's back in town," their dad announced suddenly.

All talking and laughter ceased, leaving a silence that was only disturbed by the occasional cries of seagulls.

Tyson's breath held as he took another sip of beer and tried to glance over at his brother inconspicuously.

Trevor's expression was unreadable, his gaze shuttered. But Tyson didn't miss the way his fingers tightened around the bottle in his hand.

"Is that so?" Trevor finally replied in a voice without inflection. "I hadn't heard."

Their mom cleared her throat. "Maybe you should invite her over to join us? She's not far from here—"

"No." The harsh word whipped through the group, snuffing out any hope his parents might have for further discussion.

Even Todd's cheery mood diminished some and he turned to check on the salmon, his smile gone.

Ellie moved closer to Tyson's side and tightened her grip on his hand, obviously sensing the tension.

But then she surprised him, clearing the air with a bright, "That salmon smells wonderful. Do you guys ever go out there and go fishing?" She gestured to the ocean that lay just beyond the fenced line of Wyatt property.

"Hell, yeah, we do," Todd said, his grin returning. "I'm the one who caught the salmon we're grilling right now."

"Bah! I believe I caught this one," their dad corrected. "Yours was barely six pounds."

"Bullshit it was, Pops!"

Any remaining tension from the family dissipated as the two began arguing good-naturedly.

Trevor had turned away from the group, silently staring out at the water.

"Good save," Tyson finally murmured against Ellie's ear. "Thank you for that."

She squeezed his hand and glanced up at him. "No problem. What was that all about anyway?"

He hesitated, but then decided Trevor was too far away to hear.

"Megan was Trevor's fiancée until they broke up last year. He won't admit it, but I think Trevor still has some pretty strong feelings for her."

"Why did they break up then?"

Again, he hesitated. "Trevor's unit in the Army deployed to Afghanistan for a year. When he came back...I don't know. Something changed. Their engagement ended shortly after that."

Sympathy flashed across her face, before Ellie turned to watch Trevor. "I'm really sorry to hear that."

"I need to go throw together the fruit salad," his mom said, passing them on the way to the house. "Ellie, why don't you come help? You can tell me more about yourself."

Ellie's eyes widened and her fingers clenched around his, but she said a bright, "Sure."

Tyson bit back a laugh as he watched her follow his mother inside. He should've seen that coming a mile away. It wasn't every day he brought a girl to the Saturday barbeque...hell, it wasn't ever.

Which made him wonder again how he was going to convince himself this was a summer fling.

With a sigh, Tyson took another swig of his beer and went to check out the salmon that he was pretty sure *he'd* caught.

A few hours later Ellie clutched a croquet mallet and glared down at the yellow ball.

"I've got this," she muttered, which only garnered an amused laugh from Tyson who stood behind her.

"Come on, sweetheart. Take it home and win this one for us," he encouraged.

She grinned, then bit her lip in concentration, trying to block out the sounds of Trevor and Todd, who immediately began yelling and making as much noise as possible.

The afternoon had been incredible. Amazing food, wonderful people, and she couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed so much or had so much fun.

And now, she was going to kick some major Wyatt ass with the help of the middle child.

Raising her mallet, she swung it against the yellow ball and watched as it soared through the last two wickets to smash into the stake in the ground.

"You did it," Tyson yelled, picking her up around the waist and swinging her around in a circle. He glanced at his brothers. "Take that, ya pansies!"

Ellie let out a giddy laugh, clutching his shoulders as she stared down into his smiling eyes. And then he lowered her slowly back to the ground, their bodies passing in a sensual glide that left her tingling and short of breath.

Tyson's gaze locked on hers and she saw his pupils dilate and his nostrils flare.

Her heart tripped and she swallowed hard, knowing he must be able to see the same desire in her eyes.

"How about another beer, guys?" Todd called out. "I'm grabbing one for myself."

"Think we're going to pass," Tyson replied back, not removing his gaze from her. "We've got to head out."

Trevor gave a soft laugh. "Get out of here, already. I'm surprised you lasted this long."

Ellie knew her cheeks were pink as they said their goodbyes to everyone, stopping inside the house to hug his parents farewell and thank them.

By the time they were inside Tyson's truck and driving back to her place, her knees were shaking and her pulse pounding.

"They loved you," Tyson said, breaking the silence.

She was almost glad he wasn't bringing up the wild sex they both knew they were about to have. It was the distraction she needed.

"I had such a wonderful time. You have an amazing family. I wasn't sure Trevor cared for me much at first, but he seemed to warm up."

"He's like that with everyone. Trev's got some demons and doesn't trust easily. But he liked you. I could tell he approved one-hundred-percent."

"And that's a good thing?" she murmured and glanced over at him as the truck bounced down the dirt road of her driveway.

He tore his attention from the drive, and looked at her. "That's a very good thing."

Heat slid through her body, gathering heavy between her thighs at his softly spoken words.

*Want. I want this man.*

A moment later, Tyson slowed to a stop outside her house, putting on the parking brake.

Her hands shook as she reached for the door handle, tugging it open and climbing out of the truck before Tyson could open the door for her.

He was right behind her though, climbing the steps on her heels as she moved across the porch. But, before she could enter the house, he slid an arm around her ribcage, pulling her back against him so her ass brushed his hardened cock.

"We were almost inside," she whispered, her voice cracking.

"I need to touch you. Now." His lips found the nape of her neck, caressing the skin before he bit gently.

Her ass clenched and she gasped. "Tyson."

"Jesus, Ellie, when you were leaning forward earlier, swinging that mallet...your little sundress rose high on your thighs and I got so damn hard just watching you."

With his free hand, he lifted her dress, rubbing his palm over the backs of her thighs.

"I wanted to pull you off behind the trees, away from the family. Get you alone," he muttered. "I wanted to lift your dress like this, and slip my hand between your legs. Feel how fucking wet you were."

He kicked her legs apart and urged her to lean forward, as if he were about to frisk her. But then his hand went straight between her parted thighs to cup her sensitized pussy.

Ellie cried out, a shudder racking her body as her palms lay flattened against the door, holding her weight up.

"Cause you were wet earlier," he went on, his voice hoarse as he massaged her mound. "I know you were. Just about as wet as you are now. Weren't you, sweetheart?"

"Yes."

She didn't bother to deny it. To deny that she'd been thinking about him all day and what was about to happen.

"Good girl. No lies between us, Ellie. No lies."

Closing her eyes, she bit her lip, trying not to let the *no lies* comment drag her back to reality.

And then she didn't have to think, because he slid the hand around her ribcage up to close over her breast through the dress.

"I want your tit in my mouth again, Ellie. And then I want my face between your legs." He ground his pelvis against her, so she felt the press of his hard cock against her ass. "I want you to beg. To scream my name. I want *everything*."

Her knees trembled, and she couldn't do more than let out a gurgle of a moan.

Tyson maneuvered his hand beneath her thong, and stroked one finger into her soaked cleft.

“But I also want you on your knees, sweetheart. I want to watch you undo my jeans and pull out my cock, then take me between those pretty red lips of yours.”

“Yes.” The vision swept through her, so hot and powerful, that her thighs clenched around his hand.

“I want to fuck your mouth. Come down your throat.” He moved his finger up to rub her clit, slow and steady, while the hand on her breast pinched the nipple. “And you’d swallow me, wouldn’t you, Ellie?”

She didn’t answer. Couldn’t answer, because the pleasure was so intense.

“I know you would, because you’re dirty like that. You’d swallow every last drop of my come. Tell me you would, Ellie,” he ordered thickly, bringing his finger, soaked with her juices up to her mouth.

He traced her lips and she tasted herself, felt her tongue sliding out to flick over the tip before she knew what she was doing.

He groaned. “Or better yet, show me.”

## Chapter Ten

Tyson's hands moved to her shoulders, spinning her around and pushing her to her knees in front of him.

The rasp of his zipper sounded and her gaze finally focused on his hand, freeing his cock from his jeans.

Her mouth went dry at the sight of him. Thick and long, with the blue ridges of veins throughout. The head of his shaft was purple and engorged, a tiny pearl of moisture gathered at the small opening.

"Suck me," he commanded huskily. "Taste me."

Hypnotized by his seductive order and the complete change in him, she reached out and curled her fingers around his cock. Hot. Silky. Steel.

Her womb clenched and she licked her lips. The hard wood of the porch bit into her knees and it aroused her further. She knelt in front of him, knowing there was about to be a huge power shift. Her mouth watered for the taste he'd ordered her to take.

She leaned forward and let her tongue flick over his mushroom-shaped tip. Caught the salty drop of semen and savored the taste of him.

"Fuck." He groaned, his fingers sliding into her hair to hold her against him. "Take me inside, sweetheart."

Ellie parted her lips and let him slide deep into her mouth.

"Oh, God. Yeah, Ellie, just like that."

She moved her mouth on him slowly to start. Letting Tyson's cock rub against her tongue as her teeth lightly grazed him. She curled her lips over them to protect him, worried about hurting him.

But he gave a low growl in his throat, his fingers tightening in her hair as he took over.

Ellie closed her eyes, rubbing his balls as she relaxed her jaw and let him take control. Let him fuck her mouth.

She felt him tighten in her hand and then he groaned, long and loud. The first warm burst of his release hit the back of her throat and she sucked his length, milking his climax, wanting more. Wanting it all.

A minute later, Tyson pulled from her mouth and leaned forward above her, his palms against the front door of the house in a perfect imitation of the position he'd had her in moments before.

Ellie licked her lips, savoring the last taste of him, and a little shocked at what had just happened.

"Damn," he muttered. "I am so sorry."

"Sorry? Why?"

"I lost control. I was a jerk—"

"Umm, that was hot as hell," she murmured, coming to her feet and sliding between him and the door. "So don't you dare apologize. Besides, you were right."

His chest rose with each uneven breath he took, and he stroked a thumb over her lower lip.

"Right about...?"

She nipped at his thumb and watched him from beneath her lashes. "You going from vanilla to red velvet in under ten seconds."

He laughed, even as his gaze darkened. "Still, I lost control. Here on the front porch, where anyone could've seen us."

"No one saw us. This house is up a long driveway. Besides, is losing control really such a bad thing?"

"Guess not. Besides, I had an ulterior motive when you were going down on me."

"You have a filthy mouth, Sheriff."

He grinned. "And you like it."

"You're right. Now what was your ulterior motive?"

"Well, sweetheart, I needed the edge taken off." He trailed his thumb down to the pulse in her throat that she knew was beating incredibly fast. "Because once I get you inside this house, I want to take my time enjoying that tight little body of yours."

Her heart thumped so loud, she was certain he could hear it.

"Oh yeah?" Her voice cracked.

"Yeah. I want to touch it," Tyson murmured as he slid his hand down to cup her breast. "Taste it." He pressed his mouth against hers, his tongue sliding inside for a brief moment to flick against hers, before he lifted his head. "And then I'm going to fuck it." His pelvis ground against hers, pressing her into the door. "Every way possible."

Again and again. Because we have all night, sweetheart, and I intend to use those hours.”

Every nerve in her body went taut with need. Her thong, which had slid into the folds of her pussy, was thoroughly wet.

She wanted to make some seductive reply, or at least try for witty.

Ellie opened her mouth, but the only thing that came out was a strangled, “Please.”

Tyson watched her body tremble, saw the glaze of arousal in her eyes, and couldn’t wait another second to make good on the statement he’d just made.

He slid his hand down the door, grabbing the handle and turning. Since it wasn’t locked, the door swung inward.

Ellie’s eyes widened as she started to fall backward. But he caught her, and instead of just steadying her, he swept her up into his arms.

Moving into the house, he kicked the door closed.

“Where’s the bedroom?”

“In the back.” Her words were unsteady and she clung to him as he strode through the small house.

The bedroom door was open and his gaze immediately landed on the queen-size, perfectly made bed.

He laid her down on the mattress and then quickly disposed of his clothes, grabbing the condom out of his jeans and setting it on the table next to them.

Then he climbed on the bed after her, covered her body with his and let his hand sweep down the length of her body as he took her mouth in a hard kiss.

Ellie moaned, thrusting her hands into his hair as she kissed him back, her tongue sparring with his, her body arching beneath him.

Wedging his hand beneath her, Tyson found the zip at the back of her dress and tugged it down. He quickly realized that the style of the dress would have to be removed by tugging it over her head.

He eased his mouth from hers and then sat up, encouraging her to her knees.

“Take it off, sweetheart,” he commanded softly. “I want to see you.”

She nodded and reached for the hem of her dress. Her arms crossed in front of her as she lifted the black skirt over her thighs and up her body.

The tiny black thong he’d felt earlier showed more than it covered. The lace front was a small triangle that disappeared into the swollen lips of her pussy.



His cock went just as hard as it had been on the porch, and he groaned, raising his gaze to follow the removal of the dress.

Time seemed to stop as she lifted off her dress inch by inch. Her pale stomach was toned, and a small gem glittered from a piercing at her belly button.

*Fuck. That was so damn hot.*

Then her small breasts, wrapped in a black strapless bra, appeared, before the dress cleared her head and she tossed it to the floor.

“Now the bra,” he ordered, his gaze on her chest, waiting for the hard, red nipples he knew she’d soon expose.

She didn’t hesitate, but reached behind her to unfasten the bra. The black strip loosened, before she plucked it free and tossed it aside.

“Damn,” he muttered thickly and stroked his cock, which still hung free from his unzipped jeans. “Now you just relax and let me do the rest, sweetheart.”

With Ellie still on her knees in front of him, he slid a hand around her back and pulled her forward.

Her perfectly sloped breast dangled in front of his face, and he flicked his tongue over one taut nipple.

She drew in a sharp breath and swayed against him, reaching for his shoulders.

“Like that?” He smiled before closing his lips around the tip and drawing it inside his mouth.

Ellie’s breathing grew ragged as he suckled her, and he grabbed her other tit, squeezing it, plucking the nipple as he enjoyed its twin with his mouth.

When he eventually pulled his mouth away, his breathing was a bit irregular too. With a low growl, he pushed her breasts together and buried his face between them, flicking his tongue over each nipple in turn, using his teeth, and alternating which one to suckle.

“Tyson,” Ellie whispered, her head tilting back. “Oh God, you’re making me so hot.”

Though he didn’t need her words to know how aroused she was—the scent of arousal grew stronger by the minute—he loved hearing her say it.

Catching the sides of her thong between his fingers, he tugged them down. But with his mouth on her tit, it was like unwrapping a Christmas present without looking.

He lifted his head from her breasts and watched the black thong slide over her hips and down her thighs.

“Jesus,” he muttered and rocked back on his heels for a moment, just to take her in.

A tiny triangle of black curls was the only hair that rested above the smooth, pink folds of her pussy. The hint of moisture gleamed between his legs, and lust surged through him, knowing he'd brought her to this point.

Tyson reached out and palmed her mound, groaning at the wetness that met his hand.

"I want to taste you, Ellie," he said, and then slid two fingers deep inside her. So hot and wet. His cock jumped. "I want my tongue where my fingers are right now."

"Then do it," she said raggedly, her pussy clenching around his fingers. "Or are you just all talk, Sheriff?"

He laughed softly, lifting his gaze to hers while he fucked her with his fingers.

"I'll make you eat those words in a minute, sweetheart."

"I'd rather you just eat me."

His laughter grew, as he was genuinely amused by her dirty challenge.

With a gentle shove, he pushed her backward so she fell with her head against the pillow. Then he pushed her thighs wide and smiled down at her.

"I can't wait to hear you beg."

"I don't beg," she replied, her gaze rebellious, even as watched her ass clench and lift off the mattress.

"Really?" He arched a brow as he moved to lie down, urging her legs over his shoulders. "We'll just have to see about that."

She seemed ready to let the argument die, but with his face not even an inch from her pussy, he wasn't all that surprised.

He took a second to breathe in the spicy scent of her arousal, and rubbed a thumb through her folds. Then he dropped a light kiss on her inner thigh.

Tyson watched her stomach clench and her chest stop rising and falling. *She was holding her breath.* He smiled, knowing Ellie wasn't nearly as composed as she'd want him to believe.

He kissed her other thigh, before turning to lazily nuzzle her warm slit. Her strangled whimper made him bite back a soft laugh.

And then his amusement died when his tongue caught the taste of her essence. Hunger, savage and raw, ripped through him, sending his blood raging through his veins.

With a low growl, he forgot the notion of teasing her and gave in to his primal instinct. Needing to taste her completely and to make her lose control like he knew he was about to.

He slid his tongue through her folds, before making it rigid and plunging deep into her core, burrowing in her musky slickness.

Oh, yeah, he was a goner.

Ellie gasped, any intent she had at keeping calm and controlled when Tyson was going down on her vaporized.

*Oh God. Oh God.*

Her head spun and her heart pounded as he began to slowly fuck her with his tongue. Her thighs tightened around his head, her heels digging into his upper back.

And then he moved his tongue from the channel, dragging up through her pussy, before honing in on her clit a moment later. At contact, her body jackknifed and she cried out. Pleasure screamed through every inch of her being as a film of sweat broke out on her skin.

He suckled the small bud, making quiet masculine growls of approval. And then his hands slid up her body to massage her breasts, squeezing and kneading the sensitive flesh.

"Tyson," she whispered, clutching blindly at the bedding. "Oh God..."

His mouth moved over her faster, his tongue flicking and swirling, creating havoc on her mind and body. And then, it was too much, even as she needed more.

"Please," she begged, just as he'd predicted. "Tyson, oh God, please."

Tyson's hands slid from her breasts and she groaned in disappointment. But then he caught her hands in his, weaving their fingers together as he slowed his tormenting tongue to hard licks against the button of flesh.

Her thighs gripped his ears as the release built low in her body. Then it spread to every inch, leaving her tingling and on the edge. She just needed that little...*God!*

He lightly bit her clit and she went flying. Her body shook through the orgasm, gasps of pleasure spilling from her lips.

She was vaguely aware of Tyson shifting, moving to his knees, even as her legs stayed on his shoulders. Then she felt the thick prodding of his cock between her thighs.

"I know I promised you slow, sweetheart," he muttered hoarsely. "But I can't wait another minute to be inside you."

Before she could catch her breath, his grip on her ankles tightened and he thrust deep.

Her body arched and she moaned, the lingering pleasure of her orgasm sparking up again tenfold.

"Tyson," she gasped softly and closed her eyes, letting herself adjust to his quick invasion.

Incredible. It felt so absolutely incredible. Her entire body tingled as he made slow thrusts inside her. Her nipples hardened and her breathing grew strained.

But she wasn't the only one. She opened her eyes again when she heard ragged breaths. His face was pinched, the pleasure so clearly sketched in each line on his forehead and the heat in his eyes.

Tyson must have sensed her watching him. He'd been focused on where they were joined, his thumb rubbing her clit as he fucked her, but then he lifted his head and their gazes collided.

"Ellie," he rasped. "Oh God, you're amazing."

She tried to reply back, "Likewise." But it came out more as a gurgled moan.

And then any ability she had to think vanished when he began thrusting harder into her, rubbing her clit faster. Her breasts jiggled and she pinched the tips, heightening her excitement.

The wave of pleasure bore down on her, demanding her surrender and that she let go completely. And she had no choice. With a ragged moan, she gave herself over, grinding herself frantically into his thrusts, moaning and crying out in abandon.

When the wave crested, she screamed hoarsely, clenching around his cock and milking him into his release.

Tyson groaned, the sound ragged and guttural as he did two more shallow thrusts, before going deep and remaining buried.

It took a while before she could form a thought, and by then Tyson had pulled out of her, disposed of the condom, and was climbing back into bed.

"I need a minute," he muttered, looping an arm around her waist and tugging her to him. "And then we can go again."

She gave a weak laugh and shook her head. "I'll need at least an hour, turbo."

"Deal."

Closing her eyes, she let herself snuggle against him and rest. Just for a while...

## Chapter Eleven

“Ellie. Wake up, sweetheart!”

Ellie gasped and snapped her eyes open. Her whole body was rigid with tension and she couldn't figure out where she was.

She blinked, turning to look at Tyson before it sank in where they were and what had happened. Judging by the fading light outside, it was probably after eight p.m.

“Did we fall asleep?” she asked uncertainly.

“Yeah.” His gaze, full of concern and questions, searched hers. “You were having a nightmare.”

“A nightmare...”

“You don't remember?”

She hesitated and then shook her head. Her stomach swirled as anxiety ripped through her. No, she didn't remember. But she had a pretty good guess what it was about.

Tyson's expression softened. “Come here, sweetheart.”

When he pulled her into his arms, she didn't resist. She burrowed her face against his hard chest, smelling the soap on him and faint hint of sweat from their earlier lovemaking.

Lovemaking? Her mouth parted in dismay. When in her life had she ever called sex lovemaking?

“Relax,” he murmured, stroking her hair and then her naked back. “I've got you, sweetheart. You're okay.”

And she was. Somewhere in the past couple of days, she'd really come to trust Tyson. She closed her eyes, listening to the solid thump of his heartbeat. It eased the tension from her body, brought back the peace and warmth.

“Elinamayfia...whatever it is that's going on, I promise, you can tell me.”

And just like that, the serenity of the moment evaporated.

He'd finally *almost* mastered her name...and it sounded beautiful on his lips.

Only it wasn't her name, it was her cousin's. And she and Tyson weren't really together like a normal couple, because everything was built on a lie. *She* was a lie.

Ellie squinted her eyes closed, wanting to shut out the guilt and the frustration. Wanting to forget this cute little town and its wonderful people. She wasn't one of them, and she certainly didn't belong here. She was just *using* them.

"Please, Tyson...just hold me," she whispered. "Make love to me."

There was that phrase again, *making love*, only this time she didn't flinch at it. She couldn't really call it sex, because she'd never had the kind of sex that left almost left her crying with joy and her heart swelling with...no. She was not going to go *there*.

She turned her head to glance at Tyson, because he hadn't replied and she knew he was disappointed to an extent at her lack of confession.

But then he gave a slow smile and reached for her, lifting her so she lay on top of him. His hands slid down to cup her ass.

"Damn it, Ellie, you know I can't say no to that kind of request," he said softly and nuzzled her breasts.

She sighed, heat already rocketing throughout her body again. "I know. That's why I suggested it."

"But afterward, we'll—"

"Cook dinner." Knowing that wasn't at all what he'd been about to say, Ellie gave a flirty smile. "I'm going to work up an appetite."

And then, before he could argue, she lowered her head and covered his mouth with hers. Initiating a hot, thorough kiss.

The distraction worked. Tyson gave a low groan and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tighter against his hard body and plunged his tongue deep into her mouth.

Ellie tried not to think about how much longer she could keep diverting him, because Tyson obviously wasn't going to let it go. Which meant she might have to consider leaving sooner than expected. The trial was in one week, and she really hated to leave Wyattville. If she could just make it a little bit longer...she'd be in the clear.

When Tyson slipped a hand between her legs, she let out a whimper of pleasure and gave herself over to the rush of passion.

She couldn't think about how she was going to deal with tomorrow. Not right now. Not when they had tonight.

Tyson only drove home briefly to grab a change of clothes, before bunking in at Ellie's for the weekend. They spent most of Sunday being lazy. Only taking a break from the bedroom to eat and go for a quick walk on the beach.

And now they were in bed for the night. He listened to the sound of the waves hitting the beach and Ellie's steady breathing beside him. Darkness had fallen hours ago, but now, approaching midnight, he couldn't seem to get to sleep. His mind wouldn't shut down. Which wasn't good, seeing as he had to be at work in the morning.

He propped himself up on one elbow and stared down at Ellie, waiting to see if she'd stir. But her eyes remained closed and her lips parted just the tiniest bit.

Reaching down, he lightly traced a finger over her satiny cheek. His chest tightened and tenderness like he'd never felt for another woman seeped through him.

"How did you do it," he asked softly. "How did you manage to work yourself into my heart in just a handful of days?"

Ellie didn't move, and there was no flickering of her eyelids. She was solidly out.

With a sigh, Tyson rolled over and off the bed. His bare feet made no sound as he left the bedroom to wander around the house.

The Bakemans tended to be gone more than they were here. At least since Roddy Bakeman had retired. He and his wife had been bitten pretty hard by the travel bug.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he wandered the living room, glancing at the paintings that hung on the wall. As he approached the kitchen, the familiar sound of electronic humming broke the silence in the house.

He walked purposely into the kitchen and toward the computer tucked away in the corner.

Though the monitor was off, it seemed Ellie had forgotten to shut it down. Hmm, maybe he'd check his email since he hadn't all weekend.

Tyson sat down at the computer and pushed the monitor button. It hummed, flickering with light, before the screen came to life.

Jesus, this was an old computer. He moved to type in his email server, when his gaze caught on the page Ellie had left up.

His gaze scanned the headline of the *Chicago Tribune* article that was up.

*Trial to begin next week for Chicago man accused of drug trafficking.*

Tyson's brows furrowed and he made a small noise of interest. It was always possible that Ellie just liked to keep up on the news from the city she used to live in.

He kept reading. Scanning the article until he'd finished. But then his gut clenched. There was a key witness missing.

Glancing down the hall to where she slept, he couldn't shake the sense that whatever Ellie was hiding also scared the hell out of her.

It was a lead. Probably a false one, but he'd be stupid not to check it out.

Easing out of the chair, he moved silently back into the bedroom, determined to keep her sleeping. He didn't want to risk her overhearing what he was about to do.

He found his jeans on the floor and grabbed his cell phone out of them, before moving stealthily back into the kitchen.

Dialing the station, he waited for the twenty-something working the graveyard shift to answer.

"Hey, Eve," he said quietly when she picked up. "It's Sheriff Wyatt. I need you to check something out for me."

"Hi, Sheriff! You're up late. Sure, no problem. What do you need?"

"I need you to make some phone calls, do some Internet searches on a trial going on in Chicago. Any info on the trial and a missing witness."

"I can do that. It's dead as a doornail this time of night. It'll give me something to do," she said cheerfully. "All right, I've got the computer up. All I need is the details..."

The screaming of the seagulls woke Ellie. Her eyes snapped open and she lay still, letting herself take a few deep breaths as she gained her surroundings again.

A moment later, she rolled over, but her excitement faded as she noted the empty bed beside her. Though a dent remained in the pillow, Tyson was gone.

She pressed her hand against his side of the bed and felt the cool sheets. And apparently he'd left a while ago.

With a sigh, she scampered out of bed and stretched, easing the kinks out of her body. Her gaze fell on the alarm clock and her eyes widened.

Holy crap! Eight in the morning? She never slept this late! Then again, she'd never had an evening like the one she and Tyson had shared last night.

She wandered into the kitchen and found the note on the counter. She grabbed it and scanned it. Ah, he'd had to work this morning, but she'd better be ready to see him tonight. And clothing was discouraged.

Her lips twitched into a smile and she headed to the fridge, pulling it open and staring inside. Her stomach growled as she debated what to eat for breakfast.

As she stared, she became aware of the humming of the computer in the corner. Thoughts hit her at once. She'd left it on. She'd left the article open. What if Tyson had read it?



Shutting the fridge again, Ellie moved slowly over to the computer, her breath held. When she reached it, she drew in a relieved gasp of air to see the monitor was still off. She turned it back on, and stared at the *Chicago Tribune* article that sat exactly as she'd left it.

## Chapter Twelve

"I'm so glad you came in!"

Ellie smiled up at Kate, who was fixing her an iced Americano, and then licked a bit of cream cheese frosting from her finger.

"This cinnamon roll is to die for. And what can I say? You hooked me with that éclair the other day, Kate. I woke up and my first thoughts were of your shop."

Well, maybe after that whole computer freak out thing. Uneasy that she'd left the website up in the first place, and not wanting to risk Tyson discovering it later, she'd shut down the computer.

Then, after a quick shower and throwing on some clothes, she'd headed into town. Breakfast at Kate's Cakes had sounded like a good distraction to get her through the Monday.

Kate carried the iced Americano to the table and gave a mischievous grin. "Those were really your very first thoughts?"

Accepting the drink, Ellie felt her cheeks warm a bit and she cleared her throat. "All right, maybe they were my second...or third."

"Hmm, thought so." Kate sat down across from her and her smile widened. "I've gotta say, I've *never* seen him like this."

Ellie's pulse quickened and she was pretty sure she knew exactly who Kate was referring to, but still asked, "Who?"

"Sheriff Smiley—I call him that because he's always smiling. And Tyson Wyatt's been smiling even more since you came to town. He's fallen for you, girl. Hook, line and sinker."

If Ellie's pulse had been fast before, it was breaking all kinds of records now.

"I don't think he's fallen for me," she said carefully, though she couldn't say the same for herself. "I think it's just that..."

"The sex is good?"

Okay, now she *knew* her face was red.

“Don’t answer that, I was way out of line.” Kate grimaced and leaned back in her chair. “So, what have you guys been up to?”

Though part of her wanted to declare just how great the sex had been—to confide in a woman with whom she was already building a friendship, Ellie went with the topic change instead.

“Hung out and relaxed yesterday. Saturday, after stopping by here, we walked around town, explored the beach, and then went to Tyson’s parents’ house for a barbeque.”

“Wait a minute.” Kate’s eyes widened and she leaned forward. “You got invited to the *Wyatts’* barbeque? Wow, Ellie, I’m so impressed.”

Ellie gave a nervous laugh. “It was just a barbeque.”

“Oh no. It’s not just *a* barbeque. It’s the *monthly Wyatts’* barbeque. You’ve got to have Wyatt blood in your veins or be damn near engaged to a Wyatt to get invited.”

*Damn near engaged to a Wyatt?* Ellie’s throat dried out and her head felt light. She lifted her cinnamon roll for another bite, and her hand wasn’t as steady now.

“You just don’t understand, Ellie,” Kate continued earnestly. “The Wyatts are like our town’s version of royalty.”

Actually, she had gotten that impression a little. But it appeared the town folk took it pretty seriously. How had she not realized getting invited to Tyson’s family barbeque was such a big deal? Well, she’d realized it was a big deal because she’d been invited to meet *his family*, but she didn’t realize it was like the equivalent to getting into Buckingham Palace.

Kate slapped the table and shook her head. “Seriously, Ellie, there isn’t a girl in town who hasn’t tried to snag one of the Wyatt men.”

“Except for you of course.” Ellie couldn’t resist teasing, her amusement returning.

But clearly it had been the wrong thing to say when Kate pulled back, her expression clouding over.

“Don’t worry,” Kate said, her voice quieting as she shifted her gaze. “It’s never been Tyson.”

Ellie blinked in dismay. *What? Really?*

“Seriously? Todd? Trevor? One of the elusive cousins I’ve heard about?”

Kate’s lips remained pressed together, her expression a bit sad and reflective. Ellie didn’t think she was going to answer and realized she probably shouldn’t have even asked.

“Todd.”

The quiet confession had Ellie's eyes widening. Todd, the firefighter who was known to have seen more action with women than fires. And that was a direct quote from Tyson.

"Has he...have you guys ever...?"

"No. Oh, God, no." Kate rolled her eyes. "Todd doesn't even know I'm alive that way. If anything, I give him the little sister vibe."

Ellie took another sip of her iced Americano and eyed the other woman curiously. Kate might not be society's definition of sexy or beautiful, but she was cute and curvy, and funny as hell. Probably mid-twenties, if that. She was the kind of girl who slipped under the radar, but who some guy would eventually discover and realize how damn lucky he was.

"Maybe you should ask him out?" Ellie finally suggested.

Kate let out a short laugh, her expression incredulous. "Umm, I'll pass. I can think of plenty of other ways to humiliate myself, thank you very much."

Ellie was trying to think of how she could convince Kate to at least try, when the door opened and another customer came in.

"Be back in a minute, Ellie. You enjoy your breakfast."

Watching Kate go deal with the customer, Ellie's thoughts returned to last night.

Memories of Tyson and their two days of hot lovemaking flickered through her mind. And, just like that, her body was alive with need again. Jeez, just thinking about him could make her nerves all jittery. It was like an addiction withdrawal...only her poison was the town's sheriff.

Sighing, she tore off another piece of cinnamon roll and popped it into her mouth.

Maybe he'd get off work early...

Tyson put the brakes on in his truck, turned off the ignition and exhaled a long breath, staring hard at the Bakemans' house.

Looking in the window, he could see Ellie doing some yoga positions in the living room.

Since this afternoon, his stomach had felt like there'd been a brick in it. Ever since he'd walked into the station and found Eve's report on his desk.

He closed his eyes, seeing again in his head the report that had detailed the Chicago drug trafficking trial. And, through some web searches and social networks, Eve had also managed to dig up some information on the missing key witness.

Eleanor Owens.

A twenty-six-year-old yoga instructor from Chicago, the ex-girlfriend of the defendant. And currently MIA.

Bitterness sent bile rising into his throat and he shook his head. Damn it, he didn't *want* it to be true. Didn't want to think that the woman he'd slept with last night, the woman who'd crawled into his heart and set up real estate, had been lying to him.

Shit, had *anything* she said been the truth? A fucking waitress in Brooklyn?

Right now, he only had some pretty damning similarities adding up that Ellie was Eleanor, but he'd get the proof.

After reaching for the handle on his door, Tyson pushed it open and stepped out of his truck. He strode up the porch and to the front door, knocking once before opening it.

Ellie, bent over in the most fucking erotic pose he'd ever seen, looked at him from between her legs and smiled.

"Hey there. I'm just finishing up."

"Take your time. I'll just sit down," he said, folding himself onto the sofa, "and enjoy the view."

She gave a soft laugh and slid her body into another weird pose. Hell, he didn't understand the yoga stuff, but knew the chicks seemed to dig it. Some of the local gals even drove an hour away to take a class in the neighboring town.

Watching Ellie with her hands and knees on the floor, her back arched, Tyson's cock jerked. Damn, he wanted her again. Which made no sense. Why he could want a woman who could look him straight in the eye and lie without batting a lash.

"Okay, maybe you'd better not watch me," she muttered. "I can't think. You're getting me all hot staring at me like that."

"You can't see me watching you."

"I can feel it."

"Mmm. All hot, huh?" His blood pounded in a metronome of need. Everything primal rose to the surface inside him. He shouldn't want her, and he could tell himself again and again that he didn't. But damn it, he did. And despite his *don't touch her* buzzer going off at full volume, he suddenly found himself reaching for his belt buckle.

She must've heard the rasp of his belt through the denim of his belt loops, because she twisted her head and glanced at him over her shoulders.

Ellie's eyes widened and he heard the swift breath she caught.

"What do you think you're doing?" she asked unsteadily, and began to move into a new pose.

"Stop. Don't move," he ordered and stood up, pushing his jeans and briefs to the floor after grabbing a condom from the pocket. "I want you just like this."

It was easier if he didn't have to look into her eyes and think about how she'd lied to him. Having her this way meant he could focus on just the moment, and how damn good it would feel to be inside her.

A shudder ripped through her body, but she didn't move. "Tyson, I'm not quite done."

"No, you're not," he murmured and came to kneel behind her. "In fact, you're just starting, sweetheart."

He hooked his fingers into the waistband of her yoga pants and panties, tugging them down, baring her ass as they fell to her knees.

"Damn." His voice turned husky as he caressed one firm globe. "You look so hot like this."

"Tyson," she protested weakly. "I'm all sweaty."

"I like it." He moved his hand lower, to the cleft of her pussy that lay just below her ass, and pushed a finger through her folds to rub her clit.

A tremble rocked her body and she sighed, pushing back against his hand. He rubbed her steadily, thinking about nothing except making her nice and wet, ready to accept his dick.

He plunged a finger into her channel a minute later and found it creamy and welcoming.

"I want you now," he muttered.

"Yes."

"Fast."

"Yes."

He sheathed himself with the condom, gripped her hips and then plunged into her from behind.

"Jesus." He gasped as her walls clenched around his cock, so hot and wet.

"Tyson. Oh, God. Oh, God. Yes."

Blinded by lust and lingering anger from her lies, Tyson tightened his grip on her hips and pounded into her. Hard. Fast. Letting his turbulent emotions show through in the way that he fucked her relentlessly.

Ellie's moans turned guttural and she pressed backward to meet his thrusts, bringing him deeper with each penetration.

Knowing he wasn't going to last very long, but wanting her to explode with him, he reached around to find her clit again. He pinched and rubbed, heard her cry of pleasure right before she clamped around him. Clenching and unclenching.

Her hoarse cry of his name sent him over the edge. His mind exploded with light and his knees trembled as he came hard. The roar that left his chest sounded almost animalistic.

She fell forward, lying on her folded arms with her ass still in the air and him buried deep inside her.

When his mind cleared, Tyson slid from her and closed his eyes. Disbelief and anger slid through him again. Jesus. He'd lost all control. Not an ounce had remained as he'd taken her.

He'd come here with a purpose to find out the truth, but then he'd walked in the door and his priorities had changed.

His jaw clenched and he shook his head. Well, now that he was done thinking with his dick, he would get the answers he'd come for.

"I should shower," Ellie said weakly, her heart still pounding and her body sweaty from yoga and making love. Though, this time, their joining had been hard, fast, almost angry. Even still, it had been incredible.

She tried to wiggle out from under Tyson, but gasped in shock as he flipped her onto her back. The breath rushed from her chest as he moved to kneel over her, straddling her waist.

"You're ready for more...?" she started to joke, but then saw the hard line of his jaw and the anger in his eyes. A frisson of unease slid through her, premonition tickling in her gut. "Tyson?"

"Tell me your name again."

## Chapter Thirteen

Her name? Oh God. Why was he asking, unless...

"Elinamifia Owens."

His flinty gaze narrowed. "Try again."

Her throat went tight and her heart smashed into her ribcage. She ran her tongue over her bottom lip and drew in an unsteady breath.

"What do you mean? That's my name—"

"Then let's go find your purse, Ellie, seeing that I never checked your ID that first day we met." He was off her in an instant, and striding across the room.

Ellie was on her feet, fumbling to pull up her pants as she stumbled after him, her chest tight with fear.

"Tyson, wait—"

But by the time she entered the kitchen, he was already swinging her satchel purse around two fingers.

She went to snatch it, but he lifted it above her head.

"*Your name*," he ground out, his gaze flashing with irritation. "And don't even think of lying to me this time."

It was right there in her purse, in her wallet. The driver's license that would confirm what he already knew. For a moment, she contemplated turning and running like hell out of the house. Try to disappear again, and just hide for the next week.

"You already know my name," she finally whispered.

"I want to hear you say it."

"Eleanor Owens."

"And Elinamifia is just some person's identity you stole?"

"Elinamifia is my cousin!" she shouted, her cheeks heating with frustration. "You don't understand, Tyson—"

"I understand there's a bench warrant out for your arrest."

Ellie's hands fell to her sides and the blood rushed from her head. She reached for the counter when her knees threatened to buckle. "What did you say?"



"You heard me, Ellie." He shook his head and thrust a hand through his hair. "Instead of screwing you the minute I walked in the door, I should've been arresting your ass."

A few heartbeats went by. "And are you going to arrest me now?"

She watched Tyson, saw the tic in his jaw as he stared down at her.

"I asked you to trust me, Ellie. Multiple times."

"I know."

"And you didn't." Accusation shone in his gaze now.

"I *couldn't*. I can't trust anyone. You still don't understand, Tyson." Tears flooded her eyes and she cursed herself. She was not the type to cry, not even when James had beaten her.

"Damn it, I do understand, Ellie." And then the tone of his voice shifted, gentled. "I haven't always been a small-town sheriff, sweetheart. I was a cop in Seattle for a while, too. I've testified in numerous trials, myself. I've seen the kind of fear that can make a witness walk around puking for days before taking the stand."

"You...you worked in Seattle?"

He sighed and took a step toward her, setting down her purse as he moved to cup her shoulders. She blinked the tears from her eyes, the tension in her body dissipating at the massaging of Tyson's hands.

"For five years. I was young, eager for action and adventure. I got it in spades." He shrugged. "But then I realized what I'd given up. How much I loved and missed Wyattville and its people. I came home two years ago, deciding it was time to put down some roots for good, find a girl and start a family."

"Two years ago? And you're still not married," she said, and then her lips twitched. "Unless there's something you'd like to tell me?"

"No, I'm not married," he said with a soft laugh. "I just never met anyone I could fall in love with." His gaze lifted to hers. "Until recently."

Ellie's heart tripped and then sped up, her body tingled and her head grew light. Was he saying...?

"I want to help you, Ellie. I'm *going* to help you."

Her mind slipped away from romantic, happy thoughts, and right back to her current situation, and how utterly hopeless it was. "I don't see how you possibly can."

"Let me deal with that. Go take your shower and when you get out, things might look a little brighter."

She bit back a humorless laugh and tried to pull away, but Tyson's grip tightened on her shoulders.

"And don't do anything stupid, Ellie," he warned softly, rubbing his thumb over her collarbone. "Cause if you run, I'll follow you. And then I'll have no choice but to arrest you."

How the hell *could* she run? She didn't even have a car here—she'd taken a taxi into town.

"I won't run," she said flatly, a bit numb now.

"Do you trust me, Ellie?"

She started to nod automatically and then hesitated. She didn't want there to be any more lies. When she answered his question, it would be the truth.

Ellie lifted her head to look at him again, searching his face and her heart for the answer. Some of the heaviness lifted as she replied, "Yes, Tyson. I do."

"Good." Relief flickered in his gaze and then he lowered his head, before brushing a light kiss across her lips. "Go get that shower, sweetheart."

With a sigh, she nodded and headed to the bathroom.

Tyson stared out the window of the Bakemans' house and his pulse jumped when he saw the red convertible pull up the drive.

She was here.

Striding from the kitchen, he went to open the front door, walking onto the porch to greet Megan as she climbed out of her car, carrying her laptop case.

"Megan," he called out in greeting, and grinned as he strode down the steps to meet her.

The tall redhead looked gorgeous as usual, as she smiled back and slid into his embrace.

"How've you been, Tyson?" she asked quietly.

He kissed her cheek and stepped back. "Been pretty good."

"That's what I'm hearing. You fell in love or something? It's about time, Sheriff."

He laughed, holding nothing but affection for the woman who had almost become his sister-in-law. Again, he had to wonder what had happened between Trevor and Megan to make things end so abruptly.

"So, where is she?" Megan asked, taking a step back and smoothing down the silk tank top she wore over her slender frame.

"In the shower. I owe you, Meg. Whatever the cost, I'll cover it."

"We'll see, Tyson, it may be pro bono. This could be your future wife we're talking about."

He laughed, even as his blood quickened. "Easy, Megan, it's only been a few days."

"Sometimes that's all it takes to know when you've found the one." Her smile remained, but he didn't miss the sadness that flickered in her eyes. "Anyway, invite me in already, I'm dying for a cup of coffee."

"Let's hope she has some. Ellie's kind of a health nut." He pushed open the door and waved Megan inside.

Fortunately, he found some coffee in the freezer and soon had a pot brewing.

By the time Ellie walked into the kitchen, hair still damp, and dressed in another sundress, he and Megan were deep in discussion at the table.

"Oh." Ellie's eyes widened and she stumbled to a halt.

Tyson pushed back his chair and came to his feet. "Ellie, I want you to meet Megan Asher. Megan's a family friend and an attorney who's going to be able to advise you. Megan, this is Eleanor Owens."

Megan stretched a hand across the table and shook Ellie's hand. "Nice to meet you, Eleanor."

"Please, call me Ellie," Ellie replied and sat down at another empty chair at the table. "I...thank you for coming over. I don't..."

"Ellie, I'm only here to help you. But to do that, I'm going to need you to fill me in on everything that's going on and then we'll see what can be done," Megan said gently.

"Okay. I'll...try." Ellie cast Tyson a furtive glance. "Can you grab me a cup of coffee, too? I think I'm going to need it."

"Sure. Cream or sugar?"

"Black."

Tyson nodded and pushed to his feet, rubbing her back encouragingly as he passed her on his way to the coffee pot. Damn, he really hoped Ellie opened up to Megan. They needed to find out how much trouble she was in and what could be done to avoid it.

"So, Tyson told me a bit about what's going on, but I'd love you to elaborate. You were called to testify in a trial in Chicago?" Megan began and flipped open her laptop.

"Yes. I was sent a subpoena last week." Ellie was silent for a moment before she nodded. "My ex-boyfriend is being charged with drug trafficking. The prosecution tracked me down and they want me to testify."

Megan nodded and began typing. "And since you're...*vacationing* in Wyattville, I'm guessing you weren't thrilled with the notion of testifying?"

"I can't do it," Ellie's voice dropped in volume, fear lacing her words.

Tyson, returning with a mug of coffee, caught Megan's gaze above Ellie's head. He guessed she suspected the same thing she did, that Ellie was running scared.

He set the coffee down on the table and then pulled his chair closer to hers.

"Are you afraid to testify, Ellie?" Megan asked.

"Of course." Ellie gave a sharp laugh as she reached for her coffee. "I'd be stupid not to be."

Tyson placed a hand on her leg. "What makes you say that?"

Ellie's hand trembled as she took a sip of coffee and then set the mug down. "Because it's all true. James was dealing heroin. And he had some pretty high-profile clients."

"And you can prove this?" Megan prodded.

"We were together for a year," she said distantly, her fingers drifting up to touch the small scar on her cheek he'd been wondering about. "He thought I was his soul mate—even if he smacked me around a bit. And though he didn't usually talk business in front of me, sometimes it was like I was invisible, and he'd do it."

The muscles in Tyson's body went rigid, fury exploding from his gut and spreading with his pounding blood. "He hit you, Ellie? And you stayed?"

Ellie glanced over at him, genuine surprise on her face. "Of course I stayed."

"Why?" Now it was his turn to be stunned.

"Because it was easier to stay than to try to leave him." She shook her head, looking past him now and out the kitchen window. "It was only when he got arrested eight months ago that I was essentially freed. And, yes, I realize how ridiculous that sounds."

"It doesn't sound ridiculous. And I'm so sorry, Ellie," Megan said, her tone and expression sympathetic. "What happened to you isn't uncommon. Many women don't leave an unhealthy relationship because they're afraid of the reprisal."

"Thank you." Ellie gave a weak smile, but seemed to really appreciate Megan's comments.

Tyson stood up and paced the room, telling himself to calm down. That it was pretty much impossible to go beat the shit out a guy who was already in jail.

"Tyson," Megan said suddenly and glanced up at him, giving him a warning glance. "Why don't you go grab us some lunch? We're probably going to be here for a good portion of the day."

He hesitated, but realized Megan was probably right. Besides, Ellie might feel more comfortable with Megan if he wasn't standing over her looking like he was going to put his fist through the wall.

"All right," he muttered. "What do you gals want to eat?"

"Anything easy," Megan replied. "Pizza works."

Ellie didn't reply, and he knew food was the last thing on her mind.

"Pizza it is." He dropped a kiss on the top of Ellie's head. "You're doing great, sweetheart. Be back soon."

When Tyson walked out the door, Ellie let out the breath she'd been holding. While part of her wanted to beg him to come back, to hold her hand through this, another part of her was relieved he'd gone. Relieved he wouldn't have to hear any more details about her sketchy past with James Mahoney. It was bad enough that he'd learned what a damn coward she was.

"Ellie," Megan began again. "Besides hearing James talk about the drug trafficking, did you ever see anything that could implicate him?"

"I've seen him in action."

Megan nodded, seeming completely unfazed as she typed away. "Did you see money exchange hands? Drugs?"

"Both. He was pretty discreet about it, but I started to suspect things early on. When I confronted him about it...he hit me." Fear lanced down her spine and she shuddered. "I learned to keep my mouth shut after that. I was too scared."

"Did you ever have thoughts about going to the police?"

"Of course. Until I realized they were working with him."

Megan glanced up sharply, her mouth thinning. "You have proof of this?"

"Yes. Well, there's only one I'm aware of. But I've seen him talking to James on multiple occasions. And, after I got subpoenaed, he threatened me."

"A Chicago police officer threatened you?" Megan repeated and then shook her head, fingers flying across her laptop. "Jesus, girl, no wonder you ran."

"So, what happens now?"

Megan pushed her chair back and crossed one leg over another. "Now I request permission from the court to see if I can appear as your attorney." She hesitated. "Look, Ellie, I don't live in Chicago, I'm not licensed to practice in that jurisdiction, but I can make a motion for *admission pro hac vice* that would allow me to get around this. So, if we get that motion granted, I'll see what can be done about your warrant."

Just the word warrant had the ability to make Ellie's knees shake. "Right...God, I feel like such a criminal."

"You were scared and you ran. We're going to fix it. With what you've just told me about being threatened by a dirty cop and your understandable fear, hopefully we'll be able to arrange for you to turn yourself in without being arrested."

Ellie swallowed hard. "Would I still have to testify?"

Megan stared at her for a moment, compassion in her gaze. "Of course, Ellie, you're a key witness in this trial. If you don't testify, James could walk. And now you're likely going to be testifying against this officer as well."

"Of course. You're right. You're totally right." Ellie nodded and stood up, suddenly nauseous. "Sorry. I've just never let myself face the possibility of *actually testifying*."

"I understand. Look, let me make some phone calls. Go relax and try not to think about it too much."

Ellie gave a wan smile and left the kitchen, her immediate plans not to think about it, but to get sick.

## Chapter Fourteen

Ellie walked into their hotel room, her heart pounding a mile a minute. But then, it had been that way since they'd landed at O'Hare over an hour ago.

"How are you holding up?" Tyson asked, closing the door behind them.

"Exhausted. Mentally, at least. I think I want to just eat and then pass out," she said, glancing around the room they'd be holed up in until tomorrow.

The past couple of days had been a blur of activity. Megan getting the motion granted to serve as her attorney and having the arrest warrant removed in exchange for Ellie agreeing to testify. Then Tyson buying airline tickets and getting them all on a flight to Chicago two days later.

After traveling all morning, they had finally arrived in Chicago. Only after dropping by to meet briefly with the prosecutor had they checked into a hotel. Megan had a room down the hall, and she and Tyson were sharing one. They'd agreed to hang out in the hotel, to keep a low profile, until after her testimony.

Tyson set down their bags and crossed the floor to where she stood, cupping her shoulders and pulling her close.

"Why don't I order us some room service and then we can have some time in bed watching television?"

"I'd like that," she finally murmured and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing her face to his shoulder. "Or maybe you could just hold me after dinner."

He kissed the top of her head and murmured, "You know I will, sweetheart. Now, what do you want to eat?"

"Something light. I'm not sure I can hold down much...too nervous."

"All right." He set her aside and moved to the desk in the corner, picking up the binder on top. "Let's see what they've got room service wise."

Still half out of it with exhaustion, Ellie walked to the bed and pulled back the covers, climbing in and collapsing against the pillows.

"How about a chicken Caesar salad? And we split some garlic bread?"

Face still buried against the pillow, she mumbled, "Sure. Sounds good."

Tyson laughed softly and then she heard him pick up the phone and order their food. A moment later, the bed dipped as he sat down.

When he smoothed a hand down her back, she sighed and rolled over to face him. He lay beside her, his elbow on the bed and his head propped up on his hand.

"You're amazing, you know that?" she asked softly. "You. Megan. Your family. You didn't have to help me. And yet you've all joined in to help me through this. I'm completely blown away. Humbled."

"We couldn't walk away. For me, it wasn't even an option." He pushed a strand of hair off her head. "And Megan is just an incredible chick."

"Is Megan the same Megan your mom was referring to at the barbeque? Trevor's ex?"

"Yeah. She is."

"Wow. That's sad. She's pretty awesome, and your brother seems great...if a bit haunted."

"Hmm. Interesting word choice for Trevor, but it kind of fits." Tyson frowned and then sighed, glancing toward the bathroom. "I'm going to take a shower before the food gets here."

"All right."

Tyson leaned down and pressed a soft, lingering kiss to her mouth, before climbing off the bed.

"Don't fall asleep. You'll need to answer the door when the food comes if I'm not out."

"Not going to fall asleep," she mumbled, but closed her eyes the moment he shut the bathroom door.

She must've drifted, because she jerked upright when a knock came at the door and someone called out from the other side. Hearing Tyson still in the shower, she scrambled off the bed, blinking away her disorientation and rushed to the door.

"Hang on."

She unlocked the door and then began to pull it open. Wait, the person had yelled *housekeeping*, not *room service*.

The door shoved inward and she stumbled back from the sheer force. Her stomach hit the floor as she realized the man who stepped inside the room was definitely not a hotel employee.

"Thought I warned you keep your mouth shut," Officer Maliano muttered quietly and withdrew a gun from the waist of his pants.



She wanted to scream for Tyson, but her gaze was locked on the gun and her throat had gone tight.

The dirty cop strode toward her and wrapped his fingers around her neck, shoving her hard against the wall. She clawed at his hand, her ability to breathe completely gone.

“You trying to be all brave and honorable, Eleanor?” he sneered. “Going to testify tomorrow? I don’t think so. James wouldn’t like that. I don’t like that. You show up in that courtroom and you’re a dead bitch.”

He pressed the gun to her head and she closed her eyes, her body shaking violently as she grew dizzy from lack of oxygen.

“Got that? You’re *dead*. There are plenty of people who will do it. And you’ll suffer first. Maybe I’ll bring in some friends to take turns with you. You’ll be so goddamn horrified, you’ll beg me to kill you.”

Stars danced behind her closed lids and her effort to pry his hand away grew weaker as her fingers went numb.

She heard the shower turn off and Lionel glanced toward the bathroom, eyes narrowing.

His attention snapped back to her, as he demanded softly, “Do you *fucking understand me?*”

She nodded, anything to make him let her go. And then he did. She dropped to the floor in a dead weight, sucking in air greedily.

His retreating footsteps sounded, followed by the soft click of the door shutting.

Officer Maliano had gone as quickly as he came.

Tyson had just pulled on his boxer shorts when he heard a thud. The hairs on the back of his neck rose and unease shot down his spine.

He jerked open the bathroom door and immediately spotted Ellie on the ground, clutching her neck. Fear and rage exploded in him as he strode into the room, helping her to her feet.

“The cop,” she croaked and pointed to the door.

“Call 9-1-1,” Tyson snarled, grabbing his gun out of the suitcase that sat open on the bed.

Then he tore out of the room and immediately spotted the man he assumed to be Ellie’s attacker pressing the elevator button down the hall.

The man heard Tyson coming and glanced his way. Any pretense at casualness disappeared as the man sprinted past the elevator toward the stairs.

Tyson pushed himself faster, his bare feet flying over the thin carpet of the halls. Shit, anyone who spotted them would think he was nuts. Running down the hall wearing nothing but boxer shorts, gun in his hand.

The cop ahead of him pushed open the stairwell and burst through, but Tyson was just seconds behind him now.

Tyson spotted the gun tucked into the man's waistband, and knew he had no intention of using it. If he had, he would've shot Ellie in the room. No, the guy had only shown up to intimidate her into disappearing again—he was stupid, but not stupid enough to kill someone and face a murder charge.

The cop rounded the first sharp turn in the stairwell, and was almost directly parallel to him, but a floor down.

Tyson didn't think, just acted. He grabbed the rail and leapt over it, falling probably six feet before he landed on the man and sent them both sprawling to the concrete steps.

Pain sizzled through Tyson's wrist and the air was knocked violently out of him, but it only kept him down for a second. He staggered to his feet and leveled the gun at the dirty cop.

"Move and I'll shoot," he said.

But the man didn't reply and his eyes were closed. Tyson knelt down, keeping the gun trained on him, and felt for a pulse.

Still there, but it was obvious the guy was out cold. Probably hit his head on the concrete when Tyson had jumped on him.

The door at the floor above burst open.

"Tyson!" Ellie's scream reverberated in the empty stairwell.

"Down here," he called out, holding his arm just above the wrist. "Did you call for help?"

"Yes! They're on their way." She hurried down the stairs, cast a glance at the cop out cold, and then threw herself into his arms. "Oh God, I'm so glad you're okay. You shouldn't have gone after him."

Tyson pressed a kiss against her forehead, then leaned back to look her over.

"Did he hurt you?"

Her hand fluttered to her neck where he could see red marks that would doubtless turn to bruises.

"Damn it, sweetheart," he muttered fiercely and pulled her against him. "I'm so sorry."

"I wonder how he found us."

"Probably called every hotel in town until he found one of our names. Before I knew about him, I called Chicago P.D. to let them know I had you in custody." He shook his head, angry both with himself and the situation as a whole. "I thought we were being safe checking in tonight under Megan's name, but the asshole must've figured out who your attorney was too. And when a cop calls a hotel, most of the time they give out info."

"I'm just glad you're okay," she whispered, wrapping her arms tighter around his waist.

He moved his hand over her back, reassuring himself that *she* was okay. That she was here. A chill slid down his spine and a sheen of sweat broke out on his forehead.

He'd been in the bathroom when that bastard had come in. What if she'd been seriously hurt? What if the dirty cop had just decided to put a bullet in her head?

His stomach rolled and he closed his eyes briefly.

Another door slammed and the hotel security rushed up the stairs, saving him from the tormenting *what ifs*. He set Ellie aside gently and went to meet them.

The cold wood of the bench pushed against Ellie's thighs. She suppressed a shiver and listened, her head cocked, to the defense grilling the current witness behind the closed door of the courtroom.

She was next.

"I'm going to run to the bathroom," Megan said, checking her watch. "They're running behind."

The clicking of her heels sounded on the linoleum floor as she disappeared around the corner.

"You doing all right, Ellie?" Tyson asked, ceasing his pacing of the hallway to come sit next to her. "Do you still feel sick?"

"No. I feel...nothing. I think I'm numb." She sighed and slid her hand into his. "I just want this to be done with."

He squeezed his fingers around hers reassuringly. "Me too, sweetheart. Me too."

She glanced at his other hand, his sprained wrist bandaged after his fall. "How's your hand?"

"Fine. Don't even notice it with a few pain killers."

"Good." She drew in a ragged breath. "I'll have testify against Officer Maliano, too, huh?"

"Not for a few months, I'm sure. Don't think about that now. Besides, at least the jerk is in jail now."

"What if there's more like him?" she asked, voicing the fears that she'd tried to snuff out. "More people who were working for James?"

"Law enforcement doesn't look fondly on a cop who goes dirty, Ellie. Trust me. If there are more, they're trying to find them right now. And you can bet your money that Officer Maliano is not enjoying his time behind bars."

She nodded, suddenly wanting to drop the topic. They'd been awake half the night talking to the Chicago P.D. about him, and when she had finally slept, she'd relived the moment when Officer Maliano had come into the hotel room and threatened her.

The door to the courtroom swung open and a uniformed police officer carrying a notebook—he was apparently the prosecution's last witness—came striding out. He winked at her as he passed.

"Miss Owens?"

She glanced back to see the prosecutor, Robert Samuels, striding out of the courtroom. The thin Asian man, with whom she'd met briefly yesterday, clasped his hands in front of himself and smiled.

"You ready?"

Ellie nodded, though trying to force a smile in response wasn't really possible. She took a step forward and then paused.

"Wait. My lawyer is—"

"Right here," Megan called out from the end of the hall.

The prosecutor turned to look at her and Ellie noted the blatant male appreciation in his gaze before he was once again professional. It didn't surprise her anymore, all the men who looked at Megan. She was drop-dead gorgeous.

"All right," Mr. Samuels said, turning to face Ellie again. "Why don't we head in?"

Ellie nodded and followed him, reassured knowing Tyson and Megan were right behind her. She walked to the witness stand, felt every pair of eyes in the courtroom on her as she took her oath.

Her focus turned to James, sitting beside the defense attorney, and for a moment her heart seemed to stop—her whole body went cold. But then she looked beyond him and saw Tyson and Megan sitting in the first row of benches.

Tyson's gaze locked with hers and she heard his silent words of encouragement, saw how much he supported her and the confidence he had in her.

A calmness and a quiet assurance settled over her. Yes. She *would* get through this.

She sat down in the witness chair, smiled at the jury, and waited for the questioning to begin.

"You were amazing," Tyson muttered, shutting the door to their hotel room.

He cupped Ellie's face and brushed his lips over hers, backing her up toward the bed. When she hit the edge, he pushed her back onto it, following with his body.

Tyson's lips trailed kisses down her neck and to the neckline of her blouse.

"I thought I did pretty good," she agreed with a breathy laugh, delving her hands into his hair. "Think it's enough to convict him?"

He lifted his head and stared down at her. "I think you made a pretty good impression on the jury, Ellie. And, from what I understand, there were at least two heavy-hitter witnesses before you."

"It'll probably be a few more days at least before they finish up, the prosecutor said. Before the jury deliberates." She sighed and closed her eyes. "It's going to be hard not to think about it."

"I have some pretty good ideas how to distract you," Tyson murmured, slowly unfastening her buttons on her blouse with his good hand.

Her eyes darkened with anticipation. "Hey, now, that might just work."

He winked at her and then cupped her breasts. Lowering his head, he suckled her nipples through the silky bra and reveled in the cry of pleasure she made. She squirmed beneath him, before her head fell back against the pillow.

Reaching beneath her, he easily removed her bra and plucked it free from her breasts. Then he brought his mouth to her again, licking and nibbling her nipples while unfastening her skirt.

A moment later, he had removed the rest of her clothing and she lay on the bed. Ellie wrapped her leg over his hip, opening her body completely to him. And Tyson wasted no time taking advantage of it, delving his fingers into the slick folds between her thighs to bring her to a higher state of arousal.

Then he moved lower, replacing his fingers with his mouth. Following the rise and fall of her body until she was screaming out his name and clutching his hair.

Tyson put on a condom, and with the orgasm still shuddering through Ellie's body, he eased into her.

His eyes closed and he breathed out an unsteady breath. Jesus, he'd never get over the way being inside her made him feel. Feeling the strain of supporting himself with one hand, he rolled over so Ellie rode him.

Gripping her hip, he thrust up and into her. She moaned and rocked back and forth, until they were moving in unison. Joining together with such ease that made him feel like they'd been doing this with each other forever.

When he reached his release a short while later, Ellie was right there with him. They both cried out as they came.

As the powerfulness of his climax faded, the pounding of his heart corresponded with the pounding of realization in his head. He had them both booked on a return flight to Portland tomorrow, but would Ellie really fly back? Her reason for being in Wyattville no longer existed and she hadn't left anything behind besides a few clothing items. Then she'd just have to pay to fly home again eventually.

Unless...an idea took root in his head, and he wondered if he was crazy for considering it. But he had to ask. If he didn't, he'd always wonder...

## Chapter Fifteen

Ellie snuggled against him, her eyes still closed and her heart racing a mile a minute. She couldn't seem to get enough of him. His touch, his scent, being in his arms. She didn't want to move.

It felt so right. When had anything ever felt so right? When had any guy ever made her feel all giddy inside? Who else could make her feel like she could take on the world—

Her eyes snapped back open and she stilled, unable to breathe. Oh sweet Jesus. She was in love with him.

A fear that was almost stronger than that of this morning's rushed through her. How had it happened so fast? How had she *let* it happen?

"So, did you miss it?"

"Miss what?" she asked, trying to keep her voice normal, but it still came out kind of high pitched.

"Chicago."

*Relax, Ellie. Just relax. It's a normal question, just focus and answer it.* "Uh, well, considering I was only gone a week or so, not really."

"What about your friends? Family?"

*See, this wasn't too bad.* "My parents live in Michigan now. Most of my friends I'm not really close to anymore. They're married, have children, or they've moved on. Physically and metaphorically speaking."

Tyson smoothed a hand down her back, silent for a moment. And then he asked softly, "Think you'd miss them more if you moved to Wyattville?"

Ellie blinked. Had she heard him wrong? Hope clung in every inch of her being as she looked up at him.

"What are you asking, Tyson?"

His expression flickered between earnest and uncomfortable. "Well, I realize we've only known each other a short time, and you'd probably think I was crazy if I suggested

getting married. But maybe you would consider moving out to the west coast? You could teach yoga in town. I know this great place..."

She gave the tiniest shake of her head and whispered, "I wouldn't."

Disappointment flashed across his face and he nodded. "Yeah, I suppose that's a hell of a lot to ask."

"No. I mean wouldn't think you were crazy for suggesting marriage." It was gambling on a comment he'd loosely thrown out there, but right now, it was worth the risk. "I would love to move to Wyattville. I love the people, the town, and most of all... I love you, Tyson."

Tyson's gaze searched hers and then that familiar grin she'd grown to love sprawled across his face. "And how long have you known this, sweetheart?"

"Um, for about two minutes."

He laughed and rolled her under him again, pressing a solid kiss against her mouth.

"Then I forgive you for not telling me earlier," he said and caressed her cheek. "And I claim bragging rights for having realized I'm in love with *you* about three days earlier."

Her heart swelled with love and she blinked away tears. "Seriously?"

His humor faded and he nuzzled her neck. "Seriously, Ellie. You've only been in my life a short time, but I just can't imagine you out of it now."

"You don't have to." She clung to him, not fighting the tears this time. "Because wherever you are, that's where I want to be."

He groaned softly and then kissed her again, and she gave herself over. To the passion. To the possibilities. And to their future...

Megan disconnected her cell phone call and smiled, slipping it back into her purse. Maybe she should've just left a message for Tyson and Ellie, but the idea of delivering the news in person would be more exciting. James Mahoney had just been found guilty by the jury.

And what better way to celebrate than with cupcakes from Kate's Cakes?

The two lovebirds had been busy getting Ellie moved cross country and into Tyson's house and planning a wedding, it sounded like.

Megan's heels clicked on the paved sidewalk of Main Street as she headed back to her car, adjusting the box of cupcakes in her hands.

"Megan?"



She stopped walking and closed her eyes, tension radiating through her body at the sound of his voice. *For fuck's sake.* Would she ever be able to hear it without getting sucked into the past?

Forcing a polite smile onto her face, she opened her eyes and turned to face Trevor.

"Hi, Trevor."

He stood tall and straight, every bit the soldier with the poker face and stiff nod he greeted her with. His eyes, once full of heat and passion for her, were void of any emotion.

"I just wanted to thank you for what you did for Tyson and his fiancée."

It was amazing he didn't follow it up with a *ma'am*. Her heart twisted and she forced herself to swallow the bitterness in her throat.

"No problem. Your family means a lot to me." She had to leave. If she stood here one more minute, she'd do something foolish—like cry. Or throw a cupcake at him. "I don't mean to be rude, but I'm on my way somewhere. It was good to see you again."

She turned away, hoping he'd stop her. But there was nothing but the sound of her footsteps until she reached her car.

*You need to move on, Megan. It's obvious he has. Find someone new.*

Lifting her head higher, she opened the door to her convertible and climbed in, vowing to do just that.

Pushing Trevor Wyatt from her head, she pulled the car away from the curb.

It was time to go deliver the good news to the soon-to-be newlyweds.

## About the Author

To learn more about Shelli Stevens, please visit [www.shellistevens.com](http://www.shellistevens.com) Send an email to Shelli at [shellistevens.com](mailto:shellistevens.com) or join her newsletter at <http://www.shellistevens.com/contact/>.

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*She'll make him finish what he started—if they live through the night.*

## Alaskan Heat

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Framed and on the run, FBI agent Joe “Hawk” Hawkins has only one chance to clear his name: hit the road for Eagle, Alaska. Things can’t get much worse, until a woman from his past steps into his path. Sophie’s a brilliant statistician, pissed off about their disastrous one night stand—and offering him a deal.

This is Sophie’s first field assignment, and the fact that it involves Hawk doesn’t make it any easier. She’s never forgotten or forgiven the night Hawk found his way to her bed and left her wanting more. Now she’s on a double mission to make Hawk finish what he started, and get them both to Eagle alive.

The long Alaska Highway stretches before them, and long nights of sexual fireworks that rival the Northern Lights. Caution turns to trust, and then to a love neither of them bargained for.

With two rogue agents in hot pursuit, though, the end of the road may be closer than they think...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Alaskan Heat:*

Sophie forced a casual smile even though her body thrummed with the need to leap on Hawk. She didn’t want foreplay. Already the insides of her thighs were wet and sticky. She cleared her throat and reached for the robe hanging on the outside hook of the bathroom door. “Sounds tempting. As soon as I get back.”

The man of her dreams sat up and bumped his skull again. “Damn it,” he muttered. “Where are you going?”

Two steps brought her to the door. “To put Rueger in the cab for the night. Be right back.”

Once outside, Sophie breathed in the nippy air. More than likely there’d be a frost tomorrow morning. Unlocking the truck, she fished around the seat until her hand curled around her cell. The hard, packed gravel hid the sound of her footsteps as she sprinted toward the woods. As soon as she’d run far enough for privacy, she punched five on the speed dial.

“Clements here.”

“It’s Sophie.”

“Sophie, why haven’t you called? I told you—”

“Be quiet and listen. I only have a minute. Hawk’s with me. Call off your hounds.”

“What hounds?” Stan’s confusion sent a shard of fear through her.

She gripped the slim cell hard enough to break it. “Some feds stayed on our tail for several miles. I turned into a picnic area and they sped by.”

“Damn it. Has to be Blair and Reed. I had to put them on administrative leave, but I can’t restrict their movements. They’re on to us.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted?”

“Not this far from Eagle.”

Sophie whirled. The camper rocked. “Got to go.” She disconnected and slipped the phone in her robe pocket, making sure to shut it off in case Stan decided to call back. She whistled for Rueger and jogged back to the truck. “Up.” Once he jumped inside, she slammed and locked the door. Taking a deep breath, she prepared to face Hawk’s inquisition.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demanded the moment she stepped inside. He stood buck naked at the side of the bed.

More moisture lubed her thighs.

“Who’d you call?” He held up his hand. “No lies. I heard you talking.”

Christ. The man must have the ears of a wild animal. “Stan. Those weren’t his men following us.”

“Damn! Blair and Reed then.”

“Isn’t this what you wanted? A confrontation?”

Her lower belly cramped at Hawk’s face tight with lust.

“Sure is,” he purred. “But at a place and time of my choosing. There’s not much they’ll try tonight so close to the highway. You and I have unfinished business. I always pay my debts.”

Sophie trembled, imagining the pleasure she’d discover in Hawk’s bed tonight. Ever since she’d met Hawk, she’d waited for this moment. She wanted everything to be perfect. As she wiggled out of her robe, the fleece material slipped off her shoulders to pool at her feet. If only she owned a sexy, silk negligee.

Several moments passed before she realized Hawk wouldn’t make the first move. At least he’d given her the opportunity to change her mind. As if that would happen. She closed the short distance and stepped into his open arms. “This is only the first installment, you know. I’ll let you know when I’m totally satisfied.”

“You do that.” Callused fingers trailing across her nipples sent a jolt of desire to her core. Her stomach clenched when those same fingers dipped into her bellybutton only to slide lower. One finger, then two slid between her swollen folds. Reality was hotter than her imagination. She hadn’t burned with such need last Christmas. Now she had to keep her emotions under wraps. Hawk wanted hot sex, not love. She slumped and clung to his shoulders to keep from falling. Her groan came out of nowhere. “I’m on fire.” Was that her voice, hoarse with need?

“I can feel it.” Warm breath touched her skin while his tongue played with the lobe of her ear. His fingers pumped in and out of her sheath while his busy thumb made circular motions on her clit, nearly throwing her into climax.

She loved his playing, but right now she wanted release. No, she *needed* release. “Enough teasing. Fuck me.”

“Such language from the lips of a lady. I thought you wanted satisfaction? Let me do my job. Be patient. You won’t be sorry.”

Sophie squeezed her legs together, clenching her vaginal muscles on his fingers. The huge cock poking her belly didn’t lie. He, too, was fast losing control.

“Do you play with yourself, Sophie?”

The question intruded on her pleasure. “What?”

“Nights when you can’t sleep. Do you make yourself come? How do you do it? With your fingers? A vibrator?” The whispered words made her clit throb.

Unable to stand the torture, she pumped her hips on his fingers.

“Is that a yes?” He nibbled her lips, his tongue licking her mouth before pushing inside. She sucked hard.

His free hand curled around her hip, encouraging her to fuck his fingers faster and harder. “I’m going to—” He withdrew his hand, and the building climax waned. “Damn you, Hawk! Not again. I won’t let you leave me wanting more.”

“Got no intention of it.” He grasped her waist and lifted her onto the small table, pulling her butt to the very edge. “Put your hands behind you. Brace yourself,” he growled.

Hawk spread her thighs, stretching her wide. Muscle discomfort fled at the touch of his cock rubbing her clit. “I’m through playing, Sophie. I’m going to fuck you. How do you want it? Hard and fast? Slow and easy? A little at a time or all at once?”

Hawk scrutinized Sophie spread-eagled on the hard surface. She had a gorgeous body. One he’d thought about more times than he cared to remember. With her head back and her mouth slightly parted, she invited him to take what he wanted. Her body sent out rippling waves of heat. He pushed the head of his cock inside her wet opening.

The tremble in her legs fueled his self-torture. For a moment, a twinge of guilt held him back. Sophie was a good girl, not the kind who participated in sex games for the sheer pleasure. Not like him. Was she ready for sex for sex’s sake? In the game he played, emotional love had no part in the action. Pleasure and satisfaction were the end results. He should stop right now.

“Please, Hawk.” His cock swelled at the wanton tremor in her voice. “Fuck me. I can’t stand it.”

He shoved his guilt aside. “Talk dirty to me.”

Her eyes opened, and he drowned in the dazed passion of her usually alert gaze.

“What are you’re feeling? Tell me what you want. What makes you feel good?” He let go of her thighs. They stayed splayed. After one teasing pinch of her hardened nub, he cupped her breasts. He leaned forward to tongue a swollen nipple and pushed his cock deeper. So damn snug.

He quickly pulled out of her and sank to the floor and licked her clit. “Talk to me.”

Sophie gasped. "Yes! Your tongue feels so... Oh!"

Her panting voice urged him on. He tongue fucked her until he sensed her orgasm fast approaching. Grabbing her hips to stop her squirming, he blew on her opening.

"Damn you."

She yanked his hair. Despite her desperation, a perversity to let her know what kind of man he was drove him on. "What do you call your vagina? Pussy?"

"Bunny," she choked out.

Hawk chuckled and ran his tongue down the full length of her slit, sucking her clit. She lurched and flooded his mouth.

"I bet Bunny would like a big carrot."

"Stop tormenting me. Do you want me to beg?"

He came to his feet and pushed her flat on the table. Hooking his hands under her knees, he yanked her onto his aching cock. With one hard thrust, he was inside. Closing his eyes, he held her pussy tight against his pelvis. Her clenching vaginal muscles milked his cock. Like a stick of dynamite, his body was poised to explode.

He forced himself to loosen his grip. "Move, baby. Make yourself come. Hurry."

*She's dead-set against him. He's dead certain he can change her mind...*

## Position Secured

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Marienna Valdez has a cop allergy. Their cocky, superior attitudes never fail to turn her stomach. How fitting that her reward for enduring a perfectly sucky work week is a traffic ticket from one that's on the kind of overblown power trip she learned to hate when she was growing up surrounded by boys in blue.

But now she's finally home, where she prepares to take the edge off with a well-deserved self-love session. Just as she gets settled in with her favorite toys, though, what should come barreling through her bedroom door but...another cop!

SWAT team sniper Marcus Pearson doesn't need detective skills to figure out just what he's interrupted. If he can keep Marienna quiet long enough to resolve the tense situation under her bedroom window, he intends to put down his rifle and take aim at her aversion to the badge...

*Warning: This title contains one sheet-wrapped, cop-and-damsel burrito with toys on the side. Extra batteries included.*

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Position Secured:*

"Alpha confirm. Subject in custody." After a moment, he stood, one smooth movement unfolding his body. Mari yanked her hand away from her pussy, almost whimpering at the injustice. She gathered the opening of her robe in two handfuls. He removed the magazine from the rifle, then carefully took the single round from the chamber. His movements showed none of the stress she would expect to see. Each was practiced, smooth and deliberate, as if he trained a deadly weapon on people every day. Perhaps he did. He straightened and scanned the room before looking through the doorway to meet her eyes.

"Echo three to Alpha base. One witness to debrief. Echo three out."

He pulled the headset from his ear, and it dangled off his shoulder. Mari took her first good look at him facing her, and she had those damn visions from her fantasy stuck in her head.

But the man in her fantasy burned hot and wild, and this guy was cool as a slab of marble and showed just as much emotion. Maybe he was a robot. He *was* a cop after all. "I'm sorry I had to startle you, ma'am. I appreciate your assistance." His voice didn't fluctuate from the deep, even tone.

Mari nodded. "No one was hurt?"

"No. A struggle, but no shots fired." He jerked his chin toward the window. "Seems some pretty shady deals have been going on right outside your bedroom window. Probably while you were in here sleeping..." His gaze swept over the bed and fixed on her vibrator.



Heat flooded her face. Her heart, confused at the roller coaster of emotions, pounded painfully. She pressed her thighs together to quell the need flaring in her heated sex.

“You said you were in the middle of something?”

Great. He had a photographic memory. Mari blinked, bringing him back into focus. His smirk might have sent a lesser woman running for cover, but Mari saw the intrigue behind those blue eyes. She didn’t stop to think that it might just be her hormones bouncing around like fireflies in a jar. She folded her arms across her chest, lifted her chin and raised an eyebrow.

“That’s right. I’d like to get back to my...” she paused meaningfully, “*something* now, if you don’t mind.”

He walked toward her. Swaggered would be a better word. He paused at the foot of the bed and, without releasing her from his stare, he reached over and scooped Bob up off the pillows.

Holy hell. There was no way she misinterpreted that hungry look. The man almost drooled and bared his teeth like a cartoon wolf. Mari blinked again, just in case her imagination and libido were still salsa dancing in her brain.

Two more steps toward her and he lifted her vibrator to his nose and made a show of smelling the pink silicone. His eyes drifted half closed. She bit her lower lip to stifle the moan.

“I can’t tell you how sorry I am for interrupting you.” His voice dropped to an intimate pitch, and Mari released the breath she’d been holding. “If there’s any way I can make it up to you...” He stopped once their clothes brushed. The back of her head hit the wall when she lifted her chin to meet his eyes. Heat from his body surrounded her. His musky scent wafted up to her nose, surrounding her. She sucked a deep breath, indulging in that male smell. “I took an oath to protect and...to serve.” His breath fanned her face.

She watched his lips move, and licked hers. This wasn’t really happening. This way-too-gorgeous man was not in her bedroom holding her favorite toy and standing close enough to taste. She should wake up from this fantasy before she embarrassed herself. The click and ensuing hum of the vibrator close to her ear was real, though. She met his eyes again. He nodded slowly and dragged Bob’s tip along her jaw line.

“Let me.” It could have been a question, but it sounded more like a statement, or maybe an order. “Tell me it’s okay. Tell me you want this.”

She tried to think. If this really was happening, she needed to think straight. The vibrator hummed a path down her neck. He deftly slipped it beneath the fabric of her robe and farther down her chest. She let her arms drop to her sides.

“You have to understand. I get called on an assignment like today and I can’t think about anything but my target. I can’t be distracted. I can’t think about the woman who opened her door to me wearing a flimsy ass robe. I’ve got the lives of innocent people and my fellow officers to consider. I’m stressed out enough with that. I usually relieve myself afterward with a workout in the gym, followed by a solo in the shower, but I’ve never been presented with the likes of you when I’m feeling this.”

“The likes of me?” Mari surprised herself with her ability to speak clearly. His words puffed against her lips, and Mari could even taste his breath. Coffee.

“A fucking sexy as hell woman like you,” he continued, dragging her vibrating dildo around her breast. “Aroused. Naked...”

“I’m not...”

“Take this off and you will be.” He used his free hand to peel her robe off one shoulder.

Mari shut her mouth with a click. She’d been about to say she wasn’t a sexy woman, but she wasn’t a stupid one, either. She didn’t even shiver in protest when her robe slithered to the carpet to pool around her feet. Why should she? This was all a crazy dream that she’d awaken from any second now. She wasn’t really standing naked in front of a cop in her hallway.

“Tell me it’s okay,” he repeated. “I can feel the heat coming off of you. I can even smell your arousal. Let me take care of it for you. Tell me it’s okay.”

But Mari couldn’t say the words. She could barely wrap her mind around the fact that this was real, let alone say something. The vibrator teased the skin below her navel, but he wouldn’t go farther.

“Touch me,” he panted against her lips before she could answer. Her lids drifted closed in anticipation of a kiss that never came. “Please, touch me. Pull my shirt out. Let me feel your hands on me.” He simply rested his mouth against hers while he spoke.

At that point she realized her arms hung limply at her sides. She laid both hands on his stomach. Just as she thought, he was in exquisite shape. His abs tightened beneath her fingers. She indulged in the first touch of his body. Hard male. A wall of muscle and man, wrapped in this thin T-shirt. She gripped it and slid the hem from his pants. He hissed when her hands met his bare skin.

“Fuck, yeah. Tell me. Tell me it’s okay.” He planted his elbow by her ear and leaned against her, caging her to the wall.

“It’s okay,” she whispered. “I want it. I want you.”

“Goddamned beautiful...” He wasted no time in sliding the vibrator inside her. His moan blended with hers in a tuneless harmony. He didn’t move it once the vibrator was firmly seated deep in her channel. “Don’t come yet, baby. I need one thing from you first.” He didn’t continue until she lifted heavy lids to meet that electric blue stare. “Tell me your name.”

Mari’s legs almost gave out on her. Marc caught her and pressed his body against hers to hold her up against the hallway wall. She whimpered and tried to grind against the humming intrusion. He switched it off. The sudden silence drew another whine from her throat.

“Tell me.”

Mari slid her tongue along his lips. She didn’t want to talk. She wanted him to kiss her. She wanted him to quit fucking around and make her come. She moved her hands around to his back, reaching up to trace the indentation of his spine. She nipped his lower lip and squeezed her channel around the vibrator.

“Huh-uh.” He turned his head enough to press his cheek against hers. “Tell me your name or I walk out right now.”

He wouldn’t dare. “Please...does it really matter?” She scraped her fingers back down and around to his abdomen, until she held the waistband of his pants and belt in a tight grip.

“Yes. It matters. What’s your name, sweetheart? I want to shout it out when I come for you.”

“Oh, my God. Marienna. Marienna Elena Valdez. But you can call me—” She gasped.

He pulled out the vibrator, flicked it on, then slid it back inside with a twist. “Marienna,” he breathed, and then he kissed her.

*A wounded cop. A frightened woman. A desperate race to save a child in danger...*

## The Midnight Effect

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In a single phone call, Lily Brent's entire life—past and future—becomes foggy with confusion and danger. Her estranged sister is dead, and the body is lacking one definitive mark: a surgery scar from the kidney Lily thought she'd donated to her sister long ago.

There's more than a mystery on her hands. There's a niece she never knew she had, and a madman on her trail who's hell-bent on getting the child back.

When a beautiful woman crashes her car into his remote mountain gas station, followed closely by a man with a silencer-equipped pistol, three years of inactive duty fall away as Miles Goodwin springs into action. He saves Lily and her golden child, but nothing can save him from the painful reminder of the family he lost. Retreating to his emotional coma, however, isn't an option; they're far from safe.

There's something strange about a six-year-old girl who's never eaten a hamburger or heard of Tinkerbelle—and who seems to be the source of psychic phenomena so powerful, someone's willing to kill to get her back.

Warning: Contains heart-pounding suspense, a charm-your-socks-off kid, and a compelling romance that may inspire you to combine your DNA with someone you love!

*Enjoy the following excerpt for The Midnight Effect:*

Miles Goodwin tipped his chair back as he took a slug from his beer. Across the tree line the remainder of the day was a bloody smear on the horizon. The setting sun drifted away mockingly. *Another day and you're still here because you don't have the courage to put your revolver in your mouth.*

He smacked at a mosquito on his neck. The bugs were relentless at dusk, but this was Miles' favorite time of day. Swallowing darkness was moments away, when he wouldn't recognize each agonizing minute in the passage of time. Night was limbo in the personal hell his life had become.

It was a chore to drag himself out of bed every morning, painful to endure every endless minute. The mark of each sunset brought him one day closer to the end he longed for. Closer to the end he didn't have the courage to seek on his own. Suicide was a sin, and if there was a sweet hereafter, he wouldn't join Sara and Michelle there if he took his own life.

The roar of an engine pulled his attention to the dark tunnel of Northern pine where the highway wound out of sight. The front legs of his chair fell onto the porch with a *thunk*. He rarely saw a customer at his little gas station after six. By now most of the tourists were already in town at the expensive restaurants, sipping their second martinis.

A classic Mercedes two-seater raced around the bend and went into a drift on squealing tires.

The car fishtailed before regaining traction. Clouds of white smoke poured from the exhaust as though it had blown a head gasket. As it barreled down the highway at breakneck speed, chunks of rubber flapped at the right rear wheel. The car was out of control, but the driver wasn't trying to stop.

Sparks flew from the rim as the last shreds of the tire disintegrated. The car careened down the embankment on the side of the highway and launched itself off the incline, headed directly for his small station.

"Jesus!" Miles leapt to his feet and dove off the porch, narrowly missing the rusted edge of a twisted bumper as he hit the ground. He scrambled to his feet and ran, still clutching his foaming beer bottle, as the car crashed into the pumps.

A dull *whuff* pressed on his eardrums as the pumps exploded. For the space of a heartbeat the dusky forest was as bright as high noon.

Miles hit the emergency shut-off lever at the side of the garage and the tanks sealed off, but the car was already on fire. There were no sprinklers at the historic station's stand-alone island.

Nobody could have lived through an explosion like that. At that horrific moment, he knew there was at least one dead body at Goodwin's Garage.

The irony hit him—there could have been two. What had made him run? He'd been longing for death for three years, aching for it more with each day that passed. Yet at the first sign of danger he'd been on his feet, preserving his sorry ass. It had been instinct as much as police training.

*Dammit to hell.*

Momentum had taken the car past the worst of the flames. The windshield was a shattered milky spider web, but still held.

Conditioned by police training, he ran toward the car without thinking, more concerned for the driver than for himself.

Movement shifted behind the white-green kaleidoscope of safety glass. A hand passed over the steering wheel, and Miles knew it was a woman in the car.

*She's alive—there must be a God in Heaven.*

The driver's door opened as flames burst across the hood. She staggered out and fell to her knees.

A second explosion rocked the quiet mountainside. Still running, Miles threw up his arm to block the intense heat.

His heart caught in his throat as he rounded the coupe's door and saw she had a little girl clutched under her arm.

The woman braced herself on the ground with her other hand as she tried to get away from the burning car. He grabbed her by the forearm and hauled her to her feet. She wobbled unsteadily as he pulled her arm over his shoulder. The child scrambled past him, headed for the backside of his garage.

A confusing mixture of past and present rocked him like a punch to the gut. She wasn't his beloved daughter, but the sight of her blond hair tossing as she ran ahead of him sent coherence spinning away.

The woman moaned and her weight sagged on him, bringing him back to the here and now.

"Help..."

He dragged her away from the car. "Jesus, lady, what the hell? Are you trying to get killed?"

He was practically carrying her by the time they arrived at the corner of the building where the little girl waited, shielded from the scorching heat.

"Aunt Lily!" She threw her arms around her aunt's waist.

The woman knelt and gripped the child by her shoulders. "Are you okay?"

She nodded, sniffing.

"I'm so sorry." She pulled the child close. "It's okay, Annie. We're going to be okay."

"Not if you keep driving like that," Miles growled. "You just blew up my gas station."

The woman glanced at him. The horror in her eyes made him flinch. A trickle of blood ran down the woman's temple and spattered her blouse.

"You're hurt," Annie said. Her voice trembled with the precursor to tears. She reached out and touched the woman's face with tiny, hesitant fingertips. The gesture caused his shriveled heart to jerk.

Without removing those wide, brown eyes from his, Lily took her niece's hand and stood. Only then did she glance past him.

"Is that your truck?"

His mouth fell open. "Lady, you need an ambulance."

Would the phone still work, or had the destruction of his station knocked out power and phone lines? Services were finicky enough up here without being rocked by a two-megaton blast.

"He's coming," Annie whimpered.

The horror in Lily's eyes deepened. She glanced at the child and started past him.

"I need your vehicle."

Before he could have guessed this night would get any weirder, she snatched up a rusted sliver of metal and whirled around, pointing it at him.

"Give me the keys."

*She's robbing me with an old antenna?* "You've got to be kidding."

"Aunt Lily," Annie persisted with greater urgency.

Slivers of wood exploded from the corner of the building above his ear. Miles heard the muffled chirp over the roar of the fire. He knew what it was even before a second shot whizzed past his head. The sound sent him careening back to his eight years with the Seattle PD.

*Silencer.*

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