

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



Kiss me, Kate

MARI CARR

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Kiss Me, Kate

ISBN 9781419918247

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Kiss Me, Kate Copyright © 2008 Mari Carr

Edited by Kelli Kwiatkowski.

Photography and cover art by Les Byerley.

Electronic book Publication September 2008

With the exception of quotes used in reviews, this book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

Warning: The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the publisher's permission. Criminal copyright infringement, including infringement without monetary gain, is investigated by the FBI and is punishable by up to 5 years in federal prison and a fine of \$250,000. (<http://www.fbi.gov/ipr/>). Please purchase only authorized electronic or print editions and do not participate in or encourage the electronic piracy of copyrighted material. Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the author's imagination and used fictitiously.

KISS ME, KATE

Mari Carr

Trademarks Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Corvette: General Motors Corporation

Ford: Ford Motor Company

Grease: Paramount Pictures Corporation

Harley-Davidson: H-D Michigan, Inc.

John Deere: Deere & Company

Lois Lane: DC Comics

McDonald's: McDonald's Corporation

Milk Duds: D. L. Clark Company

Moonlighting: American Broadcasting Company, Inc.

Peter Pan: Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Pictionary: Pictionary Incorporated Corporation

Piggly Wiggly: Piggly Wiggly Corporation

Superman: DC Comics

Chapter One

Mid-May

"Yowza," Kate muttered as the front door of the farmhouse opened. Recalling herself, she quickly said, "Hi there. I c-called earlier. I'm Jill's sister. The, uh, house-sitter." Kate stumbled over her words as a man who could pass for George Clooney's identical twin brother answered the door. *O brother, where art thou been all my life?*

"Hello." Mr. Tall, Dark and Handsome spoke in a voice so hot and deep she was sure it could melt chocolate, not to mention what it was doing to her insides. "Ms. Summers?"

"Harper." She silently remarked how strange it felt to be using her maiden name again and extended her hand. "Kate Harper."

"Harper." He shook the hand she offered, his grip strong yet curiously comforting. "Rick McAllister."

Kate prayed he couldn't feel her hand shaking. Damn, she was a fool. She needed this job, desperately. Now was not the time to act like a giggling teenager crushing on a movie star. Although with his dark brown hair and cocoa-colored eyes, he could certainly grace her silver screen anytime of the day or night. "You're doing it again," she muttered underneath her breath.

"Excuse me?" Rick had heard her mumbles and looked confused.

Mortified, Kate attempted to backtrack quickly. "Nothing, I was just, uh, saying...so you and Jill are friends?"

Rick grinned in a way that let Kate know he wasn't fooled. "Yep and I don't mind telling you that your sister makes a Dutch apple pie that can bring a grown man to his knees begging for a crumb of the crust."

Kate laughed at his description. She constantly heard similar comments from most of the folks in town. Her sister owned and operated a diner on Main Street. It was typically packed for breakfast, lunch and dinner due to Jill's amazing culinary skills and vivacious personality. Kate couldn't think of one person in town who wasn't drawn to Jill and her delicious food – which made it all the more painful to have to admit she was Jill's baby sister. People expected Kate to be like her and were always disappointed.

"Jill's cooking is one of the reasons I'll never succeed in any diet."

"Why on earth are you dieting?"

Rick looked so sincere in his question, Kate wasn't sure how to respond. Flustered, she changed the subject. "I, uh, understand you're leaving town immediately."

"That's right." Rick stepped back from the doorway and gestured for her to enter. "Why don't you come on in? Would you like something to drink? I'm not sure there's much left in the fridge except for a couple beers and maybe some lemonade. Wes and I have been trying to clean it out so nothing would spoil. We weren't sure we'd be able to find someone to stay here on such short notice."

"Oh, I'm not thirsty. Thanks anyway." Kate's eyes took in the spacious foyer. "Wow."

Rick chuckled behind her. "Is that an impressed 'wow' or a horrified one?"

"Impressed," she answered without thinking. "This house is even better on the inside." It was an old farmhouse, situated on twenty-five acres just outside the small town where she worked as the high school librarian. She'd driven by the house quite a few times in the past since it sat on the road that led to one of her favorite hiking trails. Every time she drove by, she slowed down to see all the improvements the new owners had made over the years.

Although she'd never actually met Wes Robson or Rick McAllister, she'd certainly heard all about them via the gossip grapevine, a.k.a. Jill. She had seen them in town on various occasions, but only from a distance. She had to say up-close was much, *much* better.

“Other than Wes and myself, I think you’re the only person to ever actually admit that. We still have quite a bit of work left to do, as you can see. Wes and I have put most of our efforts into maintaining the outside of the house and the outbuildings. I’m afraid neither one of us is much use when it comes to interior decorating. Add to that the fact that our housekeeper quit a couple months ago, we’re two hopeless bachelors when it comes to housework and voila – the mess you see before you.”

“Not a mess.” Kate studied the high ceilings and arched doorways that led to several different rooms. The house was clearly built at a time when people paid attention to detail. She was so sick of the carbon-copy cardboard boxes contractors liked to refer to as “dream homes” nowadays. “A work in progress—and one with a lot of potential.”

“I agree,” Rick added quietly. “We’ve just had a hard time making any progress on that work. Come on in the living room. Wes will be here in awhile. He’s out mowing the yard.”

“I assume you have a riding mower?” Kate wondered if yard chores would be part of her duties if she could convince Rick and Wes to allow her to stay.

“Hell yeah. Pardon my language, but it would be a bit much to do with a push mower.” Then he seemed to realize the reason for her question. “You don’t have to worry about that, though. There’s a teenager who lives down the road. He’ll be taking over the yard work once school lets out in a couple weeks. Jill says you’re a teacher?”

“Librarian, but as it’s at the high school, chances are good I know your new gardener.”

“Scott Miller.”

“Oh yeah, Scott’s a great kid. He’ll do a terrific job.” Kate wondered if Rick knew how much the Miller family could use any money Scott would earn. His mother was a teacher at the same school as Kate and his father had recently been placed on disability. The family had four kids, ages eight to seventeen, and Kate knew money was tight.

"Jill says you're going through a divorce," Rick added and Kate felt the usual tightness in her chest that accompanied that statement. The pain of her slime-ball husband's desertion still stung. She'd come home two months ago to find their house empty and their joint bank account cleaned out.

Madison was a small town and she was sure there was little chance Rick McAllister hadn't heard all the gory details of how the town's top lawyer had run out on his dumpy librarian wife and taken off with Madison's one and only hairdresser. True to the cliché, Kate was the last one to find out about Zachary Summers' cheating ways. In fact, until she came home to find everything in the house gone—except her books and clothes—Kate hadn't had a clue Zack wasn't faithful to her.

Having grown up in Madison, Kate wasn't surprised by the townspeople's reactions. Her husband's exploits were apparently acceptable because they were so expected. She overheard one particularly nasty comment about how it had only been a matter of time before Zack Summers left to find a woman worthy of him. On top of that, Kate sensed most of the women in town were actually pissed off with her for not keeping her husband happy because they now had to travel thirty-five miles to Harrisburg to get their perms and color.

Kate cleared her throat and nodded. "That's right. Unfortunately divorce is a rather pricey investment and I decided to put my house on the market to help with the cost." Not that Kate gave a damn about the house. Zack picked out the modern monstrosity, determined to rub his success as an ambulance chaser in the neighbors' noses, and Kate had hated it since the day they'd moved in.

"I've been staying with Jill, but she and I are rather different people and her apartment is a bit small." Kate didn't bother to include the fact that, although she loved her sister dearly, Jill was driving her up the wall.

"Well, I have to say Wes and I were starting to give up hope of finding someone to take care of the place. Fact of the matter is we aren't sure how long we'll be out of town

and we hate to leave the place empty for so long. There are lots of plants inside that need tending, and Rex."

"Rex?"

"Jill did tell you we have a dog, didn't she?" Rick asked, looking concerned.

"Uh, no." And Kate knew exactly why Jill had omitted that fact. Kate was deathly afraid of dogs since being bitten by one in the sixth grade. "Is Rex an outdoor dog?" Silently she prayed he was one of those dogs kept in a pen in the back she only had to throw water and food at once a day.

Rick laughed. "Oh no, although he probably should be. Big old pain in the ass is what he is. He adopted us about a year ago."

The word "big" reverberated in Kate's head. "He adopted you?"

"Just walked up to the back door and started scratching. Wes is a softie when it comes to dogs. Started feeding him scraps every night. Next thing I know, there's a horse of a dog sleeping with me in my bed, hogging the covers."

"H-horse of a dog," Kate mumbled as Rick studied her face.

"You're afraid of dogs," he said simply and, realizing she wouldn't be able to deny it, she nodded.

"Hell," Rick cursed.

Kate sank down on the plush chair behind her, indecision flooding her. A dog. Dammit, they *would* have a dog. Of everything she could have dealt with while house-sitting, she wasn't sure about an enormous dog.

Then her mind drifted back to this morning when Jill's current flavor of the month, Seth, came into the kitchen completely naked. Kate spent more than half the night listening to the man's moans and groans and her sister's headboard banging against her bedroom wall. That was when she decided sleeping on the street was preferable to spending one more night under Jill's roof. There were dogs on the street, she supposed, so if she was willing to cuddle up to a trashcan rather than risk seeing the naked

woman tattooed on Seth's ass again, then perhaps she could handle this. "Dog or trashcan," she muttered.

"Trashcan?" Rick asked, clearly confused.

"Uh, nothing." Damn mumbling. A bad habit she couldn't seem to kick. It was asshole Zack's fault. He'd left her alone for so much of their marriage, she'd started talking to herself. She seriously had to get it under control. People were going to start thinking she was crazy. "I'm sure Rex and I will get along famously."

"Really?" Rick asked, obviously unconvinced.

"Really."

Rick looked at the quirky little librarian sitting across from him and wondered for the third time since she entered the house what the hell he was thinking. Kate Harper was an odd bird with her stammering and mumbling. Add to that the fact she was obviously terrified of dogs and he figured he was the biggest fool in the world for even considering letting her house-sit his precious home. However, he and Wes were desperate and Kate was the only person who'd expressed an interest in doing the job. Rick could sense she was anxious for a place to stay despite the problem of Rex. Wes would probably kill him, yet he knew he was going to leave timid Kate holding down their rather messy fort and overly affectionate dog.

Unfortunately, chances were good she would take one look at Rex and run for the hills. When he mentioned Rex's size, her pale face had gone even whiter, the trembling in her hands seemed to escalate—and he hadn't exaggerated about the mutt. Wes joked that Rex was half black lab, half mountain lion. Not that he acted it. Rick had never met a gentler dog. If he could get Kate past her initial fear, he had little doubt Rex would claim her heart just as he did everyone else's he met.

He found himself a bit angry at the toll her husband's cheating had obviously taken on Kate's self-esteem. Madison was a small town and he knew all about Zack Summers' seedy escapades. Poor girl was dressed fit to enter a convent, with no makeup and her

long auburn hair pinned up in a tight ponytail. Her oversized t-shirt and baggy jeans shielded her figure from the world's eyes and he suspected she may be using the big clothes to hide a few extra pounds. Her voice was soft, almost unsure of itself, and despite the fact she was holding up her end of the conversation just fine, Rick sensed her discomfort in his presence.

Of course, like Rex, he was used to women being intimidated by him and his size. In this case, he had to be nearly a half-foot taller than Kate and at least a hundred pounds heavier, so he assumed some of her apprehension was due to the situation and the rest due to him.

Trying to put her at ease, he flashed an easy smile, secretly wishing Wes had been the one to conduct this interview. Wes Robson, his best friend since middle school, was one of those men women flocked to. His charming smile and devil-may-care attitude never failed to leave a trail of horny women in his wake. Where Rick was big and broad and built like a linebacker, Wes was a couple inches shorter and more compact and muscular, like a soccer player.

"Well, Kate." He sat in the chair across from her and leaned back. "Fact is this was not really an interview, but more an introduction. Jill's word is certainly good enough for me and having met you, I have no doubts at all you'll take good care of the house. Would you like to take a tour of the place?"

He watched as the breath Kate had apparently been holding since entering the house escaped and she gave him the first genuine smile he'd seen since meeting her. He was surprised to see how much it transformed her face from plain Jane to plain pretty.

"I don't know how to thank you for letting me do this." She rose from her chair so quickly he nearly got whiplash watching her move. "I was at my wit's end, trying to figure out what to do next. I really couldn't spend one more minute with Jill. Although God knows I love her dearly. How we managed to co-exist for the first eighteen years of ours lives together is absolutely beyond me. Mind-boggling. Do you have any idea how long you'll be gone?"

"Hard to say." He stood up to join her and struggled to take in her rushed speech. As he could only recall the last question, he said, "Anywhere from six months to a year. I suppose Jill told you what Wes and I do?"

"All she said was you were in law enforcement."

"Drug Enforcement," he clarified.

"DEA agents. Must be an exciting job."

"Sometimes," Rick answered, "but lots of times it's non-stop, painstakingly boring stake-outs."

"How will I reach you if there is an emergency?"

"I'll give you a number to a messaging system Wes and I check in with periodically and we'll call or email whenever we can. You don't mind staying out here all by yourself?" Rick kicked himself for asking the question. Fact was, the house, despite its fairly close proximity to town, was basically in the country. Completely isolated. If Kate refused to take the job, he and Wes would have to put Rex in a kennel—which the dog would hate—in addition to worrying about vandals or the old pipes leaking or freezing.

However, the thought of Kate staying out here alone was starting to worry him more than the idea of vandals wrecking his belongings. Deep inside he knew Kate would be just fine. Madison was a small town with little to no crime. It was one of the main reasons they decided to settle here rather than remain in the city after nearly a decade with the agency. He and Wes decided it was time to put down some roots, invest in some property and start looking toward the future rather than merely living in the present. He sensed his time at the DEA was running out. More and more he resented the extended assignments away from this home he had come to love. Once he retired his badge, he was looking forward to doing a bit of farming and operating his own little fix-it shop from the garage out back. He'd stashed away a nice nest egg due to thrifty living and good investments and he was ready to start enjoying it.

"I'm used to being alone."

Kate's answer dragged him back from his thoughts before they headed to the foyer and up the stairs. Rick wondered why a married woman would be used to being alone—before remembering Summers' infamous infidelity. His exploits had been prime fodder for the town gossips since Rick's move here four years ago.

Had Kate known about her husband's cheating ways and merely turned her head? Rick couldn't help but think not, for some reason. Yet, she didn't seem to possess much self-assurance, if the way she carried herself was any indication. Perhaps she simply hadn't had the confidence to confront Zack about his steady stream of girlfriends. Rick had encountered the arrogant, annoying lawyer several times and couldn't picture someone as quiet as Kate married to such an asshole.

"Jill failed to tell me you were so pretty." He wanted to draw her out of the protective shell she seemed to be encased in.

She snorted with disbelief. "I'm a sure thing, Rick. I need a place to stay—badly. You don't have to butter me up."

Rick was overcome by two emotions at once and they stopped him in his tracks. Her words "sure thing" sent all the blood surging to his surprisingly aroused cock. He certainly didn't feel an attraction to the poor little mouse, did he?

However, the other emotion—anger—won out. "Don't call me a liar, sweetheart. It's the one thing you never want to do."

Kate seemed taken aback by his harsh tone and she blushed. "I-I didn't call you a liar."

"You are very pretty." He repeated the words, daring her to refute them again, yet unsure why he felt compelled to push her on the subject.

"No." Her voice was showing its first real bit of strength and her back stiffened even more, inviting Rick's cock to do the same. "I'm not. But thank you for the compliment." Turning around, she started up the stairs without awaiting his invitation and Rick struggled to follow with his painful erection rasping against the zipper of his jeans. Nope, he thought, Kate definitely did *not* know about her husband's cheating.

Once he caught up to her, he led her to the first room on the left. "This is the guest room where you'll be staying." As Rick opened the door, he watched Kate's eyes widen.

"This is the guest room?"

Rick smiled at her awed response. He and Wes worked well into the night trying to make it enticing enough that Kate would agree to stay. When Jill called to suggest her sister as a house-sitter, they threw themselves into making the room presentable and inviting. Given her wide-eyed response, he would say they were successful.

"It's lovely." She stepped farther into the room, running her hand along his grandmother's handmade quilt on the bed. Rick had opened the window earlier to air the room out and with the mid-morning sun shining through and a light breeze blowing in, he had to admit the room did look homey.

"A window seat." She walked over and was going to sit on the light green cushion when she glanced out into the backyard. "Is that Wes?"

Moving behind her to look over her shoulder, Rick could see Wes hosing off the John Deere tractor. "Looks like he's finished with the yard. He should be in soon."

"Are you sure, um, I mean is he okay with the idea of a stranger staying in the house?" Kate was no doubt afraid she could still be denied.

"It was his idea, Kate," he reassured her. "He'll be thrilled to have someone here to look after Rex and the plants."

Kate grinned. "Well, you don't have to worry about a thing. I'll take care of the house like it was my own, I promise. And, of course, R-Rex."

Rick returned her smile, imagining Kate pattering around his house, walking the dog, cooking and cleaning, sitting on this seat to read a book, rocking on the porch swing in the evenings, sleeping in the room next to his.

The image of a naked Kate sleeping under a cotton sheet in the summer heat flashed through his mind. Christ, first thing he was going to do when he and Wes left town was find himself a willing woman. His libido was playing tricks on him. Kate

Harper was definitely not his type. Women who attracted him did not blush or stammer and if Kate knew half the games he liked to play with his lovers, she would hop on Rex's back and make a break for it.

"Come on," he said, taking her hand, "let's finish the tour and then you can join Wes and me for some lunch. Give Rex a chance to get to know you."

At his words, he watched Kate struggle to stifle any qualms she had about meeting the dog and was impressed with her determination. "I can do this," she mumbled in self-encouragement all the way down the stairs. Her ego may have taken a beating from her soon-to-be ex, but she was clearly a strong woman and Rick had a feeling she'd land on her feet in the long run. He also trusted she would take good care of his beloved farmhouse.

Smiling, he led her downstairs to the kitchen, pleased with the day's events. If he felt a slight regret niggling at the back of his mind, he chalked it up to the fact he hated to leave Madison, not that he hated to leave this shy, intriguing young woman.

Chapter Two

Early June

"Hey Kate!" Scott waved wildly from the tractor.

"Hiya Scott!" She smiled as the young boy turned the corner. She and Scott went way back since she and his mother belonged to the same book group, in addition to being colleagues. He clearly loved doing lawn work, although she was concerned about the speed at which he drove the John Deere tractor. She was sure Rick and Wes would have a fit if they knew, but she wasn't about to tell on the sweet boy. Mainly because she was exceedingly glad not to have to mow acre after acre of land.

Kate kicked off her sandals at the front door and walked toward the kitchen with Rex literally dogging her heels. It had taken her only one short week to get over her fear of dogs. Well, actually just Rex, who in her opinion was more cat than dog anyway. The sweet mutt followed her everywhere and she found it hard to imagine staying at the farmhouse without him. Last night, he curled up at the foot of her bed and she was lulled to sleep by his deep, relaxed breathing. Any qualms she may have had about living out in the country alone were put to rest by Rex's comforting, protective presence. He was a fierce guard dog and she suspected he could rip to shreds any bad guy who might come her way.

School was out for the summer. She survived yet another "last day" and was looking forward to long, lazy days in the sun with only herself to worry about. She started writing another story last night and ended up typing away on her laptop until nearly two a.m., when she finally forced herself to go to bed. Making up stories had been a salve to the wounds caused by her lonely marriage. When Zack abandoned her in the wee hours, supposedly working late, she would sit down and write out all the unfulfilled dreams buried deep in her heart.

Now as she struggled to come to grips with Zack's departure, she found herself finding solace in her fictional world once again. Sighing heavily, she considered this mess she called a life. As much as it pained her to admit it, Zack's infidelity hurt. She felt as though he'd dropkicked her heart all the way into the next state.

Walking by the mirror in the entryway, Kate paused to look at herself. For weeks after Zack's exodus, she'd been unable to look at herself at all. Now as she studied her reflection, she saw that the years of depression and loneliness had taken their toll. She was carrying around at least twenty extra pounds. Her reddish-brown hair was so limp and lifeless she rarely did anything more than pull it back in a ponytail simply to keep it out of her face. Suppressing a shudder, she realized her outfit was one more suited to her mother's taste than her own. "God," she muttered. "I'm a mess."

Unwilling to look at her reflection any longer, Kate went straight to the kitchen. Grabbing a beer out of the refrigerator, she headed back to Rick's office. The cozy room with its dark wooden bookcases and plush leather chairs was her favorite in the house—after her bedroom. Her laptop was set up on his large oak desk and she crossed the room to turn it on. Waiting for the machine to boot up, she silently hoped for an email from Rick. He'd emailed her almost daily since he and Wes left and she hated to admit how much she looked forward to his brief, informative messages. They were mainly lists of things he forgot to mention to her in his hasty departure but in the last couple, he'd made small remarks about what he was doing and even asked her a couple questions about herself.

No sooner had she sat down than the phone started ringing.

"Hey Jill," she answered after looking at the caller ID.

"Happy last day of school!" her sister sang out.

"Thanks," Kate said with a laugh. "I was basically living for the arrival of this summer. One more day in that library and I thought I would spontaneously combust!"

"I know the last few months have been rough on you."

"Yeah, well, I'm determined to close the chapter on Zack Summers and the last six years. It's time for me to move on."

"Amen to that, sister," Jill joked. "You know, I've been doing some thinking Kate. I wonder if I was wrong to push you to do the house-sitting job. I mean, you've become a hermit these last few weeks and I hate to see you hiding out there in the country for an entire summer depressed all the time."

"I'm not depressed, Jill," Kate replied. "At least not much."

"Zack doesn't deserve a single, solitary minute of your thoughts, you know."

"I know," Kate agreed. "But I disagree with you about staying here at the farmhouse. This is the first time I've ever lived alone and I'm glad to have the time to think about where I went so wrong with my life."

"Oh sweetie," Jill said. "You got married so young. I wish Mama and I had tried to talk you into waiting a bit longer. Zack was your first serious boyfriend and he swept you off your feet. Problem is, you grew up and he didn't."

Kate laughed at Jill's astute observation. "That's an understatement," Kate added. "The idiot still swaggers around town like the high school quarterback, hanging out with his equally immature friends. God. How could I have been such a fool for him? I've come to the conclusion marrying him was the single biggest mistake of my life." Unfortunately, Kate thought to herself, she allowed herself to be carried along with the current of that mistake rather than turning the wheel and changing the course she'd sailed for six long years.

"Mistake or not, you need to get past it, Kate. Get out there and live a little. It's not healthy the way you hide yourself away from the world," Jill argued. "You aren't the first young girl to be taken in by the attentions of a charming, handsome man and you won't be the last. Zack Summers may have been the first man to really notice you, but Kate, he will not be the last. Trust me."

"I know all that, Jill. I'm just not ready to show my face in town yet. Give me some more time."

"How much more time?" Jill was tenacious and clearly not backing down from her argument.

"I don't know how much more. Why are you pushing me on this?"

"Because I care about you," her sister retorted.

"Right, you cared so much you didn't bother to tell me about my husband screwing the hairdresser from hell."

"What?" Jill asked, obviously shocked by the vehemence in Kate's voice. Kate never raised her voice to Jill. She hated confrontation of any kind.

"Jill, you are Gossip Central in Madison. Do you honestly expect me to believe you didn't know about Zack and his girlfriend?"

"Yes." Jill's voice was laced with fury. "I *do* expect that. I'm your sister, Kate, and if I had known for one second what that lying, cheating bastard was doing, I would have run over him with my truck!"

Kate sank down on the chair behind her at Jill's words. For months, she'd worried Jill had kept Zack's infidelity a secret along with the rest of the town. Finding out her worry was unfounded relieved her more than she could say.

Guilt over her accusation consumed her. "Oh Jill, I'm sorry. I was so afraid that you—" The rest of her words lodged in the lump in her throat.

"Never, Kate." Jill's voice was calmer though still hurt. "I would never do that to you."

Tears began to flow as Kate tried to explain her cruel suspicions. "God, I'm such a wreck, Jill. I don't know who to trust anymore."

"I know that, Angel May." Jill still called Kate by her childhood nickname and Kate found solace in the playful name. "Don't think about it another minute. Just believe me when I say I will never lie to you."

"I do," Kate hiccupped. "Honestly, I do."

"So take your time. Get your act together and if you need a shoulder to cry on, you better call me."

"You're on speed dial." Kate was filled with relief mixed with the lingering sadness that never seemed to completely leave her.

"Good. I love you, Kate."

"Love you too, Jilly."

As she hung up the phone, Kate grabbed a tissue and blew her nose. For months she'd avoided Jill's attempts to help her, so afraid her sister had known about Zack and kept the secret. Knowing her sister hadn't betrayed her lifted a burden from her shoulders Kate hadn't realized she was carrying and before she knew it, she was smiling. Perhaps she wasn't as alone as she feared.

She knew Jill was worried about her, but for the most part Kate was relieved the marriage was over. She didn't have to worry about dealing with Zack anymore—not that she ever had to deal with him much, given his long work hours and the time he spent hanging out with his mates.

"Long hours," she mumbled. "Yeah, right." The one thing Kate had truly not anticipated was Zack's cheating, although God only knew why she hadn't. She supposed it was because she was a trusting soul and when Zack said he was going golfing or hanging out at a friend's house to watch the football game, she believed him—and deep inside, she was secretly glad not to have him at home.

Glancing at the desk, Kate saw the computer blinking at her and demanding a login. Leaning forward, she typed in her username and password. She started to open up the story she'd begun writing the previous evening, but decided to check her email first. Once she started writing, it would be hours before she came up for air. When her marriage started to go to hell, Kate had turned to writing stories to escape the misery of her real life and in a lot of ways, it had helped. Jill was the only person who knew about her obsessive writing and her sister often accused her of using the hobby to hide from reality. Maybe there was some truth to that. But sometimes it felt more like therapy.

There were a million feelings and ideas bottled up inside her and putting them out on the page relieved some of the intense pressure building up in her so she could make it through another day.

Now here she was, six years later, a bit smarter, a bit stronger and living alone in someone else's house because she didn't have two pennies to rub together. All of her paychecks, plus her secret book royalties, were going toward paying for her divorce, in addition to making the outrageous monthly payment on the damn empty mansion Zack saddled her with before disappearing to God only knew where. She couldn't even live in the place because there wasn't a stick of furniture left in it. If she could manage to sell it before it sank her, maybe she could scrape together enough money for a down payment on a small house after the divorce was final.

Of course, all of those points were moot until Zack the Rat slinked back into town with his mall-hair tramp of a girlfriend.

She watched as Rick's name appeared in her inbox and felt instantly better. Anytime she was overwhelmed or depressed, she created a new sexual fantasy starring her own personal Clooney clone. The super hot daydreams never failed to cheer her up.

Excitedly, she clicked on his message. She knew it was completely irrational to lust over a man who was so far out of her league, but heck, it was a free world and if there was one thing Kate had an abundance of, it was imagination. Since first laying eyes on Rick McAllister, her dream world had gotten hotter and hotter.

Kate,

The key to the back shed is in the kitchen drawer under the phone. You'll find the garden tools in there. Should have told you that, but as I said, you don't have to do any yard work. Guess you are celebrating the end of the school year. It's damn hot and miserable here, but we're getting ready to make a move tonight. You probably won't hear from me for a while. I'll check in when I can, but I won't be writing every day any

more. Is that motion light in the back working or not? If not, call Seth and have him come out and fix it. Have a good summer.

Take care,

Rick

Kate smiled at the message. So much for a spicy love note. Rick, oblivious to her growing crush, was the master of no-nonsense. She'd asked about the garden tools thinking it would be nice to plant a vegetable garden, and the motion light was becoming an obsession for Rick. She merely mentioned to him a few emails ago that she was amazed how dark it got at night and how she had a hard time seeing Rex when he went out for his nightly constitutional. Rick had a fit that the motion light wasn't working. Now every message contained some comment about the damn thing and she was sorry she'd mentioned it at all.

Fact was she preferred to leave it broken. Her experience with the annoying things was that they came on if the wind blew a leaf across their path or a stray cat roamed into the yard. When the light flashed on, it scared the hell out of her and she spent half the night listening to every creak and groan, letting her overactive imagination run away from her. Zack actually got her one for Christmas one year, claiming he knew how much she hated being alone in the house at night when he worked late. Now there was an award-winning Christmas gift. A motion light. Is it any wonder her marriage failed? "Dumbass," she muttered. As far as she was concerned, if someone was sneaking into the house to kill her, she'd just as soon be surprised.

She was strangely upset by the thought of Rick not emailing any more and she didn't like the idea of him doing such a dangerous job. She felt as if she'd come to know him in the past month by living in his house and talking back and forth through emails. He even called once, although the connection had been so bad they hadn't had the chance to say more than a few words.

Hitting reply, she hoped he'd get her message before moving on.

Rick,

Don't worry about the light. I'll take care of it. Hopefully you'll be back in time to eat some of the veggies I'm planting. I'm looking forward to weeks and weeks of complete idleness. Aren't I lazy? Actually, I've vowed to do a bit of housecleaning as well. Do you mind if I touch up a few rough patches with paint? I'm taking a long weekend with Jill at the beach, but don't worry about Rex. We got a hotel that allows pets. Figure he'll love chasing the waves. Please be careful. Say hey to Wes.

Kate

Leaning back in the office chair, Kate sighed and made a decision. This was going to be the Summer of Kate. This was *her* time and she was bound and determined to make good use of it. "Call me Sandra Dee," she said to Rex, recalling Olivia Newton John's makeover in *Grease*. "A whole new me," she vowed with a smile. "And who knows? Maybe by the time Rick comes back, I *will* be in his league. Stranger things have happened," she added with a giggle. She hit send before silently toasting herself and taking a long sip of her cold beer.

Chapter Three

Late August

Rick dragged himself into the dreary motel room he'd been calling home off and on for the last two months. They had a break in the case late yesterday and he and Wes managed to squeak in a couple days off. Even though they couldn't go home, they could relax for a bit.

Logging on to his laptop, he immediately checked his email. He knew it was silly to look forward to Kate's little messages, but he found himself impatient to hear from her since she was his one connection to Madison, a place he now considered home. He and Wes had been Madisonites for four years and given the smallness of the town and the fact everyone in it seemed to operate as one big, happy, dysfunctional family, he felt as though he'd lived there forever.

It was too dangerous to call right now, so he was forced to limit his communication to the computer. He grinned like a fool when her name appeared on the screen.

Rick,

Back from the beach. Got a major sunburn. Rex had the time of his life. My tomato plants and green beans are producing more than I can eat. I've joined a gym with Jill and have lost eight pounds! We're going shopping next weekend to celebrate. Zack the Rat slithered back into town with his slutfriend, Soozan. God, who spells Susan like that? What a dimwit! Guess what? The hated house sold! I'm not a pauper anymore and can actually afford my own place once you return. School starts back next week, so no more laziness for me. Be careful. Say hey to Wes for me.

Kate

Rick fought back a grin at her words. He knew for a fact Kate was the furthest thing from lazy you could find. She'd begun to do little odd repairs and renovations within the house. Rick and Wes had spent much of their four years fixing up the outside of the house, the numerous outbuildings and the massive yard. Neither one of them had the inclination or the desire to actually attempt to decorate the place. Mercifully, Kate took pity on them. Originally Rick sent her some money to fix up the dining room after she'd made some suggestions of things she wanted to do—stripping the old wallpaper, painting, recovering the chairs, as well as purchasing new curtains and a rug. Once he saw pictures of the finished room, he sent more cash and encouraged her to have a go at the living room as well.

Looking back, he couldn't believe there was a time when he thought having Kate stay in the house was a mistake. He also couldn't help but notice the Kate from these recent emails seemed different from the shy woman he'd met in May. He was pleased to see her emerging from her shell a bit. In each of her emails he sensed she was gaining some much-needed confidence. On top of that, the woman had a wicked sense of humor.

His musings were interrupted by Wes stumbling into the room, his arms full of boxes of Chinese takeout. "Damn, I'm sick of eating this crap." He unloaded the food on the table. "I'd kill for some of the food Kate is growing at the house. Nothing like a tomato fresh from the vine." Wes looked over and noticed the open laptop. "Get an email from Kate?"

Wes was also growing fond of Kate's correspondence.

"Yeah," Rick answered. "She says hey."

Wes laughed at the comment—a standard in every email. "How's Rex?"

"Great. Apparently he loved the beach."

"Shit," Wes muttered. "My dog's having a better summer than I am. What else did she say?"

"Zack the Rat's back in town with Soozan and Kate managed to sell the house."

"Good for her!" Wes cheered. "Jill said the jerk was going to end up putting her in the poor house if he didn't come back soon and face up to his responsibilities. You wouldn't believe what the monthly payment on that monstrosity he called a house was."

"I knew he'd come back. Man seems to think he's the God of Madison."

"Yeah well, like the King of Pop, I think that title is self-proclaimed." Wes changed the subject while unloading the food. "The fair ladies of Madison will be happy to have the hairdresser from hell back."

Rick chuckled at Wes' use of Kate's nickname for Soozan. "Yep, Farrah Fawcett do's for the young ladies and beehives for the older set. We better make sure to get laid before we head home."

Rather than laugh at his comment, Wes shook his head. "Oh, I don't know about that. I've kinda got my eye on one of those girls back home."

"You're kidding." Rick studied Wes' face and was surprised to see that his friend was not. "Who?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies," Wes answered enigmatically.

Rick sat silent for a few moments, trying to think of a woman in Madison who could actually catch the discerning eye of his best friend. In twenty years of friendship, Rick could count on one hand the number of times Wes claimed a serious interest in a woman and even with that, he had several fingers left over. Most of the time, Wes was the sought-after party and all he had to decide was if he felt like getting caught for a little while.

Aware Wes wouldn't say another word about the subject, Rick pointed back to the computer. "It sounds like Kate's getting back on her feet. She's lost weight too."

Wes frowned. "She didn't need to lose weight."

"How the hell could you tell that?" Rick asked. "Only time we saw her, she was covered from head to toe in that huge t-shirt and baggy jeans."

Wes shrugged. "I don't like thin women. You know that. More cushion for pushin', I say."

Rick found himself uncharacteristically angry at Wes' chauvinistic comment and had a sudden uneasy feeling the woman Wes was pining over was Kate.

Shaking himself, Rick knew it was irrational to be livid at the thought of Wes thinking about Kate in any way even remotely sexual, yet he was. Wes never seriously committed to any woman and he was uncomfortable with the idea of Wes possibly using and then hurting Kate just as she was getting back on track. Somewhere in the midst of all her emails, Rick had begun to think of Kate as someone he could become friends with. Maybe even more than friends.

He'd noticed over the past couple months Wes seemed to share a bit of Rick's fascination with their house-sitter. Not that it mattered much. Neither one of them could do a damn thing about their interest in timid Kate, no matter how unlikely that attraction seemed. First of all, Kate was still basically a stranger—a married stranger—despite their long-distance correspondence. Secondly, she was definitely not the type of woman either one of them had ever given a second glance in the past. Rick couldn't imagine Kate trying anything more adventurous in bed than the missionary position, let alone bondage or a sexy spanking. Finally, there didn't seem to be an end in sight to this investigation and it could be winter before they made it back to Madison. At which point, Kate would move out and on with her life.

Rick wished that thought didn't leave him feeling so strangely empty.

Wes interrupted his musing. "Look what I found at the convenience store across the street." In his hands was the latest erotic thriller by Kay Knight. He and Wes discovered the author's books a couple years earlier and had read every single one of them.

"Hot damn," Rick said, relieved to have something other than the case and Kate to occupy his mind. "Hand it over."

"Nope," Wes replied. "I bought it so I get first dibs."

"You take forever to read a book."

"That's bullshit," Wes joked. "I simply prefer to savor the story. Unlike you, I don't gobble it up in one sitting."

"Which is why you should let me read it first. I'll have the thing knocked out by morning." Rick couldn't help but wonder about his favorite author, the mysterious Ms. Knight. There was never a picture of her in the back of the books or even a biography. He tried to do a search for her once on the web, but apparently Kay Knight, a pen name, preferred her anonymity—and Rick could understand why. No doubt if her identity was ever revealed she'd have horny men lined up around the block to her house. Her bedroom scenes were some of the hottest he'd ever read.

"Fine." Wes gave in so easily Rick knew he'd never intended to read the thing first anyway. "I need to do a bit of research on the Internet tonight and there's no point in trying to read it when I know you'll be hovering over me every minute telling me to hurry up."

Wes tossed the book to Rick, who grabbed chopsticks and a carton of Kung Pao shrimp and settled in for a good, long read.

Only problem was, thanks to Wes and his damn comments about Kate's attractive figure, he found himself picturing himself as the passionate master and his innocent house-sitter as the willing submissive...

He walked into the house and Kate was waiting for him in a sheer nightgown that left very little to the imagination.

"Get down on your knees," Rick demanded.

"Yes, Master," Kate answered, quickly kneeling before him, her head bowed.

Rick could sense her excitement in the soft tone of her lilting voice and see her desire as her luscious nipples became instantly hard beneath the flowing material.

"What do you want, Kate?"

"I want to suck your cock, Master. Please."

"Then do it."

Kate reached up to relieve him of his jeans, but Rick grabbed her wrists. "Oh no, my sweet slave. No hands this time. Put them behind your back and clasp your fingers."

Kate looked up at him, her light blue eyes sparkling with desire as she followed his command. Slowly, she leaned forward and grasped the zipper of his jeans with her teeth. As she tugged it down, Rick took a steadying breath in an attempt to calm the racing of his heart at the image of her working to free him from the tight denim.

It took several minutes and plenty of frustrated curses before Kate was able to work the top button free. Rick, unable to prolong her torture—and ultimately his as well—grasped the waistband and pushed his jeans and boxers down together.

"Yes," Kate hissed, leaning forward and greedily engulfing his length in one quick movement.

Lightly gripping her head, Rick guided Kate back and forth on his rock-hard cock, directing the speed and the depth at which she took him.

"Deeper, angel," he whispered, suddenly desperate to feel the back of her throat. In only a few quick, hard thrusts, he was fighting back the impulse to climax. Too quick. The thought was soon washed away by the feeling of Kate's tongue teasing the sensitive skin just below the head of his cock.

"Oh yeah, baby," he cried. "Just like that." Unable to hold back any longer, Rick gave up the battle and spilled into her mouth. Kate swallowed every drop as he struggled to remain upright, the aftershocks of the most incredible blowjob of his life rumbling through his body.

Repressing a shudder, Rick opened his eyes, startled to find himself in the hotel room. A quick glance across the room confirmed Wes was hard at work on the laptop and didn't notice his rampant erection tenting the sheets.

What the hell was that about?

Tossing the book aside, he grabbed up his laptop and hit reply.

Kate,

Beach trip sounds like fun. Wish I'd been there. Wish I'd been anywhere but this godforsaken place. Been doing stakeouts for two weeks straight and still don't have any solid leads. Feels like I've been away a lifetime and there doesn't seem to be an end in sight. Sometimes I wonder why I do this damn job.

Ah hell, ignore me. I'm eating Chinese takeout for the fourth night in a row and watching Wes scratch his balls. It's making me cranky. Have a great year at school and take it easy on the weight loss. You look just fine the way you are. Give Rex one of his favorite treats for me.

Rick

Chapter Four

Late September

Kate threw Rex's leash down on the table by the front door and headed to Rick's office with her bottle of water. She'd started running with Rex every day during the summer and what had started out as two brutal miles a couple months ago had gradually worked its way up to five invigorating ones.

Clicking on the email, she smiled to see one from Rick hit her inbox. She hadn't heard from him in a few weeks and she'd been getting worried. Regardless of his sporadic replies, she wrote to him daily. Usually little tidbits about work or the town or some funny thing Rex had done. She figured she was annoying the hell out of him, inundating his inbox with such worthless correspondence, but he hadn't asked her to stop, so maybe he didn't mind so much after all.

She laughed out loud as she read his brief reply to at least a dozen different messages.

Kate,

What the hell do you mean you went out with Pete Simpson? Has Jill lost her mind? Why would she set you up with that guy? He's so tight he probably superglues his wallet shut so he has an excuse not to open it. Tell Jill to mind her own damn business the next time she tries to hook you up with a loser.

Rick

Kate couldn't believe Rick's heated response. She'd written the man volumes and all he could do was yell at her for going on one disastrous date. Besides, she'd only

mentioned the Simpson date in passing—one sentence, tops—within a much longer email.

Grinning, she couldn't help but wish his words were laced with jealousy rather than what she was sure was friendly concern. Obviously Rick was trying to keep her from making another mistake, like any good friend would do—and over the past few months she had come to consider him a friend. Still, it was fun to imagine Rick pea green with envy.

He hit the nail right on the head with Pete Simpson. Their single date had been an unmitigated disaster. The man invited her to dinner and the movies then suggested they go Dutch treat—at McDonald's—for God's sake. Then he'd claimed to be too full when she'd suggested they get popcorn, but managed to devour two-thirds of the small box she bought and over half of her Milk Duds. Needless to say, she didn't accept his invitation for a second date.

She wasn't sure what had compelled her to try the dating scene again anyway. No, actually she was. Jill had been relentless, suggesting one hook-up after another. Finally, Kate decided to give it a go with the most innocuous man on Jill's long list of local bachelors just to shut her up. It worked. After Kate told Jill about the unfortunate evening, she finally believed Kate when she insisted Rex was better company and she really didn't need a man to be happy.

And for the first time in a long time, Kate believed those words herself.

Her divorce was well underway and thus far she'd managed to avoid actually seeing Zack the Rat and Soozan. Of course, apart from going to work and occasionally helping Jill out at the diner on weekends, Kate spent most of her free time at the farmhouse and didn't see anyone. She loved living in the big, old house and when Rick and Wes had given her the go-ahead to do a little painting and decorating, she'd felt as if she'd found her niche in life.

For the first time in forever, she was free to be herself. Out here in the country, she didn't have to live up to anyone's expectations but her own. Much of her childhood had

been spent in the rather large shadow cast by her more popular, beautiful older sister and although Kate loved Jill to distraction, she knew Jill struggled to relate to her. Jill loved people and parties and big crowds. She was the football-games-and-dance-club sister while Kate was happiest at home with a book or hanging out and talking with a few friends in a quiet restaurant.

Unfortunately Zack's social life mirrored Jill's, so throughout their marriage Kate had constantly been thrust into uncomfortable situations as he expected her to host elaborate parties for his clients and friends. Once she'd proven herself to be completely inept at such things, Zack checked out of the marriage and Kate, rather than confront him, watched him walk away.

"I was a doormat."

It had taken months of soul-searching for Kate to realize she'd lived her entire life trying to be someone she wasn't, attempting to live up to other people's expectations of her. This time in the country with only Rex for company had been the best time of her life. She was relaxed, carefree, comfortable and slowly discovering that there was nothing wrong with being quiet and reserved.

The ringing phone roused Kate from her thoughts.

"Hey Jill," she said after glancing at the caller ID. "I thought you had a date tonight."

"I do, but not until later," Jill said. "I wanted to see if you were up for a shopping trip tomorrow. Thought we'd hit the mall in Harrisburg then maybe stick around to try that new comedy club on the strip."

Kate groaned at the thought of a whole day fighting the Saturday crowds at the mall. "Actually," Kate said, looking at her laptop, "I have plans for tomorrow."

"Oh yeah? What plans?"

"Tomorrow is Kate day."

She could hear Jill smile through the phone. "Is this in any way similar to the Summer of Kate, which just ended?"

"Yep, very similar," Kate joked. It hadn't taken her sister very long to get used to the new-and-improved, looking-out-for-number-one Kate.

"Kate day," Jill repeated. "Sounds intriguing. Let me guess. You snooze until, oh let's see, seven is probably your idea of a sleep-in, Miss Rises with the Birds. Am I right?"

Kate laughed at her sister's astute observation. Jill could sleep until early afternoon without even rolling over, while Kate typically rose with the sun. "My goodness, do you know how much of the day would be wasted if I slept until seven?"

Jill groaned. "I figured that was pushing it. So you'll laze around in bed until six a.m.—I have been told by others that hour truly exists, although I'm fairly certain I've never seen it myself."

"It exists," Kate assured her.

Jill continued as if she hadn't spoken. "Then I suppose you'll spend the entire day fixing up someone else's house before settling down on the couch for the evening with some disgusting microwave diet dinner and a romance novel. Is that Kate day?"

"In a nutshell. You are brilliant, Jill."

"How do you not die of boredom?"

"One girl's idea of heaven..." Kate began.

"Is another girl's idea of hell," Jill finished. "Okay," she added, "I'll do the shopping and club hopping with Grace. She appreciates my thirst for movement and excitement. You're sure?"

"Jill, I'm sure." Kate was touched by her sister's concern. "You have to believe me when I say, big sister, I've never been happier."

"Oh, I know that," Jill said. "In the past you would have tagged along just to please me and hated every minute. You may not believe this, Kate, but I prefer the new you. Boring though you may be."

"I prefer the new me too." And Kate realized that she did. She really did.

After hanging up with her sister, Kate hit reply to Rick's email.

Rick,

I'm going to put up those flower boxes outside the kitchen window, like we discussed, tomorrow. Jill has given me some suggestions for herbs to plant. Rex and I had a heart-to-heart discussion about his sleeping on my bed and we decided it would be best for him to occupy the new fluffy dog bed on the floor that I purchased for him at the pet shop. I'm looking forward to actually getting to sleep under your grandma's handmade quilt rather than watching him roll around on top of it. With the onset of cooler weather, this seemed like a good compromise. You and Wes really need to try to discipline the dog at least a little when you get back. He's spoiled rotten.

Pete Simpson was all you said and more. Needless to say, we will not be going out on a second date. Given the ever-dwindling pool of eligible men in my age bracket in Madison, I've come to the conclusion I will have to (a) move to a bigger city, (b) give up, become an old maid and adopt lots and lots of cats, (c) consider lesbianism, (d) seduce you and/or Wes upon your return. I'll let you know my decision once I make it—ha ha. I hope you're safe wherever you are. Hey to Wes.

Your house-sitter, dog-sitter, interior decorator and friend,

Kate

Clicking send, Kate climbed the stairs, stripping off her sweaty running clothes as she walked to the bathroom and turned on the shower. As soon as she entered the cool water, she let her mind travel to her favorite Rick shower fantasy...

"Do you have room for me in there?" Rick's deep voice asked.

"Always," she answered.

Rick stepped into the shower, wrapping his arms around her from behind. Kate could feel his erection rubbing against her buttocks and she wiggled against it to torment him.

"Tease," Rick whispered, lifting her wet hair and pulling it aside to make room for his lips at her nape. Kate groaned at the sensuous slide of his tongue against her sensitive skin.

"Oh Rick!" she cried. "Touch me, please."

Rick's hands roamed up from her waist to loosely cup her breasts. "So sexy," he murmured. His fingers toyed with her turgid nipples for ages, causing her to press back against his cock in desperation rather than fun.

"Patience, angel," he murmured when her movements became more erratic, more needy.

"Rick, I want more."

Rick's sexy chuckle permeated the steam filling the small stall and his hands began their slow, seductive slide downward to the place Kate most needed his touch. When he reached her wet pussy, his fingers parted her. Shifting her body slightly, Kate gasped when Rick placed her clit directly into one of the streams of water jetting down from the showerhead.

"Yes!" she cried and Rick added his own delicious touch to the mix. Tapping firmly on her clit, he waited until she was panting with frustration before moving his hand farther down and driving two thick fingers into her weeping cunt.

The impact of his fingers fucking her hard and fast sent an orgasm whirling through her body, a silent scream hanging on her lips.

As Kate came back to her senses, she slowly pulled her fingers out of her pussy, washing away the sticky residue left behind by her climax. Sighing heavily, she wished the water could wash away her ever-growing infatuation with Rick McAllister as easily.

Fact was, her growing feelings for the man were scaring the hell out of her. She'd just spent the last few months trying to get over the pain caused by her unfaithful husband and there was absolutely no way, come hell or high water, she would ever open herself up to that kind of devastating desertion again.

Nope, this silly crush on Rick was going to have to remain just that. Besides, she was now the proud owner of two vibrators. A girl's true best friend. Simply keep the batteries charged and they never let you down or left you for some bleached-blond bitch named Soozan.

Chapter Five

Mid-October

Rick quickly minimized the picture on his computer screen as Wes, wrapped in a towel, walked out of the bathroom. He'd studied the photo Kate emailed him of her and Rex at the beach so many times he had every pixel of the damn thing memorized.

"Anything interesting going on in Madison?" Wes asked, seeing Rick in front of the computer. The two men had become big fans of Kate's newsy emails. Her voice rang through in her writing as she shared all sorts of silly stories about the townspeople. Rick related Kate's latest tale about the preacher's wife getting into a fight with the grocer over the fact he was now selling beer on Sunday. Apparently the whole town was divided on the issue and Kate's take on the thing was hilarious. He and Wes chuckled as Rick read aloud some of the funnier bits.

Wes shook his head. "That girl is a pistol."

Rick grinned at the comment. "Yep, she sure is something else." Glancing back at the email, Rick reread the end again.

I cannot tell you how much I love being at the farmhouse in the fall. The pumpkin patch I planted out back is filled with the biggest pumpkins you've ever seen. Jill and I are going to pick them closer to Halloween and take them over to the orphanage in Harrisburg to carve. Jill promised the kids she would roast the seeds with them and hold back a few of the choicer pumpkins to make her famous pumpkin pie.

I wish you could be here to see the colors of the trees. The mountain looks like someone dripped paint all over it—every imaginable hue of yellow, red, orange and purple. All so vivid and bright and beautiful. Last night I watched the sunset from the front porch swing and I swear the yard looked like one of those oil landscape paintings

you see in museums. I couldn't tell where the mountains ended and the sky began. I'm not sure I believe in heaven, but if I did, I think it would look just like this. Wish you could be here to share it. Say hey to Wes.

Kate

"So what are we going to do about her?" Wes asked.

Rick had been waiting for Wes to ask that question for months, more and more convinced Kate was the girl back home his friend was pining over.

"I wasn't aware *we* needed to do anything about her." Rick shifted in his seat, uneasy with the topic.

"Rick," Wes said, clearly oblivious to Rick's testy tone of voice. "I've been thinking. It might be a good idea if we invited Kate to live with us. The house is huge and there's plenty of room. I have the feeling she'll be a fun roommate now that she doesn't have all those Zack-induced insecurity issues."

"Live with us?" Rick was shocked by the suggestion. The idea of Wes pursuing Kate under their own roof and under his nose was more unnerving than he cared to admit.

"Think about it. If we're called away again, she's already in place to take care of the house and Rex. Besides, the place has never looked better. I'm blown away every time she emails us another pic of the house. We don't need money, so she could live there rent-free. I don't think she'd mind pitching in on the housework, cooking and redecorating if it meant a free place to stay."

"So she'll serve as our cook, dog-sitter, housekeeper—and what else, Wes? Bed warmer?" Rick's voice was sharp and angry, but he didn't care. The idea Wes would suggest they use Kate in such a fashion made him want to drive his fist through his best friend's face.

“Who said anything about sleeping with her?” Wes was clearly surprised by Rick’s heated reaction. “What the hell is your problem?”

“You,” Rick replied. “You’re my problem. You’ve been pining after that poor girl for months. You think I don’t know she’s your girl back home? The one you can’t wait to get back to? The reason we don’t go out and get laid anymore?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Wes shouted. “For your information, asshole, *you’re* the one with a thing for Kate, not me. You’re the one who’s always too tired to hit a club when we manage to get a few free hours. You think I don’t see you drooling over that goddamn picture of her night and day?”

Rick was taken aback by Wes’ words. First of all, he hadn’t realized Wes knew about him ogling the picture and secondly – could his comments be true?

Was he falling for Kate?

Good God, he barely knew the woman. Although, on second thought, that wasn’t entirely true. He felt like he knew her better than anyone besides Wes. He’d discovered her personality, her likes and dislikes, her sense of humor, all through her emails. Kate was open and honest – a refreshing change from most of the women Rick knew. He lived for her messages and sometimes wondered if Kate wasn’t the only thing standing between him and losing his mind.

This job was slowly draining every bit of happiness from him, yet just when he felt like he was empty of the emotion, Kate filled him up again. Her comments about the town, her little jokes about the students at school and her willingness to keep him connected to his beloved home and dog never failed to make him smile at the end of a long day. With her humor and bright observations, she kept him putting one foot in front of the other, simply so he could achieve his goal of solving this case and getting back home – to her.

Christ. Wes was right. He was falling for Kate Harper. Shy, awkward, mumbling Kate.

"I can't be in love with her," Rick muttered. "I must be having a mid-life crisis. That's what this is. I'm nearly thirty-five after all."

"Bullshit." By the tone in his voice, Rick could tell Wes was still angry about his previous attack and he felt his own temper flare again.

"You don't know what you're talking about, Wes."

Wes waited a minute before gesturing at Rick's clenched fist. "If you're planning on hitting me, you better know that I *will* hit back."

"You aren't interested in Kate?" Rick repeated the question as a tidal wave of relief flooded his system. For months he'd thought Wes was falling for Kate and it had eaten away at his insides like a cancer.

"Hell no." Wes sounded calmer now. "I mean, she seems like a nice girl, but she's not really my type is she? Too quiet, reserved. I go for the more dramatic type."

Rick and Wes both smiled at those words as the image of Wes' last serious girlfriend popped into their minds. When Wes had ended the relationship, she began to stalk him with a passion that bordered on insanity. She was one of the main reasons Rick and Wes had decided to leave the big city four years ago and apply themselves to less hazardous dealings, like fending off the hordes of small town Britney Spears wannabes at the Piggly Wiggly grocery store in Madison.

"So, you like her, Rick. It's not the end of the world and I'd say it's pretty obvious she feels the same way."

"How on earth do you know that?" Rick couldn't help but feel unexpectedly pleased with the comment.

"All her emails are addressed to you, Einstein. Her correspondence with me is limited to 'Say hey to Wes'."

Rick grinned as he realized this was true. Kate was writing to him and only him. He didn't know why that fact hadn't occurred to him before.

"Why not ask her out when we get home and see where it goes from there?"

"Because she's not some nameless woman at a bar I take home for a good time and then never call again."

"Good God, Rick, I had no idea you were such a bastard. You never did the day-after follow-up call?"

Rick couldn't help but laugh at Wes' joke.

"We're not twenty years old anymore, Rick. I think if you're serious about pursuing a real relationship for once, Kate would be perfect for you. You've both got the same weird sense of humor and God knows you both love that dilapidated old farmhouse."

"You know, you do own half of that house you refer to as a 'piece of shit' so lovingly."

"Yes, but we both know it's only a matter of time before I grab my half of the acreage and build myself a low-maintenance cabin. Something smaller with pipes that don't leak, cabinets that don't squeak and that nice 'new house' smell I love so much."

"Problem is, I've started to consider Kate a friend. I don't like the idea of losing that. She's funny and sweet. She's working miracles in our house and Rex is probably going to defect to her new place once she finds one and I'll have to sue for visitation rights. Let's face it, Wes. I'm not what any woman would consider a good bet for the long run."

Rick thought about the digital pictures Kate sent of the house. She claimed she'd merely done a little cleaning, but fact of the matter was she was an interior design genius. She had recovered and rearranged the furniture, added a bit of accent paint here and there, sewed new curtains for nearly every room and turned his house into a showplace anyone would be proud to call their own. Not to mention the flowerbeds and vegetable garden outside.

He loved her sense of humor and savored every minute they spent talking on the phone, which was nowhere near often enough for him. She didn't stutter or stumble anymore and Rick was pleased to hear a strength in her voice that hadn't been there in the early days of their acquaintance.

"I still don't see a problem." Wes interrupted his thoughts with a consoling slap on the back. "I didn't say you should go home and do the nasty with her. Date her, Rick. I know it's a radical concept, but if you really apply yourself, you should be able to pull it off."

"People who live in glass houses, Wes..." Rick figured his friend's jest described both of them to a tee. "I haven't had a normal relationship since college. Our chosen profession doesn't lend itself to normalcy. We can be called out of town or the country at a moment's notice. We never know if we're going to be away days or months. No woman will put up with that kind of crap. Add to that the fact that Kate is a vanilla girl and I'm a dark chocolate kind of guy and you have a recipe for disaster." Rick tried to make light of facts that were keeping him up most nights, but sensed Wes wasn't fooled by his nonchalance.

"I don't know about disaster. Haven't you ever heard of swirl ice cream? Like I said, you and Kate are perfect for each other."

"What in the hell could you possibly be basing that on?"

"Consider this." Wes started ticking off his list on his fingers. "One, she loves that damn old farmhouse as much as you do. She's freaking Martha Stewart, which God knows, we need. Two, you obviously find her attractive if you count the number of times you look at that blasted picture of her and Rex on the computer."

Rick started to deny it, but Wes shrugged him off.

"Save your breath. You minimize the thing every time I'm around. I'm the observant one, remember. You have to get up pretty early in the morning—"

"I get it." Rick raised his hands in mock surrender. "You got me. So what if I do look at it? It's a good picture of Rex."

Wes burst out laughing at Rick's joke. "Yeah, right, you're only looking at Rex. To continue, you can deny this but I happen to know you're through with the agency and for that matter, so am I."

Rick fell silent, amazed by his friend's intuitiveness. He'd been thinking of leaving the DEA for months, but hadn't mentioned those thoughts to Wes. He simply hadn't known how to admit to his partner he wanted out when he was sure Wes didn't.

Wes continued to speak, his voice serious for once. "Rick, we used to love this life. The thrill of the chase and all that. There was a time when we thought we could save the world. Time and experience has made us wiser and a hell of a lot more cynical. I'm tired, man. I'm too old for this shit and fact is...I want kids."

Rick was shocked by Wes' admission. His best friend never talked about leaving the agency. Rick thought he was the only one fed up with the tediousness, the red tape, the danger. And Wes never in twenty years of friendship expressed a desire to be a father, yet as soon as he said the words, Rick knew the same was true for him. He'd love to settle down and raise kids. He could picture Kate standing on the porch of the farmhouse with a baby—his baby—on her hip. The idea appealed more than he thought possible.

"And I want them before I get too old to pick them up. Kate is the kind of girl you could marry and spend a lifetime with. Don't fuck it up. Go after her."

Wes, never one to maintain a serious conversation for long, walked toward the bed. "Besides, if you don't go after her, I just might. I mean let's face it, Kate's kind of turned into a total babe now that she's lost some weight and wears her hair down with those sexy blond highlights—and her tits are to die for."

Rick narrowed his eyes at Wes' words, which caused his friend to start laughing. "Before you hit me, I'm kidding. Kate could never be more than a friend to me. Not when it's so obvious you're head over heels for her. Besides, let's face it, Rick. We're mature, responsible, manly men now." As he spoke, he deepened his voice and struck a Superman pose and Rick laughed.

"God help the world when you decide to grow up, Peter Pan."

"I'm going out for ice cream. Noticed a couple tasty-looking treats downstairs in the hotel bar when we came in." Wes flashed him a wicked grin, obviously not finished

taking a dig at him. “Kinda in the mood for some Neapolitan. Always did like how they put the strawberry in the middle of the chocolate and vanilla.”

Rick laughed at Wes’ continued teasing. “Let me guess. In this instance, you plan to be the strawberry?”

“Well, I am known for my sweet disposition. Wanna come? Last hurrah, as it were? Just for old times’ sake?”

“No,” Rick replied, “I think I’ll abstain from sweets until we get home. I suddenly find myself craving something simpler, less complicated. Besides, what about your girl back home?” Rick’s curiosity about the mystery woman was returning now that he knew Wes wasn’t in love with Kate—and he was taken aback by the sadness that crept into his friend’s eyes.

Wes shrugged. “I don’t seem to be a blip on her radar yet and until we finish up this damn case, my hands are tied. But don’t worry. Once we get back to Madison, that woman isn’t going to know what hit her.”

After Wes left, Rick reread Kate’s email again before clicking reply.

Kate,

Next year, you and I will usher in autumn on the front porch together. Save the first day of fall for me.

Rick

Chapter Six

Late November

"Hulloooo," Kate's voice greeted.

Rick frowned, uncertain he'd ever heard that particular tone from his lovely house sitter. "Kate?" He spoke loudly, wondering if she could hear him over the blaring music in the background.

"Rick?" She was yelling into the receiver and he could hear her shushing someone behind her. "Be quiet. It's Rick. Stop singing, Jill."

The background noise only faded a bit. "Hiya Ricky. How're you doin'?" Kate's voice was slurred and Rick realized at once why she sounded so strange. She was drunk.

"Are you having a party, Kate?" Rick watched Wes emerge from the adjoining hotel room.

"Kate's having a party?" Wes asked, but Rick waved him away listening to Kate's response.

"Jus' a few of the girls from work and Jilly. We're celebrating."

"Oh." Rick struggled to decide whether he was amused or angry. "What are you celebrating?"

Rather than answering, Kate asked her own question. "Is Wes there?"

"Yes." Rick finally settled on being annoyed. *What the hell is going on?* "He's right here."

"Lemme talk to him." Rick could tell by her demanding tone that Kate was not just tipsy, but completely and utterly sloshed.

"She wants to talk to you." Rick frowned and handed Wes his cell.

"Hi Kate," Wes said. "Are you having a —"

He didn't get to finish his question and Rick watched as Wes' face flushed slightly.

"Yes," Wes said after a moment. "I've heard of those. Four of them? Maybe you should take it easy."

"What's she saying?" Rick demanded.

"She's drinking shots — blowjobs." Wes was chuckling.

"Give me that phone." Rick grabbed the phone away from Wes.

"Kate," Rick started, but she continued speaking, apparently unaware Wes was no longer on the phone.

"Can't use your hands." She was obviously mid-story. "Just your mouth. They taste like coconut — yuck. I *hate* coconut. But I didn't spit it out. I swallowed every drop."

Rick groaned at her words as the erection her voice inspired rose to full mast. "Jesus, Kate." He tried to erase the very erotic picture she drew in his mind and then figured what the hell and gave into it. When he checked back into the conversation, she was still slurring and rambling on about a mile a minute.

"Shot the fucking bastard right between the eyes!"

"What? Who did you shoot?"

"Shoot?" Wes came to sit beside Rick, who pushed the speakerphone button so Wes could hear as well. In his mind, Rick was trying to figure out how he could get home in time to extricate Kate from whatever mess she may be in at the moment without damaging his investigation.

"It was a brilliant shot. Even the firefighters said so."

"Firefighters?" Rick was more confused than ever. "Kate. Is something on fire?"

"Jus' my wedding dress."

"Kate," Wes interrupted. "Is Jill there?"

"Yep, hang on a sec." A loud hiccup crossed the line followed by Kate's laughter. "I'll get her. I sure do miss you guys. Jilly, the boys wanna talk to you."

"Hello?"

"Jill," Wes' voice was irate and Rick realized he wasn't the only one alarmed by Kate's condition and comments. "What the hell is going on there?"

"Her divorce was final today." Rick began to feel somewhat reassured by the steadiness of Jill's voice. At least she wasn't drunk as a skunk.

"So what?" Wes didn't seem to share that relief and was clearly still concerned. "Kate mentioned shooting someone and firefighters."

At Jill's laugh, Rick felt his temper rise. "Dammit, Jill, what the hell is going on?"

Jill attempted to stifle her laughter, but her answer was halting at best between all her giggling. "Kate got the divorce papers in the mail this morning. A couple of the girls and I decided to throw her a divorce shower."

"Divorce shower?" Rick asked.

"We brought over a bunch of booze and a big picture of Zack. Started doing shots and shooting BB guns at Zack's photo. Kate really got into it. Never seen her so happy or at ease. I thought she'd be depressed, but she's actually over the moon. Anyway, she went up to the house and came out with her wedding dress. We used it as kindling to start a bonfire. Someone driving by called 9-1-1 even though the fire was perfectly contained. Jonesy and Mick ran the call, thank God. They thought it was funny and put out the bonfire, then Jonesy helped Kate line up her last shot at Zack the Rat. Nailed the picture right between the eyes. She was so excited she kissed Jonesy! Can you believe it? Jonesy! Thought the old guy would have a heart attack!"

Rick and Wes frowned at each other. Rick didn't like the thought of Kate kissing anybody, even if Jonesy was pushing sixty and a grandfather of five.

"Jill." Rick couldn't help worrying when a loud shriek sounded through the phone line. "You will take care of her, won't you?"

"Of course I will, Rick. She's my baby sister – and don't you dare yell at her either. Your precious house and yard are fine. She needed today. Wait a second."

Rick could hear Jill talking to someone and then Kate's voice came back on the line.

"Hey," she said breathlessly.

"Hey Kate," he and Wes both answered in unison.

"When're you guys coming home?"

"It will still be a couple weeks, at least," Wes answered.

"Oh, well, don't worry about anything. Me and Rex and the house are all doing just fine."

"Yeah." Rick attempted to joke despite his worry. "You sound like you're doing fine."

"Oh hell." She started giggling. "I'll be sick as a dog tomorrow and swearing off alcohol forever, but you know what? Even then, I'll know it was worth it. I love how I feel right now. I wish I could be this happy every day."

Rick silently wished the same thing for her and then wished even more that he could be with her to celebrate.

Late that night, he was still thinking about her and decided to send her an email.

Kate,

Hope your head isn't hurting you too badly today. Try ginger ale and saltines. That always works for me when I'm hung-over. Congratulations on your return to single status. Enjoy your freedom. Have some turkey and dressing for me tomorrow. Can't tell you what I'd give for a slice of Jill's pumpkin pie with that fancy whipped topping of hers. I wanted to let you know that this year I'm thankful for you. For all your work on the house, the way you've taken care of Rex and your unwavering friendship. With any luck, I'll be back for Christmas and if not, definitely in time to ring in the New Year with you.

Happy Thanksgiving,

Rick

Rereading the message before hitting send, Rick was tempted to add a bit to the “Enjoy your freedom” part. Something along the lines of “while it lasts”. But he decided not to mention his intentions of expanding on their budding friendship.

Deciding the message was fine for now, he hit send before shutting the computer down and chuckling himself to sleep – the image of Kate drinking shots with no hands, shooting a BB gun and kissing an old fireman running through his mind as he drifted off.

Chapter Seven

Mid-December

"The whole thing went to hell at the end." Rick paced the hallway of the hospital outside Wes' room as he answered his captain's questions. "Someone on the inside figured out Wes wasn't what he seemed to be."

"And your identity?" Captain Rogers asked.

"Remained secure, sir," Rick replied. "Wes went missing about an hour before the bust went down yesterday morning."

Rick replayed the events of the past two days for his captain, trying to determine if there was anything he could have done differently.

"Rick. I think you know your response was reckless and downright asinine. You could have gotten yourself killed."

It was nearly midnight and Rick had been awake well over seventy-two hours. His brain had gone to mush so many hours ago he couldn't even work up the energy to defend his actions, so he merely nodded.

"I think you also know if you hadn't acted as you did, Wes would be dead." His boss's voice was gentler as he continued to speak and he reached over to put a comforting hand on Rick's shoulder. "Good job, McAllister. If you hadn't run into that warehouse to find him, he never would have made it out alive."

"I left my post, sir. I failed to follow your direct order to stay put." Rick wasn't sure why he was voluntarily admitting to his misdeeds.

"And believe me, at the time, I was pissed as hell. I was more than ready to fire your impertinent, arrogant ass and the brass will know it was your decision and yours alone to risk your neck running into that place in the middle of a gunfight to drag Wes

out. The jury is still out on whether it was bravery or stupidity, but the fact remains you saved your partner's life."

The raid launched by Rick's team interrupted the drug lord's rather persuasive questioning of Wes about his association with the law. However, two hired thugs still managed to beat Wes to within an inch of his life before Rick could get to him. Rick couldn't help but feel a sick satisfaction about having put a period at the end of their corrupt lives. Breaking into the room in the midst of the gunfight raging outside, Rick shot both men before either of them was able to draw their gun. Rick still wasn't sure how he managed to get out of the warehouse with Wes on his back. One minute they were dodging bullets from every direction and the next they were both laying on the ground behind their own SWAT vehicles, Wes unconscious from his injuries and Rick gasping for enough breath to thank God he was alive.

A nurse came out of Wes' room and Rick walked over to her.

"How is he?"

"Sleeping peacefully. He's heavily sedated, so I'm afraid there's no chance he'll wake up tonight if you were hoping to speak to him."

As the nurse returned to her station, Captain Rogers moved to stand next to Rick. "Why don't you go on back to the hotel and get some rest, Rick. You heard the nurse. Wes will be asleep for quite a while. It looks like you could do with some of that yourself."

Rick nodded. "Yeah, all right. I'm sorry for not following your orders, Captain, but I'm not sorry for any of the rest."

"You did good, Rick. Besides, it's no fun chewing your ass when you're this tired. Get some sleep and I'll kick it good and hard tomorrow." Rick smiled wearily as his captain left. The captain was a good man and it was going to be hard to tell him that he was retiring his badge.

Rick's future loomed bright ahead of him and with any luck, it would come complete with auburn hair and cerulean blue eyes.

Rick walked over to Wes' room and peered in the window to see his friend lying in the bed, needles and tubes sticking out of both arms. His right leg was elevated in a thick cast that reached to his knee and his head was bandaged. Even from this distance, Rick could make out the two black eyes surrounding his broken nose.

He knew his friend's recovery wouldn't be easy and would take time. There had been internal bleeding and the doctors were originally concerned that perhaps a lung had been punctured by one of his numerous broken ribs. Fortunately, emergency surgery proved that wasn't the case. Although he was far from out of the woods, the doctor's prognosis for his recovery had been hopeful.

"He's healthy and young with a strong will to survive." The physician's words had reassured him, but he was still unwilling to leave his friend completely alone. Sinking down into a chair in the waiting room, Rick reached for his cell phone. Before he could make a conscious decision about what he was doing, Rick called his own home number. Kate answered on the third ring, her voice heavy with sleep.

"Hello?"

"Kate. It's Rick."

Rick listened as she forced herself to wake. He could hear her sitting up in bed and he thought he detected the click of the bedside light being flicked on. "Are you okay? Where are you? What time is it?"

"It's a little after midnight and I'm in a small hospital in Texas."

"Oh my God, what happened? Are you hurt? Where's Wes?"

"I'm fine." Rick was secretly pleased by her concern. "Wes is considerably less than fine, but getting better." The stress of the case and the last two days caught up with him. "I'm done with this, Kate."

"With what?"

"This job, the agency, all of it. I'm just so fucking tired."

"Good." He was surprised by the strength behind that single word. Before he could ask her what she meant, she continued to speak. "Do you need me to come there? I can miss a few days of work and catch the first flight out. I could be there by morning."

Touched by her willingness to put everything aside for him, he shook his head before realizing she couldn't see the gesture. "No. Wes will need to stay here for a couple more days and then they'll transfer him via helicopter to the hospital over in Harrisburg so we can be closer to home. His leg is broken as well as his nose and a few ribs. With any luck, I'll be home the day after tomorrow and we'll both be back in the farmhouse to stay by Christmas."

"Jill and I will put up a tree and decorate so Wes will have a nice place to come home to. We can even set up a bedroom for Wes on the ground floor, so he won't have to deal with the stairs."

Rick grinned, more than happy to let Kate take care of all the details. "That sounds perfect, Kate. Moving Wes' bedroom downstairs is a good idea."

"Don't worry about anything, Rick. I'll get Seth to help me start moving some of my stuff back over to Jill's. Today's Tuesday and I have to work this week, but I can probably have most of it out by Saturday."

"What the hell are you talking about?" Rick was upset by the thought of Kate's sudden departure from his house and life.

"You're coming home, Rick. That sort of alleviates the need for a house and dog-sitter."

Spying an opportunity, Rick glanced back at the door of Wes' hospital room and silently apologized to his friend for what he was about to do. "Actually, I need your help now more than ever."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll need help with Wes. He's going to need care while he recuperates. I was hoping between the two of us, we could supply it." A small thread of guilt permeated his conscience, since Rick knew the agency would offer to provide a nurse for Wes, but

desperate times called for desperate measures. He wanted Kate in his home, his life and his bedroom, and if he had to tell a hundred little white lies to make that happen, he would. There was no way he was letting Kate get away.

“Oh my goodness. Of course I’ll stay and help. I wasn’t thinking. Are you sure you won’t mind having me under foot for a while?”

Rick wasn’t sure about the under foot part, but he sure as hell wouldn’t mind having her under another part of him. “I need you, Kate.” His exhaustion was getting the better of him, causing him to forget to shield his words. Luckily, Kate misunderstood his comment.

“Then I’ll stay. For Wes.”

Chapter Eight

Kate ran through the house double-checking every room one more time. Rick had called earlier to say he was getting ready to leave the hospital in Harrisburg and should be home in an hour or so. She'd intended to leave work early today, but as it was the last day before the holiday break, she was delayed by friends and students with cards, gifts and well wishes for the season. Rex, in tune to her nervous excitement, finally frazzled her last nerve and she put him in the basement so she could finish making dinner without constantly tripping over him. Wes wasn't coming home until late next week, just a couple days before Christmas Eve.

Anxious to make sure everything was perfect for Rick's homecoming, Kate straightened the banner she and Jill had hung up yesterday afternoon. The words "Welcome Home" were emblazoned across it in bright red and green letters. Kate felt a bit like a teenage girl going on her first date, which she knew was ridiculous, but she couldn't calm the butterflies twittering around in her stomach.

Ever since Rick's midnight phone call she'd been plotting and planning for this evening. After months of fantasizing about the man, Kate had come to a decision.

She was going to seduce Rick McAllister.

The sum total of her sexual experience was wasted on Zack Summers and she had admitted as much to Jill a couple weeks ago over a bottle of wine. Jill had convinced her that being free didn't mean being celibate and that Kate certainly needed to live a little. Kate had to agree that the bloom was off the rose as far as her vibrators were concerned and she was anxious to spread her wings a bit in the bedroom.

As far as Kate was concerned, she would have Rick all to herself for a week and she intended to make use of every minute. The man wouldn't know what hit him by the time she was finished. Jill had laughed when she told her what she'd planned and then

inundated her with suggestions, advice and an incredibly expensive trip to a lingerie store. Kate blushed to recall some of her uninhibited sister's more risqué comments. When Kate began to get cold feet yesterday, Jill had suggested a trick.

"If you get nervous and find yourself drifting back into shy Kate mode, simply think about what I would do and do it."

"Right," Kate said, nodding her head enthusiastically. "What would Jill do? What would Jill do?"

"Well," Jill laughed. "It sounds kind of sacrilegious when you say it that way."

"And the things you just told me to do aren't sacrilegious?"

"Oh heck, baby sister, one look at the new you and you won't have to do a damn thing. He'll be falling at your feet."

Jill's words had gone a long way toward reassuring her.

It took her nearly two hours to get ready, soaking in a long, hot bubble bath before taking special pains with her hair and makeup, doing it exactly the way Jill had shown her. She'd lost nearly twenty pounds since she last saw Rick and she was determined to show off her new figure. In addition to the lingerie, and as an early Christmas present to herself, she'd purchased a new red-silk blouse and short black-velvet skirt. She felt skinny and sexy in her new clothes and she couldn't wait to see Rick's reaction to the new Kate.

If she was successful in her scheming, Rick wouldn't see just the new outfit, but the matching black bra and thong beneath.

It was hard to believe she and Rick had actually been in the same room together only once. Her obsession with him had grown as the months passed and she was amazed to see the difference less than a year could bring. During Rick's eight-month absence, she'd transformed herself into a new, stronger version of herself. She could face herself in the mirror now and like what she saw. Through their emails and phone calls she'd begun to consider Rick one of her best friends. His compliments and

kindness had carried her through more than a few rough nights when she'd felt like she'd die of loneliness or heartache.

A knock at the door caught her unaware.

That was a fast trip. Rushing to the front door, she paused with her hand on the knob, taking a steadying breath. "Breathe, Kate. It's just Rick. You can do this."

Opening the door wide, she was shocked to see not Rick, but Zack the Rat on the front porch.

"Katie." He graced her with a charming smile that didn't fool her for a minute.

"Zack, what are you doing here?"

"Is that any way to greet your husband?" His voice oozed false friendliness.

"Ex-husband and I'll ask again, what are you doing here?" Kate was pleased with the steadiness of her voice. In the past, she'd let this creep run roughshod over her, but those days were over. She could tell Zack was taken aback by her new attitude.

"It's the holidays, Lovekins, and I missed you. Thought I'd pay a visit. See how you're doing. I thought you might be missing me too." His lips formed a playful pout she found neither cute nor endearing.

"Yeah, well, next time call." Then she reconsidered her words. "Actually, no, don't call. I don't miss you and I never will. Now I'm busy. Good night." She attempted and failed to close the door before he managed to sneak a foot in. No doubt Zack had plenty of experience with doors slamming in his face. After all, he was a seedy lawyer who took great pride in robbing the rich and poor alike to fill his coffers.

"Katie, what's gotten into you? I thought you'd be glad to see me."

"No, Zack, I'm not." Kate tried to close the door despite his foot wedged in the way. Frankly she didn't care if she broke the thing off if she could make him leave. Of all nights, he *would* show up tonight. Glancing over his shoulder, she was relieved to see Rick hadn't arrived yet. "You left me, remember?"

The tug-of-war on the door ended when Zack finally managed to shove his way completely into the house and Kate felt her temper reach fever pitch.

"Get the hell out of here!" She was furious that Zack would attempt to muscle his way into a place where he so clearly was not wanted.

Zack looked behind her. "Where are your boyfriends?"

"Boyfriends?" She felt a bit stupid for responding to the shallow jerk and found herself wondering what on earth she'd ever seen in him. While the time apart had been good for her, Kate couldn't help but feel a perverse satisfaction that the same didn't appear to hold true for Zack. His expensive suit was wrinkled and beginning to show some wear and his usually immaculate hair looked greasy and in dire need of a good cut. His face was covered with much more than a five o'clock shadow. In fact, it didn't look like he had shaved in days.

Moving closer, Zack reached his hand toward her face as if to touch her. Kate's skin crawled at the thought and she smacked it away. She took a calming breath and repeated her request. "Go home, Zack. Go home to your girlfriend. You remember her? Soozan."

"She threw me out," Zack muttered. "Said I spent too much time with the boys. All she ever did was yell at me and nag. You never nagged me, Katie."

"Yeah, well, I was wrong not to."

"Oh no, Katie, you were the perfect wife. You never cared if I went out with the fellas and came home drunk. Soozan actually hid my car keys and this last time, she threw all my clothes out into the yard. Look at my suit, Katie! Do you know how much this cost?"

"Great," Kate muttered. "I'm suddenly starting to respect Soozan. Zack, I hate to burst your bubble, but the reason I never nagged you is because I didn't want you at home. You really do need to leave now." Once again, Kate tried unsuccessfully to move Zack out the front door.

"Got nowhere to go," he added. "This is a nice place. I always wondered what it looked like on the inside." He started looking around the house.

"Go away, Zack. I'm busy and have absolutely no desire to sit around and rehash the good old days. Oh wait a minute, that's right. There *were* no good old days."

Hoping he would follow her lead, Kate moved back toward the door, but Zack halted her with a strong hand on her upper arm.

"Not so fast, Lovekins." Kate caught a whiff of his breath as he spoke. Whiskey. So that was it. He was drunk.

"If you call me Lovekins one more time, I swear to God I will castrate you."

"Okay, Sweetpea, okay. Don't get your panties in a bunch. I just wanted to talk to you. Are you alone?" Kate felt a cold chill creep down her spine at his question.

"Rick will be home any minute and as I said," Kate shrugged Zack's hand off her arm, "I have nothing to say to you."

"Sure, Rick will be here any minute." Zack drawled Rick's name in a way that made Kate uncomfortable. "Talk around town is he's out of the country."

"He's back now." Kate didn't like the way Zack was ogling her new outfit.

"Look at you." Zack took a step back, looking her up and down. "You've changed, Katie. Nice, tight, firm body, new hairdo, badass attitude. This isn't good, Katie. Not good at all. What happened to the sweet little girl I married?"

"She divorced you." Kate's voice was deadpan, but Zack didn't seem to register her words at all.

"Nope, don't like the look of this at all." He grasped her hair, pulling several strands out of the braid.

"That's funny." Kate shoved his hands away. "I don't remember asking your opinion. You have thirty seconds to get your ass out of here or I'm calling the cops." With that, she moved toward Rick's office and the phone. The longer Zack stayed, the more he said, the more he tried to touch her, the more uneasy she became. Zack had

never raised a hand to hurt her before, but obviously her ex-husband had done quite a bit of changing in the past year as well. There was a hard edge to his face and his green eyes suddenly seemed cold as he looked at her like a starving dog drooling over a juicy bone. The thought brought to mind Rex. Damn it, she never shut the dog away before tonight and now, the one time she really needed his threatening presence, he couldn't get to her.

"Oh no you don't." Zack grabbed her roughly. Kate didn't have a chance to react before he threw her violently against the wall. Struggling to regain the breath he knocked out of her and process Zack's anger, Kate stopped struggling and merely looked at the man she'd called "husband" for six years. Zack's unleashed fury was evident and for the first time, Kate felt true fear in his presence.

"You think I don't know all about you?" he taunted. "What do you think the guys at the bar are talking about these days?" He didn't wait for a reply. "You. That's what they're talking about. You and this cozy little set-up you got going here. My wife playing house with two men."

Kate was stunned speechless by the vehemence in his voice and she couldn't begin to understand his anger. Clearly he was so inebriated he didn't know what he was saying. Rick and Wes weren't here and hadn't been since she'd moved in.

Kate struggled to process Zack's jealousy. He'd never paid two minutes of attention to her in years of marriage. Now he was here, ranting and raving about other men and calling her his wife just as she was picking up the pieces and moving on with her life. Besides, she hadn't heard any nasty gossip from the town about her living at Wes and Rick's farmhouse.

Of course, she was the last one to find out about Zack's infidelity as well.

Zack's voice quickly reverted back to his previously charming one before she could reply to his strange comments. Reaching out, he drew one finger down her cheek and the action caused a tremor of fear to rumble through her body again.

"You should have told me you wanted two men in your bed, Katie. Any one of my friends would have been happy to join us in our bedroom. Shit, I'd love to watch one of my mates fuck your ass while you suck me off, especially now that you've lost all that disgusting weight. All you had to do was ask."

Revulsion at his words caused her stomach to lurch. "Get your filthy hands off me!" Her earlier strength was gone, replaced by confusion and disgust.

"My hands – filthy?" Zack snarled at her insult. Kate never saw it coming, but she felt the thousand pinpricks of pain his hard slap on her cheek initiated. Her head rolled to the side hard and only the wall at her back kept her standing.

"You're the filthy bitch and don't you ever forget it! You play Miss Sweet and Innocent with me then turn around and spread your legs for McAllister and Robson. Oh no, Katie. You owe me. Years of boring sex and now it's payback time."

As Zack grabbed her struggling hands, Kate was surprised to discover her ex-husband was so strong. The only lifting she ever saw him do was beer mugs in the bars. In the midst of her attempts to get free, Zack pulled on her new blouse. Kate cried out as the shirt ripped down the middle. Buttons fell onto the floor like raindrops and the sound of them hitting the hardwood woke up a demon in Kate. She knew she should be horrified by the situation, but her anger was definitely stronger than her fear and panic at the moment.

"You asshole!" She struck out at him with both fists.

"Why are you fighting me?" Zack's grip on her shirt was relentless. "You're my wife."

"Are you delusional?" Kate screamed back. "We are divorced, Zack! DIVORCED!"

Her words failed to penetrate Zack's whiskey-induced fervor as he tried to kiss her. Kate managed to elude his lips at the last minute, the smell of his rancid breath sending a wave of nausea through her stomach.

"Let go of me." She kicked out with her legs as he held her arms pinned tightly. Her knee connected with his balls and Zack howled with pain, but he still managed to hold

her tight. Raising his arm, he slapped her again. Harder than the first time, even though she didn't think that was possible. A metallic taste touched her tongue as she realized her lip was bleeding.

"My *wife*!" His hand reached out to pinch one of her nipples through her bra — hard. It hurt and Kate screamed at the top of her lungs. Rex, hearing her distress, started to bark loudly and she could hear the dog scratching and pawing at the basement door, obviously desperate to get to her. She watched Zack glance nervously over his shoulder for the animal, but when he realized the dog wasn't a threat, he turned back to her.

Before she realized his intent, Zack grabbed the hem of her skirt, yanking it up around her waist, revealing her new garters.

"Is this how your new boyfriends like you to dress?" Zack snarled as Kate continued to fight him off. Her sexy lingerie seemed to trigger his insane jealousy toward Rick and Wes yet again.

"I don't know what you're talking about!" She was breathless with her attempts to escape. "Let — me — go!"

Zack merely laughed at her request, scraping her neck with his teeth and biting her bare shoulder.

A deep voice from the doorway and the sound of a gun cocking stopped them both.

"I believe the lady made a request." Rick's gun was pointed steadily at Zack's head. "I suggest you let her go."

Zack seemed to consider Rick's words and for a moment, Kate feared in his drunken stupor he wouldn't stop and Rick would be forced to shoot him. Finally, after several tense moments, Zack dropped her arms. Kate scrambled to grasp the sides of her torn shirt together while trying to pull down her skirt at the same time.

"This is my house and Kate is my guest. You're a lawyer." Rick's voice was laced with menace. "You know the law is on my side. I can shoot you for a trespasser or a thief and get away with it. Get out."

His words were so soft Kate could barely hear them over the incredible thundering of her heart and her struggles to catch her breath.

Zack, fool that he was, didn't seem to realize the imminent danger he was in. He looked back at Kate with a smirk. "Just giving my wife what she likes. You should know, McAllister. The bitch goes for the rough stuff."

Red-hot fury pierced her and she spit in Zack's face. "I never gave you permission to rape me! I'm getting a restraining order first thing in the morning. Don't ever look at me again or I'll save Rick the trouble by shooting you myself."

Zack wiped his face with his sleeve, an angry snarl curling his lip, but he didn't say another word. He merely walked to the door.

"You heard the lady." Rick's words caused Zack to pause at the doorway. "You come near her or this house again and you're a dead man."

Zack stormed out of the house and Kate heard the sound of his car door slamming and the engine turning over before he peeled out of the driveway.

Her legs failed in their struggle to remain upright and Kate slowly slid down the wall at her back as all the strength in her body fled with a whoosh.

"Jesus, Kate." Rick rushed to her side. The compassion and worry in his voice was her undoing as tears flooded her eyes.

She didn't recall Rick picking her up and carrying her to the sofa in the living room, but she figured he must have because when the sobs finally subsided, she was tucked on his lap as he rocked her, whispering comforting words in her ear.

"I'm s-sorry," she stammered. "I never c-cry."

"Good God, Kate." His grip on her tightened even more. "I think you're allowed under the circumstances."

As Kate struggled to pull herself together, she took several deep breaths and forced the tears to stop. "I'm okay now."

Taking her chin between his fingers, he raised her face until she had no choice but to look into his dark eyes. She watched an angry scowl cross his face as he turned her head slightly to the left. "He hit you."

Realizing Zack's blows must have left a mark, she reached up to cover her cheek and nodded only slightly, afraid of the absolute fury she saw on Rick's face.

"I'm sorry I didn't shoot him. I'll have to rectify that situation the next time I see him."

His anger and tough words struck her as funny and sweet and incredibly macho and before she could think better of it, she laughed.

Rick looked at her, completely confused by her sudden about-face, which only caused her to laugh harder.

"Can I play Lois Lane to your Superman?" she asked in between giggles.

Rick merely smiled at her silly comment and took her breath away with his response. "You can be my Lois anytime, gorgeous lady, but do you think I'm kidding about shooting that asshole?"

Realizing she was laughing at his attempts toward chivalry, she quickly stopped and shook her head. "No, I'm sure you mean it. But you're a smart guy, Rick, and I'm sure by tomorrow you and I can figure out a way to get even with Zack the Rat without going to prison. Trust me, he's not worth that. Okay?" She hoped her light tone would help the seriousness of her words penetrate the anger that continued to linger in his eyes.

"Revenge without prison sounds good." His gorgeous, dimpled grin was back in place and causing her to squirm on his lap. The movement brought her derriere in direct contact with a surprisingly firm part of him and she gasped, looking up into his eyes. The laughter and anger she'd found there in the previous moments were replaced with something much more disturbing and exciting—lust, pure and simple lust.

"Rick." Her voice was a mere whisper and she fought to repress a shiver as his eyes traveled from her face down her body.

Glancing down, she realized she was as good as naked, with her shirt hanging open to reveal her lacy new bra and her skirt hovering around the tops of her thighs, leaving at least two inches of bare leg showing above her black garters.

"Oh." Her unfamiliar feelings of lust and the lingering fear of Zack's actions crashed in on her all at once and stole away the self-confidence she'd felt when the night began. She looked like a disaster and felt even worse. She struggled to cover herself despite the trembling of her hands. Rick grasped her hands in one of his to still them.

"No, let me." He pulled her skirt down gently. "I'm afraid all the buttons are gone on this shirt." The slippery material of the blouse refused to stay closed.

His words brought frustrated tears to her eyes. "The best laid schemes o' mice and men," she whispered under her breath, her voice hoarse from crying. As far as seduction set-ups went, this had to have been the worst in all of history.

"Gang aft a-gley? Go astray?" Rick finished her quote with a question in his voice.

Kate was startled by his knowledge of the Burns poem and the annoying fact that he always answered her mumblings. She shook her head in amazement. "How in the hell did you know the rest of that line?"

Rick laughed. "Tenth-grade English. We read Steinbeck's novel. I must have paid attention that day. What was it referring to here?"

Regretfully, Kate rose from his all-too-cozy lap. "It's not important." Her seduction plans for Rick were hanging in tatters around her, much like her ruined shirt. So much for making a better first impression on Rick than the one she'd managed in May. She'd started the night feeling confident and beautiful. Now she could feel the mascara tracing the tracks of her tears, her hair hanging limply down her back and her sexy new clothes were utterly ruined.

"I should run up and change my clothes. I'm a bit indecent."

Kate thought for a moment Rick was going to say something, but he merely nodded and she escaped to her bedroom. As she closed the door behind her, she fought back the

fresh round of tears that threatened. Walking to the mirror, she inspected her face. The damage Zack wrought was worse than she'd feared. Her mascara was indeed smeared down her face. Almost all of her hair had escaped its French braid and she could see a dark bruise forming on her right cheek where Zack slapped her not once, but twice. The thought of his attack and her image in the mirror didn't upset her as much as it made her furious.

"That son of a bitch," she muttered. "Who the hell does he think he is?" Zack Summers married her fresh out of college, stole her innocence and then steadily ignored her for the next six years. Now, just as she was getting back on her feet, the bastard returned for round two.

"No sir. Not going to happen."

Catching her reflection in the mirror once more, Kate felt her confidence crumble, considering her plans for tonight once more. "Not going to happen." How could she seduce Rick? Even with fancy clothes, hair and makeup, she'd been a nervous wreck.

"Back to square one," she said to herself as she briefly toyed with the idea of calling Jill to get another much-needed pep talk.

No. No Jill. There was no way in hell she was going to let Zack the Rat ruin one more night of her life. She'd worked hard for tonight and she deserved it. She wanted one night—well, actually one *week* of magic with a man who made her toes curl and, by God, she was going to have it. No more acting like her usual bumbling, mumbling, nervous, shy self. Grabbing a tissue, she started to scrub away the mascara.

"You can do this," she chanted as she washed her face, combed out her tangled hair and changed her clothes.

When she looked in the mirror again, she saw herself—Kate Harper—and again she was filled with uneasiness. Considering her sister's silly advice, she wondered, what would Jill do?

Go downstairs and rip the man's clothes off.

"Oh yeah," she muttered with a light laugh. "Good luck with that, Kate."

Chapter Nine

It took all the strength in Rick's body not to follow Kate up the stairs to her bedroom. He could see she'd taken special pains for his homecoming tonight as he glimpsed the banner lying in a heap on the floor and he knew Summers' attack had ruined her plans, as well as her pretty outfit.

Reaching for his cell phone, Rick walked back out onto the front porch despite the chilliness of the night. Calling his friend, a cop at the Madison police department, Rick tipped Josh Kendrick off that Summers was driving back toward town dead drunk. Josh assured Rick he'd intercept the sleazy lawyer, all too pleased to help bring down the arrogant Mr. Summers. *Revenge without prison*, Rick thought with a grin, recalling Kate's earlier words.

As he glanced back at his car, Rick could see the driver's side door hanging open. When he'd heard Kate's scream and saw the strange car as he'd pulled in the driveway, his heart had stopped. Grabbing his gun, he'd flown up the front porch steps in a single leap. Seeing Zack Summers with his two-timing hands all over Kate made him see red and it was all he could do not to follow the example Kate set in November and shoot the bastard between the eyes. Not that his Kate was anybody's weak victim. She gave as good as she got and he'd been proud to see the way she fought back. He would have to teach her some self-defense moves one day soon.

Rick walked back to his car and retrieved his suitcase. The sound of Rex's hysterical barking brought him back into the house. The poor animal had been barking since his return, but Rick had failed to really hear it as anything more than background static until now, his concern for Kate overshadowing everything around him. He moved quickly toward the basement and opened the door to release his beloved pet. Rex

barreled out of the room, the fur at the back of his neck standing straight up, teeth bared.

"Easy there, boy." Rex ran around the room, apparently looking for the intruder. Satisfied it was only Rick in the room, he launched himself at his owner in obvious joy. Placing his two front paws on his chest, he began licking all over Rick's face. Rick laughed and half-heartedly tried to escape the big creature's wet, sloppy kisses.

"That's a good boy," Rick said with a chuckle. "I missed you too, big guy."

A soft voice from the bottom of the stairs interrupted their brief reunion.

"I think he knew you were coming home." Kate came back into the living room. "I had to put him in the basement because he was so excited, I thought he would break something. I swear to you, Rick. I've never locked him away before today."

Rick smiled, hoping to reassure her. He knew how much Kate loved Rex. He could hear it in the emails she'd written about the crazy dog's exploits and adventures. "He can sense when something good is about to happen. Some sort of sixth sense, I suppose, and it does make him a pain in the ass. I had a friend from college come to visit last year. Rex picked up on my enthusiasm and ended up knocking the kitchen table over. Our whole dinner hit the floor. It's okay, Kate. I'm just sorry he couldn't help you when you needed him."

"Me too." Rick took a moment to study her to make sure she was okay and savor the image of her. She had changed into comfortable lounge pants, a long-sleeved tee and thick socks—and he found this outfit as stimulating to his libido as the silk and velvet one Zack had destroyed.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"Thanks to you, I'm fine. But I don't want to talk about Zack any more tonight." Kate was obviously anxious to forget the whole sordid ordeal. "It's your first night home."

"So it is." He started to walk toward her. "I've miss—" he began, but the sound of a smoke detector caused Kate to cry out.

"My casserole!"

She ran by him into the kitchen and Rick arrived just in time to see billows of black smoke streaming out of the oven. Kate grabbed a potholder and pulled a charred casserole to the counter with a curse. Quickly, Rick raised the window above the sink and opened the back door. Kate picked up a towel and tried to send the smoke out the window while the detector continued its ear-piercing scream.

When the incessant beeping failed to stop, Rick watched in amazement as his mild-mannered librarian turned into a tiger. Fury filled her face as she grabbed a metal spatula from the counter and swung as hard as she could at the annoying noise.

"Shut up!" she yelled as the detector flew off the ceiling, breaking into at least a dozen pieces.

"Ouch. Remind me not to piss you off in the kitchen."

Embarrassed by her sudden fit of anger, she groaned. "I broke your smoke detector." Her voice was filled with remorse and Rick struggled not to laugh as she closed her eyes and immediately started her usual, adorable mumbling. "Great, Kate. Brilliant, just brilliant."

Unable to restrain himself, Rick responded to her self-recriminations with a laugh. "I thought it was rather brilliant. I mean, I understand the purpose and need for those damn things, but my God, that noise is unbearable, isn't it?"

Kate looked at Rick rather shell-shocked before a light giggle escaped. Rick smiled and bent down to pick up the pieces of the destroyed detector as Kate's giggles turned into great peels of laughter.

"Dolly Parton said in *Steel Magnolias* that laughter through tears was her favorite emotion and after the night I've had, I have to say I agree. Oh Rick." Tears of mirth streamed down her face. "I cannot even begin to count how many ways tonight has gone wrong."

The sound of her laughter was infectious and Rick found himself carried away with the humor of the situation as well. He crossed the room to stand closer to her and found

himself reaching out to touch her before he could think better of his actions. His fingers gently tucked a piece of hair that had fallen into her face behind her ear. After everything she'd been through tonight, the fact she could laugh touched his heart. Kate's laughter calmed at his gentle touch and he watched her big blue eyes widen as he bent down to her.

"Oh, I don't know about that." He moved until his lips barely touched hers. He watched as she studied his approach, her breathing suddenly labored. "I can't think of anything nicer than coming home to a beautiful woman and a nice meal."

He punctuated his words with a light kiss before retreating again. He knew he needed to take things slowly with Kate, especially after Zack's attack, but he found her very hard to resist after such a prolonged absence.

For a moment, she seemed spellbound by his soft kiss before gathering her wits and contradicting his words. "Beautiful woman? How could you determine that through the thick layer of mascara running down my face? And your nice meal is that hunk of charcoal over there on the counter. By the way, it was chicken."

"Kate." Rick reached out to cup her freshly washed, makeup-free face with both hands. "You *are* beautiful and I'm not hungry." Before she could fight his words again, he bent down to press another quick kiss to her moist lips. At least, he intended for it to be quick. The second his lips touched hers, his best intentions flew out the window as he ran his fingers through her soft hair, taking her mouth in nothing less than an absolute possession.

Kate stood stock still for only a minute before he felt her hands rise to his shoulders, clinging to him briefly before they moved behind his neck.

Tightening his grip, he moved his tongue along her lips, begging for entrance to her warm mouth. When she parted her lips on a gasp, he took advantage, claiming her breath as his own. After several tentative swipes, Rick silently rejoiced when her tongue joined in on the action, traveling to his mouth, teasing his lips and teeth.

After a few minutes or perhaps a few years, Rick reluctantly released her. He pressed his forehead against hers. "Perhaps I should clarify. I'm not hungry for chicken."

Refusing to give her a moment to ponder the kiss or his words, he grabbed her hand and towed her toward the living room. Settling her next to him on the couch, he kept a tight grip on her hand.

"Rick. Why did you kiss me?"

Rick smiled at her, the question one he had anticipated and expected. "I wanted to." He loved teasing her with the brevity of his response.

She rolled her eyes in mock impatience. "But why did you want to?"

"Because," Rick began, "I've spent eight long months in dingy motel rooms with only Wes for company. If not for your emails and phone calls, I would have gone mad. You were the only thing getting me through that last mission, Kate."

"I loved your emails too."

"Look at you." He brushed his hand through her hair once again, unable to stop touching her. "You look good enough to eat."

"Good thing," she replied, "considering there's no dinner."

Rick laughed at her response. "I like your new haircut."

He watched as she blushed with his compliment. "I've lost a lot of weight too." Obviously she thought Rick only cared about her external changes.

Rick leaned back and looking more closely at her. "You look beautiful, Kate, but it's more than that. I don't know how to describe it, but it's as if someone turned a light on inside you."

"My God." Her eyes filled with tears. "I think that's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me."

Rick reached out to wrap one arm around her shoulders, pulling her over to lean against his side. He pressed a light kiss to the top of her head. "You've changed since

you've been here. I noticed it in the emails, but seeing you in person..." He shook his head. "Kate, you take my breath away."

Squirming out of his grip, she peeked up at him with a coy grin he couldn't quite read. "Can I tell you a secret?"

"Of course you can."

"Before Zack showed up, I mean, tonight. I, umm..."

Rick gently nudged her knee with his as encouragement. "Just say it Kate."

"I know we've only spent a little bit of time together. Only a few hours when you stop to think about it."

Rick grinned. "That's true. The first day we met eight months ago and tonight."

"But I really feel as though I know you. Maybe better than I've ever known anyone else. Does that make sense?"

"It does to me. I feel the same way."

"Tonight I planned to seduce you." She spoke so quickly he had to struggle to understand her words.

"Seduce me?" Her words hit him with the force of a two-ton truck. He anticipated having to convince her they should begin dating and as far as seduction, he thought he would be the one initiating any bedroom play. To hear she was thinking along the same lines thrilled and relieved him. Hell, more than that, he was aroused beyond belief.

Kate, obviously confused by his failure to respond, merely nodded and he watched her courage begin to waver in the face of his continuing silence.

"Seduce me," he whispered.

Surprised by his acquiesce, Kate didn't move at first. Then, as if awakening from a long sleep, she gave him the most seductive smile he'd ever seen.

Rising up to kneel beside him, she leaned forward and initiated a kiss so hot, Rick wondered if they would set off the smoke detector in this room as well. His shy angel turned into a vixen and Rick struggled to keep up. Her hands were touching him

everywhere—in his hair, along his day-old beard, over his shoulders. Just when he thought she couldn't surprise him any more, she threw a leg over his to straddle his lap, gripped the lapels of his flannel shirt and pulled roughly. The buttons popped as they tore from the material, but his wild Kate simply continued her assault, her fingers and lips toying with his now-hard nipples.

"Jesus." His hands clung to her soft hair. It smelled like orchids. When he'd first come in tonight, she'd had it pulled away from her face in a fancy braid, but now it hung loose and long over her shoulders. He would have to make sure she always wore it down for him.

Small fingers at the button of his jeans caused his grip in her hair to tighten. For a moment, he thought he was hurting her as her fingers stilled, but her accelerated breathing clued him in—Kate liked his rough touch. Testing the waters, he pulled her hair again. This time Kate groaned, her hips thrusting against his upper thighs.

Beautiful, he thought. By God, she was the most beautiful, sensuous woman on earth and she was going to be his. He was going to teach her how to use all that latent sexuality with him. Before he could consider it further, Kate was moving off the couch, kneeling between his legs.

Dear Lord, maybe Kate had a few lessons of her own to share.

She was killing him. A dominant in bed, Rick couldn't recall ever letting a woman take the lead, but something about Kate told him she needed to do this. Whether it was residual fear from Zack's assault or a way of testing her newfound self-confidence, he couldn't say. Maybe it was both or neither, but tonight, he knew she needed to direct the course they took.

Taking a deep breath, he felt her rob it from him again as her small hand tugged at the waist of his jeans. Lifting his hips, he helped her pull them down until they hit the floor around his ankles. Damn boots kept him from kicking them straight off. Kate hadn't removed his boxers so his cock was still hidden from her view and Rick was grateful for that small mercy. Slow and steady wins the race, he thought as he offered

up a silent prayer that Kate wouldn't suddenly revert back to her innate shyness when faced with his extremely obvious desire for her.

Bending over, Kate unlaced one boot and then the other, dragging them off so slowly, his teeth hurt he was clenching them so hard. It was all he could do not to throw the damn seductress on the floor and pound into her, his need for her was so great.

When she finally removed his boots and pants, she leisurely moved her hands up his legs, teasing the light dusting of hair on his upper thighs before moving inward. Clenching his fists into the couch cushions, Rick tried to concentrate on calming down or this was going to be the shortest seduction in history.

"God, Kate." He hissed in a pained breath as her fingers trailed lightly over his boxer-clad erection. "Touch me, sweetheart. Wrap your hand around me."

Kate smiled at his words as she reached for the waistband of his boxers. Slowly, she dragged the cotton down until his rock-hard cock was freed. Rick could hear her intake of breath as she saw him for the first time. He was well aware that some women found his rather large size intimidating.

"Holy shit," she muttered and Rick couldn't contain the groan that escaped his lips.

"Don't worry, Kate." He felt the need to reassure her when he felt her hands tremble slightly on his legs. "We'll take this nice and slow."

Watching her closely, ready to stop her if she tried to escape, Rick watched her stiffen her spine, much like she did back in May as she'd prepared to meet Rex. Experienced she was not, but her strength and determination more than made up for it. Rick was finding himself falling even more for this sexy innocent.

Kate gave him a lopsided grin. "Have you ever heard that saying, 'Anything more than a mouthful', Rick?"

"Ah, my sweet Kate, I can assure you none of this will go to waste." With that, he took her hands in his and wrapped them around his erection, showing her exactly how to touch him, caress him.

She mastered the art in less than a minute and again Rick felt himself struggling to maintain control. Never before had a woman driven him to this height so quickly. Wes liked to joke they were jaded old men who'd peaked too early. A few minutes in Kate's capable hands blew that theory out of the water.

His lack of control was shattered even further when he felt Kate's soft lips kiss the tip of his cock. Her tongue darted out to taste the drops of pre-cum gathered there.

"Mmm." She hummed as she opened her mouth to envelop the entire head.

Rick started muttering himself and Kate stopped for a moment.

"Did you say something?"

"I'm reciting the states in alphabetical order—California, Colorado, Connecticut. Don't stop, Kate. Whatever you do, don't stop." Her soft giggles at his joke tormented his turgid flesh even more.

The next time she opened her mouth, she took him to the back of her throat in one quick movement. Rick's head flew back against the cushions of the couch. In and out, Kate played his cock like a flute.

"Florida, Georgia," he spat out through gritted teeth and Kate giggled again, this time with her mouth full of him.

Her hands wrapped around the base of his erection as she began to move her mouth upon him in earnest. Rick's hands returned to grip her hair tightly. He was rewarded by a small nip on the head of his cock that felt like heaven. He wasn't averse to a little bit of pleasure-pain himself. Kate deep-throated him like a pro and Rick realized after only a few minutes he would never last long. His eight months of celibacy had left him with very little control.

"Kate, sweetheart, I'm going to come. If you don't want—" His warning was cut off when she tightened her grip on the base of his cock, her other hand reaching low to grasp and play with his balls.

"God. Damn. It!" It felt as if the tip of his cock had exploded as Kate swallowed every drop of his cum, not releasing him until she had licked him clean.

For several minutes, Rick lay still, trying to calm the beating of his heart. Kate simply sat at his feet with her head resting lightly on his thigh. He knew he should say something, but the intensity of the moment robbed his ability for speech. The only words that came to mind were "I love you" and Rick was afraid it was much too soon to utter that particular phrase. Kate had just come out of a terrible marriage and, regardless of their pen-pal status, they really didn't know each other well enough for those words.

Or did they? He was certain he'd never felt this way for any other woman. But were those feelings wrapped around the fact he was suddenly feeling his age and overcome by a desire to settle down? Was he trying to make Kate into the woman he wanted at this stage in his life or was she truly the one? One thing he knew for sure was Kate was too special to toy with. Until he was certain his feelings were genuine, he wouldn't risk saying the words now, only to hurt her later.

Lost in his own thoughts, Rick was surprised when he felt Kate rise quickly. Realizing he'd been a selfish bastard in his own pleasure, Rick reached out for her, more than ready to make amends.

"Kate." She moved too quickly for him and managed to elude his grasp.

"I-I," she stammered. "I'm kind of tired. I think I'll go to bed."

Confused, Rick tried to rise but his ankles were confined in his boxers. "Bed?"

"Yeah." She spoke so casually he was left reeling. "Sorry about dinner. Good night." Before Rick could pull up his boxers and set himself to rights, she was gone.

"What the hell?"

She merely smiled and left the room as if they'd done no more than watch a movie together. He knew — deep inside he was certain — Kate had never given a man a blowjob before. There was no way in hell he was going to let her crawl into bed with no more explanation than "I'm tired."

It was time Kate realized exactly who and what she was dealing with in regards to Rick McAllister. While he may have a few uncertainties at the moment, he had no intentions of letting Kate escape him until they fully explored their potential as a couple. The best way for that to happen was for Kate to see exactly what she was getting with him.

And what she was *not* getting was a man who ever let a woman walk away unsatisfied.

Chapter Ten

Kate leaned heavily against the inside of her closed bedroom door. If it weren't for bad luck, she wouldn't have any luck at all tonight.

"Shit, shit and double shit," she muttered, not for the first time since escaping the living room. As if the night hadn't gone to hell in a hand basket from the very beginning, she had to blow it all by turning into a coward and running away like a fool.

"I mean bloody hell, Kate," she continued to chastise herself under her breath.

First, Zack shows up and tries to rape her—

No, she refused to linger on the thought of that. Every time she remembered Zack's hands on her, she felt like vomiting.

"I am not going to think about that," she whispered to herself, pushing Zack's face from her mind. She knew sooner or later she would have to deal with the horror of his attack, but for now it was easier to push the whole thing from her mind.

On top of that nightmare, her new, way-too-expensive outfit was ruined, dinner burned to a crisp and then she lost her temper and destroyed that stupid smoke detector. Worst of all, she'd admitted to Rick McAllister, man of her dreams, that she'd planned to seduce him before falling to her knees and sucking his cock. *Good God. I've lost my mind.*

Never in her life had she given a man a blowjob. Why had she thought for even a moment she could pull it off? Although, come to think of it, Rick certainly hadn't complained. In fact, he'd looked downright pleased with her efforts, so maybe she hadn't screwed it up entirely.

Thinking back on the amazing experience, Kate felt the same incredible pressure in her body she'd experienced all night. She was so horny she thought she would explode.

Problem was, all her damn insecurities came crashing down on her at once. Suddenly the idea of Rick taking her clothes off, seeing her naked and making love to her seemed too far out of her realm of ability. Who the hell did she think she was? She was plain, old, boring Kate Harper. No doubt Rick was used to sophisticated, experienced, sexy women. She'd never done much more than missionary style. I mean, sure, she'd read plenty of erotic romance books in her life, but there was a hell of a big difference between reading and doing.

She'd been so terrified by the look of desire in his eyes, she had fled the room like a babbling idiot. God only knew what she'd said to him, but she would be surprised if it wasn't something as stupid as, "Gee, thanks for letting me suck your cock, Rick. See you later."

Sighing heavily, she walked over to her bed wondering how on earth she'd ever face him again – when she heard a knock on the door.

"Great," she mumbled. Of course, he wouldn't let her suffer her humiliation in silence.

Unwilling to open the door, she simply called out, "Yes?"

"Open the door, Kate," Rick replied in a no-nonsense voice.

"Uh, Rick, I..." She attempted to think of some reason to deny him entrance.

"Kate, open this goddamn door or I'll break it down."

"That's an old door, Rick. It's solid wood."

"All the more reason you should open it. Save it from demolition and my shoulder from pain." His voice lost some of its gruffness as he continued his plea. "Please Kate, open the door. I only want to talk."

The sincerity and kindness of his request worked. She crossed the room and unlatched the lock. He stood in the doorway for several seconds before giving her a guilty grin.

"I think I owe you an apology."

"You owe me an apology?" Kate was surprised by his words. "Actually, I was thinking it was the other way around. I'm sorry I ran out, Rick."

"Why did you leave?"

"I, um, well," she stammered.

"Dammit, Kate. You don't have to be afraid of me."

Kate could see the concern in Rick's gaze and it made her feel even worse. He thought he'd frightened her. She didn't want him to suffer remorse just because of her lack of confidence.

"Oh Rick, I'm not afraid of you. Honestly, I'm not."

"Did we go too far too fast? Did I scare you? Because we can slow down, sweetheart. After what you've been through tonight, I was a bastard to push for anything at all. I'm sorry about that."

It upset her to hear him berate himself. "I swear to you, you didn't do anything wrong. It's just...me."

Rick raised an eyebrow and waited for her to elaborate and she felt all the blood in her body rush to her cheeks.

"You can tell me anything, Kate. You haven't held back a thing from me in the last eight months of emails and phone calls. It shouldn't be any different face-to-face."

"I'm not really sure I'm ready for you to see me naked." She turned around quickly, hoping he couldn't see her mortification.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist as Rick's chuckles tickled her ear. "Is that all?" She struggled to get free, too embarrassed to be so close to him. "No, don't." He gripped her tighter, her back pressed flush to his front. "God, Kate. You scared the hell out of me. I thought you were disappointed or something."

"Disappointed?" she asked incredulously. "Are you kidding me?"

"Well, you have to admit, sweetheart, the pleasure was all mine."

"Oh no." Kate escaped his hold and turned to face him. "It was wonderful for me too. Really. I've always wondered, I mean, I wanted to know what..." Her words fell away and Rick smiled as he pressed a playful kiss to her nose.

"I know it was your first time, Kate."

"Was it that bad?"

Rick frowned at her question. "Good God, Kate, if it had been much better, I would have had a stroke. You were amazing. Sexy as hell."

Kate smiled at his compliments, pleased and silently praying his words were sincere. She rather suspected they were, given his response at the time.

"When's the last time you were with a man, Kate?"

Kate felt her face flush even darker. "Zack and I...I mean, our sex life sort of died out about three years ago."

"Three years?"

"Guess I should have realized right then that he was getting his milk from another cow." She grimaced as she tried weakly to make a joke of her own foolishness, but Rick merely shook his head.

"That man was an idiot to let you go, but I can assure you Kate, I won't make the same mistake."

Kate was amazed by Rick's unexpected attraction to her. She'd had a crush on the man since she'd met him, but she never imagined, didn't dare hope that her desire would be returned. To hear him compliment her, to feel his hands hold hers, to taste his lips as they kissed hers was so completely unreal, she wasn't sure how to react.

Rather than feeling better, however, she felt a cold chill snake its way down her spine. She could see herself wanting a heck of a lot more than just a night or a week in this man's bed. Hell, her overactive imagination was already cooking up a lifetime of sexual fantasies for them. Her heart was screaming the word "NO" over and over to her weak mind and she fought against the overwhelming, contradictory thoughts of Rick

that were destined to drive her insane. She would not give her heart to another man only to have him and his new girlfriend drive over it in their Ford pickup as they escaped to Vegas together.

"You won't?" she asked, surprised by the conviction in his voice.

"No, I won't." His hands cupped her cheeks, leaving her no choice but to look into his face. "Kate, are you on the Pill?"

"W-what?"

Rather than respond to her question, Rick merely arched his eyebrow, awaiting a response.

"No," she admitted. "There didn't seem to be much point."

"Call tomorrow and make a doctor's appointment. Get the shot," he added, "it's quicker. We'll use a condom until we can be sure it's safe. I'll get the doctor to give you a copy of my medical records, so you'll know I'm clean."

Just when she didn't think she could blush any more, her face betrayed her again. "Rick, I-I'm not quite sure how to respond to all of this."

He smiled before bending down to kiss her gently on her lips. "You don't have to respond. Just feel."

His hands wrapped themselves into the long strands of her hair, pulling her face back to his. "I want to be with you, Kate." His lips traveled along her cheeks until they reached her ear and he teased the lobe with his teeth. "I want to make love to you."

Kate's heart began to race at his words.

"But not tonight," he said. "Tonight we'll play. Get acquainted."

"Play?" Zack was more the wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am type and she wasn't quite sure what Rick meant by "play".

Chuckling, Rick's lips traveled down to her neck, nipping and sucking at the sensitive flesh there. "My sweet little innocent." His hands reached down to the hem of the shirt she'd hastily donned after Zack's attack.

Kate's hands flew to his in an attempt to stop him, but he merely brushed them away. "Trust me, Kate."

Those three words were her undoing because Kate knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that she *did* trust Rick, implicitly.

Pulling the shirt over her head, Rick gave her no reprieve as he quickly slid her pants down. "Step up," he directed and she complied.

She was left standing before him in her new sexy black bra. Unfortunately, she'd replaced the matching thong with a clean pair of granny panties. Sighing heavily, she cursed her luck again.

"You just missed the matching thong," she said with a crooked smile. If she couldn't wow him with her sexy new body, she would have to fall back on the only other attribute she had left—her sense of humor.

"You can model it for me later." His hands held hers away from her body. She was uncomfortable with his close scrutiny and tried to pull her hands free.

"Rick." She wanted to protest, but he merely continued to look his fill.

"You're gorgeous."

"Yeah, right," she replied. "You have a thing for belly warmers, do you?"

Rick laughed and pulled her body against his. "I have a thing for anything you wear. Although, I *am* looking forward to seeing you in nothing at all."

Kissing her, he slowly moved her backward until she felt the backs of her legs brush the mattress.

"Lie down." His voice became commanding as he issued the order and she complied willingly. She couldn't wait to see where tonight would lead.

Rick quickly shed his shirt but left his jeans on. Bending over her, he pressed kisses on her neck and at the bare flesh above her bra.

"Your breasts are amazing." As he spoke, he cupped one in each palm. "The perfect size."

"They're too big."

"Sweetheart, there ain't no such thing as too much money or breasts too big." She giggled as he leaned farther down and blew a raspberry on her stomach. Squirming underneath him, she tried to escape as he held her down and tickled her.

"Stop," she cried breathlessly through her laughter. "Uncle!"

"Ah." He smiled smugly. "Victory. Now I have you at my mercy."

Reaching up, Kate pulled Rick's face down to hers for a kiss. She never laughed in bed and she found his teasing irresistible and charming. He was turning out to be so different from the man she'd expected him to be. She knew he had a sense of humor, but he was always so intense and serious in his emails.

Breaking free from her kisses, Rick's face suddenly turned serious. "Put your hands on the bed above your head."

She did as he asked and Rick placed his own hands on top of hers, pushing them into the mattress. "Don't move them. No matter what. If you do, I will punish you."

"Punish me?" Kate's insides melted at the thought of Rick turning her over on his lap and spanking her. She'd read lots of erotic novels during her lonely marriage and the idea of spankings never failed to arouse her.

Rick bent down and took one of her lace-covered nipples between his teeth and bit down, softly at first, gradually nipping harder. Kate gasped at the feeling, her hips thrusting up for relief.

"Be a good girl, Kate, and you won't have to worry about my methods of punishment."

"Doesn't sound like much fun."

Rick chuckled in her ear in response. "Mmm, I like naughty girls, Kate, and I have a feeling you'll give me a run for my money. Test me, by all means. I'd love to punish you."

The idea of Rick playing the dominant in bed brought all of Kate's secret fantasies to her mind. When reading erotica failed to ignite her, she began writing down her own sexual fantasies. Her laptop was filled with erotic stories. All of her secret sex dreams captured on screen. The thought that Rick may actually help her fulfill some of those fantasies this week was like a dream come true.

Kate was pulled from her musings by Rick's teeth on her other nipple. Again he issued the hard bite and again she fought to thrust against him.

"You're killing me," she cried. Rather than stop his tormenting, Rick notched up the play even further.

Reaching behind her, he unhooked her bra and pulled it off her in one swift movement. Once he had her breasts free, he grabbed them roughly, pinching her nipples none too gently. "You like this." He took one hard nipple in his mouth, sucking hard.

"God yes." Her pelvis found his leg and pressed into it, striving to find relief. Moving against him as he tormented her breast, Kate was shocked when she felt the pressure that signaled the beginning of her orgasm.

"Rick!" she cried.

Rick continued his caresses, pushing his leg more firmly into the vee of hers. "Give over, Kate." His voice was stern and hard. "Let me see you come."

Gasping, she struggled to regain control of her body but Rick wouldn't relinquish it. "Don't fight me, Kate. You will come when I say. Do it. Now!"

His words, lips, hands and leg pushed her over the ledge she tenuously clung to and she screamed as an orgasm ripped through her body, feeling as if she were catapulting through the air.

When she came back to herself, Rick was lying beside her on the bed, whispering sweet nothings in her ear and gently stroking her breasts.

"I can't believe we just did that."

"I told you we could play," Rick said with a smile.

"That seemed way too intense to be considered play."

"My sweet Kate. That was only the beginning."

Chapter Eleven

Rick woke up the next morning with a face full of auburn curls and a hand full of plump white breast. Smiling, he savored the moment. *What a way to wake up.*

Unfortunately, a moan that had nothing to do with arousal met his ears. "Kate?"

"Migraine," she groaned. "I get them all the time."

"Do you want me to get you something?" He was concerned by the pain that laced her words.

"There's some ibuprofen in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Would you mind bringing me the bottle and some water?"

"Not at all." He leaned forward to press a kiss on her upper back. His hand couldn't resist one last touch and he squeezed her breast.

"That feels pretty good too." She snuggled closer to him as he lightly stroked her nipple.

"Mmm, I'd love to stay in bed with you all day, sweetheart, but Rex has been pacing by the bedroom door for a solid forty-five minutes. If I don't take him out now, it could get ugly."

Kate's only response was a louder moan and Rick clambered out of bed and grabbed his jeans off the floor. He and Kate made out and petted like a couple of love-struck teenagers until the wee hours of the morning and yet he'd never felt so wide awake, so alive.

"I'll grab the medicine." He made his way to the bathroom while Rex, all traces of patience gone, pranced around his feet, whining.

"I know, bud," he cooed. "Let me take care of Kate and then you and I will have a nice long stroll."

Leaving the whole bottle of pills and a glass of water on the bedside table by a now sleeping Kate, Rick clambered downstairs with Rex. Putting on his leather coat and grabbing his cell phone from the table in the foyer, he walked out onto the front porch as the dog sprinted for the nearest tree. One of the best parts about living in the country was being able to let Rex run free. The few times he'd tried to use a leash with the dog had been utter disasters. Rex liked his freedom and Rick couldn't blame him.

Stepping off the porch, Rick roamed from the house to the large garage across the driveway. Glancing to the side, he could see the remains of Kate's summer garden. He couldn't wait to see it in season next year. Rex started chasing after a leaf caught in a breeze while Rick pulled his cell out of his pocket.

Placing a call to his friend Josh, he discovered Zack had indeed been pulled over for a DUI and had spent the rest of last night in the drunk tank.

Pleased with that small bit of justice, Rick hung up and called the Harrisburg hospital next.

Jill answered the phone in Wes' room.

"You're up early," Rick commented.

"Don't remind me," she barked. "Fact is I never made it to the hotel. Ended up falling asleep on the couch in the room. My neck is killing me."

"How's Wes doing this morning?"

"Physically, he's getting better. Mentally, he's a pain in the ass."

Rick laughed. "I warned you he wasn't a good patient."

"Ha," Jill exclaimed, "that's an understatement. So far he's managed to complain about the nurses, the bed, the food, the selection of channels on the TV and the itch in his leg he can't scratch because of the cast. I swear to you, I'm about two minutes away from breaking his other leg."

"Where is he, by the way?"

"He's in the bathroom. Damn fool insisted he could manage on his own. He has about four minutes left before I go in and get him." Rick could tell by her raised voice she was making the comment for Wes' benefit more than his. "What's Kate up to?"

"Actually, she's not up at all. She's still asleep."

"What? It's nearly 9:30! Kate never sleeps this late. She must be dying or have one of her migraines."

"Migraine," Rick said.

"Hmmm," Jill said thoughtfully. "Talk about your lousy timing."

"I can only assume from your unexpected arrival at the hospital to stay with Wes and your comment just now that you were aware of Kate's plans to seduce me."

"I was aware," Jill admitted, "but when did *you* become aware?"

"About a second after she told me she planned to seduce me."

"Criminy," Jill exclaimed. "I told her to be subtle."

Rick laughed at that. "Jill, Kate is the least subtle woman I know. Whatever pops into her mind flies out of her mouth."

"Yeah, I know. That muttering of hers drives me mad."

"Oh, I don't know," Rick admitted. "I kind of like that about her. It's rather refreshing to know exactly where you stand with a woman."

"And I suppose Kate told you all about her eight-month-long crush on you as well?" Jill's voice was hovering between dismay and laughter.

"No, but you just did."

"Crap."

Rick laughed. "You know, Jill, it's been longer than four minutes. Shouldn't you check on Wes?"

"Naw," she said, joining Rick in laughter. "I like the idea of making him beg for my help. Of course, knowing that stubborn fool, he'd probably drown in the toilet before he called for assistance."

"How long can you stay with him?"

"Cheryl is running the breakfast and lunch shifts for me this week, but the dinner one is all mine. I'll travel back and forth until they release him. Apparently, I'm the only one he'll listen to in regards to taking his medication and physical therapy. Personally, I think it's my amazing bedside manner."

Rick considered Jill's odd comment for a moment, trying to figure out what Wes was up to, but he was distracted when Jill continued speaking. "Besides, I figured you could use the break and I know you were anxious to be home after so long away."

"Jill." Rick was overwhelmed by her generous offer. "I know my idiot partner won't thank you, but I will. Thanks. You're going above and beyond the call of friendship here."

"Oh, believe me, Rick," Jill said softly. "I'm not being completely selfless here. I expect something in return."

"What would that be?" Rick was fairly sure he knew the answer, but asked the question anyway.

"Take care of Kate. She's gotten tougher this past year, grown up a lot, but I'm afraid she's going to make the mistake of believing she's strong simply because she can do things on her own. She may be trying to seduce you, but the real trick will be getting her to love you. She's hidden that emotion so far away, I don't think she knows where she left it."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because when Wes isn't grumbling, he's actually quite forthcoming. I know Kate's crush isn't one-sided."

"I should have let the bad guys break his jaw," Rick grumbled. "Then his mouth would be wired shut."

"Rick, you know I love you and Wes, but more than that, I trust you guys with my life. Now, I'm trusting Kate's heart to you. Step on it and I'll crush you like a bug." Jill's

warning reverberated in his head as Rick tried to imagine Jill's petite five-foot-four-frame attempting to crush his much larger body. Unfortunately, it wasn't too hard to see fiery Jill doing just that if he hurt her sister.

"I'll take care of her, Jill."

"I always knew when you fell, it would be hard. I just didn't think Kate would be the one. Kate *is* the one, isn't she, Rick? Wes told me the two of you were retiring from the DEA. You aren't grabbing hold of Kate simply because she's there, are you?"

Rick was amazed how in tune with his own worries Jill seemed to be. The bubbly blonde had befriended him and Wes during their first few weeks in Madison. She'd made their transition from big-city men to small-town fellas painless and even fun. Much like Kate, Jill had a way with words and her irreverent descriptions of Madison and its inhabitants had kept them entertained through many delicious homemade lunches at her restaurant. However, after spending last night with Kate in his arms, his own initial concerns about his true feelings for her seemed to melt away.

"It's Kate," he said with confidence. "Only Kate."

"Good. Ah, there it is."

Rick was confused by her comments. "There what is?"

"A cry for help." Jill giggled. "Although with all the pain and suffering he's put me through, he's going to have to word it more nicely."

"What's he saying?"

"Something along the lines of 'hey you'," Jill answered. "Oh wait, that's a bit better. I think he added a 'please' to that 'come here, you hateful shrew'."

Rick laughed as he said goodbye. His friend was in capable hands with Jill in charge. The man was a grizzly bear if he had to stay in bed more than a day or two and unfortunately, in their chosen line of work, both of them had spent more than their fair share of time in hospitals. Jill was certainly tough enough to withstand Wes' moods and Rick was exceedingly grateful to her for giving him this time alone with Kate.

Turning back toward the house, Rick called for Rex. Time to check on his sleeping beauty. Maybe a nice breakfast in bed would make her feel better. Rick had a feeling his patient was going to be much more pleasant than Jill's.

Chapter Twelve

Kate felt much better after a couple aspirin and another hour of sleep. Rick had even brought her tea and toast in bed with the promise of a great big breakfast when she awoke. Glancing at him across the dining room table, she thought back to all the meals she'd eaten alone at this table over the last year—and all the naughty fantasies she'd had about him stretching her out across the shiny surface and using her body as his dinner plate.

Rick raised his eyebrows and flashed a knowing smirk. Kate quickly averted her eyes. No doubt the observant man had noticed her all-too-hungry look. She really was going to have to get a grip on her libido.

"That was delicious." She wiped her mouth with a napkin after polishing off the western omelet. "Nice to know you can cook. At least we won't starve this week."

Rick looked at her with astonishment. "You mean to tell me, Kate Harper, with your sister the finest cook in all of Madison County, you cannot cook?"

"Didn't seem to be much point, did there? I mean, Jill's meals aren't merely edible like mine, they're delicious. Once my mother discovered my lack of talent in the kitchen, she left Jill in charge of the meals."

"And what did she leave you in charge of?" Kate was pleased by his genuine interest in her. For most of her life, she merely blended into the background while Jill or Zack emerged as the more interesting players. It was nice to take center stage for a change.

"The house. I did all the decorating and cleaning."

Rick glanced around the room, not for the first time, and smiled. "I think it's evident you do have a talent for that. Kate, the house looks gorgeous. I can't believe everything you accomplished in a few short months."

"It was nearly a year," Kate corrected with a grin. "Believe me, there's plenty more to do. The kitchen needs a major overhaul and I haven't touched the bedrooms yet. I was thinking we could paint the upstairs bath..." She paused, chagrined. "Listen to me ramble on. It's not even my house. Sorry. I tend to get carried away."

"I want you to get carried away, Kate. Don't think for a second you're going to get out of finishing what you've started here simply because Wes and I are back."

"Really?" She felt like a child being handed a kitten at the prospect of continuing her improvements on the house. "Because I have lots of ideas for the other rooms and I would love to help you with them."

Rick laughed. "I think in this circumstance I would be helping you. I'm a disaster with a paint brush."

"Well, I suppose we won't have much time to do any redecorating with Wes laid up. But don't worry. I'll definitely come back every weekend until we're finished."

Rick frowned and Kate wondered what she'd said to upset him. "And just where do you think you'll be coming back from?"

Kate was puzzled by his question. "I, um, I suppose I'll crash at Jill's apartment for a while until I find a place of my own. I've been perusing the classifieds in the newspaper for the past couple weeks for available apartments. You would think with eight months to think about it, I would have made some decisions about whether I want to rent or buy, but honestly I've been so busy with work and redecorating this house that I haven't given it a thought."

Kate realized she was rambling and struggled to keep her voice from trembling as Rick's face became darker and darker with each word. Finally, she couldn't stand his silent sullenness and asked, "Are you mad at me for something, Rick? Did I say something wrong?"

"I thought we'd agreed you would stay here," he replied.

Kate breathed a sigh of relief. Of course, he'd misunderstood her intentions. "We did and I am, Rick. You don't have to worry. I have no intention of leaving you on your

own to take care of Wes. I really won't desert you until he's back on his feet and in tip-top shape, I promise." Kate grinned, thinking her response would settle Rick's concerns – until she realized her words hadn't made a dent in his anger.

"Kate, what do you think is going on here?"

"I don't know what you mean," Kate answered.

"What was last night about? That whole seduction scene you set up?"

Kate leaned back for a moment and tried to gather her wits about her. She felt her face flush slightly at Rick's mention of her amateurish attempts at seduction. When he continued to watch her, she took a deep breath and decided to offer him complete honesty. Rick had become her friend and she owed it to him to tell him the truth about her feelings. Problem was, as she tried to think of the words to describe her mindset, she had to admit it seemed almost as if she was using him. For sex.

"Rick...I was a virgin when Zack and I got married. And regardless of his infidelities, I was completely faithful to the creep. I was hoping, I mean, I kinda thought maybe..." Her voice failed her.

"You want to gain a little experience in the bedroom." Rick's voice was monotone and offered Kate no hint to his feelings regarding her confession.

"Well, no, I mean...okay, yes. It's just that you've become an important person in my life and I trust you. I think we established last night that we both seem to be attracted to each other, at least sexually. Jill believed you would be a good teacher in terms of—" Kate paused, realizing she was digging herself deeper with every word. Especially when Rick practically growled at her use of the word "teacher".

"Oh hell, I'm screwing this up royally," she muttered.

"So you were hoping for some lessons in getting laid? You want a fuck buddy. Isn't that what you're saying, Kate?"

"Good Lord, no! I mean...damn it, Rick, do you have to make it sound so crude? Fine, you want the truth? Yeah, I want the 'getting laid' part, but you're making it all sound so callous and calculating. I like you, Rick. I like you a lot."

Rick's scowl grew even darker and Kate felt her own temper begin to flare. "Fine, Rick, what did *you* think last night was about if not, you know, sex?"

A laugh that had very little to do with humor and quite a bit to do with disappointment passed Rick's lips. "I thought we were embarking on a relationship. I was hoping to make love to a woman I've grown to care very deeply about."

"A relationship?" Kate all but screamed the phrase back at him. "What in the hell gave you that idea? My God, Rick, I just got out of the world's worst marriage, I have absolutely *no* desire to get back into anything even hinting of a permanent relationship."

Rick flinched at her heated response and Kate fought back a groan, wishing she could call back her thoughtless words. "Oh shit. Rick, please try to understand. The most I can offer you—hell, the most I can offer anyone right now—is a casual relationship with no strings attached."

"Friends who fuck." Rick's voice was deep and Kate could hear the hurt and anger in his words. She wished he'd stop throwing around such horrible phrases.

"Dammit, Rick. Jill has casual flings all the time. Lots of women do. Is it so wrong for me to want the same? I want to be with you. I want it so bad I can taste it, but Rick, I can't give you more than my body and my friendship. I'm very sorry, but I've only just now gotten to the point where I can look at myself in the mirror without cringing. I like the woman I've become this year and I don't want to lose sight of her again."

"And how on earth, Kate, would that happen if you were to start dating me? I like the woman you've become too. You must realize that."

"I don't know how it would happen, I just know it would. I'm free, honestly and truly free, for the first time in my life and I don't want to give that freedom up."

Rick sighed heavily and Kate watched his anger dissolve into something that bothered her even more—sadness. They sat in awkward silence and Kate fought against every fiber in her being that was screaming for her to run away as fast and far as possible. She hated confrontations.

“Well,” Rick finally said, his voice quieter. “It would seem we are at a bit of an impasse.”

Kate nodded and swallowed hard in an attempt to dislodge the lump in her throat. If Rick asked her to leave, she would, but the idea of not talking to him any more left her aching and cold. Damn him. Why couldn’t he at least try to see things from her perspective?

“So I guess this calls for a compromise,” he added.

Kate was shocked by his words. She’d expected him to kick her out, yell and scream at her. She certainly didn’t expect this calm, collected conversation.

“A c-compromise?” she asked, clearing her throat.

“You want a casual, no-strings-attached fling, is that correct?”

Kate simply nodded, wondering where on earth Rick was going with this.

“I want more, Kate. My ultimate goal with you is a long-term, committed relationship.”

Kate had to physically restrain herself from trembling at his words. *Long-term?* Oh no. Hell no. “Doesn’t sound like there’s much hope of compromise, does there?”

Rick grinned, but Kate noticed the smile never reached his eyes. He stood up, reaching down to pull her to her feet. “Where there’s a will, there’s a way.”

His answer was enigmatic at best. “Meaning?” she asked.

“You’ve promised to stay and help me until Wes gets back on his feet and I intend to hold you to that.”

Kate nodded, uneasy with the immense relief she felt at knowing she could stay with Rick. Damn her rebellious heart. She’d be a fool to hang around him any longer

than necessary because the fact of the matter was, he was the epitome of danger and her heart was in definite peril. How would she ever be able to resist him and maintain the flimsy grasp she had on her newfound freedom?

"Okay," she agreed slowly, unsure what he would ask in return.

"While you're here, we can indulge in this casual sex you've got such a yearning for, but I want you to promise I'm the only one you'll engage in any fling with while we're together."

Kate started to protest that the whole concept of "casual" was the idea that there wouldn't be a commitment, but then she thought, *who am I fooling?* There was absolutely no one else in Madison—hell, maybe the planet—who pushed her sex buttons like Rick.

Besides, with Rick standing so close, looking down at her with those dreamy chocolate-brown eyes, she was too horny to argue over nit-picky details. "I guess I can live with that," she answered, silently congratulating herself for her calm tone.

"I should warn you, Kate. I don't intend to hold back. If it's lessons in lust you want, you've come to the right place."

Kate's pussy quivered at his sensual threat and she felt a sudden dampness between her thighs.

"And you?" she asked. "What will you expect from me?"

Rick smiled, his gaze warm and dear. Kate sucked in a deep breath and closed her eyes briefly in an attempt to block out the beauty of it.

"You will allow me to plead my case. Once a day, every day that you are here. I have every intention of changing your mind about us, Kate."

Kate tightened her hands into fists, anxious to shield their trembling from Rick. "Plead your case how?"

"With words, angel. Only words. I won't use your body against you, if that's what you're worried about."

"So once a day, you'll tell me why we should be together and...?"

"And that's it."

"And in return, you will...I mean, we can..." Again Kate stumbled over the words.

"Have sex, fuck, screw. What do you want to call it, Kate? It's your game."

"S-sex will be fine."

"Sex it is then," Rick answered easily. He pulled Kate toward him. "Should we seal the deal?"

Kate didn't have an opportunity to respond as Rick bent down to kiss her. His lips rubbed so lightly against hers, she could barely feel them. Unfortunately, as seemed to be the case with Rick McAllister, nothing was ever as it appeared to be. The second she relaxed in his gentle grip, he upped the ante and devoured her mouth with his.

As his teeth and tongue conquered everything in their path, Kate felt a bit more of her hard-won independence slipping oh-so sweetly from her grasp.

Desperate for air and distance, Kate pushed back, somewhat surprised when Rick relinquished his grip without a fight.

"Deal?" he asked, his voice husky.

"Deal," she whispered in reply – and wondered if perhaps she'd just made a deal with the devil.

Chapter Thirteen

"Come on. Grab your coat. I want to go check on my Harley."

"The motorcycle?" Kate was surprised by Rick's quick change of subject. She reached for her denim jacket as he grasped her hand and started tugging her toward the front door. "Believe me, Rick, you don't have to worry about that. The thing hasn't moved since you left."

"What?" Rick asked in fake astonishment. "You mean you didn't go cruising while I was away?"

Kate laughed, relieved by how easily their conversation had reverted back into the easy, no-pressure commentary she'd come to enjoy. Rick was so easy to be with and talk to that Kate often forgot about her cursed shyness. "Good God, no. I'd be scared to death on one of those things."

Rick halted halfway across the yard. "You mean you've never ridden on a motorcycle?"

Kate shook her head.

Rick looked up at the dark clouds in the sky and sighed heavily. "Well, it doesn't look like we'll have a chance to correct that oversight today, but soon, Kate. Soon, you and I are going to go soaring."

"Soaring?"

"That machine makes you feel like you're flying. There's nothing like it. Come on. I'll show you."

As they entered Rick's large, heated garage, Kate immediately noticed the covered motorcycles in the far corner.

"Two of them?"

"One belongs to Wes. Every now and then we pull them out and, according to Jill, play at being weekend warriors."

"I'm not even going to ask what that means. I think I can figure it out for myself."

Closing the door behind them, Kate took her first long look at the place. She'd never had much reason to come into the disconnected garage as she preferred to park her hunk of junk in front of the house so she didn't have such a long trek across the yard.

"Wow," she mumbled and Rick laughed.

"I guess you can see what I've spent my time on these past few years when I should have been renovating the inside of the house."

"This place is huge," she exclaimed. "I've never seen so many tools. What's under that cover?"

"That is money in the bank, sweetheart," Rick replied, pulling the cover off a Corvette. "I like to tinker with it when I'm home. It's a '74 Stingray with T-tops and only forty-seven thousand miles. I've rebuilt the engine, done some major bodywork and refitted the interior with all original parts. All that's left now is the paint job. I'm thinking about midnight blue with a white racing stripe across the top."

"Oh no," Kate exclaimed. "You're a motorhead."

Rick laughed. "I like fine machines. But what I really wanted to show you was this." With that, he pulled the cover off a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. It looked like something out of *Easy Rider* and Kate giggled at Rick's obvious delight over being reunited with the vehicle.

Walking over, Rick straddled the bike and put his hands on the handlebars. "Now I've come home."

Kate laughed at his almost orgasmic groan. "This can't be normal behavior."

"Perfectly normal," Rick assured her. "Come here, I'll show you."

As Kate approached, Rick surprised her by suddenly lifting her up and over the cycle, facing him.

"Put your legs around my waist." He used the same commanding voice he'd used many times last night, a voice that never failed to leave her hot and bothered.

As she placed her arms around his shoulders, Rick's hands crept underneath her jacket, pulling up her sweater.

"Hey!" she squealed when he found the bare flesh at her waist. "Your hands are cold."

"That's why I put them there," he joked. "You can warm them up for me."

Rick used his cold hands to pull her even closer and soon they were sitting pelvis to pelvis. She could feel his hard erection through the thick material of her jeans and immediately began to rub against it softly.

"Is this the casual-sex part?" she whispered as she reached up to pull Rick's lips down to hers.

"Mmm, yes ma'am. It sure is." Kate was thrilled when Rick followed her lead and took her mouth in a hard, long kiss. Kate decided she could kiss Rick forever and never get over the incredible feeling. His lips were moist and soft, with a dangerous habit of making her forget everything except the touch of them. They could be registered as a lethal weapon. Then his hands crept up her back to unclasp her bra and she figured his hands should be added to that deadly list as well. She tried not to consider how efficiently he'd unhooked her bra. Not that she was thinking about much when she felt him slowly shoving her clothing upward until her breasts were uncovered for delicious assault by his mouth.

Taking one hard nipple in his mouth, Rick sucked hard. Kate clung tighter to his hair, pulling him closer. Rick gently nudged her back until her shoulders rested on the handlebars of the bike. She could only imagine what she must look like with her legs clinging to Rick's waist, while she lay in front of him across the Harley like some sort of biker-babe feast.

His lips and hands tormented her breasts and she couldn't stop rubbing herself against his hard cock. In another minute, she'd say "pride be damned" and start

begging him to take her. Rick, obviously sensing her distress, pulled back a bit. Kate groaned and closed her eyes, her head thrown back.

Until she felt Rick's hands at the waistband of her jeans.

Her eyes flew open as she saw Rick looking at her, his dark eyes filled with unrequited desire and lust.

"Rick," she whispered.

"Trust me." Once again, Kate was lost to those two words.

Rick unbuttoned her jeans and slid the zipper down, but made no move to pull them down.

Giving her the sexy grin she was coming to adore, he leaned closer, his warm breath brushing her cheek. "Just one little touch."

His fingers toyed briefly with her pubic hair before slowly sliding inward until the tip of one finger rested firmly on her clit.

"Oh!" she cried as he applied a bit more pressure. "Oh Rick."

Satisfied, he pushed her harder against the bike and continued his loving assault on her breasts as his finger pressed and stroked her to the pinnacle.

Her breathing was harsh and her hips began moving of their own volition. She was flying, soaring, just as he'd promised and then she heard her own strangled scream as Rick simply said the word, "Now."

The world dissolved into colors and music and Kate floated through the heavenly clouds until she felt Rick working her jeans over her hips. She opened her eyes to find Rick's gaze burning her body alive with its intensity.

"I want you, Kate."

"Then take me," she said simply. Pushing up onto her elbows, she helped Rick divest her of her jeans, no small task on a motorcycle, before leaning forward to open the front of his jeans. Fisting her hand around his hard cock, she pulled him free of the

clinging denim. She licked her lips and started to lean forward for a taste, but Rick halted her movements.

“Not this time, angel. You take me in that gorgeous mouth of yours and I’m a goner. Lean back again, the way you were earlier. This time, when I come, it’s going to be inside that sweet pussy of yours.”

Rick reached back and pulled a condom out of his back pocket. He quickly sheathed himself as Kate watched through lowered eyelids. Her mind was in overdrive and she was panting – honest-to-God panting – with desire.

“Hurry,” she hissed.

Rick chuckled and reached for her. Pulling her upright, he lifted her hips until he was poised at the drenched opening to her body.

“Slowly, angel.” With those words, he directed her down onto his throbbing cock. He was considerably larger than she was used to and she felt a slight twinge of pain as he continued moving in.

“Rick,” she gasped.

“I know, Kate. Damn it, you’re tight, baby. So good. You feel so fucking good.”

His own breathing was harsh and labored and she took solace in the fact that this joining was affecting him as much as her.

When he was fully seated within her, he stopped and both of them struggled to catch a deep breath. His gaze never left hers and she was well aware of the fact he would call a halt to everything if he thought she was in pain or distressed. After a few moments, Kate felt the muscles of her pussy begin to clench and her body began to make its own demands.

“Fuck me, Rick,” she cried. The feeling that she would suddenly expire if he wasn’t moving inside her overpowered her.

Her words served as the impetus and Rick gently pushed her backward on the bike. As he rose up to stand over the motorcycle, he leaned forward, coming inside her more fully.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Like that, just like that.”

Rick began to thrust into her and she reveled in his unrestrained passion. Harder and faster he took her, shoving her higher and higher until she disintegrated once more. Her orgasm seemed to trigger his own powerful climax and Rick collapsed against her chest, kissing her heaving breasts and showering her with the loveliest words she’d ever heard. Words like “amazing” and “beautiful” and “incredible”.

I made him feel that way. Plain old Kate Harper just rocked Rick McAllister’s world.

Hot damn.

Chapter Fourteen

Three days later, Rick watched the sun rise over the mountain and once again marveled over how good it felt to be home.

Four days in Kate's presence had solidified his belief that she was indeed the only woman in the world for him. Now all he had to do was convince the stubborn woman of that fact. When she'd initially rebuffed his demand for a proper relationship, Rick had been overwhelmed with anger. However, as she explained her fears, he could understand her reluctance to jump straight from the frying pan and into the fire.

Zack Summers had done a royal number on his sweet, shy woman and it would take a hell of a lot more than a few months of emails and a few days together to persuade her to take such a big risk again. Rick realized his only hope of winning the war for Kate's battered heart was patience. Unfortunately, he wasn't known for being a particularly patient person and he figured the fates were having a good laugh at his expense. Regardless, he was going to give her all the time she needed, although he silently prayed that time would be short.

Hopefully, by conquering her fears one at a time, she would come to realize that he was a man she could entrust her heart to. When he'd offered the compromise, he'd done so with a heavy heart. However, as the days passed, he was more and more convinced he was doing the right thing with Kate. Besides, if he was being perfectly honest, he wasn't suffering overmuch since Kate's request in the compromise was sex, sex and more sex. Rick grinned as he remembered last night's dinner. After they finished dessert, Rick bent his voluptuous beauty over the dining room table and introduced her to the pleasures of being taken from behind. Her passion-filled screams as she came around his cock still sounded in his ears.

God, she was an amazing lover. So open and willing and adventurous, she took his breath away. Rick was continually amazed by his shy girl's incredible sexuality. She held nothing back and although he never pushed her outside the realm of his more tame appetites, several times he found himself wondering if Kate Harper would be as opposed to his darker desires as he'd feared.

"Rick?"

"Out here."

"I wondered where you were." She stepped out of the house and came to join him on the front porch. "It's freezing out here. What are you doing?"

"Watching the sunrise. Come here." He gestured at the spot next to him on the swing. "Come sit with me. I'll keep you warm."

Taking her place by his side, Kate cuddled into him as Rick pulled her close with an arm around her shoulders. "Your sister told me you had a bad habit of rising early."

"Apparently it's one you share. I've yet to beat you out of bed."

"Yeah, well, don't get used to it. Combination jet-leg and insatiable horniness," he teased. "Once those two problems are cured, you probably won't see me much before eight."

Kate laughed at his joke. "Correct me if I'm wrong, Rick, but I have the sneaking suspicion that your insatiable horniness is chronic."

"Only with you." He placed a light kiss on the top of her head. "Imagine Kate, once we're married we can spend every morning out here together just like this."

"Rick," Kate warned, but he ignored her annoyed tone. As he'd promised, he spent a little while each day weaving a picture of the future he hoped for with her. Thus far, Kate hadn't responded to his words, instead sitting silently and stoically as he pressed his suit.

"Now, now, Ms. Harper. We did reach a compromise. You owe me a chance to seriously woo you once a day, remember."

Kate made a face and Rick fought to restrain his laughter at her cute expression.

"You're working it in a bit early today, aren't you? I haven't even had a cup of coffee yet."

Rick shrugged. "Wouldn't you like waking up out here in the country every morning, Kate? Coming out onto this front porch together, watching the sunrise and talking about our day's plans?"

Kate remained quiet, as was her habit whenever Rick discussed his dreams with her. She tried hard to appear unmoved by his imaginings, but every now and then, Rick thought he saw a glimmer of longing in her face. She glanced toward the rising sun as he continued to speak.

"In the summer, we could sit out here as long as we wanted, just talking. Of course, when the kids come along, it'll probably be a bit noisier as they'll be running around in the yard, chasing Rex and riding bicycles."

"Kids?" she whispered. Rick pulled her closer, tucking her head under his cheek. He'd never discussed his desire to have children with her yet.

"Do you want children, angel?"

"Yes," she acknowledged. "I do."

"How many should we have, Kate?"

Kate shrugged and Rick wondered if she'd answer. Her voice when she spoke was so quiet Rick had to struggle to make out her words. "I always thought I'd like to have one of each, a boy and a girl, but then I remember how it was for me and Jill growing up and I can't imagine not having two girls, sisters."

"Well, I think two is a definite, although I'd like more, a houseful. I'm an only child and I wouldn't do that to any kid of mine. Wes filled in that noticeable gap, but I've always thought it would be nice to have a real sibling."

Kate sighed heavily and Rick could sense her climbing back inside her protective shell. Today was the first time she'd truly taken a peek out, however, and it filled him with hope.

"When do you want to leave?" Kate asked, obviously ready for a change of subject. Rick knew he could object to her cutting into his part of the deal, but he felt like he'd made great strides and decided to let it go.

The two of them were traveling to Harrisburg to visit Wes. Then Rick promised to take her out to lunch in a cozy little Mexican restaurant he'd discovered not far from the hospital.

"Visiting hours don't start until nine, so we have a couple hours yet," he answered.

"Want some breakfast?"

Rick grinned at her apparent nervousness. They both knew what Rick really wanted and Kate was as skittish as a new foal. Apparently his wooing had had more of an effect on her than she was comfortable with.

"Eventually." He tightened his grip on her shoulder. He had no doubt if he gave her an opening, she'd escape to the house under the pretense of needing to do something.

"Oh." She sighed softly and he watched the wheels in her brain churn.

"What I'd really like to do is enjoy the morning, relaxing here with my best girl by my side."

Kate giggled at his comment. "So I'm your best girl, am I?"

"The very best," he whispered. "Except..."

"Except?"

"I don't remember getting my good-morning kiss yet."

Good Lord." She laughed at his request. "Don't you think you've had enough kisses from me? I seem to recall doing nothing but kissing last night for nearly an hour."

"I'll never have enough kisses from you, sweetheart. Kiss me, Kate." Rick leaned closer and staked his claim on her lovely lips.

Kate never failed to respond to his call and within seconds, her arms were wrapped tightly around him and her mouth was open for his possession.

"Mmm." She hummed with a grin when at last they parted. "I love kissing you," she mumbled and Rick smiled at her unconscious comment. Kate was absolutely unable to hold back anything she was thinking and he loved having the window to her thoughts wide open to him. He never had to second guess about her feelings.

"Ditto," he whispered back and, as always, Kate looked slightly startled to discover she had spoken her thoughts aloud.

"Come inside with me, love." Rick was unable to hold back. He had planned to wait until tonight to make love to her again, but as with most things involving Kate, all his best intentions went out the window.

Kate studied him closely before nodding. Taking her hand, Rick led her back in the house and up the stairs to his bedroom. He noticed Kate was surprised by his choice of room. Although they slept together every night, it was always in her room. This time, Rick wanted to be in his room, in his oversized king-sized bed and silk sheets.

Closing the door quietly behind him, Rick listened as Rex settled outside the door with a single whine.

"He hates being shut out," Kate said softly.

"You're mine, Kate. All mine. It's time the big old mutt realizes that fact." Moving into the room, Rick sat down on the edge of the high bed.

"Take your clothes off." His words were a soft request laced with an edge of command and he watched her face go through an amazing range of emotions. She flashed from embarrassment to shyness to apprehension all in the blink of an eye. Then a sweet smile graced her luscious lips as she pulled her sweater over her head and Rick was pleasantly pleased to discover the only thing under Kate's sweater was Kate.

Obviously intent on teasing and tantalizing him, she raised her hands and lifted her large breasts as Rick struggled to take a deep breath. She took the nipples between her fingers and pinched them firmly, letting him know exactly how much she liked a rough touch.

“Oh baby, you are so beautiful.” He was captivated by her sexy movements.

Turning away from the bed, Kate looked over her shoulder with a smile and Rick realized she knew precisely what she was doing to him and his overwhelmed libido. She slowly slid her jeans down before bending over to slip them off completely and Rick was treated to a bird’s-eye view of her gorgeous ass.

“Get over here.” The huskiness of his voice broadcast his desire clearly, but he didn’t care. He needed to touch her now or die with the effort.

She walked toward him confidently. In her eyes, Rick saw the same need he felt all the way down to his toes. This woman captivated him like no other and he knew the next few moments were bound to be some of the most precious in his life.

He helped her climb up onto the high, old-fashioned bed. “Lie down.”

She complied without comment, her gaze never wavering as Rick began to unbutton his shirt. As she watched him undress he ate her alive with his eyes, admiring every inch of her lovely body.

“Spread your legs. Let me see all of you.” He unbuttoned his shirt quickly, dropping it to the floor.

Kate flushed as she looked at him and he could see the exhilaration written on her face. Oh, she loved to be dominated. It was so clear to him now. Slowly she opened her legs, giving him a crystal-clear view of the gates of heaven.

“Leave your legs open, just like that. Show me how much you want me.”

Kate trembled at his words and her breathing sped up. She was thoroughly aroused by his demands. With shaking hands, she reached down and ran her fingers through her wet pussy.

The image of Kate playing with herself was too much for Rick and he quickly shed his jeans before crawling up on the bed between her legs.

"Give me a taste, Kate." As he spoke, he grasped her wrists, slowly pulling her fingers toward his mouth. "Just one small taste of this," he whispered as he took each digit into his mouth to suck off the sweetness of her arousal. Unsatisfied with that small sample, he bent his head to her wet pussy. The faint smell of orchids washed over him again and he was powerless to stop until he consumed her completely.

Kate's hands flew to his hair as he pressed his lips to her hard clit, his tongue probing and pushing. As always, Kate's hips began to move against him, but Rick denied her movement by placing his firm hands on her upper thighs.

"Don't move," he ordered. "It's my turn, Kate."

"Please, Rick." She continued to beg him breathlessly for more, but Rick refused to give up the haven her drenched cunt provided his hungry mouth. Over and over he teased the entrance to her body with his tongue, until he felt Kate's muscles tensing and suspected she was only moments away from exploding.

Sliding a finger into her hot cavern, he thrust hard several times and his efforts were rewarded when Kate's body quivered uncontrollably and he heard her screams of pleasure.

Rising up on his elbows, Rick watched her beautiful face as she came. When she finally opened her eyes to find him looking at her, he spoke to her in a firm voice. "That's the last time you'll come without my permission, Kate."

He expected confusion or perhaps even anger at his strong words, but again it was Kate who surprised him. Without saying a word, she nodded her assent.

Bending his head, Rick decided to test that agreement. Using his tongue on her clit, he returned to her wet pussy and pushed two hard fingers deep inside her.

Kate cried out and he immediately felt her body building back up. Moving in and out with reckless determination, he drove her to the precipice time and time again, each time refusing to give her the final push over.

When at last she was gasping for breath and begging for release, he gave her the command. "Now, Kate," he demanded. "Come now." With that, he added a third digit to the other two while nipping at her rock-hard clit.

Kate screamed as she came yet again but Rick refused to back down. Twice more he brought her to climax until Kate, in her delirium, pulled him over her body by the hair. Quickly, Rick sheathed himself with a condom and before he realized what she was doing, Kate had his cock poised at her soaking entry.

"Now...I need you now." She wrapped her legs around his waist and with surprising strength, pulled him into her body in one hard thrust that left him seated to the hilt.

He heard her cry out and felt his stomach lurch at the thought he'd hurt her. He was no small man and every time they'd made love the past few days, he'd been careful to enter her slowly, giving her body time to adjust to his girth. Her legs, clamped around his waist, held him inside her like a vice and Rick's temper exploded at her careless actions.

"Damn you. You weren't ready for me, Kate."

"Move!" she demanded. "Move, Rick. Oh God, please, I need you. All of you. Hard. Fast. Now!"

Her words were the trigger his aching body needed to hear. Without any further thought to his own careful actions, Rick took her at her word—and gave it to her as she'd requested, hard and fast. Thrusting fully over and over again, Rick felt the walls of her pussy begin to contract. Aware he wouldn't be able to hold off much longer, he gripped her head between his hands, silently demanding she look at him.

"Now," he said. "Come now."

Kate exploded in his arms, but her gaze never wavered from his. Anxious to give her the same gift, Rick let her orgasm pull his climax from him. He shuddered as his cum shot straight into her, filling the condom, but he never looked away. He opened the window to his soul and let her see inside.

When the last of their pleasure faded away, Rick gently pulled out of her body and enveloped her in his strong hold.

“You little fool.” His chastisement was merely for show and they both knew it. His voice betrayed his intense feelings for her. “I could have hurt you.”

Kate stretched up to place a soft kiss on his lips. “Never,” she whispered. “Do we have time to do it again? Before we leave for the hospital?”

Rick laughed at her hopeful request. “Oh, hell yeah. Wes has a broken leg. He sure as hell isn’t going anywhere. Come here.”

Chapter Fifteen

Kate stretched like a lazy cat the next morning. She and Rick had spent most of the previous day—after they'd managed to leave the bedroom—strolling around Harrisburg. The visit with Wes ended rather quickly when it was apparent the patient was no longer in any mood to be hospitalized or, as he phrased it, "imprisoned". After an hour of listening to Wes' nonstop grumbling, Rick's patience ran out and he grabbed her hand, saying a hurried goodbye.

Afterward, she and Rick ate a lovely late lunch then explored the shops along Main Street. When they returned home, Rick brought her back upstairs to his big bed and made love to her so sweetly she thought she would cry.

Smiling, she looked next to her in the bed and studied the slumbering giant who had invaded her world. She loved Rick's size as she realized that for the first time in her life, she didn't feel huge. In fact, she felt rather tiny wrapped in Rick's arms. Unlike her sister, Kate inherited her height from her father's side of the family. She was five foot nine barefoot and considerably taller in heels. Not that she owned heels any more. Those had all been thrown away during her first year of marriage to Zack the Rat. He was only an inch or so taller than her and didn't seem to like having what he referred to as an Amazon for a wife.

Shaking her head, Kate tried to push the memories of Zack away but for once, they refused to leave. For years she'd swallowed her pride right along with his insults. The thought of the other night crept back in and before she realized it, Kate's body betrayed her as well as her mind and she started to shake. What would have happened if Rick hadn't shown up when he did? Would Zack have raped her?

Her mind protested the thought she could have willingly given six years of her life to a man capable of such a horrible act of violence, but she couldn't dismiss the terrifying idea that he would indeed have hurt her. And hurt her badly.

"Kate," a gruff voice said beside her. "Are you crying?"

Kate's hands flew to her face. "Am I?" Tears were streaming down her face.

"Sweetheart." Rick rose up quickly and pulled her shaking body into the safety and comfort of his large embrace. "What is it? What happened?"

"B-bad dream."

Rick, however, wasn't fooled. Pulling away, he placed strong hands on her shoulders and waited until she had no choice but to look up into his eyes. "You're a terrible liar." His voice was so kind, Kate lost control and her quiet tears became a steady sob.

"Zack." She forced her ex-husband's name through the constriction forming in her throat and Rick pulled her even closer, settling her shivering form on his lap.

"I wondered when it would hit you." He wiped her eyes with his fingertips when her crying began to calm. "Delayed shock."

"He was going to r-rape me." Her words sounded hoarse and Rick's arms tightened even more. Rather than crushing her, the strength of them seemed to stabilize her, help her find her footing again.

"No one will ever hurt you, Kate." Rick's vow was sincere, his voice steady and strong. "Not while I still have a breath left in my body."

Rick reached down and cupped her damp cheeks in his large hands as he pulled her lips to his. His kiss was surprisingly gentle given the intensity of his previous declaration. His dark eyes turned black with desire and Kate felt as though she were being sucked into a black hole, her soul was so enmeshed with his. She could easily lose herself inside this man...

The thought jarred something ugly loose inside her and she felt herself struggling to break free of Rick's embrace.

"Kate?"

"I-I..." She was unsure how to explain the fear permeating her mind. She'd woken up in the past, memories of Zack threatening to overthrow her newfound self-confidence. Was she giving Rick the same power to hurt her? It was apparent the wounds her ex-husband inflicted hadn't completely healed yet. Zack left her nearly a year ago and during that time, she'd learned to rely on herself. With Rick's arrival, she found herself falling—hard.

How could she survive another controlling relationship? Zack called all the shots in their marriage and Kate feared Rick would do the same if she let him. He certainly played the dominant role in the bedroom. How long before that commanding attitude trickled out into other aspects of their relationship?

Would she be able to retain control of her life and her hard-won independence if she fell in love with Rick? Or would she be lost again? She wished she could trust herself and her instincts, but the fact remained she was terrified that deep inside, she was truly a weak-willed, pathetic creature and, in time, Rick would discover that secret and exploit it just like Zack did.

"I need to go Christmas shopping." The words flew from her lips without thought but as soon as she said them, she felt relieved. An out. She'd found a way out of the house for a while.

Rick was obviously blindsided by her unexpected comment. "Christmas shopping?"

"Yes," she continued on hastily. "I just realized I haven't bought a thing for Jill. With Wes coming home the day after tomorrow, I won't have time." Kate jumped from the bed and quickly grabbed the first clothes she could find before heading for the bathroom. "I really need to do this."

"I'll go with you." Rick's eyes narrowed with suspicion. She knew he wasn't fooled by her lie, especially since they'd spent the entire previous day shopping and she hadn't bought a thing, but she didn't know how to tell him the truth about her fears.

"No," she practically yelled. "I need to go by myself."

Rick stood still for a moment, no doubt surprised by the vehemence of her tone. "Why?"

"I—" she stammered, damning herself for her rambling stupidity. "Fine. I need to get you a present too. There, are you happy? I wanted it to be a surprise." She was proud of the strength behind her lie. Truth was, she'd finished her Christmas shopping weeks ago, but it was the only excuse she could think of to get out of the house.

She needed time to evaluate her situation, to think. Unfortunately, Rick's presence seemed to rob her of that ability.

"Kate." He called to her from the bed and Kate was certain he intended to stop her.

"I won't be long." She called the words out over her shoulder, escaping to the bathroom and silently praying she could get to her car and away from the house as easily.

Rick stood at the front door and watched Kate's car peel out of the driveway as if a bat out of hell were on her tail. He wasn't sure exactly what happened this morning to spook her so badly, but he wasn't completely surprised. Jill warned him she wouldn't accept his suit easily and Rick hadn't exactly been subtle in his pursuit of her. He told himself he'd practice patience, but that was a hell of a lot easier said than done.

He'd waited a lifetime for a woman like Kate and now that he'd found her, he wanted it all. The whole kit and caboodle. Kate in his home as his wife and mother of his children. He should have known it would only be a matter of time before she began rebelling against their closeness. After all, he hadn't left her alone for more than an hour at a time since he'd returned home. Ever since his homecoming, he'd hovered around

her like a mother hen, afraid of the moment when she would begin to question his motives and her feelings.

While his feelings toward Kate grew more solid as the days passed, he knew it would be exceedingly difficult for Kate to open herself up to a sensation as powerful and all-consuming as love. He wasn't carrying the same emotional baggage she was. He was fortunate that in his entire life he'd suffered very few serious blows to his heart. Of course, that was due in large part to the fact he hadn't truly given his heart to another woman before Kate.

Meanwhile, Kate had given her heart to a man who was completely unworthy of it. She'd been taken in by a handsome face and charming personality when she'd been too young to realize not everyone was as honest as she was.

Rex roamed the yard while Rick walked over and sat down on the front porch swing. His whole being was screaming out for him to go after her, but he managed to hold back. She needed time to gather her thoughts. After all, he didn't blame her for being suspicious of his sincerity. Their relationship could be called nothing other than a whirlwind. Even *he* found himself uncomfortable with the speed in which he'd fallen head over heels in love with her. Could two people really fall in love via email?

Originally he'd fallen in love with her mind, her sense of humor and her personality through her letters, and their time together face-to-face had only strengthened that feeling. The more time he spent with Kate, the more he was convinced she was the perfect mate for him. She put a spell on him he didn't think he could ever break. Hell, he didn't want to break it. His attraction to her was consuming, all-encompassing, and she had a body that was made for his hands, his lips and his cock.

Now all he had to do was convince her to take one more chance. Prove to her he didn't want her to be anyone other than herself with him. Persuade her that by losing her heart to him she wouldn't lose herself.

Determined to give Kate some time to herself, Rick attempted to distract himself from his worries by digging his favorite Kay Knight novel out from under his bed. Wes

teased him unmercifully for “hiding” them there, but on nights when he couldn’t sleep, they certainly filled the time pleausurably.

Unfortunately, his mind refused to see the words. Finally, throwing the book down, he closed his eyes and let his thoughts drift back to how beautiful Kate looked last night. Her long auburn hair had brushed his cheeks as she rode his hard cock and covered his face with her sweet, soft kisses.

His mind kept repeating the mantra “she will come back” until he thought he’d go crazy. After three hours, his confidence in her return faltered, then failed.

Picking up on Kate’s habit of talking to herself, he began muttering, “Will she come back on her own?” The final tether on his self-control broke on the question and he found himself pulling his Harley out of the garage. The day was cold as shit, but he didn’t care. Maybe the drive would make him numb to the feelings swirling around inside him.

Sweet Kate better have purchased him one hell of Christmas present today because only something spectacular would soothe his ragged nerves.

Chapter Sixteen

"Why are you at my apartment?" Jill's question filtered through the phone and Kate could imagine the look of exasperation on her sister's face.

"I thought maybe we should do Christmas here, just the two of us. Mom's not coming home from Florida. I figured I'd do a little decorating while you're visiting Wes. Are you staying there tonight?"

"Yes, I'm staying here, although God only knows why I bother. Thank goodness he's being released tomorrow. I'm as sick of this joint as he is."

Kate was pleased to learn Jill and Wes would be returning a day earlier than they'd previously thought. She missed her sister's calming presence and much-needed advice, and Wes' homecoming would help distract Rick.

"Wes, stop picking at those stitches. The doctor will be here in a minute to cut them out," Jill admonished. Kate smiled at Jill's motherly tone. For some reason, her big sister had appointed herself primary caregiver to Wes and, much to everyone's surprise, Wes accepted her in that role with relative ease.

"Well then, Cheryl could probably use my help with the dinner crowd."

"Criminy, Kate. Do not attempt to help Cheryl!"

"I didn't mean in the kitchen," Kate said huffily. "Just bussing the tables and taking orders and whatnot."

"What the hell did he do?"

Kate could hear Wes laughing in the background. "It's only been a few days and she's already tossed him on his ear?"

"Mind your own business and leave those damn stitches alone!" Jill yelled at Wes and Kate groaned at the thought of her sister and Rick's partner discussing her ill-fated relationship. "What's going on with Rick, Kate?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Kate suddenly felt frustrated at Jill's questions. She hadn't had time to fill her sister in on anything regarding Rick. Jill hadn't been home in nearly a week, splitting her time between work and the hospital to the exclusion of everything else.

"Yes you do," Jill said tiredly. "You were bound and determined to seduce the man a week ago. Now after only a few days in his presence, you're hiding out in my apartment. What happened? Get too close to the fire, little sister?"

"You know, you aren't as smart as you think you are, Jill. Things didn't work out. That's all. Besides, you said yourself, I set out to seduce him, not land a husband. Better to move out and on before any real damage is done."

"Husband?"

"Did Rick propose?" Wes hollered in the background.

"Good Lord, no. Where would you get that idea?"

"You just said...oh never mind. Kate, there is a difference between having a casual affair and entering a serious relationship. You've got the hots for that boy bad and from the strained sound of your voice, I'd say the fire hasn't been extinguished yet. Go back to the farmhouse. Stop being a coward for once in your life and do something real."

Kate was taken aback by Jill's harsh words. Her sister had never been anything but sympathetic and sensitive to her problems.

"I'm not a coward." Kate was well aware that her tone could only be described as weak. Damn Jill and her lousy advice anyway. It was *her* life and if she didn't want to jump into another serious relationship, it was nobody's business but her own. Besides, it's not like Jill's track record with men was anything to write home about. She was the poster child for one-night stands. "You don't know a thing about me."

"I'm afraid I do." Jill's voice was weary once again. "I've let you hover in the background for far too long because I convinced myself that was where you were happiest. Kate, Rick cares about you and I think if you chisel some of that ice away from your heart, you'll discover that you care about him too. He's not Zack and never will be. You can't kick yourself forever over a mistake you made when you were eighteen years old. Now get out of my apartment or I'm calling the cops and having you arrested for trespassing."

"What?" Damn Jill. Kate knew only too well her sister *would* place that 9-1-1 call if Kate pushed her. "You can't be serious."

"I'm perfectly serious."

Kate laughed at her sister's haughty tone and let Jill's words soothe her wounded heart. "I *am* a coward." Kate's voice tripped over the words, but it felt good to get them out.

"So be brave now," Jill answered softly. "Take a chance, sweetie pie."

"What if he walks all over me?" Kate struggled to take a breath as the true source of her fears was revealed.

"Rick won't walk all over you if you don't let him."

"Tell her if he tries, I'll kick his ass for her." Wes continued to chime in his two cents from the background, but this time his words drew a small smile from Kate.

"What if he cheats on me? What if he leaves me too?" Kate choked back unshed tears. For years, she'd claimed not to want Zack's attention or affection and, despite the knowledge their marriage was a disaster, his desertion hurt—badly. She knew it was silly to feel that way considering she'd practically pushed him out the door after the first year, but deep down inside, she thought if he'd ever cared for her at all, he would have pushed back and come home to her.

"I can tell you that won't happen, honey, but those aren't my words to say. Talk to Rick. Tell him what you're afraid of. Listen to what he says and then you decide."

"I've already told him. At least, I've told him some of it."

"So tell him all of it."

Kate sighed and considered Jill's words. They were smart and probably one-hundred-percent correct and she still felt paralyzed with fear. "Jill?"

"Yeah, Katie?"

"Can I stay here? Just tonight? I promise I'll go talk to Rick tomorrow, but I think I need a night to get myself together."

"Of course you can stay. I'll wait until tomorrow to call the cops."

"You're coming home tomorrow."

"Even better, it won't be a long-distance call. I love you, Angel May."

"Right back at you." Kate grinned, feeling a bit better as she said goodbye to her sister.

Collapsing on the comfy couch, Kate pushed her worries away and fell into a sound sleep, letting her anxieties float away as she dreamed of a man with dark hair and sexy eyes that crinkled at the corners as he smiled at her.

A knocking sound jerked Kate awake and she squinted into the now-dark room. The afternoon had clearly given way to night and she struggled to find the light switch in the dark. The knock sounded again and Kate realized someone was at the door. For a moment, she panicked that perhaps Jill *had* called the police, but she immediately dismissed the idea with a light laugh.

"I know you're in there, Kate." Rick's angry voice came from the other side of the door.

"Shit," Kate muttered, thinking she would have preferred the cops.

Opening the door, Kate had only a second to step back before two hundred and twenty pounds of muscle and furious male came barging in.

"Where the hell have you been?" Rick was obviously irate and Kate found herself taking several steps back in the face of his anger.

"Here."

"Jesus, Kate!" Rick was clearly not pleased with her flippant answer. "You've been gone all day. The shops have been closed for hours. I've been all over this damn town three times looking for you."

"Sorry," she replied sheepishly. It hadn't even crossed her mind that Rick may actually have worried when she didn't return to the farmhouse. No one had ever cared where she was before. Plus, she'd been such a bumbling mess when she left the farmhouse, she figured he'd be glad to be rid of her. "I should have called."

"Yes," he barked, "you should have! Dammit woman. I don't know whether to kiss you or beat your ass, but God help me, I want to do something."

Kate gasped as he moved forward so quickly she didn't have time to retreat. Grabbing her shoulders roughly, he kissed her soundly and firmly, not giving her a chance to escape his lips or his hands. Not that she wanted to escape. Rick's kisses were definitely going to be her downfall as she found herself not only succumbing to his embrace, but answering his passionate call with one of her own.

Rick was quickly losing the battle to restrain his howling demons. He'd spent hours worrying about Kate's whereabouts, roaming from shop to shop. Realizing his roving was getting him nowhere, he'd pulled into Jill's diner to question Cheryl and spotted Kate's car parked behind the building. Kicking himself for not considering Jill's apartment sooner, he'd run up the stairs behind the diner, taking them two at a time.

Breaking the kiss, he continued to scold her. "What the hell are you doing here?" He hadn't thought to come here because he knew Jill was still in Harrisburg with Wes.

"I fell asleep," she replied between kisses. Her hands were gripping his hair almost painfully, but he didn't care. She was in his arms again and responding to his touch,

rather than shrinking from it. This morning's fears were no longer evident in her gorgeous blue eyes.

Reaching down, he pulled her sweater up and over her head in one swoop and silently rejoiced when she reached for the hem of his shirt and repeated his act. She seemed to share his need to be naked — fast.

"Don't ever run away from me again, Kate." His fingers fumbled with the button on her jeans. "If you're scared, talk to me."

"I will." Her hands succeeded where his seemed to be failing. Before he realized it, his own jeans were lying in a heap around his ankles. He released her and took a step back. "Take off those pants. Now." Bending down, he made short work of his boots and pants.

Once Kate stood before him in her bra and panties, he reached for her again.

"Doctor's appointment?" he asked roughly, his intense desire stripping away what little remained of his patience. Kate had an appointment scheduled for this morning, but after the way she ran out, Rick was sure she'd forgotten.

"I kept it. Got the shot this morning." She leaned forward and nipped at the tight bud of his nipple.

"Kiss me, Kate." He cupped her cheeks in his hard palms, holding her against his chest.

The wet touch of her tongue drove him over the edge. Releasing her head, he gripped her arms tightly as he pulled her over to the couch. Before Kate could figure out his intent, he sat down and flung her over his lap.

"Rick!" she gasped.

"Were you a bad girl today?" His hand lightly stroked her rear-end through her panties.

"Oh God." Her breathing accelerated and Rick could smell her building arousal.

"Answer me, Kate."

"Yes," she whispered, her hips beginning their lovely rocking motion. Rick loved her unabashed enthusiasm to his lovemaking. She held back nothing with him, despite her natural shyness.

"I'm going to punish you, Kate."

"Please." She thrust her ass toward his wandering hand.

Offering no reprieve, Rick quickly pulled her panties down and covered her bare buttocks with several hard, quick slaps. Pausing, he caressed the red flesh and tried to gauge Kate's response.

She was panting and he could feel her heart racing against his thigh.

"Kate." His fingers slowly descended to her clit. Toying with the hard nub, he was rewarded with her cries of delight and pleas for more.

"Please, Rick."

"Please what, Kate?" he asked, determined to hear the words. After all the torment she'd caused him today, he was finding himself a bit low on charity. Not that Kate seemed to mind or even notice. "What do you want?"

"More."

"More what?" He dragged his fingers back to the drenched opening to her body. He ceased movement and let her feel the tip of his finger hovering on the brink.

"Oh no, please don't tease me! Touch me," she cried. "Put your finger inside me."

Her words were like manna from heaven and Rick quickly plunged into her hot, wet pussy. "Just one finger?" he asked, leaving the single digit buried deep and still.

"Two," she amended, "three. Stop teasing me, Rick. I can't take much more." Her hips were thrusting hard against his hand and Rick didn't doubt her words for a moment.

Pulling his hand out, Rick added another finger and then another, her pussy clamping down on him as the muscles contracted with the onset of her coming orgasm.

"You don't have permission, Kate."

"Say it." Her mind was clearly fighting to win the battle against her own body's needs. "Please!"

The woman was an inferno. Her orgasms were amazingly strong and quick, leaving Rick in awe of her passion.

Continuing his movements within her body, he watched her hover at the edge of completion before denying it and removing his hand from her wet body and gently lifting her from his lap.

"Hands and knees." He pushed her down into the position he wanted. Without warning, he thrust into her open pussy, taking her hard and fast. On the second shove, he knew she wouldn't win the war raging inside her and granted her mercy.

"Come, Kate." No sooner had he issued the command than he watched as she disintegrated into a quivering mass before him. His leniency spent, Rick reclaimed her body, shoving into her again and again. Each thrust a punishment for all the worry she'd caused him, a promise he would always take care of her and a pledge that she could indeed trust him with her heart. Her body shook with continued pleasure as her climaxes hit her one after another without ceasing and still Rick claimed her, pounded into her with all the love in his own heart.

"Mine." He felt his climax shake him. "You're mine!" he yelled as he filled her with his seed.

"Yours," she whispered, as she sank to the floor. Rick collapsed beside her, gathering her trembling body tightly against his. A brief smile crossed her face as Rick watched her blue eyes slowly close and her rosy lips part with sigh.

Rick, thinking she was asleep, was surprised to hear her speak.

"Is that your idea of punishment?" Her voice was still breathless from their exertions.

Rick chuckled at the question, but before he could answer she continued to speak. "Because I have to tell you honestly, that sort of punishment inspires a person to misbehavior more than good conduct."

“Very smart, Kate.” He leaned down and peppered her cheek with soft kisses. “You figured that out quickly.”

Chapter Seventeen

Wes' homecoming was remarkably less dramatic than Rick's had been the previous week. Unless Kate took into consideration the number of times Jill and Wes got into a screaming match over her hovering care or his refusal to follow doctor's orders. Then it was considerably more dramatic.

After two days of dealing with the "Bickersons", as Rick began to call them, he and Kate decided to escape for an evening, leaving Jill in charge of feeding an irritable Wes. The talk Jill encouraged Kate to have with Rick still hadn't occurred. Every time Kate got the nerve up to say something about her disappearing act a few days earlier, the phone would ring or Jill would arrive or Wes would need a glass of water. Although Kate had to admit to herself, she wasn't trying too hard.

She knew without a shadow of a doubt she had fallen in love with her handsome Clooney clone and she knew he shared her feelings, despite the fact he hadn't said those three little words. Her fear of losing herself to a man hovered in the background. Old habits die hard and Kate struggled to keep her feelings to herself. She and Rick were happy and she hated to ruin it by weighting their fun-loving romance down with such a serious, potentially detrimental conversation.

All through dinner she kept telling herself to bring it up.

"Talk to him tonight," Jill had insisted as she and Rick left the house. The quiet, romantic atmosphere of the restaurant was a perfect venue for a serious heart-to-heart, in addition to being a welcome respite from Wes and Jill's constant arguing. Unfortunately, the meal was over, dessert consumed and still Kate hadn't worked up her nerve.

"What a day," Rick murmured, leaning back, looking completely relaxed.

Kate wished she shared his feeling of contentment. "What are we going to do about them?" Kate took a sip of wine, relishing the silence despite her internal worries.

"Who knows?" Rick answered. "I'm afraid I need to apologize for Wes. I don't know what the hell has gotten into him. He's usually the life of the party. The good-time guy. I've never seen him so argumentative and cranky."

"Yeah, well," Kate laughed lightly, "Jill has a habit of bringing out the best in others. Fact is, I was just going to say the same thing about her. I've never heard her talk to anyone the way she talks to Wes."

Rick considered Kate's comments. "They're like gasoline and fire."

"More like dynamite and a lit match."

"Cybill Shepherd and Bruce Willis in *Moonlighting*."

"Jill's a goner," Kate joked.

"Wes is in deep."

"How long do you think it will take them to figure it out?"

"Is your sister known for stubbornness?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Kate answered.

"Wes too. He won't go down easy."

"Great," Kate replied. "Jill can be counted on to kick and scream every inch of the way."

"Maybe we should check into a hotel for a few days," Rick joked. "I don't think I can stand too much more of this twisted courtship they have going on."

Kate laughed. "Do you think we should at least clue them in? I'm fairly certain Jill has no idea she's in love with Wes."

"You can tell your sister if you feel safe doing so. I, for one, am rather fond of my face and don't relish the thought of Wes pounding on it when I break the news to him."

Kate merely shook her head at Rick's mock shudder of fear as his cell phone rang.

"Sorry," he apologized. "I meant to turn the damn thing off."

Looking at the number, Rick threw his eyes skyward dramatically. "Speak of the devil."

"Let me guess," Kate said. "Loverboy?"

"Yes, dammit," Rick said. "I better answer it. He's only been out of the hospital a few days."

"Jill did threaten to re-break his nose just before we left. Maybe she made good on the threat."

Rick opened the phone. "Hello. What? I can't hear you. Wait a minute. Kate, I'm going to pop outside and take this. Lousy reception in here. Do you mind?"

"Of course not. I'll order us coffee in the meantime."

"Perfect." Rick bent down and gave her a quick kiss on the cheek.

Kate shamelessly ogled Rick's tight ass as he walked away from her, wondering how she got so lucky this second time around. Maybe she was merely building up her karma during the torturous years with Zack. Perhaps she'd had to pay some sort of penance before she hit the jackpot with Rick McAllister. The handsome man certainly made her feel like she'd won the lottery.

"Hello Kate," a voice said behind her. Kate groaned and clasped her suddenly trembling hands together under the table as Zack moved to stand beside her. Closing her eyes, she briefly wondered if her atonement wasn't over and she'd actually conjured her worst nightmare merely by thinking of him.

"Get away from me," she whispered, pleased by the threatening menace of her tone. "I warned you —"

Zack quickly raised his hands in supplication. "I won't stay long. I promise. I wasn't going to come over at all, but when McAllister left —"

"Coward," Kate taunted him. "Afraid of Rick? You should be. Go away." She attempted to keep her voice calm and quiet. The last thing she needed was to make a scene in the middle of the restaurant. She could already feel the eyes of the patrons at

the nearby tables on them. No doubt the bored people of Madison were hoping for a good show, and Kate refused to give it to them.

Surprisingly, Zack followed her lead, speaking to her in hushed tones completely at odds with his usual flamboyant, everybody-look-at-me way.

"I wanted to apologize." Zack spoke so softly Kate wasn't sure she'd heard correctly. For a moment she simply stared at him, astonished by words she was certain Zack had never uttered in his life—at least not to her.

"I have no excuse for my behavior, Katie. I mean, I was pretty drunk—"

Kate started to argue, but Zack cut her off again. "Not that that's an excuse. It's just...ah hell. I made a big mistake, Kate. With you, with us. Soozan was..."

Zack ran his hand roughly through his hair and Kate noticed it was trembling.

"Shit, I'm making a mess of this. I'm sorry, Kate. For everything."

Zack looked down at her, his eyes brimming with unshed tears and Kate felt...

What did she feel? Here was her two-timing ex-husband, the man who'd crushed her young girl's heart and all she felt was...

"Nothing," she whispered to herself.

"What?" Zack asked.

"Apology accepted." As she spoke the words, the last vestiges of the old, insecure Kate floated away from her.

"I suppose you and McAllister are seeing each other." Kate had to shake her head in annoyance. One little apology and she could already see the wheels turning in Zack's brain. No doubt he believed he could turn on the charm and the past year would simply melt away.

"Absolutely." She raised her voice slightly for the benefit of the busybodies at the next table who were no longer even pretending not to eavesdrop. "I'm completely, wholeheartedly in love." Then, because his attack the week earlier was still so fresh in her memory, she added a bit more to her declaration. "For the first time in my life."

Zack's face flushed at her insult. "And what about Robson?" He snarled at her and his next words proved he would never truly change. "Are you entertaining him in your bed too?"

"Do you have some sort of death wish?"

Kate groaned as Rick's angry face appeared behind Zack. She felt a small bit of satisfaction as Zack's face went white before he turned to face Rick. Hoping to avert sure disaster, Kate rose quickly, brushing by Zack to take Rick's arm.

"Rick," she said nervously. "I don't feel like coffee anymore. The caffeine will keep me up all night. I'm ready to leave."

Rick looked down at her angrily, clearly not appreciative of her attempts to protect Zack from him.

"Please," she whispered. "Let's go. He apologized for the other night and I accepted."

Rick stared at her as if she'd driven a knife into his back. "And you think that makes everything all right?"

"Of course not," she answered softly. "But it's my call, Rick. Not yours."

Kate cursed her foolish words the second she'd uttered them, but before she had the opportunity to take them back, she watched Rick's face shut against her. His voice, when he finally spoke again, was cold and distant. "I see. I'll pay the bill."

Turning stiffly, Kate watched Rick walk toward the bar.

Zack the Apologetic faded away and cocky Zack the Rat reemerged from his hole. "Well, look on the bright side, Katie. You've still got the spare."

Furious, Kate reacted without a thought. Balling her hand up, she let loose with all the strength in her body. Zack never saw the punch coming and it was several seconds before Kate realized the blood gushing from his nose was because of her.

Zack howled in pain and for a moment, Kate thought he might retaliate. Apparently, Rick thought the same thing. One minute she was staring at Zack's irate

face. The next, her ex was lying on the floor of the restaurant, being pummeled by an indignant, furious Rick.

"Rick!" She grabbed fruitlessly at Rick's strong arms. "Stop! Please. You have to stop!"

It took three men to pull Rick off Zack, who was lying on the floor with his arms over his head, crying. Literally crying. Actually, Kate thought, sobbing would be a more accurate description. If Kate hadn't been trembling with anger and fear, she would have found Zack's behavior humorous. God, Jill would be laughing her ass off right about now.

Glancing over, Kate could see Josh Kendrick, a friend of Rick's from the police force, talking to him, attempting to calm him down.

Kate started to walk over to him, desperate to hold him, to say she was sorry, but the look in Rick's eyes froze her in her tracks.

"I don't give a shit if he *does* press charges," Rick muttered. "That bastard forced his way into my house last week and nearly raped Kate! He had it coming."

Kate and several people heard Rick's comment despite his quiet tone. The elderly lady next to her gasped, shooting daggers at Zack with her eyes, who had managed to calm his sobs down to mere sniveling.

"I'm not pressing charges." Zack's voice was nasal and slurred from his bloody nose and swollen lip.

"Then it looks like you're free to go, Rick." Josh was obviously relieved about not having to arrest a friend on his night off.

Rick nodded once before coming to Kate and taking her arm stiffly. They walked to the car in silence, Kate struggling to conquer her uncontrollable trembling.

Opening the passenger door, Rick helped Kate into the car, but she could see in his face how hard he was struggling to contain his fury.

"Rick—"

"Don't Kate."

Kate wasn't sure how to break through his anger as he drove silently. It was so thick around him, it seemed tangible. They were nearly at the farmhouse when Kate felt the dam inside her break. If she couldn't reach him before they arrived home, she feared she never would.

"Please." Tears threatened to fall despite her struggle to stem their flow. She wouldn't use crying to penetrate his wounded pride. She owed him the truth.

"I'm sorry I ran out on you the other morning."

Rick's face remained stoic, his eyes never leaving the narrow road as they traveled back to the farmhouse.

"I was scared." Her timid confession didn't seem to penetrate the walls Rick had erected in the restaurant. Perhaps she'd waited too long for this conversation. Maybe her actions were irrevocable.

"Of what?" he finally asked after several tense, silent minutes.

Tears escaped as she silently rejoiced. At least he was speaking to her. Once again, Rick swallowed his pride and offered her the gift of understanding. No matter how many times she screwed up, he always offered her a reprieve. The thought of his selflessness and generosity humbled her.

"Of what, Kate?"

"Of Zack and what he almost did to me. Of the way you make me lose control of myself in bed. I can't think when you touch me. Of falling in love with you. Of not being woman enough to make you happy. Of you leaving me. God—I'm afraid of everything."

The farmhouse loomed before them. Rick seemed to consider her words before hitting the switch to open the garage door and pulling in.

She looked at him closely as he turned to face her, his eyes giving away none of his feelings. She took a deep breath. "I thought I had my act together. When you were away

and I was alone at the farmhouse, I really felt like I was being true to myself, to my personality. I lost all that weight, got a new haircut, bought a bunch of new clothes. Remade myself into someone I could face in the mirror every morning. For the first time in my life, I truly liked myself."

"And that's changed?" Rick's voice was no longer quite as cold and distant and Kate knew he was truly listening to her, truly trying to understand her fears.

"Not exactly, no. Yes, I mean...I don't know."

"Kate, do I make you feel bad about yourself?"

Kate quickly shook her head. "No, Rick. You tell me I'm beautiful and when you look at me, I can see in your eyes you truly mean it. And I know you aren't just referring to my looks, but all of me. The problem is...what if you change your mind? What if one day you wake up next to me and realize you've made a terrible mistake?"

The pent-up anger Rick had suffered since leaving the restaurant exploded from him. "Like Zack? Christ, Kate! I'm not a shallow asshole and I don't tell women lies just to get into their pants. I love you! Not just today or tomorrow but forever, and I am *not* merely biding my time with you waiting for the next hot number to walk by. Either you believe that or you don't, but I'll be damned if I'll pay for your ex-husband's mistakes for the rest of my life."

"You love me?" she whispered, tears flowing freely.

"Of course I love you, Kate. How can you not know that? How can you not see that? I've been walking around with my heart on my sleeve since I got back, like some lovesick fool. Dammit, woman!"

Rick got out of the Corvette and slammed the door shut. Kate was reaching for her door handle when Rick wrenched the passenger door open and yanked her out. In seconds, she found herself pushed up against the side of the car and Rick's lips took hers in a kiss so potent and powerful, Kate had no option but to believe his words.

Pulling back, Kate reached up and held Rick's face tightly in her tiny hands.

"I love you." The words were clear and strong and true. "I understand now, Rick. I'm not losing myself in you. You make me a better person, a better me, but no matter what I'm still Kate Harper. And you've shown me that's enough."

"It's certainly enough for me, Kate." His voice was thick with emotion. "You've brought me laughter and love and —"

"Swollen fists and sleepless nights and burned dinners." Kate finished his sentence for him with a laugh, kissing his rapidly bruising knuckles. "Thank you for defending my honor."

"My pleasure, my love," Rick replied. "Now wrap your legs around my waist. Let me inside you, sweetheart."

Kate complied immediately, the stress and fears she'd suffered for days falling away from her like petals plucked from a daisy. "He loves me," she whispered.

"Always." Before Kate knew it, Rick's pants were open, her skirt shoved up around her waist and Rick's cock was there, deep inside her, showing her in no uncertain terms the truth of that statement. He hadn't even bothered to remove her panties in his haste to claim her, the material merely shoved aside.

Each thrust drove his words deeper into Kate's injured soul, filling in all the gouges left there by years of neglect and sadness.

"God Kate," Rick gasped after a couple minutes. "I'm afraid this won't take long, love."

His words triggered her body's response and on the next thrust, she felt her climax start to rumble.

"Rick," she cried breathlessly, needing his words as well as his amazing body to complete her.

"Let it take you, Kate." His lips caressed her earlobe as he spoke.

And it did. An orgasm more powerful than all the previous ones quaked through her body, producing a pleasure that was almost painful in its intensity. She felt Rick's

cock begin to pulse in unison with the clenching of her pussy muscles and suddenly it was the two of them falling together, clinging to each other as they crashed in the chaos of their shared climax.

It was several minutes before the strength in Kate's legs gave out and they dropped lifelessly back to the floor. If not for Rick's strong arms around her and the Corvette at her back, she would have collapsed on the floor in a boneless puddle.

Rick's hot breath on her cheek eventually calmed and neither one spoke for the longest time, simply staring into each other's eyes. His feelings seemed so transparent now, so clearly written on his face, that Kate wondered how she could have missed them.

She'd spent years yearning for the emotion Rick offered her so freely and she'd almost thrown it all away. Now, with Rick, she knew what true love was. She knew what it meant to commit fully to another person—heart, soul, body and mind.

"You are the only man I ever want to be with. At the end of the day it's you I want to kiss goodnight. For the rest of my life."

"Well, that's a lucky coincidence," Rick replied. "Because I *am* the only man you will ever be with and at the end of every day, my lips are the only ones you'll be kissing—for the rest of your life."

"Oh yeah? Prove it," she dared.

And Rick did—again. Right there on the hood of his '74 Corvette.

Chapter Eighteen

"Tell me again why we're waiting?" Wes asked for the hundredth time since entering the room.

"Jill's not here," Rick answered. "Although why that matters—"

"Merry Christmas!" Kate's salutation was cheerful as she called out over Rick's words. Jill stumbled, bleary-eyed, into the cozy living room.

"What time is it?" Jill asked grumpily, obviously annoyed at being dragged from her warm bed so early in the morning.

"Jill." Kate slapped Rick's hands away from the presents under the tree. "It's nearly nine. I've held these two children off as long as I could."

"She's here now," Wes pointed out to her, grabbing a large box bearing his name before Kate could snatch it away from here. "Can I open my presents?"

"Honestly, you would think you guys were ten years old," Kate exclaimed.

"She wouldn't let us open a single gift until you woke up." Rick's voice was rife with annoyance.

Jill rolled her eyes. "I know. She does the same thing every year. Apparently it is of the utmost importance that everyone be present before the festivities begin."

"It's the holidays," Kate insisted. "A time for togetherness and family. The purpose is in the giving, not in the receiving. I, for one, enjoying seeing your face as you open the gifts I bought. Besides, what's the fun of opening your presents alone?"

"Has she worked out the order yet?" Jill was grumpy and disregarded Kate's heated speech.

"Alphabetical," Wes grumbled. "Which means I'm last. I personally voted for birthday order. I'm a January baby."

Jill perked up at Wes' answer, suddenly wide awake. "Hey, alphabetically I'm first. Hot damn! Somebody give me a present."

Wes tossed her a small box before anyone else had time to look under the tree for a gift with Jill's name. Obviously, he'd had the present hidden in his lap.

Jill looked surprised by his quick action, but hid it quickly. "Thanks Wes," she said with uncharacteristic shyness.

"It's nothing," Wes said. "Just something I had lying around. Didn't have a chance to go shopping with this damn broken leg."

Jill tore into the wrapping and Kate grinned to see her sister's childlike enthusiasm. Wes and Jill seemed to have called a truce for the holidays and the four friends spent Christmas Eve enjoying Jill's seven-course feast before relaxing and playing Pictionary in front of a roaring fire. Rick was still smarting a bit this morning from Wes and Jill's trouncing.

Leaning back into Rick's solid chest, Kate smiled as he wrapped his arms around her and placed a sweet kiss on top of her head.

"Wes!" Jill pulled an antique broach from the box. "It's beautiful."

Rick's arms tensed briefly when Jill held up the delicate pin to show them.

"That belonged to your mother," Rick said. Kate remembered Rick telling him that Wes' mother passed away when the boys were seniors in high school. Apparently Wes adored her and had taken her death extremely hard.

"I don't have a sister." Wes was obviously attempting to dismiss the importance of the jewelry. "What am I going to do with the thing?"

"Wes, I can't take this." Jill tried to hand the broach back.

"Of course you can," Wes replied angrily. "I want you to have it."

Jill looked shell-shocked by Wes' generous gift.

"I'll take good care of it," Jill finally replied. "But if you ever want it back—"

The smile Wes gave Jill caused Kate's heart to do a small flip. "I won't."

Rick bent forward to whisper, "Progress," and Kate had to stifle her giggle. Just when she thought she couldn't be any happier, life threw her another marvelous surprise. Now that Kate had found her heart's desire, she wished the same for Jill. Watching Wes look at her sister with love in his eyes, she knew that wish would be granted.

Kate cleared her throat over the lump forming there. "My turn."

"Open mine first." Jill grabbed a flat package from beneath the tree.

Kate thanked her sister, unwrapping the present slowly, careful not to rip the paper.

Jill groaned. "Oh for heaven's sake, Kate. Rip the damn thing open already."

Kate laughed at Jill's familiar complaint. "Just because you don't savor your gifts doesn't mean I have to rip through mine. Christmas only comes once a year."

Rick chuckled before reaching around her and ripping the paper off himself.

"Hey," Kate protested – until she saw the framed picture.

"Jill!" she exclaimed breathlessly.

"What the hell?" Rick looked over her shoulder.

"It's a lithograph of your first book cover." Jill was obviously pleased with Kate's delighted response.

"It's beautiful." Kate ran her fingers over the frame. "That is still my favorite book."

Rick couldn't help himself as he grabbed the gift from Kate's hands. "*Your* book?"

"Lemme see." Wes was obviously curious about all the fuss.

"Yes," Kate answered. "I meant to tell you Rick, but honestly, it slipped my mind. I mean, I haven't had a whole lot of time to devote to my writing since you returned."

Rick struggled to process what he was seeing.

"What is it?" Wes asked again, annoyed at being kept in the dark.

Jill stood up to take the frame away from Rick. "Kate is a part-time writer. She's actually quite successful at it."

"It was my secret writing fund that kept me afloat when Zack cleaned out our joint account. He didn't know about my books."

Jill turned the frame around to show Wes as Kate spoke. As he looked at the picture, Wes' eyes went wide before flying back to Kate.

"Kay Knight?"

"My pen name," Kate answered matter-of-factly. "Why? Oh no." She finally noticed Rick's deer-in-the-headlights look. "You've read one of them, haven't you?"

"One of them?" Wes yelled. "Try *all* of them. Numerous times!"

"Really?" Kate seemed exceedingly pleased.

"You're Kay Knight." Rick repeated stupidly, when he finally managed to find his voice.

"Is this going to be a problem?"

"Oh, hell no." Rick pulled her up. "I'm next. Jill, you and Wes will have to wait while Kate gives me her gift."

"What?" Kate futilely attempted to dig her heels in. "Your present is right here, Rick, under the tree."

Rick ignored her words and when she continued to fight his pull, he turned around and scooped her up into his arms.

"Where are we going?" Kate asked as Rick made his way to the stairs.

He could hear Wes yelling behind them, "I get to open two presents when you get back since you're making me wait!"

Jill's laughter combined with his friend's, but Rick ignored it all until he managed to get Kate to his bedroom.

"What on earth are you up to?"

"You're Kay Knight!" he repeated.

"I know that, Rick." Kate's gaze became concerned. "Are you angry with me for not telling you? I wasn't keeping it a secret. Honestly. There's just been so much going on this past week. The books seemed insignificant compared to all the rest."

"Get undressed." Rick's voice was deep and husky as he issued his command.

"Now?" Rick watched Kate's breathing accelerate at his words.

"Now."

Kate's fingers flew, shedding her clothing so rapidly Rick knew she was as hot as he was.

Rick turned her gently toward the bed as soon as she finished. "Go lie down. Facedown."

Kate complied immediately.

Rick studied her as she struggled not to squirm under his hot glare.

"Those stories, Kate..." he said from the foot of the bed. He didn't dare touch her yet or he would never be able to speak. "They're fairly graphic and hot. Damn, Kate—hot doesn't even touch it. They scorch the page."

He watched Kate shrug and the question hovering at the edge of his mind since discovering her secret flew from his lips. "How?"

Kate didn't move or respond for a few moments, so Rick moved forward, leaning down to touch the soft skin of her ass. Caressing it gently, he repeated his question softly before punctuating it with a hard slap.

Kate squealed at the unexpected touch. "I read a lot of erotic novels. I was alone, Rick. All the time." She stopped talking as Rick gently rubbed the light pink mark he'd just left. When she failed to continue explaining, Rick slapped the other cheek.

"And?"

"Reading stopped being enough. I had all these stories, fantasies swirling around inside me and no way to relieve them, so I started putting them down on paper."

"Fantasies." Rick recalled page after page of her writing. All of them filled with the darkly erotic things he dreamed of doing with Kate.

Moving his hand through the crease between her legs, Rick found Kate's clit and pushed on the delicate button—hard.

Kate cried out, but Rick's control was gone, shattered in a million pieces and scattered to the wind. The kid gloves were off and now he was determined to truly claim his love.

Her arousal was so thick a drop hit his hand as he continued to toy with her clit. Her hips were gyrating wildly and he knew she was seconds away from begging for release. Before she could speak the words, Rick moved his fingers away.

"No!" Kate yelled. "Don't stop!"

Rick ignored her demand. His course was set and there would be no turning back. Gathering up her copious fluid on his fingers, Rick dragged his fingers back, sliding over her pussy until he reached her anus.

"R-Rick," Kate choked, her body going tense.

Spreading the moisture around the tight, puckered entrance, Rick lubricated the area well before slowly sliding his finger in.

Kate hissed at the initial breach, but by the time his finger was fully seated, he could feel her pushing back against him. His little firecracker, he thought with a grin, was certainly ready to explode.

"Have you ever been taken in the ass?"

"No," she whispered.

"I'm going to fuck you here." He wiggled his finger inside her tight portal.

"Yes," she replied so quickly, Rick chuckled.

"So hot." He pulled his finger out, returning again with two. "And tight."

Kate's body seemed to simultaneously fight against his fingers while silently begging for more.

Her arousal was so strong now Rick could see a damp spot gathering on the quilt beneath her. "You're so wet you're dripping."

"I'm sorry." Her eyes closed tightly as she concentrated on his slow thrusting.

But they flew open as his rough palm struck her ass again, hard.

"Never apologize for that," he said harshly. "I always want you wet and ready. Ready to take me at a moment's notice." He watched his strong words wash over her and marveled at her natural submissiveness. How had he missed this? For days, he'd tiptoed around his own needs and desires. So desperate to protect and shield her. To find out that she wanted it all as much as he did was a heady revelation, to say the least.

Pulling out again, he added yet another finger. She'd begged for this in her fantasies and now he was going to give it to her. He had to make it compelling and exciting enough that she would come to love the sensations surrounding this dark act as much as he did. And above all, he couldn't hurt her. Taking the time and care to stretch the tight muscles, Rick continued to gather her body's natural lubricants so when he placed his cock there, the entry would be slick and easy.

As Rick prepared her body to take him, he watched Kate acclimatize herself to his touches. She never pulled away or protested but remained with him every step of the way. When he sensed she was on the verge of climaxing, Rick replaced his fingers with the head of this thick cock.

"Yes," she hissed.

Rick only just got his hands around her hips in time to stop her from impaling herself on his hard flesh. Smacking her once again, he kept his grip firm, refusing to allow her the smallest movement. "Bad girl."

"Please!" She was mindless with need, exactly where Rick wanted her.

His tenuous grip on control slipping, Rick forged in an inch.

"Kate," he started, but she cried out again.

"God, Rick, stop tormenting me. Fuck me!"

Her words snapped the trigger and Rick withdrew, only to come back in one hard thrust that left him fully seated within her tight passage.

Two more hard shoves and he felt Kate's orgasm rumble through his own body. As if struck by lightning, she shuddered and convulsed as he continued his own trip to paradise in her body. Less than a dozen strokes later and he released his seed deep within her ass, filling her with everything his body had to give.

They tumbled together, lying side by side on the bed, Rick's cock still buried inside her warmth.

When he had enough breath to speak, he whispered the only words his brain could form. "I love you."

Epilogue

"So," Wes said, glancing at his watch. Two hours had passed since Rick and Kate's hasty exit. "This is apparently going to be a long one."

Wes savored the sound of Jill's light laugh. "And a loud one. My God, how many times has she screamed up there?"

"I lost count around twenty." Wes didn't mention that he couldn't actually remember his numbers any more since all the blood in his body was firmly encapsulated in his cock. Kate's orgasmic cries coupled with Jill's stimulating presence was wreaking havoc on his body.

He watched as she ran her fingers over the broach he gave her once again. He couldn't explain why he'd been so compelled to give her the one heirloom of his mother's he had, but something told him it was the right thing to do.

"Are you feeling all right?" she asked, when he began to fidget in his chair. No doubt she thought him uncomfortable due to his injuries. Fact was with Jill in the room, all his pain disappeared.

"Yeah," he answered with a lightness he didn't feel. "Just bored. How about you and me go rustle up some breakfast? I'm starving."

"Sounds good," she said with a smile. As she crossed the room, she offered a hand to help him up and Wes gritted his teeth at the gesture. He was tired of her treating him like nothing more than an invalid. He was a grown man with seriously grown-up desires. Deciding the time had come to prove that fact, Wes reached out for her outstretched hand. Rather than allowing her to pull him up however, he used their clasped palms against her. Pulling hard, Wes yanked Jill down and across his lap quick as a flash.

"Wes!" she said, startled by his impulsive move.

“I want to give you your other gift,” he said gruffly and before she had time to respond, he placed his lips on hers and showed her the true meaning of Christmas.

About the Author

Some people fall apart on their 30th birthday, others on their 40th. For Mari Carr, 34 was the year that took her down. After she spent the day crying and saying, “I haven’t done anything I thought I would,” her husband finally asked what was left undone. Her answer was simple—she hadn’t written a book or decorated her house. “So do it,” he said.

Five years later, the house is sparking with fresh paint and new furniture and her computer is jammed full of stories—novels, novellas, short stories, and dead-ends. The lesson: it’s never too late to achieve a goal or two!

High school librarian and English teacher by day and mother of two busy teenagers, Mari Carr finds her time for writing by squeezing it into the hours between 3 a.m. and daybreak when her family is asleep and the house is quiet.

With the publication of her first book, her latest goal—publishing before 40—has been achieved with a couple of years to spare. Phew!

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

www.ellorascave.com