

The book cover features a dramatic, stormy sky with purple and blue hues. A jagged lightning bolt strikes down the center. In the upper right, a woman with long dark hair and a white tank top looks intensely at the viewer. In the lower right, a man's face is partially visible, looking upwards. On the left, a dark, leafless tree stands in front of a building. The title 'FORBIDDEN THUNDER' is prominently displayed in the center, with a faint, mirrored version of the title below it. The author's name 'KATHLEEN LASH' appears at the top and bottom.

KATHLEEN LASH

FORBIDDEN THUNDER

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Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

The Wild Rose Press

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* * * *

The cab of the truck jumped beneath them.

The screech of metal grinding against concrete and asphalt marked the progress of what seemed inevitable. If the cab went over, the trailer would be next, and from where the trucks were mashed together the tanker could follow.

Groaning, trying to keep from falling by wedging his boots between the fuel tank and body panel, his fingers threaded with hers as Alex, his next youngest brother, said, "You have got to be kidding!"

John called, "There's not a damn thing funny about the situation."

"Well, Christ, John, crawl back over!"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Don't talk, work the chains."

"Sorry about this," Caila said.

His fingers clenched her small hands a little tighter. "You will be, little girl, you will be."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Liam asked.

"I'm going to get you both out of this mess, take your sister to my truck, and splinter her rear end."

The sound of metal crunching and scraping ended the conversation as men yelled, calling instructions to each other. "John, let go and get back," Alex yelled, "we can't secure it. We need the second truck."

"Just get it done. Bring the truck up, hook to it and get Paul to ease a steady pressure on the chains. Stabilize this mess, or we're going over."

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The truck bounced once violently. Glass broke as everything in the cab shifted. Caila screamed. "Oh, God, Liam, grab my legs! John, help us, get us out!"

The naked terror in her voice made his grasp tighten.

"Hold her," Liam yelled.

"She's not going anywhere."

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Forbidden Thunder

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Dedication

To Jenny, Eddie, Sharon, Lynn and Vicki

for critiques and encouragement.

To my husband Ralph and children

for unending support.

To my father, whose quiet manner,

gentle smile and genuine caring will forever

remain in our hearts.

And to Cindy Davis for her

expert editorial skills and patience.

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Chapter One

The intercom on the phone beeped repeatedly. Caila McKenna depressed the button. "Yes, Stephanie?"

"Liam's on line four."

"Thanks, Steph, I got it," Caila said.

Through the receiver she heard a loud grinding noise and hit the button for speakerphone. At times it helped clarify the voice over a whining diesel engine. "Hey, Liam, aren't you due back about now? What's up?"

"Oh, God, Caila, I'm so damn glad you're there. I'm in trouble." He infrequently called her *Caila*, and never admitted to needing a thing from anyone. Her thirty-eight year old, overly protective brother's voice made her heart pound. "Is Cam or Galen in the shop?"

"Galen is. Cameron took a load to Michigan."

"Then you'll have to help me. There's been an accident."

Swallowing, she gathered her emotions. "Where are you?"

"Just your side of Mansfield. I-71 Northbound. An accident. A bad one."

"Are you hurt?"

"Police are on the way but you can get help here quicker."

Her mind fired random questions but she couldn't voice them.

"Baby Girl, listen to me. Send Galen and call Four Sons."

"Four Sons Towing?"

"Yeah. Get John or Alex, either one. Tell them I'm asking a favor. Tell 'em to bring the big rig recovery unit and air bag truck."

The recovery truck and air bag unit were infamous in Ohio. Four Sons was renowned for their assistance and recovery of severe truck wrecks.

"Stay on the line while I work things out." A long pause followed.

"Tell Krista and James I love them."

"Tell them yourself," she said, refusing to believe his situation could be that bad. "I'll be right there. Stay on the line while." The call went on hold. She searched the computer, found the number and punched it into her cell phone before grabbing Liam's car keys off the board.

"Four Sons Towing," a male voice said.

"Can I talk to John?"

"Sure, hang on."

As she passed through the outer office, she said, "Steph, Liam's on hold. Pick up the call and if he needs anything, call Galen's cell."

"No problem, Caila," Stephanie said.

She raced down the stairs and through the warehouse. In the service bays she shouted, "Galen, I need you!" The impact wrench he'd been using stopped. His head came out from under the hood of a Kenworth. Her youngest brother laid down the tool and jumped from the bumper to the cement floor.

"Rusty, take over. We've got an emergency," she said.

"Sure, Caila."

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Although Galen followed quietly, she could practically hear the questions firing at her back. He'd get an explanation as soon as Thunder answered the phone. They made their way across the loading docks and ran down the stairs two at a time. Men stopped to watch, having no McKennas in the building during the heart of a work day was unheard of.

As she opened the door on Liam's black Corvette, a very deep, male voice came through the phone, "This is John."

"Caila McKenna, McKenna Trucking."

No response. She wondered if he'd hung up.

After slamming the car door she twisted the key. "I need your help." Galen climbed in the passenger side and she grabbed first gear before hitting the accelerator.

"Well, Caila McKenna of McKenna Trucking, I'm booked clear till December. That's when they say hell will freeze over."

She took a breath and let it out before calmly saying, "Liam's in trouble. We need your equipment. He had an accident this side of Mansfield on I-71 northbound. He said to bring the big rig recovery unit and air bag truck."

"Done," Thunder said and the phone went dead.

John Thunder glimpsed at the carnage in utter disbelief. A tangle of tractor-trailer and tractor-tanker blocked one complete lane of the two-lane interstate. Any description of the mess wouldn't do it justice. The cab of Liam's rig dangled off the side of the bridge. Twisted slightly toward the passenger door, the grill and windshield pointed down. The rear axles straddled the guard-rail which barely supported the cab. The trailer had jack-knifed and lay partially on its side

with the tanker tangled against it. The massive Detroit diesel sputtered, sending up tiny bursts of smoke now and again. John had cleaned up some bad accidents but nothing compared to the destruction a few yards away.

He swung the heavy wrecker across the median, then spun the steering wheel to move the truck into position. Police and firemen stepped aside. John launched himself from the cab and strode to the back of his truck. After dropping the outriggers for stabilization and extending the boom, he eyed the McKenna truck. Ominous creaking warned that a miscalculation or hesitation could send the truck into a one hundred and fifty foot freefall to the concrete highway below. The fire chief, in a bright yellow slicker, appeared at his side.

"What's the situation?" John asked.

"The tanker's intact, the driver's safe. But the McKenna driver is trapped in the cab." The Fire Department usually handled rescue, but the biggest problem was the precarious position of the McKenna truck. John's three brothers slid to a halt just then with the airbag truck and another boom truck. John hurried to the concrete abutment closest to the cab and yelled, "McKenna!"

"Thunder, is that you?" John heard Liam say before he caught the faint odor of gasoline fumes. "Yeah, I came for the barbeque. You on the menu?"

"You tell me! I don't smell smoke, so I guess my ass won't roast today."

"Nope," he said, "but how are you at flying? Grown wings since the last time I saw you?"

The long silence relayed Liam's unease. When he finally did respond, his voice wasn't nearly as loud. "I don't like heights."

"Hell of a mess you got yourself into. Can you shut the engine down?"

"Can't reach the key."

"You hurt?"

"Who the hell knows?" Again a lingering silence before he said, "I can't feel my legs but I'm pinned in here real tight. There's some blood but nothing too damn bad."

"Good, take a nap while I shut down your truck."

"You sure as hell can't get in here, there's not enough room."

"It'll take some time, but we'll get you out."

He heard Liam laugh. "I can only imagine what this'll cost. And I don't give a shit."

"I'll get to work. You need something, call out. I won't be far."

John's brothers met him at the back of the wreckage to confer. They'd already begun hooking chains to the frame between the rear axles to stabilize the cab.

The fire chief and three State Highway patrolmen joined the conversation as they walked to the safety line. One officer asked, "So, the primary goal is to get the truck turned off?"

"Yeah, I'm catching fumes from the vapor recovery on the gas tanker. If the diesel starts getting a steady dose of them, the motor could over-rev and a lot of bad things could happen if it starts running wild."

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"One of my men could climb in and do it," the fire chief said.

"Not a chance unless you have a kid working with you. There's just a small gap, and everything's so twisted someone would have to actually crawl inside with no extra gear. I think the only chance we have is to start cutting and get in through the door. Again, not only one hell of a drop if someone makes a mistake, but cutting involves spark and with the fumes..."

The shouts of one patrolman brought them all whirling around. "Hey, where's she going?"

A small blonde had ducked through the crowd and was sprinting toward the tractor. John broke into a run. "You! Hey, get the hell away from there!"

The slender, athletic body stepped onto the guard rail and jumped to the rear tires. Without hesitating, one footstep took her to the frame before inching her feet toward the back of the cab. In a single leap, she grasped the handrail on the exhaust stack and swung onto the fuel tank. Side-stepping her way, she finally made it to the driver's door.

He had to get her off. If she lost her grip...

"Come on lady, get down. Let the authorities handle this." He got as far as standing on the rear tire before the cab shifted. He froze. He yelled to his brothers, "Get some tension on those chains now!"

The woman clung to the small opening that used to be the window of the driver's door. When she glanced back, her dark blue eyes held a determination he hadn't seen in any woman in a long time.

"Here, work your way back to me. I'll get you out of here. You're going to kill yourself." She didn't reply. He tried again. "Look, your weight could make us go over."

She reached inside and struggled before placing her feet back on the fuel tank. "I can't reach it. I have to go in."

Before he could move, she jumped, used her arms for leverage and shimmied through the opening head first. The cab vibrated as she shifted around inside and within seconds, the motor rumbled to a stop. A loud cheer went up from the crowd. Anger soon replaced relief as the truck lurched and John lost his balance. *Damned little fool!*

"Lady, get out of there. Do you hear me?"

Back on the tires, heading for the frame, the truck shifted under him.

"Caila, what the hell are you doing here?" John heard Liam ask. It figured she'd be a McKenna, taking a bad situation and making it worse.

"I came to help."

"Your boot is on my crotch!"

More shifting.

"Sorry, I'm wedged in."

"Baby Girl, get your ass out of here."

"Can't. I'm stuck."

"Stuck!" Liam and John cried in unison.

"My left leg. The more I pull...Ouch."

"Are you hurt?" John called.

"Nope, but something shifted. Wait, let me see if I can squeeze my leg...Damn!"

"Show me your hand, I'll pull you out."

Her fingers appeared in the opening and then her hands. His disbelief was conveyed with a whistle as he moved forward, slowly retracing her footsteps.

All at once, with a great screech of metal, the truck pitched to the right. John grabbed the handrail and held tight as the cab twisted away from the bridge. Men shouted to get the hell out of the way. Then nothing but stunned silence as the tractor dropped. Seemed like a mile, but was probably no more than a foot. The motion stopped with a tremendous jolt as the entire weight of the truck was held by the chains his brothers used as anchors, and a not-so-secure looking fifth wheel. The cab was twisted almost completely over onto the passenger side, but safe for the time being.

Her fingers appeared in the opening. He said, "Reach a little higher."

"Sorry, that's it."

"Liam," he called, "can you push her out?"

He listened as they struggled and she yelped. "She's pinned as tight as me. I'm just making it worse." John crept to the driver's door and grabbed her hands.

Caila shrieked.

The cab jumped beneath them again. The screech of metal grinding against concrete and asphalt marked the progress of what seemed inevitable. If the cab went over, the trailer would be next, and from where the trucks were mashed together, the tanker could follow. Groaning, trying to keep from falling by wedging his boots between the fuel tank and body panel, his fingers threaded with hers when Alex, his next youngest brother said, "You have got to be kidding!"

John called, "There's not a damn thing funny about the situation."

"Well, Christ, John, crawl back over!"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Don't talk, work the chains."

"Sorry about this," Caila said.

His fingers clenched her small hands a little tighter. "You will be, little girl, you will be."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" Liam asked.

"I'm going to get you both out of this mess, take your sister to my truck and splinter her rear end."

The sound of metal crunching and scraping ended the conversation as men yelled, calling instructions to each other. "John, let go and get back," Alex yelled, "we can't secure it. We need the second truck."

"Just get it done. Bring the truck up, hook to it and get Paul to ease a steady pressure on the chains. Stabilize this mess, or we're going over."

The truck bounced once violently. Glass broke as everything in the cab shifted. Caila screamed. "Oh, God, Liam, grab my legs! John, help us, get us out of here!"

The naked terror in her voice made his grasp tighten.

"Hold her," Liam yelled.

"She's not going anywhere."

"I can move! I can move! Wait, if I shift..."

"Whatever you think you can do, do it quick!"

Liam must've been pushing because her head appeared in the opening. John got a better grip on her hands, pulled until

her waist rested against the hole, and she could brace herself on the window frame.

Caila looked back to check on Liam, but saw only concrete a long, long way down through the broken passenger window. Liam's boots disappeared into the sleeper as her stomach did a flip and her lips trembled. John released one of her hands and grasped the back of her head. Random tremors ran through her arms as John turned her face toward him.

He no longer appeared angry and his deep voice soothed and calmed. "There's nothing to see back there. Everything you need to focus on is right in front of you. I need to get you out of the way so I can help Liam. It'll be easy. You're strong and can do it. Just crawl out and hang onto me."

She blinked several times before understanding. More terrified than she'd been in her life, his calm instruction allowed her to react. She pulled herself free from the cab and stretched out carefully beside him, groping with the toes of her boots to find purchase on the fuel tank. Missing the top of the tank, she began sliding. Her fingers grasped for the opening which slid from reach.

A muscled arm came across her back as strong fingers dug into her side. She was brought up hard against him. Pain never felt so good or caused such relief. When she finally opened her eyes, she found John staring at her. "You all right now?"

"Sure," she said, her voice a little shaky.

"You ready to try again?"

After a deep breath, she grabbed hold and began working her way over his body. She resisted the urge to cling and

forced herself to keep moving. The end of a ladder thumped against the frame of the truck a few feet away. A fireman called out, "We're throwing you a line. Hook it around your waist and crawl to me."

The line came. John caught it and struggled to push it beneath her. She knew his hold consisted of only one hand and the pressure of his feet wedged between metal. He held tight to her upper arm until she finished tying herself in. She moved toward the ladder and felt his grip lessen. Once she touched the metal rungs, her body stopped, wouldn't budge.

"Caila?" he said in the same calm voice he used a few moments ago. The concrete below didn't look particularly inviting and she couldn't seem to focus on anything else. "I can't get Liam out until you're across."

Liam. Focus and clarity came back as she crawled slowly to the waiting fireman. Back on solid ground, she watched as men resembling John secured chains from another recovery truck. One of the Thunder men stood at the back of the truck working controls. The motor revved higher. With ear shattering squeals, winches tightened cables, chains stretched, links held. Many breath-holding moments later, the load was stabilized. The cab appeared to sway as John yelled to Liam. He seemed to wait before the sleeper door flew open. John helped ease Liam out and steadied him while a safety line was thrown to them and secured. "Can you make it over?" John asked.

"You'd be surprised how quick my legs are waking up."

After a second line was tossed and John was cinched in, they carefully crawled to the waiting men.

Finally standing by himself and then walking toward her, Caila's legs went weak with relief. She threw herself into her brother's embrace. Ten inches taller, he grabbed her easily and lifted her off the ground. They wouldn't die today after all. Liam set her down and she looked past him at John Thunder.

At six feet tall, his broad shoulders looked enormous. His muscular body tapered down to some rather large, well-worn work boots. Straight raven black hair hung slightly past his collar. His Native American heritage was evident with high cheekbones and a long characteristic nose. Gray eyes made a sharp contrast to his darker features. Although one of the most fascinating men she'd seen, she couldn't keep eye contact long because of his angry expression. Would he make good on his threat to take her to his truck?

As she contemplated whether to apologize or thank him, a police officer grasped her arm. "I need you to come with me, Miss."

Her arms were pulled behind her back; handcuffs clicked onto her wrists. "What the hell," Liam said.

More police surrounded her as the first officer replied, "She put herself and the recovery crew in danger. She's under arrest for endangering emergency personnel or disorderly conduct. Take your pick."

She glanced back and found Thunder standing beside two of his brothers. His angry expression was gone and a wide, satisfied, and very irritating smile replaced it.

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Chapter Two

Caila lay quietly on a cot in the tiny jail cell. Galen promised he'd get the company attorney to figure things out and then take her home. She'd made him swear to stay with Liam until the paramedics finished their examination. How much trouble could she be in, anyway? Nothing bad happened because she interfered. Trying to occupy her mind, she began a mental list of what she'd need for the annual company picnic. If she focused on something mundane, maybe the tension headache would go away.

In the middle of the list, she closed her eyes. Yes, more comfortable. She'd rest them for a moment while her mind worked.

"Wake up, Miss McKenna, you're free to go."

Her eyes barely opened before she stood and staggered to the cell door. Disoriented, she stumbled along until the officer finally grasped her arm. "That was a brave thing you did to help your brother. I didn't want to bring you in, but my sergeant insisted."

"I guess I can't blame him."

"We needed the truck turned off, you did it. You're pretty small and I doubt one of the men could've squeezed in there."

"I guessed that, too. You don't know how much this is going to cost, do you?"

"Probably a few hundred. Your brother signed the paperwork, you could ask him."

"Which brother?"

"Tall guy, reddish hair, blue eyes."

She smiled. "That describes two of them. Early thirties or late?"

"Early, I'd say."

"That'd be Galen. Where's my other brother?"

"He stayed at the scene with Four Sons. He said something about having the wreckage towed to your trucking yard."

"That makes sense. The insurance adjusters need to see it. Was he all right? I barely saw him before you brought me here."

"He seemed fine. Paramedics checked him out and released him. Wait," he said, holding up her right arm, "you're hurt. Why didn't you say something?"

A scratch started just below her rolled shirtsleeve and ran toward her shoulder. It didn't hurt and the wide spot of blood had long since dried. "It's nothing."

"We should have it looked at."

"I'll take care of it when I get home. Thanks for the concern, though."

"Are you sure? I should've noticed it sooner. I feel terrible." The officer touched her arm gently.

"Don't feel too bad. All things considered, it's minor."

They walked around a corner and Galen stood waiting with a scowl on his face. He came to her side immediately, took her left arm and pulled her gently away from the officer.

"Take it easy, she's hurt."

Galen's face reddened as he looked her over. "Where! When? Show me, sweetheart, and we'll get you patched up."

"Easy," Caila said. "It's a scratch. See? No big deal."

Her brother lifted the rolled shirtsleeve as much as he could and surveyed the damage. He pulled her close, making it obvious he'd take care of her. The officer chuckled softly and said, "We could have that looked at."

"No need, you've done plenty." With that he led her toward the door.

"If you ever need anything, Miss McKenna, you call here anytime."

Before she could thank him, Galen said, "She won't need anything and she won't call."

Once outside, she said, "I might've been interested in him."

"Were you?"

"No."

"Good. You haven't gone all goofy over a guy since Adam and I'd hate for it to be a cop."

"Why? What's wrong with cops?"

"That's the same son of a bitch that locked you up."

"So?"

He huffed. "So, if you ever marry a cop and he does something I don't like, I'd probably be in a whole bunch of trouble and in jail if I ever corrected him."

"He *was* cute."

"Not a cop."

She didn't want to verbally spar with him and gave in. They'd all had a long day. "All right, no police."

During her incarceration, the temperature outside had soared. She'd bake in her boots before they got the air turned on and the car cooled down. Streaks of lightning raced across

the night sky; the air itself felt charged with electricity. Galen handed over the keys. The gesture relayed his exhaustion.

"Are you up to it?"

"Sure. I caught a nap on the comfortable bed they provided. Is Liam *really* all right?"

"I watched the paramedics check him out. He's bumped and bruised, has some cuts and gashes, but nothing too bad. He split his head but we all know how thick his skull is."

"The officer said he was riding back with Four Sons. What's that about?"

"I needed the car to come bail you out. Besides, he was going to haggle price with Thunder on the ride home."

"I pity him."

"Who?"

"Liam," she said. John Thunder looked like one determined and inflexible human being.

"Why?"

As she opened the car, she glanced over the roof. "That's one tough man. I think Liam might've met his match."

"Fat chance. Liam could take John in a heartbeat."

An involuntary shudder chilled her. The intense, unfriendly, gray-eyed appraisal Thunder gave after she'd crawled over his hard body, made her stomach turn over.

Lightning illuminated the sky and thunder crashed around them. Rain pelted the windshield in sheets just as they got inside. The trip home would certainly take more time than the one going down. They listened to the radio and before long, Galen fell asleep. He was thirty-four, nine years her senior and the youngest of her brothers.

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The sound of rhythmic snoring and poor visibility, made her conjure things to focus on. She began counting blessings, starting with the most recent, and thanked God for Liam's life. Her gratitude quickly expanded to include all of her brothers, their wives and their adorable children. Guilt crept up and she included her father in thanks, and didn't think more about it. It was the right thing to do.

More than two hours later, she finally pulled onto the long familiar driveway. Off hours at the company mandated the use of a keypad to access the complex. After rolling down the window, she punched in the six-digit code and the gate swung open.

Nearly midnight and the yard almost deserted, she saw the wreckage of her brother's truck in the beams of headlights. Her skin roughened with goose bumps as she stared at the grotesque metal lump. Closer to the building, lights from the loading dock illuminated an older, massive, black wrecker with gold lettering. Even the trucks they ran looked masculine, foreboding and tough.

She parked the car, turned off the engine and shook Galen's arm. He stopped snoring and after shaking him again, slowly opened his eyes. "We there?"

"Yeah, just pulled in."

He stretched and took a moment to yawn before saying, "I'm glad the rain didn't hit when Liam crashed. Slippery roads would've made him slide right over the edge."

"I don't even want to think about it."

The dash for shelter got them soaked before they entered the dock area at the back of the main building. The service

bays and loading dock were deserted, while lights from the office area on the second floor burned brightly. Liam paced the office with a wide bandage wrapped around his head.

She ran up the stairs, opened the door and went directly to her brother. "What happened? Galen said you weren't hurt that bad."

"Oh, for God's sake, they wrapped my whole head because of a cut. You'll have to fix me up before Krista sees me. I told her I'm running late."

"You didn't tell her about the accident?"

"Think about it for two seconds. You know what her reaction would be. She doesn't need this crap right now."

"Why?" Caila asked. Krista could be a bit over-reactive but it didn't explain the secrecy.

"We just found out she's pregnant. James needs a little sister or brother."

"That's wonderful, Liam. Congratulations! I love nieces and nephews." After the day she'd had, the good news was certainly welcomed.

As the embrace ended, he looked at the blood on his hand. His expression became instantly furious. "Damn it, Caila, what the hell happened to your arm!"

"It's dried blood that got wet in the rain. It's just a scratch."

"When did you get hurt? Did something happen at that jail, because if it did—"

"No," she quickly assured. "I scraped it in the truck. I didn't even notice until the officer pointed it out."

A split second later, Liam held his pocketknife and before she could protest, opened the wickedly sharp blade and sliced through the layers of rolled material up to her shoulder. He moved the cloth aside and let out a breath. "You're right, it's shallow and scabbed over. You're lucky, Baby Girl, very lucky."

"My shirt isn't so lucky. The uniform company's going to drop us if we keep sending back clothes with welding burns and tears. They'll know this was deliberate."

Liam and Galen both rolled their eyes. She'd been about to explain how much the uniforms cost, when a very deep voice from the corner of the room said, "There wouldn't be a problem if you would've let me do my job and stayed out of the way."

Her back stiffened immediately as she looked up at Liam. "He's right, you know," he said, stroking the side of her face. "You had no business getting anywhere near the accident. You could've been killed."

Anger surfaced and she didn't care. "What the hell was I supposed to do? Everything turned out fine and you wouldn't be complaining if Cameron, Mannis or Galen could've gotten to you."

"You're wrong," Liam said. "Dead wrong." He turned to face Thunder. "Caila can write a check. What's your price?"

John considered blurting out the amount, but took a long moment to stare at her instead. The sum would probably give him ownership of McKenna Trucking. With the hour late and all of them tired, he thought it best Liam get the news from his own flesh and blood. Obviously, they didn't realize what

they'd done. "Speak with your father. There's an agreement between our parents. He'll know the price."

"My father isn't well," Caila said. "I have authority to pay the company's debts, so let's settle up tonight."

Her hair and clothes were soaked and dirty. Even if she wore makeup, it wouldn't hide her exhaustion. She was a rumpled mess but he couldn't seem to look away. Dwarfed by her brothers, infinitely smaller and more delicate in comparison, she exuded a confidence few older men possessed. The fact she was offspring of Duane McKenna should've made her repulsive, at the very least unappealing. It didn't seem to matter in the least. His silence made her brothers react. Liam visibly tensed and took a step closer to her. Galen walked from the doorway to stand at her other side.

"Well?" she asked. She didn't need her brother's to back her up. The woman didn't have a problem standing there staring him down.

"I run a family business too, but I have an advantage. I know the details of my inheritance. Tell Duane what happened and I'm sure he'll explain."

Her eyes narrowed, jaw tensed as her arms folded at her waist. She'd do battle if necessary. "We contracted with you. Our fathers have nothing to do with your help today. If you want to be paid, you'll name a price. As I've said, *Duane's* ill."

Anxiety or concern underscored her words. She'd broken eye contact when she addressed her father's health. The apprehension she displayed should've delighted him, knowing a portion of his father's pain would be avenged through

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McKenna offspring. Tucked between her brothers with those vivid blue eyes studying him, the experience wasn't proving the pleasure he'd initially envisioned.

John's gaze went to Liam. "Speak to the old man and then come see me. We'll discuss terms. You have three days."

He'd been more than fair by allowing them time to get the particulars. With nothing more to be said or done, he gave the office a sweeping glance. He'd do his homework and see if there'd be anything to settle or discuss. Their trucks, building and even personal vehicles, shouted extravagance. Bankruptcy probably faced them in the immediate future. His father would be pleased knowing Duane would live to see McKenna Trucking cease to exist.

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Chapter Three

"Liam, leave your sister and me alone to talk about this."

"No, I'll stay."

"Do it now," Duane McKenna said, rising from his chair.

Caila watched Liam leave the study. Despite her father's sallow complexion and thin frame, he could still intimidate. He'd never been a model father but never physically abused her. His age and poor health practically guaranteed her safety, even though in many ways, the debilitation made him less tolerant and quicker to anger.

She turned and gave her undivided attention to her father when the door closed. She'd grown up with many rules; the most important to listen to what he said. When one of his rules got broken, someone paid. Some of the lessons landed Mannis and Galen in the hospital.

Duane leaned heavily on his cane and thumped along, stopping a foot away before restating facts. "So, you called Four Sons."

His thinning white hair was combed back meticulously. His favorite dark blue, button-down shirt hung loosely over his withered frame. Even his jeans seemed long. His face held deep wrinkles from too much sun, and his eyes remained a constant shade of red from bloodshot. In his prime he'd been a mountainous man dominating everything around him.

"Yes, sir."

"After I expressly told each and every one of you to never call them for any form of help."

"Yes, sir."

"Regardless of how grave the situation."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know what you've done, Caila?"

"Apparently not," she said, lowering her eyes and shifting her stance.

"Liam showboats, drives the rigs too fast, never pays enough attention. Thunder prayed this day would come and you handed it up on a platter."

She wanted to protest and remind her father Liam hadn't ever gotten a ticket. He put in long hours, worked as a mechanic, driver, or on the loading docks to ensure everything ran smoothly. He wasn't only the best older brother a woman could have; he was one hell of a dedicated son, employee and boss.

His voice dropped an octave. "Liam's a disappointment, but that's nothing new. You however, took me by surprise."

"Dad, I didn't have a choice. No one else had the equipment."

"You called that son of a bitch for help and ruined us. I took you by the hand and showed you the business, paid for that haughty degree and figured you'd manage with your brothers' help. Wrong. I was wrong because you're too stupid to keep the company going for six months after I'm gone. Look at me you stupid little bitch! I can't save you rotten, spoiled children any more."

She didn't twitch because he'd started screaming. The behavior wasn't unusual.

"You're a disappointment. You disgust me."

"I'm sorry, Dad, please, if you could explain."

The slap came to the side of her face before she'd braced herself. Shocked he could hurt her so bad, and surprised he didn't collapse after, she sat on the floor wondering how she'd gotten there.

"The snake was suing me and the attorney advised I get rid of him by signing a contract. I agreed to pay him the entire value of McKenna if we ever went to him for help. I told you, warned you about calling, and drilled it in your thick head. Now, he gets the biggest payday of his life."

"How much?" she asked.

"Four million dollars." His cane came down hard on her left arm to impress the amount.

"The company doesn't have liquid assets totaling four million now. How could it have been worth so much forty-some years ago?"

"Everything I owned then, I owned outright. There were no mortgages or truck payments."

She rolled to her side and glared up at him. "You used Mom's inheritance."

"And you squandered it because you were too stupid to listen to me!"

The cane fell twice more before she came to her feet and brushed hair away from her stinging face. "I spent it saving my brother."

"His life wasn't worth it, damn you." The cane raised and she reached out to deflect the blow. When she did, his palm connected with her already battered cheek.

Sick, furious, and hurt, she'd finally gotten a taste of what her brothers endured. All kinds of emotions churned before leaving her cold. She much preferred receiving the strikes because watching him measure it out to her brothers had hurt in ways she couldn't describe.

"You fix this, Caila. You go to Thunder's oldest and fix this somehow. I'm too old to give up my home. I can't die watching my life being torn from under me by a careless slut."

Her head ached and body shook. There wasn't four million dollars in assets to mortgage. Even a *doctorate* in accounting wouldn't help her find it. They all depended on the company to support themselves and their families. She'd be damned if they'd lose everything because of one incident.

"Liam," her father yelled, before calling again, using more force. "Liam!" The door opened and she felt Liam's hand on her back. "Get her out of here. I never want to see her again!"

She'd been strong until she didn't have to be any more. Liam wouldn't let anything else take place. She lowered her gaze so hair fell forward to cover her face. Liam didn't need to see what happened. Her father's breath sawed in and out, a wheeze audible when he spoke. "You fix this, and then stay away from my company. Liam will run things. He wouldn't have called that bastard."

"You're wrong, old man. I would've called in a heartbeat to keep one of us alive," Liam said. "If it comes up, I'll do it again."

"I'll take back control of my company!"

"You can't legally do a thing. And that anger of yours could cost you. If it weren't for her, *our* company wouldn't be turning a dime, much less making profits. We're on a thin line but don't forget who pulled us back when you had us scratching to put fuel in the trucks. We'll all walk away if Caila does."

"Liam," Caila said softly, raising her eyes, "everyone needs the income."

She stopped speaking when her brother noticed her face. A variety of expressions swept over him as his gaze riveted on her cheek. She saw disbelief, anger and then rage. Grabbing his arms with her hands, she begged, "No."

He pulled her close and ran his hand up and down her back before turning toward their father. "I'm taking Caila home and then I'll be back."

The calmness in his voice made the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. Their father dismissed them with a wave of his cane. She placed her arms around Liam and pulled until he walked of his own accord. Once outside the house, he stopped and brought her face up by holding her chin and applying pressure. "I'm sorry. I should've stayed with you."

"Stop it," she said. "It was my turn, that's all."

"I swore he'd never hurt any of us again. After the last time he beat Mannis, I swore I'd kill him if he ever touched..."

"He was crazy when we were growing up and he's over the edge now."

"It's been years and years since he hit any of us." Her brother's upset was tangible and his regret left a bad taste in her mouth.

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"It doesn't hurt."

"You're so pretty, Baby Girl, and you take good care of us. You keep everything straight. You waited on him hand and foot while learning how to keep the company running. The only payment you ever got, was him not hitting you. I promised Mom no one would ever hurt you like that."

Her hands held his palm to her cheek. It seemed to take the sting away. "You *have* kept me safe. All of you stood in front of me and got beatings when it was my fault. And because you did, you got it twice as bad." The pain in her brother's eyes was almost unbearable. "Stop it, please, Liam. Don't look at me like that."

She took a step, closed the distance and hugged him. His arms offered protection and love. Hushing sounds came to her as his big hand stroked her head. Before she sat him down and explained the situation, she'd get information from their attorney. There was no point in concerning him until she'd gathered facts and had something to work with. Two and a-half days remained before Thunder expected her reply.

"You ready to go?" he asked.

"You think they'd miss us if we make a side trip?"

"A quick stop at the bar?"

"A drink and a cheeseburger with fries."

"You *are* upset."

"Not really, I just remember the four of you taking off after Dad slapped one of you around. I knew you went out for alcohol and food. I feel like I've earned my rite of passage. Feed me, give me a few drinks and then we'll forget all about it."

"We'll go, but I wish you didn't have anything to forget."

"Double cheeseburger, rum and Coke, and you're buying."

"Get my ass moving, is that it? You want me to drive?"

"In the company truck? I don't think so. I'll take my car in case some hot guy comes along. He'll say, God, she's so cool driving that red '70 Chevelle SS."

"And I'll say to the guy, you'd look so cool with my fist in your face."

"And then I'd tell you to leave my man alone so we can finish drinking."

"Right before your drunk ass would wind up over my shoulder and back in the company truck to spend the night in my spare bedroom. Get me?"

"Wait a minute. I thought this was all about me."

"Honey, you find the right jackass and we'll behave. If you find him when you're drinking, he'll get lost real quick. If some jerk tries to take advantage, he's done."

"Who the hell would want me with the four of you hanging around?"

"One who isn't a sneak and has the very best intentions."

"Oh, God, I'm dying an old maid."

He laughed before nudging her toward her car. "Hey," she asked, after hearing the tones of buttons being pushed on his cell phone, "who're you calling?"

"You can't have a rite of passage without your family. Cam and Mannis are at work. They'll get Galen and meet us. Rusty can hold down the fort for a few hours."

Mary and Martin Thunder sat on the couch in the vast living room of their home, giving John their utmost attention.

He knew his irritation was apparent despite his attempt to conceal it. "The woman didn't bat an eye or hesitate in the least when she wormed her way into the truck. It was the damndest thing I've ever seen."

His mother straightened her short gray hair. "You haven't chosen the women in your life with much care, John, and you haven't any sisters either. Look at your brothers' wives. Any one of them would've done it."

His father said, "Despite Duane, maybe his children have grown to value other humans. That really doesn't change what needs to be done."

John knew fully what his father wanted and would shoulder the responsibility of collecting the forty-year old debt. His father had suffered because of Duane McKenna, and repayment was at hand.

John said, "They won't be able to pay the note. At a glance, they have too much new equipment, the company supports five of them, and at least sixty employees. Their building also has a heavy mortgage."

"That's not our concern. I might've forgiven the debt if Duane was dead. He's alive."

"It's not like your father's been sitting around dwelling on this," Mary said. "The whole situation surprised us as much as the call surprised you. He knew the chances of collecting on that stupid contract were impossible, but now...your father deserves his day."

"Is there any real comfort in this, knowing he's ill?" John asked.

"Perhaps not to you, son, but to me it's very sweet," his father said.

"Even if we took the company over, some of the workers have been with McKenna for years. They'd revolt. We'd have staffing issues, payments that couldn't be made and another company to run."

"You're missing the point. I don't suppose I care if we take it over or sell it off. Duane would lose. I'd rather have McKenna Trucking fail, than divide my sons between two companies and try to run both."

"A lot of innocent people count on those paychecks."

"They drew their money from a bastard."

"Most of those employees were hired long after the incident. They have years invested and pensions to lose if we disband the company. You'd get revenge but you'd be placing more than sixty people in unemployment in a crappy economy."

His father remained silent. John said, "I know how much you hate him. You made sure I understood what happened when I took over the business. McKenna should suffer but you'll be causing grief for a lot of others."

His father looked as though he'd been struck. "Negotiate with them. Take whatever you can get but make sure you bargain for an amount that'll hurt Duane. Explain the company has no real value to you, and if they forfeit it for payment, you'll sell it off. His children all have possessions. Let them scramble to come up with money to pay their father's debt. Let them suffer so they appreciate every dime they make in the future."

"If that's what you want, it's done."

"And John?"

"Yeah."

"You said the McKennas didn't seem to know about the contract."

"That's how it appeared."

"They're old enough to see what type of man their father is. What they can't figure out about all this, make sure you tell them."

"I will."

"It's the principle of the thing as far as your father's concerned," his mother said.

"I'd just as soon leave McKenna money right where it is so his type of filth doesn't touch us again. You've asked me to collect and I will; a sum to impress a point, not only to Duane but all of them."

"If this bothers you so much, we could have an attorney work to resolve the debt."

"There're a lot of things I don't particularly like, and it's never stopped me from doing what's necessary. The matter should've been settled years ago. The attorneys should've divided the company. Justice wasn't done but it will be now, by me."

His mother and father glanced at each other before both looked at him. His father seemed proud and his mother worried. As the eldest, he'd been expected to control his father's business fairly but firmly. He'd managed that. Almost one hundred employees respected and somewhat feared him, which left no room for anyone to take advantage.

Negotiations with Liam would've been a challenge he could've risen to. His gut instinct told him Liam wasn't the McKenna he'd deal with. Caila handled financial matters. He wasn't looking forward to hashing this out with her, the woman/child with huge blue eyes and shiny blonde hair. Her tight little body wrapped in a man's work shirt and jeans, didn't hide a thing. In fact, it made him look a little harder to see the peaks and valleys stuffed into tiny work boots.

Caila wasn't drop-dead gorgeous, her eyes were too large and bright, and she had slight dimples, for Christ's sake. Her breasts were probably proportionate to her slim waist, but weren't outstanding. And who the hell could tell about her ass? Her jeans fit comfortably, like a man might wear. The only undeniably feminine attribute were her nails, and even they were moderate in length and painted a subtle pink. Why in the hell, when he mentally put the package together, did he get hard?

"Is there something you're not telling us, John?" his mother asked.

"I'll be dealing with the youngest McKenna."

"The girl?"

"Yes."

"Is that a problem?"

"No." He wouldn't *let* it be a problem.

"Good. Then everything's in place."

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Chapter Four

John set up the meeting guaranteeing the advantages would be his. She'd have to face him on his turf, surrounded by his company. He would've considered going to McKenna if he could've dealt with any of her brothers. He actually might've enjoyed going behind enemy lines to do the negotiating. Anything at the time seemed preferable than a one-on-one with Caila. He didn't like being pitted against a woman knowing the outcome would probably involve tears, whining and pleading, or maybe even hysterics.

A knock on the door gained his attention before Alex opened it and let her in. His brothers knew a problem existed between the two companies. They didn't need to know more. Eventually Alex quit looking at her and smiled before shutting the door.

John watched her scan the room, taking in everything his office was and wasn't. Clean, it held massive file cabinets storing company paperwork. A large radio used for dispatch rested on the credenza, and his computer sat on a side arm. Neat stacks of paper covered the surface of the desk, accompanied by a phone and a pink teddy bear belonging to his seven-year old niece. Alex's wife dropped off lunch earlier in the day. Their oldest decided Uncle John needed a friend. Suddenly wanting to stuff it in a drawer, he resisted the urge and leaned back in his chair.

Her gaze eventually settled on him. She stood quietly, waiting for an invitation to sit. He wondered whether manners

or fear dictated her actions. She didn't look scared but she'd been born a McKenna. She might not be bright enough to grasp the severity of the situation, or thought bravado alone would get her out of the mess she was in.

He sat forward, placed his elbows on the desk and folded his fingers. "You can sit. This might take a few minutes."

She seated herself across from him in one of the older vinyl chairs. Her legs crossed before she placed a folder in her lap and rested her hands on top. Her expression serene, she appeared completely unconcerned. He noticed something different about her and looked until he found it. When he did, adrenaline flowed.

"What happened to your face?"

"I was born with it."

"How did you get the bruise?"

"I'm not here to talk about a bruise. I'm here to discuss the terms of my predicament."

The mark wasn't from metal jabbing or even her bumping against something in the wreckage. He wondered how much time she'd spent trying to conceal it with make-up. He wondered how dark it would be without. Suddenly he knew. She'd been struck.

"Yes," he said, answering, distracted, "we have some things to straighten out."

"My father explained the terms of the contract. I talked to our attorney. He wanted to be here but you wouldn't allow it. He said if you're a reasonable man, our terms should satisfy the debt." When he said nothing, she asked, "Well, Mr. Thunder, are you a reasonable man?"

John leaned back in the large, overstuffed executive chair. A trace of perfume came to him. Of course she wore perfume. Just because she dressed like a man didn't mean she'd smell like one. "No, Miss McKenna, I'm not a particularly reasonable man."

"That's unfortunate for both of us then. We don't have four million in cold hard cash and can't wring it out of the trucks or buildings. If I finish mortgaging the equity we do have, we could be belly up in a matter of months. So, in a nutshell, there's not much to take. If you work with me however, we could arrange a payment schedule."

"Or, I could rip the company out from under you, sell it off piece by piece, and walk away with some satisfaction and a few bucks in my pocket."

"Pennies on the dollar is what you'd get," she said with a trace of irritation. "Besides, I've done some investigating and learned how you handle *your* father's business. Although you're known to be a bastard at times, the general consensus throughout the trucking industry is that you're fair."

"And you believe rumors."

"Actually, I'm counting on it. There're sixty-eight employees. Of those sixty-eight, all but thirteen are married. Many of those men are younger with children to feed and educate. Those having retired from McKenna are drawing a pension. The bottom line is, if you disband us, sell us off at auction, you'd be hurting over a hundred and fifty people. Is that something you can live with?"

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After folding his hands and placing them in his lap, he wondered again about the bruise. "So that's it? That's the pitch?"

"Yes."

Caila's palms perspired as he sat perched in his high backed chair. The intensity of his gaze unnerved her. He scanned for weakness and it took every shred of self-control not to shake and stutter. She dangled helplessly while he contemplated how fast and how hard to gobble her up.

She didn't like the position she was in. Whatever Thunder decided to do, he'd be justified. Their attorney, Brian Foster, explained what'd taken place forty years ago. While her father's greed hadn't surprised her, his actions had. He'd used Martin Thunder to get the company off the ground, legally stole it from under him, and then late one night, had an *accident* with a truck. He'd run Mr. Thunder down. If she were in John Thunder's shoes, she knew how reasonable she'd be.

"I'd like to see the proposal," he said.

Surprised he sounded so rational, she handed him the folder before sitting back. She tried very hard to remain still as he reviewed the papers. Little negotiating could be done. It'd take years to repay the debt but at least the company would continue.

After several intense minutes, he said, "Not enough."

Her heart sank. "It's all we can offer."

"It's all you can *comfortably* offer. In case you haven't figured it out, I don't particularly want any of you to be comfortable."

She stood abruptly. "We can't run on less. To make the payments outlined on those papers will put us *all* on the edge. There's nothing more to discuss."

As she walked to the door, all she envisioned were the faces of her brothers and their families. From behind, John grabbed her arm. She jerked away, the pain making her suck in a breath through already clenched teeth. Reflex alone made her hands ball into fists. Realizing what she'd been about to do, her hands opened as her gaze dropped to the floor. Her emotions were running wild and she couldn't afford to act on impulse alone. She didn't need any more regrets.

"What the hell!" he exclaimed.

Calm down, Caila...distance, perspective. You didn't do anything yet. When she moved toward the door, he took some long-legged strides and blocked her.

John couldn't fathom the problem. She hadn't acted upset before she tensed. One moment, he was sure she'd do her best to punch him, and the next she was back in control. He remembered her blood soaked arm from a few nights ago and his stomach dropped. He'd never meant to physically hurt her.

"Let me see your arm."

"No."

"If I've hurt you..."

"You have. You're taking my life away. My arm...no problem there."

She pulled away and headed across the room to the window. He couldn't move; his mind couldn't comprehend her sudden retreat. She stood at the window looking two stories

down at asphalt. Her strange behavior slowly made sense, and he knew she wasn't giving a performance. The only thing she wanted was distance. From him.

"Caila, please sit back down. We should finish this."

"Is there something more to discuss?"

His immediate concern was whether or not he'd opened her wound. He wanted to repair any damage he'd caused. "I'd like to see your arm."

"Go to hell, Mr. Thunder. Is that all? Are we finished?"

"I'll reduce the debt by fifty thousand if you take off your shirt." Her anger had made him react. Once the words came out, he regretted them.

Her mouth dropped open as she turned to stare. He purposely took the emotion from his voice before saying, "I want to see your arm."

She edged away from the window before quickly unbuttoning her shirt. "Fifty thousand is six months worth of payments."

The shirt came off and she turned so he could see. A dark blue camisole hugged her mid section with breasts supported by a built in bra. The dark lace holding the garment on her shoulders made him swallow. Everything under her work shirt was one hundred percent feminine. The removal of one piece of clothing instantly changed her appearance. Having a view of her delicate bone structure and ample breasts outlined in scented lace, he realized there was much more to Miss McKenna than he originally thought.

On top of the lengthy scratch was a thick, long bruise. "Wait," he said as she began dressing.

She turned her back and fumbled with the shirt. He came up behind her, touched her shoulder gently and she froze. Another black and blue stripe went from her shoulder blade beneath the undergarment.

"Fifty thousand's a lot of money. Hold still and make it worth my while."

He lifted the soft, slippery cloth up her back and found twin bruises running down from her shoulder blade. Barely touching her elbow, she lifted her arm slightly so he could visualize the marks running across her ribs. The thought of someone striking her hard enough to cause that type of damage made him livid. The minute he took his hands away, she shoved an arm into the shirt.

"What happened?"

"Was it worth fifty thousand?"

"Not without some answers."

"You should've negotiated that beforehand." With her other arm covered, she began buttoning. "We were discussing the three million, nine hundred and fifty thousand I owe you."

"Why are you here?"

"You invited me. Actually, you sort of demanded I show up. Is your forgetfulness age related or something common just to you?"

He let it slide because her fingers shook as she tried to make buttons go through holes. "Why isn't Liam dealing with me? Or for that matter *any* of your brothers?"

"I handle company finances. I thought we explained that."

"Do they know you're here?"

Silence.

"Do they know about the debt?"

Silence.

"Another fifty thousand." All that mattered were some honest responses and he'd get them. "We'll make it an even hundred for your time and honesty."

"You must be pretty well off to throw around that type of cash."

"Do they know about the debt?" He asked the question to see if she'd take another reduction and give him some answers.

"Liam has his hands full, otherwise he'd be here with me. No, they don't know about the debt. I'll explain once we have a written agreement."

"You have that much control of the company?"

"Yes."

"You don't think they'll be angry when they find out what you're up to?"

"Yes, they'll be mad."

"And you get hurt when they're angry, is that it?"

Prepared for some sort of reaction, she surprised him by turning toward him, unbuttoning and unzipping her jeans. Midnight blue lace rode low in the denim and lay against creamy skin. Slim but well built, he wasn't surprised at the definition in her abdomen. She began aggressively tucking the shirt in. "Not physically. If they get mad, it hurts because I've disappointed them in some way."

"None of you had any idea about the agreement before the call?"

"No. We were told to never call you but it didn't matter. You had the equipment, we needed it. Does repeating it help? Should I say it another way?"

Angry because of the marks on her, irritated by her taunts, he couldn't control himself when he ordered, "Sit down."

Oh, he knew she wanted to scratch his eyes out with her sharp, pink little nails, but he didn't care as long as she kept them sheathed. He didn't like surprises and he'd never been very patient figuring out mysteries. He'd paid for her time and honesty and he'd get it. She sat.

"Who hit you?"

"My father."

"Why!"

"Because I called you."

"Don't you dare blame those marks on me."

"I didn't. You asked and I answered. I cost my family four million dollars. He explained it."

"By beating you."

"Hardly," she said, her eyes blazing with indignation, "I didn't lie when I said he's sick."

"Explain the marks."

"He hit me, he didn't beat me. Huge difference."

Still leaning against the desk, her sitting rigidly in the chair, a knock came and Alex poked his head inside. "John, a one-ton wrecker lost an axle. Everyone's gone home. Do you want me to page one of the on-call drivers or do you want one of us to go?"

"Riggs is picking up some extra hours in the back shop. Send him. I want you to stay on dispatch until I get back."

"Where's Larry?"

"He'll be in late. I told him I'd cover until he gets here. Can you stay?"

"Sure, where're you going?"

"Miss McKenna and I have some business to settle."

Caila didn't respond. She'd either go with him or she wouldn't. He'd paid for her time, and a month of slavery wouldn't be worth what he promised. He'd salvage what he could. Hungry and tired, he still had questions and, after writing off a hundred thousand dollars in a matter of minutes, he needed to act more rationally.

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Chapter Five

Caila followed Thunder to the restaurant, which afforded her time to calm down and place the situation into perspective. He ordered steaks for both of them, and she eventually found her appetite when the food arrived. His silence throughout the meal eventually became less intimidating. The situation in his office could have easily escalated, and he defused it by changing locations. She wondered what motivated the reprieve.

"Such a serious expression," he said before taking another sip from his wine glass. He remained soft-spoken and pleasant. She noticed again how attractive he was. "Coffee?"

"Please, I should sober up. Long drive back, invoicing, payroll. You know."

"It's almost eleven o'clock. You're going back to work?"

"I have big debts to pay, Mr. Thunder. I can't expect dinner *and* more reductions for nonsense."

"I could think of things that wouldn't be nonsense between us."

What did he mean by that? She probably deserved his sarcasm but he sounded serious. Dressed in work clothes, she understood her limitations in the feminine allure department, and concluded he'd verbally hurled one across the net. Her tired brain conjured another possible meaning. *Ridiculous. The man's reputation proclaimed him to be a bastard, not a fool.* He wouldn't pay for what she had to offer.

"Give me an additional two days to rework a proposal. *That* wouldn't be nonsense."

The waitress came by and offered coffee. He nodded and she filled the cups with aromatic, steaming liquid. He repositioned himself to lean back against the chair and waited until they were alone. He pulled off the casual arrogance superbly. "I thought you gave me your very best offer."

"In all fairness, you're right. I worked on an obvious solution and I'd like to re-think the situation without the emotion I've had over the past few days."

"I'm surprised you admitted that to me."

"That I've been emotional?"

"Yes."

"You wanted honesty, I'm giving it. I'm young, I'm female. My family expected me to keep numbers for a large family business and I screwed up. I'm human. Admitting it doesn't mean I'm weak or incapable."

He studied her for a long moment before sitting straight in the chair and placing his forearms on the table. "You admit you're upset, you throw out your age and gender and take responsibility for bringing the situation down on your family. I can't figure out if you're offering an excuse, hiding behind it, or reminding me who I'm dealing with."

"Maybe I *am* putting it out there so you don't have to wonder. I don't have wisdom to draw on from years of experience, God made me female and I have the hormones to prove it. I made the call to you for help. I don't have all the answers, and sometimes I don't look hard enough to find

them. I'm asking for an additional few days to make sure I've done all I can before you rip us apart."

"I haven't decided what to do. We're negotiating, remember? I'm just trying to understand your approach. You walk into my office after getting hit for a *mistake*, and calmly try to barter with me."

"I should've done something else?"

"You could have," he said.

"I could've done something to make the outcome different?"

"I can't say anything would've changed, but not many women I know would've done things the way you have."

"How would they've handled it?"

"They might've cried me a river and shown me some bruises so I'd be more compassionate."

"And that would've worked?" *And what then, Mr. Thunder?*

"Maybe. A little."

"Over some tears and whining? Sorry I couldn't conjure it up. I have too much going for me and really, you're a minor inconvenience in the scheme of things. I'll find a way to settle with you."

"You're very confident."

"I won't give up. My family depends on me and I'll come through."

He took a sip of coffee and replaced the cup on the saucer. "That's exactly my point, Caila. You're sitting there telling me how wonderful your life is, when you *should* be telling me the contract's unreasonable. You should be worming and negotiating and explaining why I need to budge, and how you

can't. You could've said the problem was between our fathers, not us. I expected a number of things and you haven't offered up one."

"But isn't all that obvious? Whether or not you care doesn't count, does it? Our attorney assured me the contract's very simple and legal. End of story."

She grew tired of his intense gaze. She didn't have two heads and stated what she believed were the facts. "Do I have the two days, Mister Thunder?"

"John." *Why was he suddenly so hostile?*

"Pardon me?"

"My name is *not* Mr. Thunder. Even my new hires call me John."

"Have I said something?"

"I'm not that much older than you are, so stop referring to me like I'm your father's age."

"I never meant—"

"The hell you didn't," he said. He reached into his back pocket, opened his wallet, and threw some bills on the table. After standing, he held her chair, grasped her elbow and led her toward the door.

He didn't utter a word until they stood beside the driver's door of her car. "The brave little girl act was smooth but I'm not stupid. All the respectful *Mister this*, and *Mister that* crap gave you away. You had me going."

"What are you rambling about?"

"I'll listen to another proposal but it better come from Liam. I'm not wasting more time with you."

"You'll deal with me. If you can't or won't, tell me which of *your* brothers I need to see next."

"Liam has no idea about any of this?"

He reached out and grabbed her shoulders before she could turn away. Angry tears gathered in her eyes and she swallowed hard. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of something he'd been expecting. He was just so blasted confusing!

"How many ways can I say it? No. None. No clue."

"When are you going to tell him? You don't think he'll notice a few million in payments missing from the family cache?"

God only knew why, but she blurted out things that were none of his business. "He'll know when Krista's not in danger of miscarrying. Or wait, you wanted honesty, so how about if I say I'll talk to him after, because the doctors say things don't look good. His mind needs to be elsewhere. I don't have complications in my life. Get it? You deal with me."

His expression softened but he continued staring. She didn't really care. He could drill holes into her head with his eyes, and he wouldn't find anything but the truth. Could she really act so different from other women? No, it had to be him. She seldom experienced problems with other aspects of the business.

"If you're lying to me..."

Obviously a threat, she didn't understand why he'd made it. "I need the two days."

John pushed her, threatened her, accused her of deception, and she stood there looking at him with clear blue

eyes, not understanding a bit of it. He'd hoped by rattling her, he'd see through her act. He didn't like how easy she was to be around, and figured she was better than most women at the art of manipulation. The image of her racing to the wreck came to mind. She didn't bat an eye when she'd been arrested either, just looked at her brother like she was glad to have him in one piece.

She stood there patiently, waiting for an answer. He should give her the additional time and walk away. He couldn't. Her scent wrapped around him and he took a step. The urge to bring her close overrode his common sense. Unwelcome desire surged up when she was near. Maybe after a kiss, she'd slap him and he'd be cured.

He delayed what he wanted for long seconds. She didn't turn away or even pretend to anticipate the moment his lips met hers. He startled her because she tensed. He'd let her go in a microsecond if she issued a protest. She didn't.

God, she tasted sweet, the wine and coffee mingling on her breath. Soft, moist lips kissed him back causing his blood to rush. His arms and hands made sure she stayed put while he concentrated on keeping the embrace light. She was firm and fragrant and he carefully backed her against the car before leaning into her hot little body.

His hands framed her face so she couldn't move an inch. Deepening the kiss, his tongue slid in. A low moan came from her throat as she closed around him. Subtle, urgent movements brought her against his throbbing erection. Where the hell was the slap? He wanted to touch her warmth and found himself immersed in flames.

He needed a moment to catch his breath, slow things down. She came up on the toes of her boots and placed her mouth close to his. "Just once more, please."

Once more happened over and over. He couldn't taste enough, feel enough and strained against her, hoping that holding her would lessen the passion coursing his veins. Her nails slowly coming down his arms almost pushed him over the edge of control.

"Damn it, Caila," he whispered against her lips.

"Thanks," she said, breathing hard.

"Thanks for what?"

"You have a knack with words, is all."

He managed to gather his thoughts and realized what he'd said. "I want you. I want to take down those jeans, run my hands all over you, bend you over the seat of my truck and get in nice and tight behind you. You want it too with the way your hungry little mouth opened."

"Oh, God, stop."

"I'm explaining what 'damn it' means. I want my hand between your legs to see if you're as ready as I am."

"John..."

"That's what you'd say, my name." He felt her tremble. "You know we'd be good together."

"Why are you doing this?"

"I wondered about you the moment I grabbed your hand to pull you out of that damned truck. And then you crawled all over me."

"Adrenaline."

He laughed softly and shook his head. He felt a little better, more in control. "Well if that's the case, it hasn't worn off."

"I didn't do anything."

She really seemed incapable of fathoming why he'd gotten so stirred up. After a moment and a little distance, he couldn't figure it out himself. A mountain of trouble stood between them but his body didn't seem to care. For whatever reason, the little McKenna shifted his libido into overdrive.

"You need to go home, Caila, straight home. You have your two days but I'll come see you. With all your damn brothers around, I won't be tempted to make an ass of myself again."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize." *Not for how passionate you are.*

Finally with keys in hand after fumbling through her small purse, she looked up.

"Think really hard over the next two days. I wrote off a lot of money tonight. Because I was stupid enough to kiss you doesn't mean I'm willing to settle more of the debt for sex."

She completely stilled. Her keys and purse both clutched in her left hand, her right hand fell to her side. A random breeze lifted blonde tresses and blew them into her face. She shook her head so the hair fell back. "I wasn't offering sex for payment. We both know what a joke that'd be. Bastard!"

He'd like to show the little girl she wouldn't be laughing at him if he ever got between her thighs. After her moaning and rubbing all over him, he'd bet he could get inside her pants

without ever mentioning money. Responding only to the name she'd called him, he said, "So I've been told."

She wasted no time getting into the Chevelle and started the engine. By the time he got the pick-up started, she'd backed out of the space and reached the end of the parking lot. The tires broke loose from humidity that dampened the pavement as she accelerated onto the street. The car fishtailed a few feet before she brought it under control. *The little idiot has a death wish.*

Her driving became less erratic and she maintained the speed limit. As he followed, he wondered how much wine would impair a woman her size. Would three glasses do it? She mentioned having been upset for a number of days. Could she drive safely after some sleepless nights? When they'd sat down to dinner, she appeared listless until she started eating. When was her last meal?

He *was* a bastard in the minds of some, but he'd be damned if she'd roll merrily away without a second thought. He kept a distance and took the time to escort her home. He wasn't *that* much of a bastard. After thinking about the situation and the mental strain *he'd* been under, he laughed. "All things considered, I'm a rather nice bastard."

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Chapter Six

Caila worked diligently with the company attorney, who was also a sound financial advisor, to get a better proposal together. They'd managed it after a lot of research and soul searching. Thunder didn't want them comfortable and she'd grant his wish. After what her father did, the Thunders deserved payment. It didn't make the decisions any easier, but being born to Duane McKenna came with drawbacks.

Her anxiety increased as the hour grew late and he still hadn't arrived. Slightly after eight in the evening, she went down to the loading docks to take in some of the humid evening air.

"Are you the only one left on the dock tonight, Glenn?" she asked.

"Yep. Wanted the overtime so I told little Timmy to go home. I think I goofed. The kid is twenty years younger than me," he replied.

A bit taller than her, Glenn wasn't large in any way, which was unusual for a dockworker. He could however, move consistently in the extreme heat and humidity like no one else in the company.

She glanced into the trailer. "Why isn't this stuff on pallets? This all has to be unloaded by hand."

"Before I let the kid go, I should've checked the load. It never occurred to me I'd be stuck with this mess. I figured a few hours on a forklift and I'd call it a night."

"Where did the load come from?"

"Beckmans, out of Wyoming."

She walked over to the side of the dock and used the overhead paging system. "Mannis and Galen, if you're still here, could you please come to the loading dock? Beckmans gave us another surprise."

Back at the trailer, she said, "Help's on the way."

"You guys don't have to pay for my mistake. I'll get what I can and call in first shift an hour early to clean up."

"We have two loads of fertilizer hitting the dock in the morning. We're breaking down most of the loads and shipping them out. We had the docks scheduled for the day. You know it only takes a few of the smaller companies to run late and we have a bottleneck. If we can off-load one truck, we can get the other in the morning."

After rolling up her sleeves, she walked into the trailer, squatted down and hoisted a fifty-pound bag onto her shoulder. She used her legs rather than back to stand upright and walked the distance out of the truck before dropping it on the pallet. She and Glenn continued the process until Mannis joined them, taking his place in the assembly line.

In passing, he said, "Liam told me Dad hit you."

She stopped, embarrassed when Glenn stumbled slightly after overhearing. Although she resembled her brother, their personalities were polar opposites. She shrugged her shoulders before going back to work. As they passed a moment later, she said, "He's old, Mannis."

She glared at him, hoping he'd drop the subject. He didn't. "Is that where you got the mark on your face?"

"Yep."

"I should kill him for that."

Thrown off balance by his comment, the bag slipped from her shoulder. He reached out and pushed it back into place.

"Say the word, sweetheart."

Their father beat him badly enough to put him in the hospital more than once, and he never did a thing to retaliate. A bruise on her face made her very quiet, angry, older brother want to even the score. They stood facing each other, bags on their shoulders. Without a word, she walked over and dropped the salt. She waited until Mannis dropped his. Wiping her forehead with the back of her hand, she smiled at Glenn and said, "That's the first one."

Glenn got behind the wheel of the forklift and drove the pallet to the storage area. She grabbed Mannis around the waist and laid her head on his chest. He didn't hesitate and returned the hug. She'd spent a lot of time wrapped in the security of a brother's embrace.

She said, "Dad's old and doesn't have long to live. He's taken enough from us, so don't react to anything he does now. It's not worth it."

"Then what's wrong with you? Is it Liam? Are you worried about him and Krista?"

"Of course I am."

"But that's not all." He kept stroking her hair.

"There's a lot going on. There's old business that has to be settled between McKenna and Four Sons. It's...sticky."

"Does Liam know?"

"A little, but not much." Stepping away and forcing a smile, she said, "I handle the money, right? You have double

duty with Liam being at home. I can handle my end of things. I promise."

The forklift was on its return trip, and they walked into the trailer. He said, "You'd better tell me if you need help. You're stubborn sometimes and don't ask. Don't make me guess why you're not sleeping right, and why you're hanging around here all the time. I know you trust Liam and go to him. Remember I'm not too stupid to handle a problem."

"You've always been there for me. When I can't handle something, I'll tuck my tail between my legs and yell." She felt close to all her brothers. Many times Liam was simply more involved in the paperwork aspect of the business than the others.

He stroked the back of her head one last time before holding her chin and tilting her head. After brushing hair away, he gently touched her cheek. His expression displayed pain before his jaw set and his eyes narrowed. Anger ran deep in her brother. She hated the fact a bruise on her face brought it about.

She stiffened her resolve and vowed to stop worrying about what would happen to her family. People who loved each other that much would be fine no matter what. She'd been blessed with four intelligent and strong men backing up her decisions. Her brothers believed in her.

Slightly more than an hour later, the trailer half unloaded, a big rig tow truck pulled into the back lot. Caila's stomach dropped, suddenly remembering the kisses and dinner a few nights back. She placed a final bag of salt on the pallet as John walked up the stairs. Glenn continued working but

Mannis stopped to lean against the forklift with his right hand resting on his hip.

John wore a black t-shirt and jeans that rode low on his hips. Not really filthy, it was obvious he'd been working. He appeared every bit a warrior with his black hair pulled into a ponytail and a forbidding expression plastered on his face.

Mannis offered a greeting. "Thunder."

Caila heard the hostility in her brother's address. John appeared to study him for a moment before saying, "Mannis, you're working late."

Her brothers knew John and Alex from high school. Despite John and Galen being the same age, they stayed away from each other. Over the years, John drew attention for his natural talent in various sporting events and later, because of the equipment and reputation Four Son's acquired.

"So are you."

"Unpredictable business. You can't forecast when a truck will break down."

"Nothing's broken here."

Caila almost said something but John spoke first. "Actually there is, but I have an appointment with your sister to fix it."

"At nine-thirty at night?"

"We didn't set a time."

"Well, she's busy now. I guess you can reschedule."

Again she was over-ridden before she could get a word out. "She asked for the additional time. This is it. I have other work to do, so we either settle our business tonight or not at all."

She jumped in and said, "Now is fine, I have everything in order. I was expecting you." She looked at her brother. "Do you want me to call someone in to help finish this?"

John gave Caila his total regard, his intense stare almost making her take a step back. "Go up to the office, sit in the air conditioning, and get yourself together. You look like you'll fall over." His voice was low-pitched and a normal volume. Maybe it was his *look* that made it seem as if he'd just yelled at her.

He made his way into the truck and hoisted up a bag of salt on each shoulder. She watched as Mannis began working and Glenn kept pace. John's icy glares finally made her move. She wanted to tell John Thunder he'd no right to bark orders at anyone, but somehow she thought Mannis might explain it to him. It'd serve him right.

Once Caila left, John said to Mannis in passing, "She shouldn't be unloading trucks."

"Is that any of your business?"

"Have you ever thought about what she's doing to her insides lifting this crap?"

"She generally runs a forklift."

"On a loading dock."

"She works in a trucking company."

"On a loading dock with a bunch of men."

The defensiveness left Mannis' voice when he replied, "She's safe anywhere she wants to go here."

Suddenly concerned about what his father had gotten him into, he realized the entire family had a problem, not just Caila.

Glenn said, "She can do whatever she wants. She hires and fires people, and no one would touch a hair on her pretty little head."

Mannis grunted, picking up a double load. "Tell him why, Glenn."

"Because with the four McKenna boys skulking around her like a pack of crazed Irishmen, the poor son of a bitch that caused her any grief would be beaten to a bloody pulp. Did I get that right, Mannis?"

Mannis didn't reply and kept working. Twenty minutes later, Mannis asked, "Are you causing her grief?"

Tired after running figures half the day, working on the road the other half and spending his evening unloading the trailer, he was on McKenna turf and really didn't care. "I'm causing all of you grief. I'm told I have to deal with her. I'd gladly sit down with any one *instead* of her and discuss this."

Mannis took a break as Glenn drove the forklift off. "When the truck's unloaded I'll sit with you and Caila."

"What about Liam? After his little mishap, I got the distinct impression he ran things."

"Liam can't be bothered. You have Baby Girl and me. Like it or take a hike."

Some of the tension finally drained knowing he wouldn't be dealing with her alone. After the last encounter, a third party would guarantee he'd keep his hands in his pockets and his mouth a distance from hers. A forty-eight hour absence hadn't given him the perspective he'd hoped. In truth, he'd been anxious all day about seeing her again.

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Chapter Seven

After midnight when the last bag hit the skid, John followed Mannis through the empty warehouse up to the office. Caila sat at the desk on the phone, apparently settling a dispute over the dispatch of a driver. Mannis led him through the office to a door at the back. Beyond that was a hallway. "Second room on the left is a bathroom," Mannis said. "You can clean up while she finishes."

John grunted, walked down the carpeted hall and turned into the darkened room. After flipping the switch, he was pleasantly surprised. A bathroom almost the size of Caila's office had rich black marble covering the floors and walls. The countertops matched, as did the huge shower enclosure. Cabinets running the length of an entire wall held black towels and multiple pairs of folded jeans and work shirts.

He used the degreaser, a large pump bottle on the side of the sink, washing his hands and face thoroughly. The air conditioner kicked on, and a stream of icy air hit his perspiration-damp clothes. After pumping some of the regular soap into his hands, he washed again and appreciated the musky smell. It certainly wasn't a fragrance Caila used.

He made his way back down the hallway and glanced inside each room. Three rooms held beds and a fourth looked to be a common area, serving as a kitchen and living room. *No wonder they all spent so much time at work. Their cage was gilded.*

In the office, he found Caila and Mannis glaring at each other across a small conference table in the corner. Caila looked up. "Please join us. I was just bringing Mannis up to speed, since you invited him into this."

"It's his right, he's part of it."

"And you decided that for me," she said. "How thoughtful. Thank you, it hadn't occurred to me."

"Let's get to it, Baby Girl," Mannis said. "You've run all this by Brian and he can't find a way out?"

"No, we're obliged to pay."

John settled back and listened while she answered the many questions Mannis presented. This should've been done from the beginning, not Caila working on her own. He wondered if maybe she hadn't been a little renegade in her actions, negotiating this type of settlement without conferring with her brothers.

As Caila talked, Mannis scanned the papers laid out in front of him. When she explained what'd happened between their fathers years ago, Mannis didn't flinch. As far as he knew, she gave a very accurate depiction of what transpired, even placing blame for the incident on their father.

After more than a half hour, Mannis closed the folder and slid it over to her. He stood and stretched, flexing his neck. "Liam can be told when it's done. He doesn't get wind of this until things are better for him. As for Cam, Galen and me, you know we can make sacrifices, and will. This isn't all on you, Baby Girl. We all take the hit."

"But there's no need. I have it worked out."

"Equally," he said loudly, before turning to John. "They say you're fair with business deals and your men. I hope that won't change. A lot of people can get hurt if revenge is more important than money." Extending his hand, John took it for a firm handshake. "Thanks again for the help on the dock."

With that he turned and left the office. John looked at Caila who sat quietly, hands folded in her lap. She looked tired and much older. "He won't stay for the rest of it?"

"He saw the proposal. It's reasonable and probably the only chance we have. If things go badly, he knows I'll call."

"He walked away to let you deal with it."

"That's my job. This is very overwhelming at first. He needs some time to think it through. He won't be any good sitting here."

"Would Liam have stayed?"

"Probably."

"Then we wait for Liam."

"That's not possible," she said before rubbing her eyes and yawning.

"He couldn't take some time away from his wife for this?"

"Liam isn't well." The worried expression made her look vulnerable. "He can't work because of a head injury from the accident. His mind isn't clear and when it is, he's got to focus on his wife, her pregnancy and his six-year old son. You can't wait that long for an answer, can you?" As he thought about an answer, she added, "It's your father."

She stated a fact but he didn't jump at the chance to place the blame elsewhere. The victim in the scenario had been his

father, and he wouldn't say a word to make him look like a bully.

"I understand," she said.

How could she possibly understand? "Then explain it to me."

"Your father wants what's his. He's alive and if he's well, probably still controls the company from the sidelines and wants you to collect."

"I control the business, and the matter of a settlement was left up to me. I've talked to him about it and he expects me to do what's right. I will."

"Sorry, I figured he'd want to be involved. We grew up with my father ranting and raving about Martin Thunder, his children and how evil all of you were."

"And you called me for help."

"When Liam told me to call, he probably assumed you fell into a category we've placed a lot of people in. As we grew up, Dad would verbally crucify someone, and as time passed, we realized the problem was him, not necessarily those he condemned."

She was obviously tired because her eyes were streaked with red and he wasn't in much better shape. He leaned over and placed his palms on the table. "One more day won't make a difference."

"It will to me," she said, sliding the folder to him. "The terms of what I can offer are spelled out in this. I've looked at all avenues, talked with our attorney and met with our accountant. If you approach the offer with an open mind,

you'll see more than money." Her hands slipped away.
"Please take your time."

He accepted the folder and noticed the dust on her clothes. Smudges of dirt streaked her face. She and Mannis allowed him time to clean up when neither of them bothered. He questioned how she'd survived her father. He recalled when her mother died because her brothers had been absent from school for more than a week. She must've been very young at the time. He wondered how she'd grown to become the exhausted woman sitting there looking at him, believing in his sense of fair play.

With a tired mind and body, he desperately wanted to be clean and asleep.

"You shouldn't look at me that way," he said.

"Pardon? What way?"

"Like you want something."

"I'll be honest even though you're not paying me. I want something." Her gaze dropped to the hands in her lap.

"You want the papers signed and your life back in order."

"Yep, that's high on my list."

"And you want me to give it to you."

"You either will or you won't."

He stared at the top of her head and didn't like towering over her. After crouching to her level, she looked up, startled. "There's something else you want." He could sense it. "You can ask. Is someone giving you trouble? A brother, your father?"

He didn't know why it mattered, couldn't understand why he'd asked. She looked like a small, smudged urchin, and if

he could erase the dirt and fatigue... *Hell, I want her just the way she is.*

"Why did you kiss me?" she asked.

"Because I could. Why did you let me?" His voice roughened slightly.

"I don't know," she said, touching the folder in his hand.

"Thanks for helping with the truck."

"How often do you work the docks?"

"Not too much any more. There isn't time."

"So you crawl into wrecks to save brothers, run the finances, figure out loads and dispatch, deal with your father, run a forklift and unload trucks. Anything else?"

"Whatever needs doing. Galen doesn't like me fooling around with power tools but I could hold my own changing a tire or other minor stuff."

"A truck tire?"

"Yep as long as I keep it balanced. Had one fall on me once and it wasn't pleasant."

She sat there like a ghost answering questions, probably because she couldn't muster the effort it'd take to get up. "I'll look the papers over when I can think. I'll call you." The light strands of hair fascinated him, and he ran them between index finger and thumb before he stood.

He sensed a difference in her. She'd wanted something before and he never got an answer about what it'd been. The only thing she looked like she wanted or needed at the moment was sleep. The strangest urge hit him. He wanted to gather her up, walk to one of the rooms in back, strip her

naked and tuck her in a bed. In truth, he'd like to undress and crawl in with her.

"Do you want some coffee to take with you?"

After a certain number of hours, caffeine no longer worked. "I'll manage."

"You sure? It'd be ready in five minutes."

"You want me up all night so I can look over the papers?"

A smile appeared, showing dimples. "Not a bad idea, but I was more worried about you falling asleep behind the wheel and then I'd have to deal with one of your brothers."

"If it happens, you'd probably be better off."

"I doubt it. All things considered, you haven't been a total bastard."

"Not yet."

She stood, placed her hands in the small of her back and stretched. "Maybe you won't have to be."

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Chapter Eight

John barely slept after going home and reading the offer. The longer he looked at it, the less sense it made. Exasperated, he phoned his father and, at six in the morning, went to his house and drank coffee while they both read and re-read the documents. His mother woke and joined them. The longer they pondered the proposal, the more obscure it became.

He phoned Caila at eight and wasn't surprised she answered the company phone. She didn't hesitate when he invited her over to answer questions and gave his father's address.

The doorbell rang slightly after nine. His mother motioned for him and his father to remain seated in the dining room. The peculiar expression on her face relayed how upset she was.

Within moments, she came back with Caila. A dark blue uniform shirt tucked into a pair of faded jeans is what she wore. Clean, blonde, slightly wavy hair framed her face. Creases were pressed down the legs of her jeans. He again noticed her lack of adornment. She didn't have on a single piece of jewelry or even a watch. His mother left her in the doorway and took the seat next to his father. John and his father stood.

"Caila, you've met my mother, Mary. This is my father, Martin."

No pretend smile came to her face as she stood inside the doorway. With direct eye contact, she said, "Mr. and Mrs. Thunder, thanks for the opportunity to talk to you about the proposal."

His father sat and neither parent uttered a word. John extended his arm and opened his hand, offering her a seat. She chose to sit at the far end of the table in one of the six chairs lining the side. Aware of her every move, she avoided the seat at the opposite end of the table from his father, placing herself in a seat of lesser importance. Whether upbringing or calculation dictated her actions, Caila gave them nothing to hold in recrimination.

John asked, "Coffee?"

They all had cups sitting in front of them, the offer was expected. Caila gave the impression she understood this wasn't an entirely polite situation. "No, thank you. I'm sure you and your parents have questions. I'm prepared to give answers."

She rested her purse in her lap and folded her hands over it. She offered no general conversation or tried in any way to lighten the mood. She'd come prepared to face them. Her posture and demeanor allowed him to see her discomfort.

His father picked up the papers and rattled them slightly. "Ms. McKenna, the agreement between your father and me was the sum of four million dollars. Your cash offer falls extremely short."

He sat back in his chair. Caila seemed to wait to make sure he'd finished. John noticed her release a long, silent breath. She'd probably been expecting much worse.

"Mr. Thunder, I don't have the cash to cover the debt. Even at liquidation rates, if we sold everything we could, we'd fall short." Her voice remained soft but she spoke clearly and slowly.

"If you're that indebted, where will you get one point five million in sixty days?"

"While I can't raise all the money, we do have some liquid assets which I'm turning over now."

"And you'll have that much cash in sixty days?"

"Yes, sir. I've contracted to have one point three million transferred to the company account in forty-five days. I have a guarantee of an additional one hundred thousand before the sixty days and I firmly believe the rest can be obtained."

"With the debts and mortgage McKenna carries, what could you possibly have?"

"They're personal assets, sir."

His parents both glared at her. John wanted to intervene but remained silent. He too questioned where she'd come up with the sum she promised. His father broke the silence. "An additional two million in land was written into the contract. What land?"

She drew a deep breath and color seemed to drain from her face. "McKenna Trucking sits on almost four hundred acres. I'm offering you half. The land's been tested, perfectly suitable for building, and it's commercially zoned. We can't co-exist with a shopping area. The only other possibility would be to use it for a business similar to ours."

She looked at John and said, "As it sits, the parcel is worth ten thousand an acre. You currently own six acres. You've

applied for zoning to start an impound lot and you've been turned down. Rumor has it they won't change their minds."

Confounded she knew so much about the problems he'd had with the zoning board, and multiple appearances he'd made on behalf of the company, John realized Caila had done some investigating.

She looked back at his father. "With a storage lot that size, you could hold a monopoly in a six city radius for police impounds. I know you specialize in truck towing and recovery, but your car business could triple in a short period of time. The township where we reside would love the revenue and any additional jobs brought to the area."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Our attorney sits on the board and already spoke to them. Permits to rebuild Four Sons parallel to McKenna are practically guaranteed."

"You're talking about a huge sum of money."

"With the initial funds, you could begin construction and arrange the transfer of your business to the new location. While you're building, you can finalize a buyer for your current location. My sources tell me a manufacturing company would be willing to pay a premium for your land and buildings. With a decrease in truck traffic and noise, your township trustees would jump through hoops to approve the switch."

His mother asked, "And what about the remaining half million, Ms. McKenna?"

"There're a number of possibilities so I didn't include them in this proposal. There are easements I could offer. Gating,

concrete and parking are costly. We could share a common entrance to the compound and you'd save a great deal. If agreeable, the deficit would be only two or three hundred thousand. If you'd run paper on that amount, I could make reasonable payments without bankrupting McKenna the first time we had a run of non-payment, late payments from clients or breakage."

She swallowed and finished what she'd been saying. "I'm fully prepared to put everything into a legal contract. To show you how serious we are about settling this, if we default on payments in excess of sixty days...one-fifth of McKenna trucking would be titled to your son, John."

John knew what "fifth" Cailla referred to. She'd been more than fair, finding a way to keep the McKennas intact, and at the same time offer a deal only a fool would pass up. He wondered how much she'd personally be sacrificing.

His father finally looked down at the table and asked in a very low voice, "And your father? John said he's not well. Does he know what you're doing?"

Her gaze shifted to the tablecloth. "No, sir." Clearing her throat, she looked outwardly anxious for the first time since the meeting began. "He told me to handle the situation. My brothers trust me. I have complete authority to make the transactions. My father won't know the extent of what I'm doing, and I can't think of a reason in this world to tell him."

"I can. He deserves to know he's finally paying for what he did."

"I don't disagree. Had this happened a year ago, I would've gladly laid it in his lap and let him struggle. My

brothers and I not only inherited the good, but the history of McKenna as well. As a representative of my family, Mr. Thunder, it's my responsibility to make sure you receive a fair settlement for what's been done. On behalf of myself and my brothers, I really am sorry."

She stood abruptly and turned to leave. "Please take some time with this. I trust John will be in touch. Thank you for having the decency to meet with me and hear me out."

"Caila," John said, standing.

He caught her just beyond the doorway. He knew his parents watched and didn't really care. Caila entered their home showing complete respect and, from what he could tell, answered every question honestly. He held her by the elbow. "I accept. Have your attorney draw up the necessary papers."

"But your father, your mother?"

"Wanted to sit down with you, so they could see the deceit in your eyes, and have me destroy McKenna Trucking with a clear conscience. Your offer was good and my parents were suspicious, but the decision's only ever been mine to make. They didn't demand I bring you here, they asked."

His father rose from his seat, reached for his crutch and made his way over to where they stood. Her expression grew sad and accepting as his father neared. She felt responsible in some way for his handicap. John said, "It happened a long time ago."

She pulled her arm free, nodded a final acknowledgement to each of them, and made her way to the front door. This time John didn't stop her. He felt his father's hand on his shoulder. "You were right, John. And your mother was right

all those years ago to not dwell on the past. She made a good offer and you should take it."

His mother, still sitting at the table, asked, "Her face, John. What happened? The accident?"

Not too much escaped his mother, even with Caila's careful application of make-up. "She was beaten by her father when he found out she called me for help. No, I take that back—she didn't consider the bruises all over her a *beating*. He'd merely hit her."

"Dear, God," she exclaimed.

"I think we're making the wrong people repay your debt. I think they've been paying in ways I couldn't imagine."

"His own children!" Of course his mother couldn't fathom it. She'd never been a believer in physical discipline.

"I know he hit Caila. I wonder what he did to his sons."

The room remained very quiet as his parents contemplated what a man like Duane McKenna could do when angered, what he might've done over twenty years with no wife to intervene on behalf of her children. He'd certainly given the matter a great deal of thought.

The weekend held one distasteful chore after the next. Their attorney had her sign more papers for the sale of her father's home. Brian always admired the property and made Caila an extremely decent offer considering the circumstances. He'd purchase the home and transfer the much needed cash to the McKenna account, but wait to occupy it until after her father's death. Word of her father's inoperable heart condition missed no one in and around the company.

The sale of her home happened almost as fast. She'd purchased the three-bedroom house in a moderate neighborhood only six months prior. There'd been another buyer extremely interested in the property. After contacting her realtor, she learned the buyer remained available and would happily make an offer. Her home purchase was made with company cash for the large down payment, and she'd gladly give it back. Although each of her brothers received the same stipend when purchasing their first house, she never felt quite right about it.

Not really wanting to deal with finding an apartment, she arranged for her personal belongings to move into storage until the stress in her life decreased. She could stay on site at the company for a month or two until things calmed down. She wanted to make a sensible decision about where to live.

Her car and the company antique truck left that morning on a flatbed to Pennsylvania where the highest price could be obtained. She'd owned the car since her eighteenth birthday. Her brothers pitched in, bought it for her, and committed time and money to make it perfect. Her eyes misting over, she admonished, *it's a damned car. Quit being selfish and get over it.*

She managed to spend some time at Liam's house. Krista looked better and little James behaved impeccably. Grouchy and out of sorts, Liam seemed absolutely miserable and probably couldn't help his mood.

She parked the company truck in her designated space and Cameron walked up. "Where's the Chevelle?"

"Out for service," she replied, hugging him before ruffling his reddish brown hair and looking into his clear, emerald eyes, "I haven't seen you in three months. Do you think you're the only driver we have?"

He hugged her back and kissed the top of her head before they started walking. "It's only been a few days, little one. And by the way, we have a problem."

"Tell me it's something small and very easy to fix," she said, dragging her feet to keep from reaching the building.

"Okay. It's nothing to get excited over and it's very easy to fix."

"Sounds good to me. Now you can tell me what's wrong." He held the door for her and talked on the way up to the office. "You gave Troy a load of electronics going to Nashville."

"If you say I did, then I guess I did."

"I know because I asked you to give him that load. I want you to compare what we shipped and what he delivered."

"If there's something wrong, Stephanie would've caught it during reconciliation. What are you getting at?"

"I've pulled into loading docks for some of our bigger clients a day or two after Troy's been there. There seems to be a common complaint about shortages in merchandise."

"That's just not possible. As I've said, Steph would've said something."

Caila sat at her desk and moved the mouse to wake up the computer. After typing in security codes, she gained access to the accounts. She retrieved copies of the scanned invoices by

driver and began looking back over Troy's loads. Cameron hovered and saw the same things she did.

On many of his loads, "damaged merchandise" had been written in to account for a few plasma televisions here, and some very expensive car audio equipment there. Every third load seemed to have damaged merchandise.

A few more clicks of the mouse revealed the goods weren't shipped back or accounted for in any way. She and Cameron both knew Stephanie wasn't that stupid.

"How long do you need to get everything together?" Cameron asked.

"Probably not more than an hour."

"What are you going to do about Stephanie?"

"Give her a chance to admit what's been going on and then fire her. If she admits to knowing what Troy was doing, she gets a reference. If not, she's escorted out and she better never give out my name for a job."

"What are we doing with Troy besides firing him?"

"There's some money involved here." She looked at Cameron. "But if it's all the same to you, at this point in my life I really don't want to prosecute. I just want the trouble gone. Besides, without a job, how's he going to pay us back?"

"Whatever you want. You're the boss-lady," he said, rubbing her arm.

"Oh, please don't say that! I don't want to be the boss of anyone—ever. I just want to do my job and make things work."

"A lot of people think you are the boss."

"Yeah, a figurehead. All the strength is right behind me running the docks, the mechanical bays, the trucks and warehouse. You guys do the important stuff and I play with money."

Cameron's gaze intensified. "That doesn't sound like you. You seem down. What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong that won't be fixed shortly. I just hate firing people, you know that."

"Do you want us to do it? You could avoid this one."

"I hired him. For that matter, I hired Stephanie. No, I won't run from the problem, this is my fault."

"How in the hell could you've known either one of them would rip us off? You take this shit too personally. Why don't you go lay down in back until we serve the odd couple with walking papers?"

"Do you remember what happened when we let Mike Turner go?"

"I sure do. What a maniac."

"Yeah, it took all four of you plus another big guy to handle him until the police came. Liam isn't here, so I'd just as soon be the one talking. The three of you can play bodyguards. Troy had an assault charge dropped to a misdemeanor before he hired on. His winning personality doesn't consist of an even temper either. I talk, you guard."

Cameron started laughing in earnest before he gently grasped her chin in his hand. "No one's ever going to hurt you again. Liam never thought Dad would hit you."

"That has nothing to do with what I'm talking about."

"If he wasn't so old—if he wasn't so damned sick, he'd pay."

"Look you knuckle-head, that incident doesn't even register with me anymore. After what I've seen him do to all of you, I got off light." He looked as if he wanted to say more but remained silent. "So after we take care of Troy and Stephanie, I want the three of you back in here so we can chat about some other business that's come up."

"Without Liam?"

"Unfortunately, it can't wait. We'll bring him up to date when he feels better. He doesn't need anything more upsetting him right now."

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Chapter Nine

"How you holding up, sweetheart?" Mannis asked.

"Fine, and you?" Caila replied.

His rumble could've meant anything. Her feet dangled off the loading dock as her legs swayed back and forth. Stomach hunching up for another round of vomiting, she uncapped the pink liquid, chugged it and wiped her mouth with the back of a hand.

"You upset over the business with Stephanie and Troy?"

"No," she said before swallowing, trying to make the medicine stay down. "Steph will find something else and she probably learned her lesson. I don't think Troy meant half of what he said about killing us."

The pause turned into ten minutes of silence. A lot had taken place over the last two weeks. She'd sat with three of her brothers and explained what she'd done. Once they stopped yelling, slamming their fists on the table and pointing fingers at her, they'd put their heads together to figure out the remaining problem of a few hundred thousand dollars so payments wouldn't need to be considered. Despite Liam's continued health problems, Mannis decided to tell him what they'd planned. *It's too damn important, Caila*, he'd said. *It can't wait.*

"The meeting with the Thunder boys went well," Mannis finally said.

"Thanks to all of you being there."

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

"It's more like we partnered with them. They seemed decent enough. Even their old man was civil."

The paper signing took place in the McKenna break room to accommodate Mr. Thunder, his four sons and the four McKenna siblings along with two attorneys, and a notary. Liam couldn't attend but agreed with their course of action. He'd spent the day in the hospital having tests and finally left with some medication to decrease the bouts of dizziness.

She thought about the meeting and grabbed the plastic garbage bag, held it open and started heaving. Mannis' arm came around her as he held her hair. She wasn't surprised her empty stomach had nothing more to give.

"You upset about them starting the big part of the move tomorrow?"

Them consisted of John, his brothers and their employees shifting the towing company over to the McKenna compound. They'd be operating Four Sons from there until the new buildings and impound lot could be finished sometime early next year. A brilliant idea offered up by Mannis to satisfy another portion of the debt, she'd be sharing her office with John. The man loathed her.

"No," she said, "I'll love having him glare at me sixteen hours a day."

He pulled her close and put his arm around her. She didn't feel reassured.

"We got over it, he will too," he said.

"I doubt it."

"Selling your house and the Chevelle weren't the brightest things you've ever done. We could've worked something out. I told you we'd all take the hit and you should've listened."

The last of what he said sounded angry. She couldn't take another verbal lashing. In front of everyone sitting down at the paper signing, when Cameron answered direct questions about what she'd sold, John went ballistic. She managed to keep her game face on, but when John's brothers and father gave her sympathetic looks, her stomach soured and stayed that way.

"But you didn't listen," Mannis said, hugging her a little tighter. "We know why you made the sacrifices. We love you too, but damn, you sure found a way to step on our pride. We should be taking care of you."

Tears gathered in her eyes and for the first time in years, they actually dripped out. "You're not still mad at me?"

She didn't care that her voice sounded small and wounded. Each time one of them looked at her, they seemed to glare. They were quiet around her too which hadn't helped. She felt like a little kid, sickened because she'd displeased her elders.

"We were never really mad at you, sweetheart. Like I said, the situation sucked, and you taking it personally left a bad taste. Hey," he said, wiping at the wetness on his jeans. "Are you crying?"

"Hell no. I don't cry."

Her head remained against him, her face turned down so he wouldn't see the tears. She couldn't believe they'd leaked out. The last few days of angry looks from her brothers had

taken their toll. She'd only meant to fix a problem, not upset the men in her life.

Tension drained because Mannis was acting normal again. She went limp when he reached under her knees, supported her back, and hauled her onto his lap. Wrapped up, held tight, she let out a shaky breath and leaned against him. She'd made massive decisions that affected everyone, and questioned her choices at every turn.

"Hush now, Baby Girl, you did a fine thing selling that rat trap old house so we can buy you something nice."

She giggled softly and settled closer to hear the steady beat of his heart. Her head hurt, her eyes hurt and she finally felt the knot in her stomach come apart a little.

"That old piece of shit car wasn't what a lady like you should drive either. You should have something bold, hot and expensive like a Viper. Yeah, a nice, red Viper." She laughed a little louder before her stomach growled. "Is that your way of asking for food? I'll feed you."

"No," she said, groaning, "no food right now."

John stood at the top of the stairs watching and listening. He'd been looking for Mannis. He intended to speak to him about Caila. John obviously hadn't been the only one noticing how pale and tired she looked. She'd been sick almost two days while handling a double workload and training the new woman.

After a while, Mannis finally turned, readjusted Caila, and faced him.

"Caila? Baby Girl?" Mannis whispered.

John approached, crouched down and looked her over. She appeared unconscious, not just sleeping. "What can I do?"

"Take her so I can get up."

Mannis handed her over and John took the warm bundle of woman. It didn't take much effort to straighten up, and when he did, a thought occurred. Even with work boots and at dead weight, she wasn't very big. He'd handled her before, but she'd been nothing less than energy and heated passion straining against him.

Mannis stood, stretched, and reached out to take her back. Sleeping and cozy against him, they didn't need to be tossing her back and forth. John looked down at the still damp eyelashes and her peaceful expression. "You want her up in the office?"

"Yeah."

"You lead, I'll bring her."

Mannis wore an edgy, distrustful expression before he seemed to come to terms with the situation. Maybe John read too much into the look. Maybe not. As Mannis began walking, John followed. Even the stairs weren't a problem with her extra weight.

He carefully maneuvered through doorways so he wouldn't bang her legs or feet. They were almost through the office when she stirred, brought her hand up and laid a palm against his chest. His heart started pounding when she whispered in her sleep. "John."

She didn't wake up, in fact, appeared to actually fall more soundly asleep. Her head rolled against him. God, her breath was warm coming through the work shirt.

"Take off her boots before I slip her in bed," John said once they stood inside a bedroom.

Mannis did, and he stripped her socks off too before pulling the blankets back. John laid her down and moved her arm so it rested on her stomach. He brushed back a few strands of golden hair before placing his palm on her forehead.

"No fever, but she's pale."

"Just the heaves today."

No matter what time of day or evening he found himself at McKenna Trucking, Caila had been there, wide awake and working. It was little wonder she'd caught some bug. Maybe a few days in bed would take the dullness from her eyes.

Back in the office, John asked, "Who's manning the phones?"

"We transferred them to the mechanical bay. Me and Galen's been answering while Caila took a breather. Found her on the dock sipping the pink crap."

John scanned the office and looked at the additional desk. The conference table had been removed to make room for his files.

"Looks like she's ready for company," John said.

"Yep, she does what she has to." He didn't figure she'd be jumping up and down with happiness, but Mannis made it sound like she'd been sentenced to a jail term.

"And she's not thrilled."

"Nope, and I wouldn't be either if I thought my new roommate hated me. Especially, if I was an itty-bitty scrap like Caila, and the pissed off party would be you."

"When the hell did I say I hated her?"

"You didn't, not exactly. When you went off like a firecracker in front of everyone, she kind of got the impression you didn't think real highly of her."

"I was surprised she sold off her crap without saying a word. Technically she's homeless and I did it to her." Those facts still didn't sit well and actually caused some sleepless nights since he found out about it.

"Caila has a unique way of looking at things. She did what she thought was right."

"And you're fine with it."

"Hell no, we're not all right with what she did. We had our turn with her, and she sat there and listened as we explained it full blast. Then Liam got a hunk of her over the phone. He told her how he felt about the idiotic shit she pulled. Then you fell in line and chewed up what was left, making sure there wasn't an inch of her that didn't get the message."

Of course her brothers reacted badly when they found out what she'd done. He wasn't nearly as close to her, and he'd gone off half-cocked with some ranting and raving. He didn't realize however, he'd been the last in a string of angry males.

"She thinks I hate her?"

"I bet she thought we all did. Now that she knows better, she'll probably be able to keep some food down."

He'd kept his distance after the paper signing because he still had things he wanted to say about her manner of settling the debt. Knowing the words wouldn't be pretty, he decided saying nothing might be best. He took a moment to look back, and apparently her brothers handled the situation similarly. They'd upset her so much she got sick?

"Don't worry though," Mannis added, "you ignore her long enough and she'll relax about you taking up her space. You won't have to apologize or anything."

Apologize! Like hell he would. The thought surfaced and fizzled out. She could've pouted, or burst into tears or a hundred other things to make him feel like an ass. Instead, she greeted him when necessary, helped when asked and stayed out of his way. She probably did the same with her brothers. All the while she kept a smile on her face and took care of business. Until she couldn't anymore.

John glanced at Mannis and found him staring. John asked, "You really think that's why she's sick?"

"I'd put money on it. She should be used to our bitching, but we took it too far. We'll finish straightening things out."

As much as he hated to apologize, he knew he would. He'd been justified in collecting the debt and initially wanted the McKenna's to suffer. That all changed after spending twenty minutes with her. He'd never intended to hurt Caila when he lost his temper. He'd fix it.

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Chapter Ten

Caila drove John crazy by clicking on the keyboard, answering one call after the next, and spinning in the chair to get files from the credenza. She ushered drivers through the office like a damn branding session for bulls—next one up, stamp, sign, smile, bat her eyes and off they'd go, grinning like fools. Next on his itemized list of complaints would be her new clerical person. Theresa Cummings was a bombshell thirty-four year old divorcee with fluffy reddish/brown hair, long legs, short skirts and an obvious affinity for the only single male running a company there. The woman pushed him to the brink.

No, thanks, Terry, I don't want coffee, he'd say at least three times a day. She hated being called Terry. When he found the need to introduce or refer to her, he used it. He'd continue using it. The woman was a walking man-trap. He started jumping at opportunities to take the big rig out, leaving his youngest brother, David to sit in the office and deal with the women. That diversion worked for a week until he'd come back from a tow, and found Caila hovering over his brother, supposedly tending a finger he sliced. An icy glare made them quickly separate.

The dawn of yet another day came. Caila emerged from the back area with freshly washed hair, bright eyes, smelling of soap and perfume. It was the perfect combination of things needed to set him off.

"Good morning," she said, before placing a large mug of coffee on her desk.

"Whatever you say."

"All right, it sucks, but here we are, stuck together. Why did you agree to this?"

"Stupidity," he said before clicking, clicking, and clicking with nothing happening. "God damned this stupid piece of techno-garbage." He tossed the mouse over the edge of the desk.

She came closer and stopped. Like a cat waiting to pounce, she couldn't keep from helping any more than a cat could keep from pouncing. Sighing, giving in, he let the anger go and said, "I'm sorry. I liked my old office, my old chair, and the fact people pretty much left me to do my thing. In here...it's like a three-ring circus and you're the ring leader."

She reached behind the desk, retrieved the mouse and set it on the pad next to the keyboard. "I'm sorry too then. I talked to Cameron about a temporary office down by the mechanics bay so you could have space. But I'm afraid we figured out I wouldn't hear half the calls because of the compressors, welders and hand tools."

"*You* thought about moving?"

"Sure, why not?"

He'd imposed on her by taking over half her office. He couldn't stand the thought of her moving to get out of his way. *He* was the intruder. Why couldn't she seem to comprehend it? Her making more sacrifices because of him wouldn't be tolerated. "Look, lady, I caused you to lose one home, I sure as hell wouldn't make you leave another."

"This isn't my home."

"What's your mailing address?"

He'd intended to impress a point and damn it, he did. He hurt her. Again. When he stood, she took a step back. He knew she had reason to distance herself because he'd given it to her. He needed to repair the damage and apologize. He'd drug his feet long enough.

Holding her in place, he said, "I'm sorry, Caila. God I've been a jerk. You've been patient and hospitable through this disaster, and I've done nothing but bitch. I'm sorry for yelling at you about selling off your house and car. I didn't leave you a choice, and I was way off base with how I reacted. There's no excuse so I won't make one. Can you forgive me?"

"No problem."

"Oh, there's a problem all right, a big one, and it's me. No, don't look past me at the wall." He relaxed when she finally made eye contact again. "That's it. Let me finish telling you what I should've said a few days ago. I really am sorry. For everything."

"John," she said, before moistening her lips with her tongue. Her small hands settled on his waist as she came up on the toes of her boots. Her smooth lips brushed over his in a chaste kiss. "It's okay."

She looked surprised and unsure after their lips touched. He wanted her to know he didn't mind a bit and took her mouth for the type of kiss he'd been craving every time she got near. She made the caress better by wrapping her arms around him and opening so they could get closer, more intimate.

Her body drifted against him and he squeezed tighter, needing to be so close not even air could get between them. At seven in the morning with his brain barely functioning, his body pumped with adrenaline and lust. He'd behaved badly and deserved a kick in the ass, not her mouth offered up without a bit of resistance.

Needy little sounds came from her throat and it turned him on even more. God, she was sexy making those hungry little noises and running her tongue all over his, stroking, inflaming, promising...

She's insane. I stripped her of important possessions and want her clothes now too. She wasn't only allowing it, she shook with need. He didn't think, and before he knew what happened, his hand stroked her ass. Her breath caught and then she groaned into his mouth. He'd never gotten so hard from a kiss.

"This is why I've been a jerk," he admitted, giving her small biting kisses. He finally understood what caused most of his irritation over the last several days. "I wanted another taste."

"Why?"

Words spilled out before he thought too much about it. "Steel toe work boots and perfect, pink nails. A work shirt covering dark lace and soft, pale skin. Your pretty little mouth begging to be kissed when you have smudges of dirt on your face. You drive me crazy."

She shook her head and smiled. "You're crazy, all right."

"For better or worse, you've got my attention," he said, bringing her hips forward and leaning in. "See?"

The smile left and she closed her eyes. He could tell she understood exactly what he'd been saying. There were some things a man couldn't lie about. The slight swaying of her body against him relayed she might have a similar problem.

"Jesus, Caila, stop. Show a little mercy." Which she did before he instantly regretted opening his mouth. Damn, he wanted a lot more than kisses. "Tell me you don't let just any guy get this close to you."

"I don't. You see me around other men."

"You smile and laugh. You put them at ease."

"I don't flirt."

In actuality, he'd never seen it. "Not with them, but not with me either."

"Until recently, I thought you hated me." There wasn't a trace of humor in her words or expression.

"You know better now, don't you?"

She nodded.

"Now that we have an understanding, will you?"

"Will I, what?"

"Flirt with me, tease me, show me you're interested."

"You're serious?"

"Dead serious. A look, a touch; give me something, anything to let me know. Don't hide from me, not now." He kissed her once before letting her go. "Keep your distance, Caila, and I'll keep mine. I'll cage my temper from now on so you're safe. If you don't want distance, throw me a God damn bone."

She looked up with wide, crystal blue eyes. "I'm not too good at the whole flirting-thing. I tend to hide my feelings,

which is a weird self defense mechanism. You're not too bad at it yourself actually, except for that anger."

"We'll both try harder. Agreed?"

"All right," she said, before pushing him back to his chair. "Sit. Now learn from the mistress of techno-garbage." With three mouse clicks, she recovered everything he'd lost.

"You're a techno-garbage Goddess. Show me what you did." Slowly she repeated the steps. "Now how in the hell would I have known to do that?"

"You wouldn't. It's a glitch. You're using old software."

"I bought this with the promise it'd last for years. I took a class to use this crap."

"Oh."

"Oh, what? It's outdated?"

"Um, how long ago was the class?"

"I don't know. Why the hell would I remember something like that?" He did remember the promise to control his anger and added, "A few years ago. A while after I graduated."

He didn't like her smile then. "And let's see, you're Galen's age, so you're roughly thirty-four? Ten year old software?"

"I'm used to it."

"It's perfectly good, I guess. Besides, I'll be around for a few months to help with the bugs," she said, sitting her pretty little ass on the corner of his desk. Her small fingers, with those pink nails, toyed with the top button of her work shirt.

"Keep using it, you're used to it. But if you want, I could install some really trick, up-to-date accounting programs with no bad bugs to make you toss your poor little mouse on the floor."

"Yeah?"

"Oh, yeah, but we'd have to download your files, take away all the protection and go in deep." The button almost undone, his gaze was transfixed waiting for it to slip through the hole. "Then we'd have to stuff your big, hard data into the new soft...ware. It'd hold your data *tight*, secure so you could *move it*, put it *in* and *out*, and *in* and *out* of different formats. It'd do just about anything you wanted with a little pressure...just the tiniest touch from the tip of your big, strong, thick finger."

"Oh my God," he said, laughing hard, enjoying her little show.

She laughed too and he took her hand in his when he settled down. "You win. If I move into this decade, you won't desert me? You'll stick with it until I can *manipulate it* with a click of my finger?"

"No problem," she said, the seductive purr in her voice gone. "I think you're pretty smart for a guy, so you'll learn in no time. Actually, the new stuff runs like Windows. By the way, you have a great laugh. Nice smile too."

"Theresa told me."

"You've been smiling at her?"

"Like this," he said, and demonstrated.

She grimaced. "Oh, uh, she said it was nice?"

"Yeah, she did."

"She bothers you."

"Slightly," he lied.

"She's very good at her job."

"So you've said."

"I think watching her flirt is amusing. I'll talk to her about it though. I'll let her know all the short skirts, high heels and low cut blouses aren't your style. You prefer men's shirts, axle grease and work boots."

The lady could move, finishing the statement before jumping off the desk, getting across the room and sliding into her chair. He liked the triumphant smile on her face as she leaned back and sipped coffee. He'd never cared for a smug-looking woman, especially when it concerned him. With her, it was different. He'd put her on edge and kept her there so long, he wanted her to feel a little control so she'd keep *teasing* him.

An explosion from behind the loading docks made Caila jump from her seat and race through the offices. Taking the stairs two at a time, she ran full bore until meeting up with Mannis. They hit the dock together, stopped and stared at the large flaming dumpster twenty feet away. She hated fire.

Galen rounded the corner and Caila yelled, "Call the fire department!"

Mannis grabbed the closest fire extinguisher and jumped from the dock. Her heart pounded as she ran around the corner to the mechanic's bay and hefted the large extinguisher from the pegs, wrapped her arms around it, and headed down the stairs. After pulling the pin, she climbed into the bed of the company pick-up truck to get a good angle. Once she found it, she let loose. *Please let it work fast. Make it go out.*

Another explosion shook the truck and the resulting fireball scorched her eyes. Blinding pain made the extinguisher drop

from her arms. Loud noises seldom caused her to panic. Fire did. Terrified of being burned, she screamed for her brother.

Blurry vision came back and she saw a body laying twenty feet from where Mannis once stood. "No, no!" she cried, climbing from the truck, repeatedly stumbling as she made her way.

Men ran from the back of the lot and building. "Get help. Put it out!"

She dropped beside Mannis and had barely laid hands on him before another explosion shook the ground. She instinctively threw herself forward and spread her limbs out, covering as much of him as possible.

Thick smoke choked her until she grew dizzy from the lack of oxygen. Mannis wasn't choking. God, was he even breathing!

Crazy white lights swung around the darkened area before a freezing cloud covered them. *Ice can't burn. Safe.*

She gasped for air, felt pressure on her arms and everything tilted. Instinctively, she fought by kicking and struggling. "It's Paul, I've got you. Settle down and hang on. Almost there."

Jostled, held so tight she couldn't breathe, she finally felt grass beneath her as John's brother set her down. Another male voice said, "Jesus, Paul, flip her over, she's still smoking!"

Rolled onto her stomach, the choking got worse as she felt her shirt being torn open at the back. John's voice penetrated. "Hold her!"

"Mannis," she called, wheezing, coughing.

"He's next to you. You're both safe." To someone else, John said, "Give me water, now!"

She shrieked as cold washed over her.

"It's water, Caila, just water. Hold still. Damn it, did someone call the paramedics?"

"On the way," Galen said.

"Anyone else hurt?"

Someone help him! She could hear Mannis coughing but he hadn't said a word.

"No, and the fire's almost out."

"His eyes, his eyes," she said, her throat parched and painful, "rinse them out."

"More water!"

Rolled to her back and pinned to the ground, John rinsed her eyes and the rest of her face. Inhaling a portion of the water didn't lessen the burning in her throat, in fact, it made it worse because she choked. Through blurry eyes, she saw him bend over and come close. "It's all right now, help's coming."

"Mannis."

"They're taking care of him."

Still coughing, arms surrounded her before bringing her up to be held close. "It's better sitting up?" John asked.

She nodded as the spasms in her throat lessened, though it still stung like hell. "Are you hurt anywhere?"

She shook her head and rested against him before she said with a raspy voice, "Mannis?"

"How's her brother doing?" John asked.

"He's good and sitting up on his own," Paul replied. "Can you see, Mannis?"

After an agonizing moment, she heard, "That was a nod in case you didn't hear his brain rattling. Oh, and that would be a certain gesture involving his middle finger."

She actually managed to laugh before launching into another coughing jag. She held her breath and cleared her throat repeatedly. The burning was awful. At least they were alive. "What happened?"

A hand touched her shoulder and she instinctively knew it belonged to Galen. Crossing her arms, her hand caught his and held tight. "Are you really okay, Baby Girl?"

A squeeze let him know because she didn't trust her voice. Mannis grabbed her other hand and grateful emotions threatened to erupt. It would be best if she didn't cling and cry all over them like she wanted to.

"Here they come now," Paul said.

Sirens blared and she tried focusing. The blurred red and white lights came closer as a figure waved an arm to guide them to where she and Mannis sat. Before long, paramedics asked her to lie down. Held tightly by John, sandwiched between her brothers, she needed another moment to simply feel safe.

"I won't leave you," Galen said.

Mannis tried to say something but choked instead and squeezed her hand, letting her know he'd be right beside her. John said, "I'll stay with you."

And he did.

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Chapter Eleven

He rang the bell and was surprised when Mannis opened the door. "John, come in."

"How're you feeling?"

Mannis held a mini-Mannis with white blonde hair and eyes the color of his and Caila's. "My daddy go boom," the little guy said.

John smiled at him. A two-year old could be impressed by the damndest things. Mannis stroked his fly away hair and held him close. "You betcha punkin-head. How about if you go tell Mommy to bring your old man and Uncle John some coffee. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good boy." He set him down and gave a light swat on his diapered butt.

"Uncle John, huh?"

"Better than all that Mister crap. They said you were a big help with the fire. You can be an uncle to my brats any day."

"How're your eyes?"

"Great until I have to put the drops in, but not really a problem."

"Caila?"

"That's one tough little girl. Not too bright, but tough. Liam said something about you wanting to blister her ass for crawling in the wreck. I can't say I haven't thought about the same thing after last night."

Of her four brothers, John suspected Mannis would be the one to make good on the threat. The others growled and barked, but would never really take a bite out of her. Mannis, on the other hand, was quieter, solemn, and seemed to possess a deep-seated anger.

"Liam told me something at the time," John said. "I'll pass it on to you. You won't touch her."

They stood silently for a moment, Mannis taking time to look him over. "I wouldn't, no matter what she did. Glad to hear you feel that way."

A small blonde-haired cherub staggered in through a doorway. Her face lit up when she discovered her father. After shrieking, she wobbled over. Mannis gathered her into his arms. "Jordan, can you say hi to Uncle John?"

Her little hand opened and closed before hiding her face against Mannis' neck. His intensity didn't ever seem to lessen, but holding his small daughter brought something gentler to his expression. John thought maybe he'd been wrong. The big, blue-eyed, Irishman held and looked at Caila with similar caring and affection.

Mannis called out, "Hey, Barb, incoming." To him he said, "Let's go into the dining room. Coffee in a minute. Are you hungry?"

"No, thanks, I just stopped on my way to the shop to see how you and Caila are doing."

He followed through the large rooms decorated in country blues, browns and greens. Given Mannis' personality, he expected the home to be decorated in sharp contrasts with darker, more brooding colors. John glanced at his shirtless

back, saw old scarring and in places, deep pitting to go along with a few blistered spots. From the look of him, he'd survived a few explosions, some years prior.

"Take a seat while I help Barb," Mannis said. "With the two monsters she's not real bright-eyed this early."

Within a few minutes he came back, a child in each arm. A woman followed with a coffee craft in one hand, three mugs in the other. He stood as she set the items down.

"Honey, this is John. John, my wife, Barb."

Like the most natural thing in the world, she embraced him firmly and quickly before stepping away. As tall as Caila, built similarly, her huge blue eyes sparkled with moisture. "I told that stud he was the hottest man I'd ever met and he should be careful. Thanks for dousing him last night. It's a pleasure finally meeting you."

"You too."

Mannis put the boy down and asked, crouched on his level, "Who wants to go see Aunt Kay?"

Both kids started whooping and yelling. "Should be fun," he said with a devilish grin before they left.

Barb sat and motioned for him to do the same. "Sugar in the bowl to your right, cream's in the ceramic do-hickey."

"Black is fine," he said as she poured.

After a moment, she gave him an appraising glance. "How're you holding up?"

"Fine, why?"

"I hear you have a few brothers of your own, but even so, the McKenna clan can be overwhelming at first."

"No problems on my end. Not yet."

"Good for you. You're around all of them for days on end, no gradually getting used to them."

"Was it that bad for you?"

"Worse. Duane hated me, and with the exception of Caila, the rest weren't too affectionate. But if you get accepted, you couldn't ask for better family." He couldn't help but like the woman. She didn't seem reserved or guarded, and said what she thought.

"They put you through your paces."

"You could say that."

"I'm glad it all turned out."

She sighed and took a sip from her cup before an explosion of noise and thumping started somewhere overhead.

"Poor Caila," she said. "I guess they got her up."

His eyes followed the shrieking, screaming and laughter as it moved, progressed and bounded down the stairs. Caila'd been outnumbered and landed in a heap on the floor as shots of water blasted her from water guns, the most devastating hits coming from Mannis.

Dressed in a blue, sleeveless, button-down shirt with the tails tied under her breasts, her mid-drift was bare. Her shorts rode low on her hips and high on her thighs. His eyes glanced lower and he satisfied another question about her when he caught sight of pink toenails.

Mannis let Jordan down, and Caila curled into a ball as the children attacked. "Brian, Jordan, you be nice to Auntie Kay," she pleaded.

Immediately, the two youngsters hugged and kissed her. Caila sat up and began coughing, struggling to catch her breath. Instinctively, he went to her. While Barb and Mannis each grabbed a child, he got Caila.

Unsure exactly what to do once he got her off the floor, John sat on a nearby sofa, situated her in his lap and waited for the spasms to pass. Barb left and came back with a glass of water which he took and helped Caila drink. Breathing hard, she said, "Better, thanks."

"Caila, I'm sorry," Mannis said.

More in control, she looked up and realized exactly where she'd been seated. When she squirmed, he tightened his hold. She could stay put for a minute and wouldn't die of embarrassment. It took too long for her to catch her breath.

"You were up coughing half the night," she said. "You heard what they told us in the emergency room. If it lasts more than a few days, we go back. For now, it's normal."

With her back still wet and her thigh damp, it didn't lessen the heat radiating from her bed-warmed body. The lack of clothing and her eyes only half open, reminded him she'd been asleep five minutes before. He concentrated on not thinking about it—Caila in a bed.

She looked at him and said, "I don't think I told you last night, but thanks for helping. Again."

"You told me, and you're welcome. Again."

"You went back to the shop after we got done in the ER?"

"I said I would."

He'd bet his last dollar she wouldn't be squirming around so much if Mannis wasn't a few feet away. He should let her

go but didn't. She'd live a few more minutes until it finally sunk into his tired brain she hadn't been hurt too badly.

"Was there any damage to the back of the building?"

"No, just you, Mannis and the dumpster."

"Did they say what started the fire? What exploded in the trash?"

Police and the fire department seemed fairly certain the incident was arson. Until the facts were known, he'd keep speculation where it belonged. Unvoiced. "They'll come back today to give the official verdict."

"I better get ready to go then."

A resounding "no" came from everywhere. "No? So Cameron or Galen are doing payroll, right?"

"Not today," Mannis said gruffly. "Let the new woman handle it."

"Payroll? No one else has the codes for the system. After Stephanie, no one will."

John held her more securely when she tried to get up. "Don't run off. Finish talking to your brother."

"He knows where I'm going. To get ready for work."

"You can't possibly see out of those eyes. How're you going to work on the computer?"

"Squinting."

Barb offered, "Liam's covering for you and Mannis."

"Oh, no he's not."

"We all planned on showing up today, so take the day off," Mannis said.

"Good," she replied, placing more effort into getting off his lap, "we'll all be there."

Caila didn't like her current position. Mannis didn't seem bothered by it, but she felt strange sitting in John's lap, especially when Barb raised her eyebrows and smirked. Finally getting some leverage, she managed to stand. John grabbed her hips, and held her in place before touching her back and the back of her legs. "Are these burns?"

Mannis made his way behind her. Great. Just what she wanted, the two of them looking at her backside. She replied, "I checked them out in the bathroom mirror last night. I'd hardly call them burns."

"You're covered."

"Pencil dots. They gave me stuff to put on them and they don't hurt. Can I go now?"

Released, she glanced back to see the scowls on both men's faces. *Oh, my God, no wonder John gets along so well with my brothers!* He had *the look*. She thought the affliction only manifested in men with the last name McKenna. Apparently she'd been wrong. Somehow John managed to master a perfect replica of the scowl so often directed at her by loving older siblings.

Barb caught her eye and they smiled at each other. Barb knew *the look*, and complained about it often. When Mannis asked why they were smiling, she walked to the stairs. Barb could explain if she wanted to.

Glad John had something in common with her family, she felt better about the kissing that took place the day before. She shuddered, visualizing what might've happened if they'd been discovered sliding against each other in a passionate embrace. Galen warned her about getting too close to a cop.

All four of her brothers would probably fall over if they knew how she felt about John.

Payroll done, loose ends tied up, it hurt to blink even with the drops. A host of muscle pains accompanied by her back and legs burning, made Caila close her eyes for a moment. The next thing she knew, John was gently picking her up from the chair. Dreamily, she asked, "My brothers?"

His voice came back accompanied by a rumbling vibration through his work shirt. "Liam called it a day, so did Mannis. Cam took a truck to pick up a load and I sent Galen home. He was dead on his feet. I'm staying tonight. We're hiring another night shift dispatcher to work with Larry. Between two of them, we can have babysitters for both companies, and hopefully this stupidity will end."

"You're tired too. Use one of the other rooms and transfer the calls to me."

"It's only seven o'clock. I'll work for a while and then figure something out. Go back to sleep. I'll be right out front."

"Thank you," she said as he laid her gently on the bed in her room.

He gave her a soft kiss and she felt reassured and protected. After the police speaking with all of them about someone deliberating starting the fire, she definitely needed to feel safe. Exhausted, she gave in and drifted off.

Sometime later, she woke disoriented and on fire. The burning didn't stop when she threw back the covers. Soaked in sweat, her back and legs felt raw. After walking across the hall to the bathroom, she stripped off her clothes and started the shower. She adjusted the warmth as her body tolerated

it, slowly turning down the blend of temperatures until the hot water stopped all together.

Chilly water ran over her skin, and the burning turned into a stinging from the cold. Relieved, feeling a little better, she turned off the water and dried herself. When her skin reached room temperature, the burning came back with a vengeance. She turned the knob to blast herself again. Miserable, still tired, she figured she'd stand there and drain Lake Erie as long as the pain stopped and her only discomfort was frostbite.

"Caila," John said right outside the shower door. "Why didn't you answer? What's wrong?"

Her lips frozen, teeth chattering, she replied, "N-nothing. Too hot."

She heard the shower door open before, "Jesus Christ!"

The water stopped and a towel came up beside her. "Use this to wrap up. We'll get you to the hospital. You're glowing."

The soft towel felt like the roughest burlap on her back, and she sobbed before giving up and letting it drop. "There's salve on the counter. Please..."

By the time he came back, she'd gathered the wet hair from her upper back and brought it forward. The first touch of the thick cream felt like heaven and she moaned.

"I'm sorry."

"No," she said, her teeth chattering, "feels good."

"You're frozen!"

"Cold. Takes the heat out."

She didn't care that she wasn't making sense. The cream smoothing across her skin felt too delicious. The instant he

spread it, the pain went away. *My goodness, I underestimated how much those little dots could hurt.*

Her back done and decidedly more comfortable, she looked over her shoulder as he crouched beside her to get the backs of her legs. He'd probably been asleep in the next room and the noise of the shower woke him because he had on jeans and nothing else. Muscle moved beneath skin by his shoulder blades as he worked on her legs. He looked tan, sleek and she resisted the urge to run her hands over him.

He said, "Open your legs, honey. Let me get all of it." The deep timbre of his voice made her skin feel warmer.

When she shifted, her stomach dropped and her arms lost strength. Leaning into the cold tile wall, her hard nipples met damp stone, and dazzling sensations washed through her. He worked up the inside of her thigh and she sighed.

"Almost done, hang in there."

Open your legs. Let me get all of it. The pain left as his breath hit her wet legs and he rubbed areas on her naked body. It all seemed surreal, like some misplaced sex scene from a cheesy movie. It was the wrong place, the wrong time, and maybe even the wrong man, but her drowsy brain didn't consider anything but what her tired body wanted. And she wanted John.

Finished, he stood and she turned to face him. The lights and humidity in the room made his long hair shine as it framed his face. Broad shoulders gave way to strong, muscular arms where veins stood out clearly against dark skin. His chest and abdomen were hairless with supple ripples

and creases defining muscle. She suddenly felt grossly inadequate and reached for the towel.

His hands grabbed her shoulders as his eyes roamed her body. "My God, you're beautiful."

"Touch me," she said, wanting to see if his hands would make the rest of her feel as good as her back.

"Here?"

A sensual brush of lips and breath slowly caressed her. Barely a kiss, hardly satisfying and somewhat maddening, she leaned in to get closer, tighter and make him understand her desire already surpassed such chaste little kisses. Unable to temper her least feminine trait, passion surged, and broke through long practiced restraint. When her aggression surfaced with Adam, he'd made it clear *he'd* be in control. She'd managed it...then.

John touched her hesitantly, running his palms up her arms before clasping her face. Thumbs traced her jaw before he bent and kissed her again. His tongue brushing her lips made her open. He leaned in, demonstrating he too could lose control as his big body tightened. She felt muscle tense through fingers grasping his biceps before he stabbed his tongue deep. Consumed, devoured and *taken*, the remaining chill left her wet skin as rushing blood flowed. He pulled back and slowed the assault with less hurried kisses and nips, teasing her in the process.

"More. Harder. Now," she demanded with a shaky voice.

His hands left her face, slid down her sides and grasped her hips before his fingers sunk into flesh. Oh, she liked being held tight and brought forward. The course denim and distinct

bulge rubbing her abdomen made her wild. When he filled her mouth, she closed around him, challenging him to go deeper, thrust faster. He did, couldn't seem to help himself.

The kiss slowed until she nipped at his lips, enjoying the uneven breaths that made his chest rise and fall against her breasts. She went up on her toes and stretched as her hands found his shoulders, urging him to lean down. When he did, she took advantage and tasted his neck. Skin that was licked, and carefully tested with her teeth, rose in gooseflesh as he muttered broken words and phrases. Finding his earlobe, she drew the soft flesh into her mouth to suck and tease and savor.

"Slow down, let me catch my breath," he said.

He didn't simply tolerate her aggression, he liked it, seemed to want more despite his words. Slightly arrogant, physically strong, John tended to dominate situations. He didn't then, not with her. The power and control he allowed made her a little dizzy.

With her heart racing in her chest, her mouth trailed down until she sampled his nipple. Licking, sucking, biting him gently, she got rougher as her fingers went to his sides to squeeze and hold him in place. The shaking urgency she felt needed to be conveyed, and the only way she could do it was through some harsh mauling. The feel of the rigid point against her tongue, the heat coming from his skin, and the clean taste of him, forced blood to rush to the flesh between her legs.

"Jesus, Caila, do it, you feel so good. Harder," he said and a moment later, "no, honey, wait, slow down."

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

His hips thrust forward as his body strained. He was on the verge of losing control and she wanted him to. Heavy breaths caused his chest to heave. "Caila, please, I'm trying to behave but you're pushing."

God she hoped so. She'd never been more ready for sex in her life. Nails bit into his sides before she reached down and grasped his belt buckle. A quick jerk had it undone. The snap and zipper of his jeans followed, and she pushed the denim aside. Hands and fingers slid into the warmth to discover him. "Oh, God, you're so thick and hard."

He grabbed her wrists and held her hands against his erection. His pelvis came forward and her palms were filled with rigid flesh. A ripple from the base made her weak, shivery and ready. He not only wanted her, he shook with need.

He looked at her, assessing her. Could he see the wildness? Did he have any idea what he'd woken in her? Forced to release him when he tightened his hold, her hands were brought up to his mouth. Carefully biting a finger before licking it, shockwaves rushed up her arms. Intense arousal hardened her nipples, and he hadn't even touched them yet. When her last finger was sucked and thoroughly wet, she pleaded, "Please, John."

Calloused fingertips stroked the side of her face before he leaned forward to lightly kiss her. His pale eyes were filled with heat and promise. A slight grin pulled at the corners of his mouth, suggesting awareness and appreciation of her sexual hunger.

Pulled by her wrists to the bedroom across the hall, the door shut as he kicked it. Held, forced to follow, he walked slowly backward to the middle of the room.

Denim slid down his legs before he bent, picked up the jeans and tossed them aside. Magnificent in nothing but skin, she hesitated before stepping closer to feel all of him. His hand stroked her hair and slid to her nape as she began memorizing the contours of his body. Fingers threaded deep through the strands before slowly clenching into a fist. Drawn back, she watched as expressions washed over his face.

Insecurities rose up with his apparent indecision. His look gave the impression of desire and reluctance. She'd die if he pulled away, so she blurted out words to potentially salvage her ego. "We don't have to."

Intense gray eyes gazed back before narrowing. "Oh, Caila, I believe we do." His gaze swept her face before settling on her mouth.

The fist in her hair tightened and he drew her closer. His predatory look wasn't exactly inviting. In fact, it made her anxious. Achy, nervous and feeling suddenly vulnerable, she needed him to do something, anything.

"John?" she whispered.

A tremor swept through her as his lips came closer. "Trying to decide, honey."

"Decide what?" she asked as his leg went between hers, forcing her to adjust her stance to accommodate his thigh.

Pressed intimately against the core of her need, her hands found his sides and took hold for support. "What it'd take to make you break your damn control."

"What control?" She hadn't any, nipping and savaging him. A moist, skillful tongue passed over her lips, leaving her wanting, yearning.

"Yeah, that's it," he said, before grunting. "Your nails going into me like that. Your hard little body rubbing against me. That's what I want."

He came forward and plundered her mouth. His taste and the motion of him sliding in and retreating were sinful as her body prepared for climax. Almost there, ready to explode, he stopped the consuming kisses and took a step back.

Heavy lidded, gray eyes stared as the fingers in her hair opened. He seemed to be challenging her by taking her to the edge and leaving her there. She moved into him using her body to push him toward the bed. Her *damn control* was broken, and she was more than ready to take what she needed. Besides, if he really didn't want to go, there'd be no budging him.

He released her, touched the side of her face, took a few steps back and sat. After lying down, he opened his arms and waited. Stunned, she looked at him and her throat constricted with emotion. She'd never been permitted that type of power—being the one who dictated how much or how fast. Her prior experience sexually, involved one man. She believed most males to be similar in their necessity to dictate the course of events.

Glad she'd been wrong, excited by the prospect of mounting him, her palms smoothed over his thighs. He had such strength surrounded by warm skin. Kisses were pressed onto his stomach and chest that relayed how pleased and

turned on she was. The friction of her skin sliding over him made every inch of her tremble.

"You're shaking."

"Mmm," she agreed.

She splayed her hands against his broad chest as she came up. When her legs separated, she moaned in anticipation. Opened, knowing what would come, she eased back until she touched his eager flesh with her swollen and slick folds. Slowly taking him in, she hesitated, savoring the fact she held the dominant position. *Oh God, just the thought of it has me so close!*

Roughened hands grasped her rear end before separating and holding her spread. He could take her as they were positioned, but he didn't. His eyes closed, jaw clenched and his abdomen tightened until muscles rippled. Obviously, he'd let her do the taking, so she sank further and her slickened passage stretched.

An eternity wouldn't be enough to experience such a thing. She savored the gradual melding of bodies, the luscious throbbing between her legs preparing her for climax. Finally, taking the last of him, she settled her weight so that every pleasure spot in and on her sex was touched. *Heaven.*

She moved hesitantly, and sensations ripped through her lower body. "No, not yet!" she begged aloud, not wanting the hungry, greedy feelings sated.

Her body mindlessly reached toward climax. She couldn't stop or slow what happened any more than she could will her heart not to beat. Her head rolled as an errant spasm tightened her in the first wave of release.

The feeling of dominance, having him beneath, made her sexual urges extreme and unpredictable. Unable to restrain herself or worry about how he'd react, instinct took over and she gave into red-hot cravings that'd been too long repressed.

His hips surged and the penetration hurt at first, going too deep but it began her climax. The slight pain faded and aggression sank bone deep as her teeth clenched. With each spiral of pleasure, she rode him harder, faster, fanning the burning ecstasy with wild and abandoned undulations of her hips.

Low, male groans matched the senseless sounds coming from her, as fingers dug into the soft flesh of her rear. Spread apart, she felt the orgasm differently as she squeezed the thick erection buried so deep. Her vision went dark, the intense climax still refusing to ebb. Her body began feeling heavy and weak but the pleasure continued. He made it so by bringing his hips up, stroking into her.

At last a reprieve came when her passion slowed many long moments later. She again sensed her surroundings, albeit without much clarity. Hungry male sounds. The scent of arousal and sex. Warm male flesh beneath her, between her legs. Calloused hands at her waist, tightening, holding her. Her eyes opened and the bedroom spun. Soft sheets met her back as John suddenly came over her.

Pinned beneath him, her legs brought up to his sides, he filled her. Against her cervix, small circular movements inflamed desires barely laid to rest. Moisture wept from where they were joined. Luscious, thick, piercing strokes from his

long, hard flesh gave rise to wet sounds as the waves of pleasure built once more.

"I can't. Too much."

"You can. You will. Jesus, that's it. Squeeze me, Caila." The words were harsh, demanding and spoken next to her ear.

Whatever he wanted or needed, she'd give. Powerful tremors shredded her sense and she cried out. His weight settled against her damp skin before his mouth covered hers, hushing her. Opened and filled with his tongue, the dual invasions forced her hips from the bed to meet his thrusts. Lost in another fit of passion, the fingers of a hand tangled in the silk of his hair as nails scored his scalp.

Aggression fueled aggression and he drove into her, giving the type of fierce mating she'd only ever imagined. Beyond incredible, his body damp and straining, he said after tearing his mouth from hers, "Ahh, take it, Caila, every bit."

Her body softened, stopped clenching and seemed to relax. On a final trust, he remained buried tightly and she felt a shudder run the length of his body. Her insides contracted around the heat that gushed against her womb. He drew back and pumped into her again.

"That's it, honey, take it," he said with less emotion, a bit calmer.

His hand moved between them and she couldn't stop him, couldn't bring her legs together as a thumb rubbed over her sensitive nub. Her legs tightened and heels dug into the back of his thighs as he made her clench down around his erection.

"Damn it," he swore or praised, her understanding limited to the intensity of his voice, not the meaning behind the words. He ground against her before another spasm warmed her deeply.

Dazed, shaking, clinging to him, she'd never felt more sated and euphoric in her life. Slow and lazy thrusts seemed meant to soothe and alleviate the remaining tension. She couldn't help the tiny sound that escaped on the tail end of each breath.

His thumb continued to rub, the pressure slowly easing. She twitched and relaxed at random.

"Shh, calm down now. Slow and easy, honey."

His lips came back and she didn't respond because her brain was sluggish. Closing her eyes, tasting him, still wanting him to crush her body and lips, his patience and tender kisses finally sank in. Her heart slowed, muscles loosened as she settled into his rhythm of tasting slowly, savoring, exploring.

His hands passed over her, touching her shoulders and breasts. He withdrew from her slowly, and the loss was indescribable. Almost reverently, he leaned down to kiss and lightly tongue her nipples. She'd never felt particularly beautiful, especially after sex. John made her feel special and cherished.

"How's your back?" he asked, his hands still moving, tracing her ribs with fingertips as he watched.

"Fine."

"Still burning?"

"No."

"Are you angry?"

"No, you?"

"Why would I be?"

She looked beyond him at the ceiling where the fan turned. Balanced on one arm, and hovering over her, he held her chin. "We're a little too close at the moment for you to avoid me. How about an answer?"

"I'm not good with the whole *after sex* thing."

"You're doing fine." He came down to brush his lips over hers.

"I didn't mean to get so rough."

"I told you to tease me. That was better."

"You're joking with me."

"Not at the moment. No." His head tilted slightly to the side as he waited for what she'd say next.

"It didn't bother you?"

"You getting hot and wet and wanting us close?"

"Yes."

"Bother me some more, honey."

"Now you're joking."

He pulled her close. "Not really a question after what we just did, but, are you on the pill?"

"No."

He went still for a second before cradling her head and bringing his mouth down for a passionate kiss. "There're worse things that could happen between us."

"I get injections, not for birth control, but that's a side effect."

"Is everything all right? Did I hurt you?"

"No, you didn't hurt me and everything's fine—with the injections."

"I guess we don't have to worry about a shotgun wedding."

"My father would just shoot you. No wedding necessary."

"I was thinking about your brothers."

"I'm grown, they wouldn't bother."

"Oh, honey, I think they'd bother. We'll both have some marks tomorrow." Was it regret or humor in his voice?

His hand stroked a breast before running over her stomach. "You're all muscle and softness, aren't you?" A stern expression made his features seem harsh. "Why, Caila? Why did you let me get this close?"

"You didn't show up for Liam with cash on your mind. And the last thing you wanted to do was help a McKenna, but you came, and you helped. You wouldn't leave us when the truck started moving; you gave your word and kept it. Not many men do. You're big like my brothers but don't bite back as hard as you get bit." He laughed before she said, "You get grouchy but don't stay that way. And," she added the last with a smirk, "you're built, sexy as hell, and get me wet with a kiss. That's a first."

"I'm sexy, huh?"

"Like you don't know it."

When he laughed she knew he didn't believe it. Modesty? She already knew he wasn't right, liking her smeared with dirt in work clothes. She would've felt differently about the situation had he been attracted to her when she dressed like

a woman. Not too many men paid attention to her with work clothes on.

The bed shifted as he got up, left and came back with the jar of salve. Seated beside her, he gathered her up and laid her across his lap, face down. He applied cream to her back, and she relaxed as he slowly rubbed.

"Do your brothers know about your tattoo?"

"Considering its placement, I'd have to say definitely not."

"It's unique."

"I was young. Eighteen to be exact."

"Just the word *BAD*?"

"Its location is relevant."

"Caila?"

"Hmm?"

There were no burn spots on her rear but he rubbed each cheek carefully, firmly, pulling at her while gathering flesh into his hands. *Oh, that feels so good!* "I want you to think long and hard before crawling into trucks hanging off the side of a bridge or running into flames. Okay?"

Something wasn't quite right, the legs beneath her were tense, his voice was too.

"Sure." The rubbing got a little rougher.

"Good, because I'll be close for a while until the new shop's built. Even after, I'll only be across a driveway. Whether we're sharing a bed or you get sick of me, if I ever see or hear about you doing anything that God damn stupid, this is the position you'll be in. Understand?"

"You...wouldn't...dare."

With lightning speed, he flipped her and cradled her in his arms. Her mouth was forced open for a kiss, and she tried to bite him, not to draw blood, but to warn. The game went on until she felt her breast being held, and then her nipple. The body she thought she knew melted, leaving her weak.

"I'd never hurt you," he whispered against her ear, "not in any other way, but you misplace your brain again, and *BAD* can remind you about common sense and when to use it."

"But..."

"Do you know what it did to me, seeing you take off after Mannis through the flames?"

"No."

"I almost ran Paul down with the truck, barely took the time to set the brake before going in behind you. I thought I'd find you burned; nothing anyone could do. I felt that way after a few kisses. How would I feel now?"

"I'm sorry."

"You understand?"

She did and never wanted to hurt anyone like that. She nodded.

"I didn't push you before and I know your brothers didn't either, but it's time we had that talk you put off earlier."

Seated in his lap with his arms surrounding her and providing comfort, wasn't enough to have the discussion he wanted.

"I heard what the police said."

"You stuck around long enough to find out the fire and explosions were deliberate."

"And then Rusty called me down to sign for a shipment of parts."

"You ran out." His arms tightened a little.

"I didn't."

"Bullshit."

Her eyes got tired and blurry so she closed them. She promised herself she'd get the details in the morning. Someone intentionally wanting to hurt—or kill one of them, had simply been too much to cope with after the fire, explosions, emergency room and dragging herself into work.

"Caila?"

"Yeah," she answered. Bone deep weariness made her body heavy and uncooperative. Why couldn't she ever face bad things on her terms or in her own timeframe?

"The trigger used to detonate the explosions was found in the warehouse, not far from the office."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop twenty degrees and gooseflesh came up on her arms. John noticed because he briskly started running his palm up and down its length. A shudder passed through her, and he pulled her closer. Accidents happened, they were part of life. Contemplating someone purposely trying to hurt one of them, made her temples pound.

"So, what do we do about it? How do we fight back?" In her existence, avoiding unpleasantness never seemed to be an option. She drew a big breath, held it and quietly let it out.

"That's the right attitude, honey." He relaxed, pulled her cheek to his chest before slowly rocking her. "We have to be

careful. Be aware of what's going on around us. Look for trouble when things seem fine."

She swallowed before nodding in understanding. "Is that why you stayed tonight?"

"Sure." He jerked against her as she felt the rumble of laughter vibrate his chest.

"What's so funny?"

"I guess I was looking for trouble."

"And you got it." She smiled.

He kissed the top of her head while cuddling her close. After clearing his throat, his voice lacked humor. "The police are coming back tomorrow morning at nine. They want a list of people who might try to hurt one of us."

"No one comes to mind." Clarifying, she said, "At least no one capable of placing bombs to go off at a particular instant."

"I started with the obvious on my list, and Cam thought you should do the same. I made a list of disgruntled employees from the last few years."

"All of them?"

He laughed outright then. "You have that many?"

"No, I guess not. Not really. But we've fired a few people."

"Cam said the same thing. Said he'd sit with you to get names together."

"It shouldn't take long. I have a database."

She pinched his arm lightly before he sucked in an exaggerated breath to control the jerking of his body in silent laughter. A little angry, she explained, "All the employee files are kept in a database. When someone leaves, they go into a

separate file. I can access it and print it out from two years ago until present."

"I've never met one before you, but I think I like a compulsive woman."

A yawn crept up and she tried to disguise it. The shiver after couldn't be controlled. He stood, supported her in a single arm, and he stripped back the covers on the bed. Placed off center, more against the wall, he crawled in beside her and brought the sheet and blanket up.

"John?"

"Shh, come close and keep me warm. You keep this place like a meat locker."

"What if," she began before he cut her off.

"I'll wake up at five no matter what time I go to bed."

"But Glen's still here."

"He left a few hours ago. It's after one in the morning."

"We're alone?"

"Unless Cam rolls in early."

"The phone."

As if on cue, she heard the office phone beep loudly, the sound coming from across the hall.

"I transferred it to the room I started off in." He sounded thoroughly disgusted.

He rolled out of bed, picked up the receiver and depressed the button next to the flashing light. "McKenna Trucking, Four Son's Towing, this is John." After a moment, he said, "Sure, no problem. I'll have a driver out in about forty minutes. Give me an address." A pause, and then, "Will it roll or do we need a flatbed?"

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

Tired, her eyes closed as faces of people appeared in her mind. Correct in his assumption, McKenna had more than their share of mistakes in hiring the wrong people despite how thoroughly she checked them out beforehand. She'd learned over time to ask better, open-ended questions during an interview. Maybe she'd have improved intuition in the future. She hoped so.

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Chapter Twelve

The hum of a hundred pissed off bumblebees filled the warehouse and mechanics bays. John looked at Alex who'd rolled the creeper out from under the one ton, a fresh spot of oil on his forehead. McKenna mechanics stopped short, dropped tools and headed at a dead run toward the loading dock. Galen had a big smile on his face as he laid down the torch, took the comb from his back pocket and swiped it through his hair before walking from the area.

John gestured toward the noise and gave Alex a hand up before they walked to where a crowd of workers gathered. The men formed a line at the back ramp, whooping and hollering at the noise outside. When he and Alex got a spot, he saw the twenty or so imported motorcycles lined up facing the dock.

Most of the helmets came off and various sizes and shapes of blondes, brunettes, redheads, along with some pink and green-haired young women straddled the bikes, looking up at the crowd.

When Liam came forward, the men settled down. He called out in an unfriendly voice, a smile on his face, "What's trash like you doing here again? I thought I told you girls this was no place to play."

A long-haired, big busted, long-legged brunette revved her bike, popped the front wheel and walked it up until the tire rested against the dock. "Liam," she said, smiling wickedly

with a dead-sexy drawl. "I heard you had a little accident. Can I kiss it and make it better?"

The men applauded. "Are you well enough to play today?" she asked, grasping the collar of her shirt, spreading it a little. Catcalls and whistles resounded, before, "Or will I have to settle for some girl-on-girl with that sweet, little sister of yours?"

She licked her lips while tossing her mane of thick brown hair over her shoulder. Liam scowled as long as he could before he broke down and laughed. "You shouldn't tease like that, Britney. You're one naughty little girl."

Her ass wiggled before she said, "Punish me, Liam. We'll see who winds up with something red and throbbing."

The men lost it, laughing and slapping each other until she spoke again. "Where's the brat anyway? It's not quarterly P&L, not payday for you lazy men, so hand her over."

"Go on now, shoo. I don't let Caila run with bad-ass little girls like you."

If he only knew, John thought. Noise shook the warehouse, the women gunning bikes, burning out and spinning in circles.

Caila pushed her way to Liam. When the brunette saw her, she backed her bike off the dock, and dropped the front tire. "Hello, Caila, been visiting with your yummy brother and his friends."

Caila rolled her eyes. "I heard."

"Got some new breeding stock, I see." Britney looked over at him and Alex and tilted her head in their direction. "Heard from my daddy you got into bed with Four Sons. Hmm, what I wouldn't give to get into bed with *four sons*."

"Oh, come on now, Brit, only four?" Caila replied.

She had the feeling the taunts could go on all day. The bike moved as she scooted around. A completely different, composed and all business Britney asked, "You up for a run?"

"I can't."

"Bullshit. Liam doesn't hold a grudge. Do you Liam?" She practically purred the words before, "Besides, we'll be good. No police, no drinking, just a run. No trouble this time, Liam. I promise." It appeared to personally cost her a lot to make the guarantee and John wondered why.

"I have to..."

"Why, Caila? You never want to play any more."

More laughter and catcalls resonated from the men. Liam grabbed Caila's shoulders, spun her around, gave her a hug and kissed her forehead. "Go."

"But..."

"Go."

"Liam."

"You heard the man, move your ass," Britney said.

Caila looked expectant for a moment before she squared her shoulders. "I've got work to do."

"Caila," Liam said, warning in his voice.

They'd all witnessed her discomfort with the police earlier in the day. Despite it though, she'd cooperated and appeared to listen intently to everything discussed. Maybe Liam thought she needed the break.

She looked around at the men. Those belonging to McKenna gave her yells of encouragement.

"Two hours," she said before jumping off the back of the dock.

Brooklyn gunned the bike. Caila hopped up behind her before it turned one hundred-eighty-degrees and raced to the building at the back of the lot. He watched Caila dismount and run into the large shed. Bikes cruised in circles, milling around before a door slid open and a bright yellow bike raced out, the rider wearing a black helmet.

The work shirt said *Caila*, but he prayed she wasn't the fool pulling the wheel the entire length of the back lot. As the front tire hit, her body moved forward, knees hugged the tank and she applied the break. The back wheel came up and she coasted on the front wheel executing a perfect "stoppie." When she couldn't hold it, the rear tire slammed the pavement and men cheered.

She popped the clutch and the bike stalled. Her smile could be seen even through the plastic face shield. John couldn't believe her crazy antics after the warning he'd issued the night before about taking chances. *Poor, poor Caila.*

Britney started down the long drive and the other women fell in line before stopping. Caila's face shield lifted and she looked at Liam. "Two hours."

Mannis came forward to stand beside Liam. Through a number of intricate gestures, John realized he told her something using sign language. She gestured back by touching her face, and then placing both hands over her heart. After blowing them a kiss, the shield slammed down. The sound of grumbling bumblebees faded as the last of them motored down the drive.

Slowly work resumed and Galen walked back with him and Alex to the mechanics bays. His shoulders still tense from her dangerous antics, John asked, "Does she actually know how to ride her little crotch-rocket or can she only handle one wheel at a time?"

"Cam rode motocross for a few years," Galen replied. "He's got an uncanny ability on a bike. He taught her and she got good. Won competitions, even has some trophies tucked away somewhere. For whatever reason, it was a popular thing to do with your daughter back then and she made some close friends."

"That group?"

"They're good kids."

"They aren't kids."

"They were once, and filled a hole we couldn't. Baby Girl grew up amidst a pack of older brothers. The little dears clued her into things a girl her age should know. Things we never thought about adding to her education."

"Like?" John prompted.

"Girl-to-woman issues. Liam handled most of that stuff with her, but some things aren't easy when the brother in question is in his late twenties, and the girl is in her baby teens. Get it?"

"Oh." Obviously her brothers replaced not only her mother but father too.

"They taught her other important stuff. None of us knew the cool shades of make-up to wear, what kind of underwear a girl should have, and our advice on boys was to never, ever go near any of the assholes. It worked, for a while."

"So her running around with *that* bunch was better?"

"It's when she liked being covered in grease better than playing with Barbie, could out-swear anyone in the shop, and started bumming chew off the men that we got worried. Poor, little thing, her teeth were nearly brown by the time we figured out her after school hours shouldn't be spent around here. I think Mannis still likes her the way she was before she got feminized."

"She's grown up now, too late to turn back."

Galen stared ahead, a look of longing or regret on his face. "Yep, got twenty-five tons of trucking company sitting on her shoulders, four brothers with significant others, and you throw some kids in there, I don't suppose she had time to do anything but grow up. She got through high school early and took off like a shot, cramming in a Master's Degree so she could put on the cement boots like the rest of us."

"The company's a burden?"

"Not for long." Seeming to pull himself from memory, he looked at John. "Actually, it's better now, I'd say. Having you here is payback for our bastard father, a kind of justice even though he doesn't know what happened. Besides, I think having Four Sons as a neighbor won't be all bad. You and Paul didn't hesitate to help Caila and Mannis. Your men stepped up quick too."

"I'd venture things will probably work out."

Before Galen went back to work, John thought of one other question. "What's with the sign language?"

Galen kicked at something non-existent on the floor before looking over at the truck he'd been working on. A hand ran

through his straight reddish hair, relaying his unease. John wished he wouldn't have asked.

"When Mannis was twenty-one, he got hurt. It left him deaf. They wouldn't do surgery right away, had to wait a while for things to heal and he kind of just...I mean he worked, but he stopped talking, you know, communicating. He ignored people, had a reason to shut everyone out. Everyone but Caila. Baby Girl explained the problem at school and got tutored in sign language. He hated it at first, but looking at her greasy little face, especially when she'd hold onto his cheeks with her filthy little fingers to ask him a question or tell him a secret, well, he learned. You know, *had* to learn."

"I can see it, Caila not wanting to be ignored."

"That's the story we tell people but it was her trying to help that made him learn. We're kind of jealous the way they talk. Being around it enough though, we all pretty much know what they say."

"Oh, yeah? What did he tell her?"

"The usual—that *baby girls can bleed and die. Don't*. She promised she wouldn't."

"Unusual thing to say."

"Not really. Not where we grew up."

Galen refocused and said, "Hey, time's money, and I'm working off a debt to this prick who saved two of my brothers and brat sister. Shake a leg, John, I have another truck waiting and that hunk of shit you call a computer is calling your name."

"Yeah, right. I remember now. We've got another one-ton wrecker waiting too, with some wheel bearings needing changed."

"Yeah? Piece of cake. Trade you for a short in the electrical system in a Peterbilt."

"With the new diagnostic equipment Alex bought, he should be able to trace it, face it and replace it."

"Done. I'll take wheel bearings any day. I hate electrical crap. Damn man for forging ahead and making a mess of simple, easily engineered, common sense stuff. Computers in vehicles...hell, they don't belong in anything with wheels."

"Amen." As an afterthought, he added, "Or in offices. Give me a good old fashioned ledger. Yeah, no glitches and, if your technology screws up and gets too old, you throw your pen in the garbage and keep going with a new one."

She'd managed to come through the woods and put the bike away before slinking carefully around the building, and up the private stairway to the kitchen. Well within her time frame of two hours, she didn't want to hear what her brothers would say about how she looked. She closed the back door, and moved slowly so no mud hit the floor. Barely getting two feet into the room, she heard a man clear his throat. *Busted. Damn.*

She kept her eyes straight ahead, afraid to look, but curiosity finally got the best of her. Out of the corner of her eye she spotted John, and her shoulders dropped in relief.

"You *do* know the difference between a dirt bike and a street bike?" he asked.

Indeed a difference, he probably questioned her knowledge because of the layer of mud covering her clothes. "Well, now that you mention it..."

"Are you okay, or did you roll around in the mud on purpose?" What was the strange undertone in his voice?

"I'm fine. You know that nice little thunder shower we got about an hour ago?"

"Yeah, I heard it rumble by."

"Well," she began slowly, because there was a distinct edge to his statement. "When the grass gets wet, the ground under it gets wet, and a lot of tires skidding across it makes—"

"What happened?"

Why the hell did she tiptoe around him? He wasn't one of her brothers. "Amy had point, didn't see the idiot until his passenger door almost hit her handlebar and she panicked. We weren't doing more than sixty, and before you know it, all of us went off-road. Not really a problem until Judy went down. One of the lead bikes going down creates a..."

"Domino effect. Did you get hurt?"

"I said I was fine."

"You don't look fine." His voice sounded reasonable again. It wasn't going too badly after all.

"I picked up spray from the bikes ahead of me." Pretty amazed at her luck, she couldn't keep the excitement from her voice. "I didn't go down, missed the other bikes and all the arms and legs in front of me. I was fine until I swerved one last time and took a swim in a pond beside the interstate."

"How's your bike?"

"It stayed put, wedged itself in real tight to the bank. The traitor piece of crap stuck, stopped, and threw me over the handlebars. Not a scratch on it."

"The rest of the gang?"

"No blood or broken bones, and every bike fired in the first few kicks."

"You got lucky."

Now *that* hadn't come out very nice. Finally turning to face him, she saw a noticeably unhappy man. "So if you'll excuse me, I'll get cleaned up and get back to work."

"Not so fast, honey."

When she batted her eyes for an innocent, hurt little girl effect to ward off his not-so-nice sounding words, she started laughing when clumped mud stuck her eyelashes together. That routine never worked in the past. Whatever made her think it would work on John?

The mud flaked away as she rubbed her eyes, and when she could open them again, he stood in front of her. His hand caressed her dirty face. "That mud can't feel good in your eyes."

"It stings."

"Your back and legs?"

"Itch."

"I'll give you fifteen minutes before I sneak in and rub some salve on you."

She swallowed, remembering the *rubbing* she'd gotten last night. Probably the last thing on his mind with her looking like a swamp monster, he smiled and said, "Not too much chance

of repeating last night's performance. The building's filled with relatives and workers."

"No, we shouldn't."

"Go on, get cleaned up."

Wow, she could get used to his acceptance of little mishaps that'd have her brothers scowling, lecturing and growling for hours even though it wasn't her fault. John viewed her differently, apparently as an adult. After what happened between them, obviously as a woman.

Not bothering to take the clothes off first, she got into the shower and rinsed until the water ran clean before stripping and washing herself. She was wrapped in a towel, and right on cue, John came in and took care of her back and the backs of her legs. He brought the eye drops with him too, and she felt immediate relief. After thanking him, he said, "I'll be back in a while."

"Do you have a tow?"

"No."

"They need you in the service bays?"

"No," he said, resting against the vanity and crossing his arms. "I'll go have a look at your bike."

"It's just muddy. I'll get it cleaned up."

All of a sudden, he didn't have a very pleasant expression on his face. "Take your time getting out there because you won't be riding for a while."

"Pardon?"

"Remember our talk last night?" *Uh, oh, the accusatory tone of voice. Not good.*

"Every word."

"You didn't think standing that damn bike on its front wheel might make me a little concerned?"

"No!"

"And how about you sneaking back here to avoid your brothers because you looked like you'd been in a twenty-bike pile up?"

"They worry," she said, his points hitting home. "But they get worried over nothing. You're smarter than that."

"Apparently not. Did you listen to what the police said this morning?"

"I wasn't alone, knew my surroundings and it was broad daylight. It's not like I took a walk through a deserted warehouse, or left here at one in the morning with no one around. I'll lock the office door and recheck everything now."

"Did you go over your bike inch by inch? Were you sure someone didn't mess with it prior to your little joy ride?"

Honesty, the best policy, my ass. Still, he made a point and she didn't like lying. "No." She brought her hands up to her face and rubbed, concentrating on the temples. She'd never be able to routinely think in those terms.

"Caila," he said, placing a hand at the back of her head, bringing her forward to lean against him. The pain in her shoulders dissipated as he rubbed. He cleared his throat and finished what he'd started to say. "It probably wouldn't do me any good to disable it. If you couldn't fix it, you'd just get one of the guys to do it."

"No, you made your point. I usually listen to reason."

"I won't touch your bike then."

She sighed. "I don't ride often anyhow." Her tone disgusting, pouting and full of self-pity, she felt immediately ashamed. He kissed the top of her wet head and rested his chin there.

"Not too much time for fun, huh?"

"Sure there is."

"How often do you go out?"

"More than my brothers ever did."

"Oh, yeah, how often?"

"Whenever I want."

"How about tomorrow?"

"You think I should go out tomorrow?"

"With me. It's Saturday, we could probably wrangle some brothers to babysit the phones for a few hours."

"Wouldn't they wonder about both of us being gone?"

"Would it matter?"

"I thought you wanted to keep things low profile. Didn't think you'd want them to know."

His laugh felt good, coming through his chest into her cheek. "Why don't we worry about them later? I'll be here about nine. Will you be ready?"

"No problem. Where're we going?"

"You sure you're all right, not sore from the last few days?"

"Positive."

"Galen said you have trails out back."

Heart pounding suddenly, she tried to keep the excitement from her voice. "Yep, acres and acres of them."

"He also said you could handle a dirt bike." He appeared somewhat amused and slightly skeptical. No wonder with how she returned from her ride.

"I traded the dirt bike as down payment for the street bike."

"No problem, I'll trailer over two of mine. Do you want to ride with me? I know you're a pro, with trophies to prove it, but could you throttle down so an old man could keep up?"

Hugging him, really liking him at the moment because he wasn't angry any more and he'd indulge a favorite pastime, she couldn't be happier. "You're the best, John."

"You really want to go?"

"I'm drooling."

"You're not disappointed I didn't offer a nice dinner, maybe a concert or movie?"

"I love riding."

"Then we'll go riding. We'll leave the other stuff for this winter if the snowmobiles break, or maybe for when we get older."

"You think we'll be together that long?"

"I'll always be around, right next door as a matter of fact. Closer if you'll let me."

"Keep dangling combustion toys in front of me and I'm there. Actually, I'd probably stay without them. You're pretty handsome."

"Looks don't count for much. I've been told I'm a bastard."

"Whoever told you that didn't know you." And she hadn't at the time. It amazed her how a few weeks could change a perception.

"And now you do and feel different?"

"Something like that. Besides, you'll probably get sick of the whole tomboy thing and finally look at Theresa. She's beautiful in a womanly way."

"Been around her type before, they're all fluff with no substance. A major life event would consist of reaching the limit on her platinum master card, which would have her in therapy for months. You? You're homeless, have no car, work sixteen hours a day, get arrested, get blown up, and you're still happy. By the way, you're dead sexy when you get blown up. Hot too."

She slapped his side playfully and he asked, "What the hell was that for?"

"The homeless remark. Who do you know that has a twenty-thousand square foot castle situated on two hundred acres?"

With that, he picked her up at the waist and kissed her until she wanted more. She was wet, warm and happy. It'd been a long time since she'd felt like that. Hours, in fact.

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Chapter Thirteen

Anxious to see Caila, John pulled into the lot around nine in the morning. He planned on finishing up the accounts payable before they'd head out for a few hours of romping. Workers were greeted on his way through the warehouse, and he took the stairs two at a time. He couldn't get Caila off his mind or out of his dreams, and was sick of questioning the attraction. He fully anticipated simply enjoying her company for a few hours while they blew off some steam.

Inside the reception area, he looked through the open doorway and stopped cold. Her back faced him so she hadn't seen him arrive. One of her hands rested on the arm of a young stud. He became rooted in place as he listened to the conversation.

"I didn't mean to get caught, Caila. Please, take it easy on me. You know how important this is."

"Sweetie, it's not about you getting nailed, it's about you knowing better and doing it anyhow."

Sweetie! John's shoulders tensed.

"It won't happen again."

"It can't."

"Come on," he said, grabbing her arms. "Look the other way. I promise I'll behave now."

"That's what you said the last time, and look what happened."

"God, Caila, what are we going to do about the baby?"

He'd heard enough and took a step before the tall, lanky, eyebrow pierced, green-eyed *boy* hugged her. And she hugged him back. Another man might've left them alone to talk. Not him, not then. He walked casually into the office before Caila turned and saw him. He expected all sorts of things except what happened next. With her cheek resting on *sweetie's* chest, she said, "Good morning, John."

"Morning," he said almost grumbling.

As he stared, she ended the embrace and kept her hand on the young man's arm. He glared at that hand. "John, this is Dale Stonegate."

Dale extended his hand and he accepted it for a nice, overly firm handshake. Dale winced and said, "Stoner's my nickname, I hardly answer to Dale."

"Well, Dale," John said, "what brings you here so early on a Saturday?"

"Dale drives for us," Caila replied for him with her hand still on his arm.

Before she could get out another word, he felt inclined to make a comment. "That's probably why you're so familiar with him."

If her hand didn't move off the kid's arm, John's next statement would be more direct. She gave him a questioning look, but nothing changed.

"Dale picked up a ticket last night and he's done, can't drive until December when points fall off his license." Turning to Dale, she said, "The insurance won't cover you, and you aren't going out in a McKenna truck uninsured."

When she released Dale, John let out a breath and opened his fists as he leaned on the corner of his desk. Her expression told volumes about how tough it'd been for her to give the kid the news.

Dale's shoulders slumped before he smiled somewhat sickly. "Hey, you've been great. I'll figure something out."

Before he left, Caila's hand went right back to his arm, stopping him. "Look, Wendy's due in what, a month? We can keep you on payroll and keep the insurance going, but you'd have to go back to dispatching. Nights."

"Holy shit, you're an angel," he said before scooping her up and twirling her around. Back on her feet and embracing her in a bear hug, he asked, "When do I start?"

"Tonight. You're back at your old wages though; no mileage, no nothing but straight hourly. You'll have to learn the towing side of it too. Another man named Larry will train you on everything involved with dispatching tows. In turn, you'll train Larry on night call for McKenna. We'll work you in tandem tonight and tomorrow, and then you guys divide the days so we're covered from eight at night until seven in the morning."

"Overtime?"

"Sure, if you need it, but you're not working a bazillion hours a week to make up the money difference. If they need you on the docks, you can pick up dock wages to supplement."

"Can I still take off when the munchkin's born?"

"Yes."

"And when they come home from the hospital?"

"Sure."

"Will my vacation transfer with me?"

"Yep, you've been saving for this. It's the same company, just a different job."

He held her face in his hands and gave her a kiss. When he stepped away, she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. "Oh, yuck, gross! What the hell's gotten into you?"

"I was done, you know, stick-a-fork-in-me done, and you plucked my cute little ass right out of the fire. Wait until I tell Britney how bad she sucks as a sister, and how much you rule!"

On his way out, Caila said, "No trouble around here at night, little man, or your ass *will* roast."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you'll be so damn respectful to Larry, he'll think you're still an altar boy serving at Sunday morning mass."

"He'll call me St. Stoner, I promise."

The wooden stairs took a beating as Dale pounded down them before running through the warehouse. When she faced him, she was still smiling. His temper calmed as he filled in the blanks.

"Britney's brother?"

"Yep, the outcast of their family. He had a rough adolescence."

"And you took on the challenge."

"Their parents didn't put up with too much foolishness. When he was arrested for drugs at seventeen, they threw him out."

"Could they legally do that?"

"Not really, but it didn't change his lack of housing. Mannis was living alone at the time. Well, mostly alone. He took Dale in. He domesticated him in a hurry and made me train him in the office while they worked on his CDL. Liam, Cameron and Mannis taught him to drive and he got good. But for all intents and purposes, he's still a kid. He's never reckless, just pushes the speed limit."

"And didn't slow down even with a pregnant girlfriend?"

"Wife. They've been married for two years. You met Mannis' wife, Barb. Wendy is Barb's younger sister."

"How old is that kid?"

"Twenty-two."

"And he's married with a baby on the way."

"Yep."

"Seems like a lot of pressure for a puppy."

"He *is* like a puppy, bouncy, happy-go-lucky and even after he's slapped, he comes right back for more. He's crazy about Wendy and she gives him the one thing he's never had."

"What's that?"

"Unconditional love. No matter what he does, she tells him it's all right and they'll get through it. He's grown a lot since they got together. He's the little brother I never wanted."

"What about Britney?"

"She's a great friend, a lot of fun, but she holds a grudge. When the rest of her family turned their back on him, she did too."

"I'm surprised."

"She can't do anything wrong. Dale couldn't do anything right."

"What about you, Caila? I know you had a falling out with your father, but before that, did you get his attention?"

She went to her chair and sat down. She'd been smiling a moment ago. Now she appeared sad. "Sure, I got attention," she said, before her face lit back up. "Did you bring the bikes?"

He went along with the subject change to keep the light in her eyes. "I said I would."

"I asked Galen if he'd watch the phones. Did you ask one of your brothers?"

"David agreed."

"It's supposed to be a great day, lots of sun, but the trails might be damp from yesterday. You don't mind your bikes getting muddy?"

"Nope."

"*You* don't mind getting muddy?"

"No."

"Have I told you lately how cool you are?"

"Not today."

She started to get up, and he bet it was to come over and show him just how cool she thought he was...until Liam came in. "Paul said something about you two going riding."

"Yeah," John replied. "My ass is getting fat sitting behind this desk all the time."

Liam grinned. "This isn't a date, is it?"

She opened her mouth and John answered for her. "As a matter of fact, it is. I plan to impress your sister with some of my toys."

"Oh, yeah? And what if she's not impressed?"

"I'll get better toys. She's worth impressing."

"Yeah, she is," he said, walking toward the back before stopping. "You do realize she has four brothers."

"I noticed."

Liam stood with his back to them. "You also realize there's only one of her and she's irreplaceable."

"Liam," she started to say.

"No, Baby Girl, let him talk," Liam said.

"If she ever complains, I'll expect a visit."

Liam glanced over his shoulder. "Then I'll tell you to have fun on your date. You're a first, John. Lots of others got to the 'talk' and decided they weren't so sure about how they'd treat Caila. I'm glad you understand what's expected."

She leaned back in the chair, her mouth agape. Liam walked down the hall and Caila said, "That was incredibly rude."

"I expect to hear similar words at least three more times. Don't worry, honey, they won't chase me off."

"You're not upset?"

"I knew you came with baggage, expected something like this."

"And you still want to go?"

"Sure."

"You're not afraid of them?"

"No. As a matter of fact, I think we all have something in common. If I ever see anyone handling you like *sweetie* did earlier, and you aren't comfortable with it, your brothers would have to stand in line to get a turn."

"Wait a minute."

"Change your mind? Think about it before you answer, because with every yes you give, it invites me a little closer, to feel a little more. I'm a lot like your brothers; I tend to be a little over-protective with what's mine."

He watched her swallow as she mulled his words over. Only fair to let her know up front, it'd be best if she stopped things before they got too involved. If she wanted a man who didn't give two shits about her physically and emotionally, he wasn't a candidate. After all, he wasn't a light switch that could flip emotions and better judgment on and off. Once he cared for someone, for better or worse, he took it seriously.

"We're just going riding, right?"

"As soon as I get some work done."

Smiling, she said, "Then get to work. Hurry."

"Remind me to thank Cam again for letting me use his gear. Some of the brush we went through would've torn the hide off a rhino," John said.

He stripped the riding pants off and laid them on the grass to dry. He'd not only kept up with her, Caila witnessed how skilled he was on a bike. "You thought the trails would be easier to spot. They are if you've been over them, but if you don't ride often in the summer, they get buried in vegetation."

He unzipped the jacket and laid it out next to Cameron's pants. Water bunched up to ripple across the dark surface of the lake. Life turned simple and carefree every time she went there. No air brakes, no whining diesels, no overhead intercom or forklifts.

"Beautiful place," he said.

"In two weeks it'll be transformed into a huge picnic, barbecue, sports arena with live music, beer and everything else a trucker and his family could want for a day. By the way, did Liam talk to you about having your workers join us?"

"We discussed it. As a matter of fact, my guys got wind of the party from your guys, and they've been hounding me about it. How much time do I need to dedicate to make it happen?"

"No time, just money. Lots of money."

"How much cash do you need?"

"I'll figure it out."

"Are you short on your end?"

"No."

"Even with all the wheeling and dealing you did to settle up with me?"

"I have it covered."

"Would you tell me if you needed help?"

"Nope. I have some clothes I could sell."

Her feet came off the ground as he held her tightly. His forehead resting against hers, he said, "Don't joke about it." His expression a little too serious after the wonderful ride and sun shining down on them, she attempted to lighten his mood.

"Really, like anyone would stand in line to buy used work boots and work shirts."

The pressure at her waist increased until she laughed and promised she'd stop joking. He sat down and brought her with him, forcing her into his lap before winding his arms around her.

"So you'll take care of all the details?"

"I've been doing it for years. I'll double the food, quadruple the beer and pray. We have security and designated non-drinkers to help manage the few that get out of hand. Oh, and we all work the event, you know, serve those who serve us. So if you and your brothers wanted to pitch in, we could use the help."

"You'll have us at your beck and call."

"It's usually a lot of fun, don't look so miserable."

"Sounds like winching a tractor-trailer out of a bog would be easier."

"I have set-up people and clean-up people. Pretty much all the hard stuff is taken care of. Because you let me use your bike today, I'll make sure you get an easy job, like lifeguard."

"Are you kidding?"

"No, look across the lake. See the chair?"

"Yep."

"I might give you that job anyhow just to see you without a shirt or pants."

"What'll you be doing?"

"Kiddie-care. It's my annual thing. I get the tots from age one to whatever. We put on a show before the sun goes down. It's awe inspiring, spectacular and totally riveting. Really, don't laugh until you see it. I'm a genius choreographer and the little ones dance their hearts out."

"For you, I bet they would. So what happens if it rains?"

"It won't."

"Honey, we live in Ohio."

"It won't rain. It hasn't in ten years, it won't this year. Besides, almost everyone's in a bathing suit. If they get wet, so what?"

"Okay, it won't rain. It wouldn't dare."

"You're getting it now. Wait, are you laughing *at* me or *with* me?"

"I'm not laughing."

She leaned back and saw his smile. "You *were* laughing."

He looked at her, his gaze moving over her face. "You have dimples."

She smiled and went along with his sudden realization. "They're laugh lines because I'm so happy all the time." His lips pressed tight, his stomach and chest moved as he held in laughter. She asked, "Could I taste it?"

"It?"

"Your smile."

"You can taste anything you want, whenever you want." The humor left his expression as his eyelids came down into a sexy lilt.

She moved closer and his mouth slowly opened. While watching his lips, she decided how she'd do it. Absently, her tongue ran across her bottom lip in anticipation.

"I thought you wanted to taste me."

"I'm doing a comparison. First me," she said, licked her bottom lip. "Then you."

The tip of her tongue traced his mouth carefully. When he moaned, the vibration tickled her lips.

"Do it again, Caila. Tease me with your mouth."

The gentle play turned quickly and soon, they were sighing into each other's mouths with tongues sweeping back and forth for languid loving. Addicted to his kisses, her muscles tightened as something deep inside let go and opened. *Now, hurry, again, John.*

His agenda obviously different from hers, he slowed them by lessening the pressure and urgency until they savored each other with an unhurried touching of lips. The scent of greeneries warming in the sun surrounded them. Lush summer leaves slapped together in the trees above to create a melodic sort of applause as a warm breeze swept over the land. The perfect day in a perfect place, she believed then, she was with the perfect man.

Her boots already removed from when she took off the outer pants, his hands caressed her legs until he reached under a pant leg and pulled off a sock. Her foot being rubbed felt strange at first, but after a moment she enjoyed it. Laid out in the tall grass close to the tree line, a lazy sort of peacefulness replaced the urgency from a moment prior.

Engrained somewhere deep in her belief system, when pleasurable opportunities presented themselves, she'd grab hold and ride it out, greedily getting everything she could into the time she had. Apparently, John liked a more leisurely pace. She could behave and let him play for a while. She wasn't totally without willpower or self control.

The other sock came off and John pampered and massaged that foot as well. When the ball of his thumb worked her instep, muscles loosened the entire length of her

leg. She wondered if other men bothered taking the time to know a woman's foot.

Rubbed down and kneaded into a puddle of blissful contentment, she opened her eyes some time later to find him hovering, hands and fingers working up her thighs. Skillful caresses bestowed with a lighter touch were clearly not meant to relax tired muscle.

Her shirt inched up, taking the camisole with it as his hands stole over her abdomen, stomach, and sides. When his fingertips barely dipped under the attached bra, her back arched so he'd touch more. He did, by softly cupping her breasts over the cloth.

She moaned in reaction and squirmed, wanting more pressure. *The hell with self control.* It'd come later when his touch wasn't so new, when his hands didn't feel so good, or perhaps even when she'd grown accustomed to having him close.

His thumbs moved slowly over her nipples and they grew hard in the confines of cloth. She didn't think she could stand it, and then she hoped she wouldn't have to. Long fingers sunk into the front of her waistband and wiggled slightly to stroke her abdomen.

"May I?" he asked.

"Have my pants?"

"Yeah," he said, looking distracted.

"All right."

The closure came undone and he loosened her jeans, taking them down before sweeping them away. "God, you look good in black."

The fine trembling in his fingers transcended as he touched the scrap of cloth. No matter how much her mind pleaded, it appeared he'd take his own sweet time. Didn't he realize there'd be occasions for slow touching and discovery later?

Work roughened fingers ran along the thin elastic at her hips before he pushed her onto her side. His fingertips traced the string until his hand flattened against the patch of lace at the small of her back.

"Honey?"

"Mmm?" She moved so that his hand came more fully in contact with her lower back.

His breathing sounded a little rough. "All that riding took its toll on your poor skimpy underwear."

"Yeah, well," she said, trying to control the breathy rush of words. "I usually wear a thong when I ride. You know, just put it where it'll wind up anyway."

"We'll be riding a lot before the end of summer, I promise."

He traced the scrap of material down until his fingers nestled gently between her legs. *Finally. Oh, God!*

"I've never kissed a bad-ass," he said.

"Only good ones?"

"Not many at all, but I have the strangest urge."

His lips brushing and tongue sampling *BAD* had her wiggling. When he used his teeth, she flattened out on her belly and pushed against him so he had a good angle from which to taste. The man certainly had endurance, tormenting until she groaned.

Suddenly rolled onto her back, he began unbuttoning her shirt. "I don't think much could compare to what I found under the jeans, but we'll have to make sure," he said as the buttons flew open. "Jesus, I was wrong, dead wrong. Where do you find this stuff?"

"It's just a camisole."

The lace covering her breasts was caressed and then kissed as he slid the straps down her arms. "John?"

"Mmm," he replied, paying attention to everything uncovered.

Her hips shifted as her stomach tensed up. Conflicting emotions surged and she couldn't decide which she wanted more—to be ravished or to be the one ravishing. She concluded either would work.

"Let me touch you, get you as excited as I am," she said.

He kept kissing her, licking as his hands worked his shirt open. When it came off, he discarded it before shifting to undo his jeans. The mere sight of him practically guaranteed he wouldn't be getting slow, soothing strokes over his muscled body if he gave into her request.

"Touch me later. Let me finish what I started. Do you want that, Caila?"

"Yes."

"Let me see. Wiggle out of that scrap of underwear and open your legs for me."

She did and his hand came down, a long, thick finger filling her. She closed around the sweet and slow penetration and took what she'd been prepared for. Incessantly moaning, rotating her hips, he found a magical spot that brought her

instantly to the aching edge of release. She wanted and needed to climax, and offered a silent plea by lifting her hips.

"You're so wet. Will you move like that when I push more than a finger inside?"

"Find out, John. Now."

Her stomach knotted in anticipation as he settled between her legs. But instead of taking her, a hand pushed under her back before drawing her up. Held there, her back arched, his mouth began loving her breasts. Utterly devoured, a dawning came and her heart skipped a beat. He appeared bent on savoring as much as he could, as if it would be their last time.

Her tolerance increased as she let him leisurely taste, nip, and play. She too wanted to experience as much as she could in the event her handsome lover grew bored with his current fascination.

His meandering lips left a moist trail up her neck. Gently biting and sucking on flesh below her ear, the rush of his breath filled her as he roughly impaled her with his swollen, straining length.

Dizzy, aroused and aching, she stretched beneath him before wrapping her legs around his waist. The small, resonate whimpers of pleasure coming from her throat, sounded odd. Guttural male calls answered, relaying lust and hunger.

Her lips were tenderly nipped. "That's it, Caila, show me what you want. I can make love to you like this all day, or give you a good, hard ride."

"It is," she said, trying to concentrate. "Good. Hard. Yes. Ahh, ahh...John."

The climax built as her hips jumped and bucked. She bore down on him, loving the deep mounting, needing him to be as out of control as she felt. He obliged as his jaw clenched, and bluish veins on the side of his neck distended.

Then it happened. Freedom, release under the mid-morning sun, surrounded by the hushed sounds of gentle breezes disturbing foliage. Incredibly, perfectly, roughly, he extracted and prolonged each ring of climax until it seemed too much.

She was spent and overcome with exhaustion, and he didn't seem to understand or care at the moment. He grasped her hips, sank deeply into her and rolled to his back. Fatigue bled away, replaced by the need to once again experience the mindless release atop her lover.

Pierced and deeply penetrated, each labored breath she drew made her shift slightly, which caused stimulation. Her hips were grasped tightly before he showed her what he wanted.

Encouraged to move forward and back, she then wanted it too.

"God, I'm so close. Ride me as you come," he begged.

She cried out in excitement as they reached the pinnacle together, and spiraled in a place only lovers could go. Their bodies joined and straining, with his desire pouring into her, couldn't have been more beautiful.

Many minutes later, when she could control her legs, she shifted and tried to slide to his side. His breath came out in a hiss as muscles bunched in his stomach. After pulling her close, his large, warm hands stretched her out next to him.

He settled over her once again and his body became a living, flesh covered blanket.

She touched the side of his face, taking dark strands of perspiration-damp hair before smoothing them behind an ear. She expected to see the tough and proud expression he so often wore.

He'd every reason to sport it after what just happened between them. Instead, she detected something unusual—something out of character.

He looked vulnerable.

In that instant, she knew what she felt wasn't the aftermath of tremendous sex. Saddened by the realization she probably loved him, knowing his infatuation with her work boots and dirty face would fade, her vision blurred with all the extra moisture in her eyes.

"What's wrong?" he asked, touching her lips with a roughened fingertip.

"Nothing."

"You look close to tears."

"I don't cry."

"Not ever?" he asked, a teasing quality to his voice.

"Not much."

"Adrenaline rush. Isn't that what you told me once?"

"Probably."

"I can fix it."

"Oh, yeah? How?"

"By putting your underwear back up the crack of your butt, dressing you, and beating you through the mud back to the shop. Or..."

"Or?"

"I could start all over," he said before kissing her, "and make you come again. They say making love causes and cures adrenaline problems."

"Who said that?"

"I did. I'm having a problem too. Can't decide what to do about it."

"Terrible problem," she said, feeling more in control.

He stared at her before bringing his lips down to lick a nipple. "Touch yourself, Caila. Offer me your breast."

Hesitantly, she complied. He moved against her to suckle her tender flesh while rough, eager sounds caused his lips to vibrate against her nipple. First one breast and then the other were sampled.

"Would you mind?" he asked. His lips came to her chin before running along her jaw.

"Hmm?"

"If we didn't go back, stayed right here for a while so I could love you again?"

"Is that what you'd be doing?"

"This time, yes," he said. The vulnerability she detected early was then relayed in his voice. "Would you let me?"

The blasted tears came back and she nodded. The difference between hot sex and him *loving* her was so profound, when they dressed more than an hour later; she knew she'd never mistake the two again.

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Chapter Fourteen

John never minded over the road work. In fact, occasionally having to travel distances to an accident, or tow a rig a few states away, offered a welcome break in the monotony. Paul snoring in the passenger seat grated on John's raw nerves. After clearing a wreck on the Ohio-Pennsylvania border, the last fifty miles of the trip felt like an eternity.

Home. He'd wanted Caila to go home with him after they'd spent time at the lake. He'd no sooner casually broached the subject, when the call for help came in. She probably would've turned him down anyhow. He'd been insatiable that afternoon, and took advantage of her tight, willing little body. Women had limits with such things, and he'd most likely surpassed hers.

Close to his woman again, the tension in his neck lessened. *His woman.* A thirty hour separation, no sleep, combined with a mixture of fast food and strong coffee had his mind jumbled. The last thing he needed was to be thinking about Caila as more than an extremely desirable, emotionally giving, arousing female.

Monday mornings for both companies were generally busy. He expected some trucks cluttering the yard when he pulled in. What he saw in the parking lot brought him fully awake. He spun the wheel, drove off the concrete and slid to a stop in the dewy grass before shutting down the rig. He threw the

door open and leapt from the cab, running toward the building.

The first person he encountered was Galen. John grabbed his arm and Galen stopped short, whipping in his direction.

"What happened?" John asked.

"Baby Girl. Cam." His eyes darted wildly at the warehouse and all the vehicles in the lot.

"What about them?"

It couldn't be anything too bad despite the police cars. Smoke and wreckage distinctly lacking, John tried to slow frantic thoughts. The lack of color in Galen's face and his hands drawn into fists, told their own story.

"They're missing. Gone. Been looking but can't find them."

"Wait, slow down. I talked to Caila last night and everything was fine."

"When? What time?"

"Eleven. She said she was tired and going to bed."

The information appeared to take a long time before penetrating. John gave him a moment before he asked, "She's not inside?"

"No."

"She run an errand?"

"No."

"One of your houses? Did she go see one of your wives?"

"Checked."

"What about a note?"

"God damn it," Galen seethed, "there's nothing. Her bed's a mess like she slept for a while, and now she's not there."

A dose of anger slipped from John as well. "Then she left without a note! What the hell is wrong with you!"

Both their tempers on a short fuse, he expected Galen to bring the intensity up a notch with a heated reply. Instead, he looked him in the eye, and said quietly, "Her boots, keys, driver's license, money, credit cards are in her room. She's not. Larry and Dale were both here last night. She didn't go past them."

He imagined at the moment his faced looked as bloodless and drawn as Galen's. Grown women didn't just disappear from their beds. Not in the middle of a damn warehouse with two men virtually outside her bedroom door.

"What about Cam?" John asked.

"Gone too." He pointed at Cameron's rig turned sideways in the loading zone, the door open. "Liam found it like that. The truck was still running. His shit's inside like he set the brake and jumped out in a hell of a hurry."

John's gut clenched. "He'd leave his truck like that if Caila needed him."

"Mannis thought the same thing, figured Baby Girl got hurt or something. He called the local ER's and then Liam called the cops. Been searching ever since. Turned the whole place inside out and they're not here. They're..."

At some point during the conversation, Paul came to stand beside him. Paul threw his opinion in. "Then we look places you haven't. Did you check the empty trailers out back? All the sleepers on the rigs?"

An expression of hope came to Galen. The three of them began walking toward the back lot. Paul said, "And not that

it's any of my business, but her taking up residence here is a dumbass idea."

John wondered if he'd need to physically separate them. Paul tended to state the obvious. Galen wasn't in the mood.

"No, Paul, it's none of your business."

"If she was my sister," Paul began before Galen stopped, came to stand directly in front of him, nose-to-nose.

"She's not. She feels safe here, we all do. At least we used to."

Paul tensed, then released a breath and let his shoulders drop. "Sorry. Let's check the trucks."

They searched every square foot inside and under the tractors and trailers. Caila and Cam didn't miraculously appear. Anger and dread took turns twisting John's insides. Men grew quiet as the hunt continued.

An hour passed before John called in a favor. Maybe the best damn cop on the force could think of something others missed. When his friend arrived, he and Liam brought him up to speed on the situation.

He and Officer William Reid shared years of wrestling, kickboxing and football through high school. They'd remained close after graduation. Knowing and trusting him didn't make listening to what he had to say a damn bit easier.

"Liam," Bill said, "I hear you and I'm taking it serious. If you've searched here, the best we can do is get some people together to search the woods."

"I'll cover it," Liam said. "I can get enough people who know the area to make it quick work. Then what excuse will

you come up with?" To John he said, "We could call in off-shifts and get workers searching the streets."

He understood Liam's need to act and do something. His inclination was similar but things just didn't make sense. Fists jammed into the pockets of his jeans, he talked out loud, recounting facts so he could get it straight. "Caila went to bed around midnight. According to the scan time from the keypad, Cam didn't roll through the gate until three in the morning. Dale and Larry both had a view on the camera, and we've been over the stuff recorded. No one else came in the main entrance and their vehicles are both still here."

In the hours since their disappearance, one of them would've called. After someone blowing up the company garbage, John made a mental leap to a possible scenario. After the assumption surfaced and took root, he verbally reasoned it out. "It'd take at least two big men to handle Cam. If they were taken to the woods, the motion lights at the border of the lot would've been tripped. They weren't."

Liam rubbed his forehead and then knuckled his bloodshot eyes. He looked like hell. He imagined they all looked like hell.

"Liam," Bill said, "Cameron's truck was running when you found it?"

"Yeah."

"Does he have a separate set of keys for the warehouse?"

"No. He generally drives the same rig. He has one key ring. The keys to his car and house are on it too. Why?"

"So he rolled in late and left the keys in the truck. I wonder if he ever got into the building. Is the keypad to the door wired into your security system?"

"Damn, I didn't think about it. Yeah, if he used the code to get in, it'd be recorded."

"Let's see if he actually got inside."

"Would it change anything? I mean, does it really matter?"

"We all have a mental picture about what happened. It's human nature to fill in the blanks. With every piece of information we add to the picture, it changes. Let's get as many facts as we can. Maybe something will click and make sense."

John stood in the middle of the warehouse when Liam and Bill went to the office. In his mind, it didn't matter if Cam got inside or not. Something bad happened to Caila and another one of her damn brothers. His mind conjured up ten hair-brained, half-witted, life threatening situations Caila might rush headlong into.

Someone should've shaken some sense into her years ago. Anger made him visualize it, and his arms grew tense. His thoughts spun in a different direction. He pictured someone forcibly taking her. *If anyone so much as touches a sleeve on her work shirt, I'll rip the asshole apart.*

He needed space and a few minutes to calm down. His patience and common sense were slow while his temper ran hot and fast. When he passed the mechanic bays, he glanced inside. Galen leaned into a motor compartment supported by his elbows, his forehead resting in his hands.

After throwing open a bay door on the loading dock, John walked down to stand on the concrete lip next to the stairs. Mannis was already there. John took in a deep breath and slumped against the wall. The cigarette Mannis smoked looked appealing.

"You have any more?" John asked.

Mannis reached into his shirt pocket, got the pack, flicked his wrist, and John took one.

"Light?"

He brought out the lighter, stroked the wheel and held the flame for him. A bad habit given up years before, a decade in fact, tasted better than he remembered.

"Didn't know you smoked," Mannis said in a low, monotone voice.

"I don't."

"Neither do I."

The smoke rolled away and a wave of dizziness descended like a balm. Caila's image crept up and he forced it down. It wouldn't do anyone any good if he came unglued. Her brothers were missing two siblings, and *they* managed.

"She's smart, you know."

"Mmm," John replied, taking another drag before inhaling deeper this time.

"And strong."

"Yeah."

"If Cam's with her, they'd make a hell of a pair. You know what I mean—if someone tried taking them where they didn't want to go." They all seemed to be drawing the same conclusions.

"We'll find them."

"In one piece."

"Two actually."

Mannis jerked his head to the side, and glared. After a moment, he grinned. "Yeah, two."

John spent a few minutes trying not to think about Caila. He couldn't manage it. When he finished the cigarette and threw it beyond the railing, Mannis pulled the pack out and offered another. Taking it, John said, "Disgusting habit."

"Yeah, glad I quit."

"Me too."

They both took long drags.

"She's a good kid," Mannis said.

"I don't suppose I see her that way. I don't suppose you see her any other way."

"Sometimes I do." He drew on the cigarette, and on the exhale, added, "Mostly when I catch you looking at her."

Silence followed as he contemplated the statement.

"Pretty obvious, huh?" John finally asked.

"Yep. Are you serious about her?"

He didn't know how to answer because he couldn't sort through everything he felt to give *himself* an answer.

Mannis said, "You were popular with the girls back in school. I heard it stayed that way even after."

"Well, that's what you get from listening to rumors. Bullshit."

"You don't have women lined up?"

"You outgrow some things. You get smarter, get particular about what you invest in and make sure it doesn't bleed you dry."

"So, variety doesn't have advantages."

"Not when you hit twenty-five. Variety just means trading one problem for another until you can't take another problem. Now, I stick with what I know."

"And what's that?"

"Work, family, money."

"Where does Baby Girl fit in?"

"Somewhere." He stood silently, mulling over what category she belonged in.

"What the hell is that banging?" John asked, hearing it a second time.

They scanned the lot. No one close enough to account for the noise, he flicked the cigarette to the ground and walked down the stairs. Mannis followed as he walked and listened, waiting for the sound so he could figure out where it came from.

Away from the building, they approached Cam's truck. He heard the sound again, something banging against metal or tin. He knew it came from outside and turned toward the warehouse.

"For the love of God!" Mannis exclaimed, looking up.

His gaze rose in the direction of Mannis' stare. Thirty feet off the ground, sitting by the edge of the roof were Caila and Cam. Relief washed over him before seeing both were trussed up with duct tape. Dried blood stood out on Cam's face.

"How do we get to them?" John asked.

Mannis started running and he followed. "Inside. There's a ladder."

Caila heard the access door hit the roof as it fell back against its hinges. The distant voices drifted to them and she leaned against Cameron. *Safe*. She felt dizzy with relief after hours of struggling.

The roof had angles with different pitches over various portions of the building to allow for the second floor offices. Whoever came to get them would have to be careful; the crease where they sat was particularly steep.

The cavalry made their way and Liam reached them first. After snaking an arm through hers, he said, "I've got you, Caila. You'll be fine."

She tried helping by pushing with her feet as she was brought against his side. The shaking in her legs made her weak. If he would've called her Baby Girl, she might've felt better. He'd called her *Caila*, and the situation seemed a lot worse.

Held around the waist, he dragged her backwards up the pitch. Cameron managed to turn sideways and watch until she was safe between John and Galen. A pocketknife blade flashed before she felt the duct tape being cut from her wrists which were bound at her back. John cut the tape binding her ankles while she slowly pulled the sticky, silver tape from her cheeks and lips.

Liam and Mannis went to Cameron. It took both their brawn to drag him backwards up the slope, but eventually he sat next to her as they worked to free him. She rubbed her

eyes and temples. Being rescued should've felt good. Strangely it didn't.

The instant Cameron's mouth had the tape removed, he said, "What in the hell were you thinking going down to the edge like that? Did it ever occur to you if you started rolling, you couldn't stop yourself? You were six inches from a thirty foot drop onto cement! You should know better. I swear, Caila, you..."

She blotted out everything after hearing her name spat out like a curse. Cameron's loud voice penetrated, but not specifically what he said. A lot of his anger probably came from a few hours up on the roof, although he'd been unconscious for most of it. Probably stiff and sore too, the ugly words and angry tones had to go somewhere. She had experience letting her brother's vent. She felt a little too emotionally raw at the moment to let it go in one ear and out the other.

Carefully pushing against the shingles, she stood and began walking stiffly toward the access door. Hands reached out to help but she avoided them, making her own way just fine. As she prepared to go down the ladder, John touched her and she stopped. "Caila," he said, his voice calm. "Let me go down first so you don't fall."

He did and she climbed down after him. She didn't once look up to see all the pissed off faces that'd be watching. Twice she missed a rung in the ladder, and John caught the back of her calf, easing her foot where it should've been in the first place. She appreciated his silence, needing to concentrate on simply making the descent.

Her socked feet finally met the cement floor inside the medical closet. She didn't waste time as she walked through the door, past the men gathered outside, and raced up the stairs to the offices. She wasn't a coward. She simply couldn't face anyone then.

Dale, Larry and a police officer stood beside her desk. She avoided them by hanging her head and walking. She went directly to the kitchen where she opened the tap and filled a glass with cold water. It tasted good but wasn't enough. After emptying a second glass, a portion of the stress left.

Thoughts crowded her mind. She leaned against the sink trying to decide what to do and how to feel. Someone got into her room last night. She wasn't safe there anymore. There was no longer a home to go to for protection. Even if she had one, would she be in danger there too?

Ugly, scared feelings groped her. They weren't new because she'd grown up in an environment that fostered unease. Afraid for her brothers, afraid for herself too this time, she wondered what trick would work to make the terrible sensations go away. Not a child to be placated and redirected, she'd no choice but to face her demons in broad daylight. And she would—as soon as her eyes quit stinging.

A hand came to lightly rest on her back. She knew without looking, John stood close. When she opened her mouth a sound came out, and she snapped her lips tight. She thought she could control her voice despite the constant flow of tears. Apparently, it didn't work that way.

John stood motionless, watching her white knuckled grip on the counter as she trembled. Instinct told him to grab her

and hold tight. After running from her brothers, he waited patiently until she sought comfort. Concerned by the constant flow of tears dripping into the sink, and not knowing what else to do, he stroked her back and shoulder.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Liam and Mannis in the doorway. They appeared shortly after he'd reached Caila. Mannis gained a step before Caila stifled a sob by placing a hand over her mouth. Mannis froze.

After long minutes, in a controlled voice, she said, "Excuse me."

Her face remained turned away as she walked to the back door, opened it and went onto the small deck. Seated on the edge, her feet on the top step, she covered her face and brought it to rest against her legs. She remained doubled over, quietly sobbing. John stepped up beside her.

In the past, female tears made him angry because they were used to sway him in a particular direction. Caila desperately trying to hide the tears also made him furious. He wanted to get his hands on the person responsible and beat him to a bloody pulp. Forcing his fists open, he sat next to her. She leaned against him. The moisture spattering his jeans washed the fury away as he placed a protective arm across her back.

"Don't," she began before dragging in ragged breaths, "let them see me. Please, just," she hiccupped, "give me a minute."

Knowing tears could only really go away when given to someone who cared, he pulled her onto his lap and gave her a comfortable place to spill them. He reached into his back

pocket and got a handkerchief. He raised her chin before blotting her cheeks and eyes.

"You didn't get much sleep last night, huh?" After a choked bit of laughter, the crying slowed. "I wondered why you drank so much water. You needed it to get all this out of your system."

"I'm sorry." And he believed she meant it. *Apologizing for a few tears.*

"Don't be. It's a nice morning and we'll sit out here and enjoy the breeze."

After a few minutes, she appeared more in control. "They'll all think I'm crazy, or worse, a wimp. Nothing happened, no one died, and I don't know what's wrong. I can't seem to stop."

"Haven't we had the discussion about adrenaline?"

"I don't think that's the problem."

"I know it isn't but I was giving you an excuse."

She struggled a little. "I need to..."

"Sit right here with me, get comfortable and let the sun relax us. You don't really have to be anywhere, do you?"

Settled against him again, she took in a shaky breath. "Not just yet if you need to relax."

He let her get comfortable and waited until every breath wasn't a spasm or sob. "Why would a few tears upset your brothers?"

"It hurts them when I cry."

"I'm not doubled over or bleeding. They're bigger than me, they could probably take it."

"I don't like making them worry."

"That's what brothers do."

"I'm glad this stupid crying doesn't bother you."

He turned her face up to blot more tears. The tentative smile threatened to tumble upside down. *Honey, those tears on your pretty little face are lethal. Keep smiling for me.*

"You go ahead and leak all over me if you want. We'll dry you off and then fix what's wrong."

Some more ragged breaths were drawn. "Did you see Cameron?"

"Sure, he's fine. Made it down the ladder without a problem."

"I woke up," she said, sobbing a little as the words came rushing out, "and he was right there, wouldn't wake up, and there was blood on his face, and I couldn't figure out where we were, and it was dark..."

"Shh, it's daylight now and like you said, nobody died. You'll think about it a little later. Right now you're taking a break. You're taking a John break." She laughed and cried and laughed again. "Down in the lot we have an ambulance pulling up. See? They'll check Cam, check you, and maybe you can share a ride."

"No, I'm fine."

"Good, then you'll stay with me the rest of the day when they say you're fine."

"No. No one looking at me or touching me, please."

She'd almost stopped crying. *Damn.* He *would* bleed for her if her eyes didn't dry up. "What's the worst job at the picnic?"

"Pardon?"

"You know, what's the job you have to give out that no one else wants to do?"

"The grill I guess."

"Why?"

"Heat, smoke, hours of standing there serving people."

"I'll make you a deal."

"What's that?"

"You give the medical guys a few minutes of your time, and I'll take hours of watering eyes and passing out food with my best damn smile glued on my face. Deal?"

"You're not always very bright, are you?"

It wasn't so hard to get her to relax a little. "About some things, I guess not."

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Chapter Fifteen

John sat at the desk, glad Caila went to the kitchen in search of food. He suspected she also needed some quiet time without phones or interruption to digest and come to terms with her most recent mishap.

The woman paramedic had checked her out and suggested a trip to the hospital. Caila refused, promising she felt fine. He believed her until the police started asking questions. She answered each time with, *"I don't know, don't remember."*

She wasn't being uncooperative; just couldn't seem to get the detail of what happened straight in her mind. The paramedic warned that her unusual behavior might be from shock and said to give her time. They all wanted answers. Cam couldn't choke them up either.

When all four of her brothers came into the office, John leaned back in the chair. Fairly obvious that Caila'd been avoiding them, talking to her about it might actually be the right thing to do. What he objected to was the manner in which they planned to do it.

"Where is she?" Liam asked.

"In back. Do you really think she needs an angry mob coming down on her right now?"

Liam led them through the room. The last to pass by, Mannis said, "We're here to apologize."

Surely they meant well, but four against one? Especially since the *one*, was an exhausted woman. Why the hell couldn't they give her a little time? He stood and went to the

office door and asked Terry to answer the phones. She'd been one hell of a help lately, and if she kept it up, he'd have to start referring to her as Theresa.

When he reached the entrance to the kitchen, Liam, Cam and Galen hovered around her. She picked at the side of a sandwich with a single bite gone and rubbed the crust between her thumb and index finger. Tiny fragments fell on the side of the plate. Eventually she glanced up, and gave them a once over. "Hey," she said, before making more bread dust.

Cam knelt beside her. "I'm so sorry, Baby Girl."

"For what?" she asked, looking at him blankly.

"For what I said. I'll never spout off like that again." Her eyebrows came together as if she couldn't comprehend the apology. "I yelled at you. I'm sorry."

"It's okay, I don't even remember." Her eyes were red and dry with dark shadows beneath.

Galen stood at her back with his hands on her shoulders. "What's wrong? Tell us so we can make it right."

When she didn't answer, Liam slid the plate aside and rested against the table. She didn't seem aware. The silence went on, until Mannis said, "Sweetheart..."

John didn't know any of them well; least of all Mannis, but he heard the strain and emotion in the single word. They all looked at him, including Caila.

"I'm sorry," she said, like she finally woke up. "I guess I'm slow or something right now. A few things caught up with me and I got scared."

Liam said, "That's natural after being hog-tied and drug up on the roof. Don't be sorry, honey. You've got a lot of people around who'll make damn sure nothing like that ever happens again. You're safe."

"I don't care about that. It's you," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "I thought it was over and we all got away. And now it's happening again. You and the truck, Mannis and the dumpster, Cameron with blood on his face. I feel like a little kid again, at home with Dad."

John stood quietly in the doorway. She'd yet to look beyond Mannis and see him. He wouldn't leave her alone to face her brothers, but with the mention of her father, he felt like an intruder.

"What about Dad?" Cam asked. "What's he got to do with all the stuff happening now?"

"I'm watching you get hurt again, one by one, and I can't stop it. I couldn't stop him either." Her voice softened even more. "I never tried."

John wondered what she thought she could do when her brothers obviously couldn't influence situations when they were younger.

"You did the right thing, Baby Girl. You did what we told you, and it all worked out."

Dual tears spilled before she closed her eyes. "It's like back then, when I couldn't do anything. I just hid in the closet like a coward, listening and waiting."

"We always came and got you."

"Yeah, after. And I'd see the blood and the wrecked furniture and the bruises or worse; one of you missing and in the hospital."

"You don't feel safe here," Galen said. She shook her head. "Then you take some time off, as long as you need, and we'll handle things."

"No."

John listened as they tried to rationalize events from their pasts. It was worse than he suspected, they'd grown up in a war zone. A lot of things began making sense. Caila's death-defying trip into wreckage. Her running to Mannis despite smoke and flames. Their unusual closeness and caring. *She hid in a closet and listened to her brothers being beaten.* Liam at work despite the lingering effects of a head injury. Mannis' back covered in scars, his anger and mistrust. The list went on.

The conversation turned and he finally witnessed the form of manipulation Caila used. She downplayed her feelings, got the tears under control, and began bantering with them. Subtle at first, she verbally sparred just enough to keep them playing along. He loathed deception, especially when seeing it come from a woman. Her form of trickery was different. Strangely, he admired the strength she used to hide her own emotions in order to calm her brothers. Did they even realize what she did? They probably didn't care. With the animation back on her face, he found himself a little less worried.

"Wait," she asked, "who's minding the shop?"

"Your new boyfriend," Liam replied.

"Are you trying to run him off?"

Cam said, "No, just testing him. We're seeing what he's made of."

"Well," Galen said, "he abandoned his post. He's been taking up space in the doorway, making sure we didn't gang up on you."

"That's a plus in my book." Cam stood and stroked her hair. "Can't have too many people looking out for our brat sister."

"Are you okay now, honey?" Liam asked.

"Yep, good as new. Better. I'm sorry for all the drama. I'm just tired, and you know how weird I get when I'm tired."

One at a time, they kissed her head, stroked her arm and rubbed her shoulder before filing out of the room. When she and Mannis remained, she stood and stepped into his opened arms. John figured he'd stay put for a minute or two. Caila looked sad again and Mannis' eyes gleamed with intensity.

"Are you really better, sweetheart? Twisting this up with the old man and years of bullshit isn't very healthy. We got you out of there as much as we could when we started taking over the business. We should've done more. Sooner."

"Please don't. It's over and everything turned out okay. I just got scared and confused. I know all of you felt bad when I was crying. And then I felt worse because I couldn't stop, and you felt worse because I did." She took a breath before she started babbling more. "And we keep the pain going by feeding off each other. None of us are normal; you know that, don't you?"

"We manage," he said, rubbing the back of her head, a tolerant smile on his face.

"I have a question for you."

"Sure." He pushed her to arm's length.

"When did you start smoking again?"

"I changed clothes and brushed my teeth. Used the strongest mouth wash we have."

"Oh."

"You still smell it?"

"Sort of," she replied, looking a little less defenseless.

"John and I split a pack this morning."

"I didn't know he smoked."

"We had nothing better to do than stand out back and wait for you and Cam to fall off the roof."

"You knew we were up there?"

"Sure. John and I were betting how many cigarettes we could smoke before one of you took the plunge."

"If you were expecting us to fall, it sure didn't take you long to get us down."

"Liam was an ass about it, cracked the whip and made us." He tugged on the side of her hair.

"He's so bossy sometimes. How many cigarettes?"

"I had about ten left."

"Had?"

"Yeah, gave them to Rusty. Didn't need them any more with the drama ending."

"Mannis?"

"Yeah, sweetheart?"

"I really am sorry."

With the mischievous expression gone, Mannis looked forlorn and a little angry. "For what, a few tears and some

bad memories? Not your fault, so don't be sorry. We all have wives now. We're figuring out how you're wired. It's just surprising to blink an eye and see a woman where our baby girl used to be. Hell, by the time you're fifty or sixty, we'll have you all figured out. There, feel better?"

"Sure."

"I'm glad. By the way, I thought you were scared of heights."

"I am."

"You could've fooled me, slinking your way to the edge like that." He stroked her hair.

Caila appeared to be much better and if Mannis didn't get rid of the lecturing tone, John would step between them and explain things.

"Cameron was bleeding and wouldn't wake up. That scared me more."

"Why didn't you bang on the access door?"

"I did for a while, but I couldn't make enough noise."

"You figured the gutter would get some attention?"

"Yep, and it did when Cameron woke up and put his size thirteen's to it."

"Let's stop right there and get a smile back on your face," he said. "You just reminded us you get weird when you're tired and sappy when you're hungry. You want something better than the crumbs over there?"

"Not really. I'll eat later."

He went to a cabinet, crouched down and dug through the contents before emerging with a bottle. He removed a glass

from the cupboard and poured in some of the liquid before handing it to her. "Cherry brandy."

She took a sip and smiled. "You're too much. You know we can't have this stuff here. They'd cancel our insurance with alcohol on the premises."

He winked. "I won't tell if you don't. Besides, it's just cough syrup."

"Thanks. I like you as a brother and I think I'll keep you as a friend."

John headed up front, leaving them alone. He couldn't quite comprehend how Caila and some tears managed to emotionally cripple four grown men. Consideration for their upbringing taken into account, he firmly resolved that no woman, sibling or otherwise, should have that type of hold over a guy.

After revisiting *his* reaction to her crying her heart out, he moaned and sat heavily down in his chair. His insides crumpled up and he felt like he'd puke when tears streamed down her cheeks. He couldn't recall being more angry, anxious or helpless in his adult life? *Get a grip. You're tired.*

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Chapter Sixteen

John got on the phone and rented a few security guards to come in at night. No one complained. In fact, they argued about which company would foot the bill. After two bouts of trouble, he'd pay out of his pocket for some protection. A few trained men to keep watch would make the drivers and dispatchers feel better too. As for Caila, she'd pick a brother and find a guest bedroom to sleep in. She wouldn't be spending nights at McKenna, and if he had his way about it, wouldn't be working so late either. She sure as hell wouldn't ever be left alone late on second shift.

Her eyes were red and head bobbed as she stared at the computer. She finally gave in and headed to the back to find a bed. An hour later, when Liam went to wake her, there'd been more commotion. John joined in the search and found her.

"She's in here," John said.

In the bedroom across the hall from the one she typically used, he found her huddled in a corner, sound asleep. Liam walked in. "Let's go, Baby Girl. We're not leaving you here."

She didn't budge. When he touched her arm, she jerked away and flattened against the wall. Her eyes wide with fright, Liam took hold of her arms and helped her stand. "You know where you are now?"

She nodded.

"You awake?"

She covered her mouth, yawned and nodded all at the same time.

"Go up front and hang out. We're packing your stuff and getting you ready to go."

She mumbled as she walked by, "Safe tonight. I remember."

He followed Liam across the hall and helped stuff the contents of drawers into the suitcase they found in her closet. Her brother was uncomfortable with the task of handling her undergarments. The chore for John was equally distasteful with Liam right there. The most atrociously packed suitcase in history made it to the bathroom, and girl items were hastily gathered to be thrown in on top of rumpled material.

When they reached the office, he stopped to make sure Dale knew what to do. The kid said he felt comfortable dispatching for both businesses and would call if anything came up that he couldn't handle. Reassured, John followed Liam out of the office and down the stairs.

Galen stood at the bottom and Liam asked, "Where'd she go?"

"Out back. She's coming with me. Caroline's expecting us."

"Krista's expecting her too."

Mannis said, "Barb's holding dinner for us."

Cam already left but John knew from an earlier conversation, Cam believed someone would drop her off when they finished work. As a group they left the warehouse, leaving a few workers and Glenn to lock up when second shift ended. They couldn't find her in the parking lot out back, so

they started checking cars. How many times in a day could a woman disappear!

He went to his truck and pulled on the handle. The door didn't budge although he hadn't locked it. After hitting the remote entry, he opened the door and all the irritation from another round of *seek and find* disappeared.

While the rest of them looked through cars, he said, "I've got her."

Liam joined him and set her suitcase down before the others came up. Caila was curled on the passenger side floor. One of his work coats was draped over her shoulders, while her head rested against the seat.

"I'll take her," Liam said.

"She's fine right where she is," John replied. Possession being nine-tenths of the law, he suddenly felt like fighting about it. Upon waking, she'd said she remembered she'd be safe tonight. Apparently, she'd feel safe with him.

To his credit, Liam only glared for a moment before his expression softened. He placed her suitcase in the bed of the truck and jammed his hands in his front pockets. They all lingered. John partially understood and waited for one of them to voice concerns. When it didn't happen, he ended the silence. "She has her cell phone and you have my number. You also have the address. I have your home numbers programmed into my phone."

"It's not you, necessarily," Galen said. "Her last choice in a man wasn't the greatest."

"I can understand why you don't trust her, why you'd think she has bad judgment," John replied.

"She doesn't have bad judgment."

"Maybe it's my irresponsible nature then." They'd all joked at one time or another about his bitching at drivers to use extra straps to secure a tow, slow down in the lot, run using the light bars when they had a tow on, and countless other reminders to keep the men and equipment in one piece. They stood in silence. "It could be how rough I am with her," John added.

"Good night, John. We'll see you tomorrow," Mannis said.

Galen and Liam also offered a parting acknowledgment before heading toward their cars. He could only imagine what it cost them to walk away and leave Caila. As he went around to the passenger door and opened it, he figured they better damn well get used to it. The woman made a choice and no one, not even one of her precious brothers, better open their mouth.

He grasped her in his hands before he started lifting.

"Come on, honey. Let's get you up in the seat. Can't have you flopping around and banging yourself up when I take a turn."

She went where he directed. Once in the seat, she looked at him with swollen and dazed eyes. "I had the worst dream."

"I bet you did. Here," he said, stretching the seatbelt across her, "make me happy by wearing this. I'm a little blurry-eyed myself."

"I could drive."

He smiled but didn't laugh. He knew she'd try and laughing might hurt her feelings. Shutting the door quietly, he went to the driver's side, stepped in and started the truck.

By the time he coasted into the garage thirty-five minutes later, the sun had gone down. John gathered her in his arms. She stirred but didn't wake. He made his way through the garage, up the stairs and into the kitchen before climbing the stairs to the bedrooms. It felt good to finally be home.

Seated on the edge of his bed, she complied with simple requests to move this way and that, so he could get her clothes off. He kept a hand on her arm and brought her to her feet as he pulled the comforter and sheet down. She crawled in, stretched and shivered before curling on her side. The minute her head hit the pillow, she fell asleep.

Her light complexion against the dark green comforter untied a knot deep inside his gut. He hadn't shared a bed with a woman for an entire night in a number of years. There'd been only a few that'd made it into his house at all, and then, only one came back for a second visit. He hadn't seen her after. By the time he'd bought the property, he'd been given a thorough education in dealing with women.

Beautiful, easy to touch and arouse, he'd learned early about the perfection of a woman's body. After a steady infusion of different women, he became expert at detecting the seemingly inherent personality flaws. Greed, calculation, manipulation, lies—the list was extensive and consistent with the women he'd let close. Definitely female, and more sensual than any of the others, he'd looked for the regretful traits in Caila. Damned if he'd found them. His brothers managed to find caring, honest women. The oldest of four and unmarried, he'd personally come to believe his path in life was a single lane, no room for a woman at his side.

The small lamp beside the bed remained on in case she woke in unfamiliar surroundings. He went back downstairs, got her suitcase, locked doors and turned out lights. After he placed the bag on a chair and opened it, he went into the adjoining bathroom, closed the door and stripped.

He adjusted the shower head to punish his skin. The temperature came up to match, hovering just short of scalding. The pressure of the spray washed away two days worth of grime. It also heated every tired muscle, turning them to soft putty. Clean and relaxed, he dried himself and toweled his hair. Quietly opening a dresser drawer in the bedroom, he grabbed a pair of sweat pants, pulled them up, and cinched the drawstring.

After turning off the lights, he drew the covers back and crawled into bed. A sudden thought came to mind. He wondered what the chances were that one of her brothers would show up. Not really caring, needing a few hours of sleep after a few days without, he stretched out and tried to let go.

The king sized bed should've made it easy to give her some room. Once he got comfortable though, she started squirming. *God, he prayed, don't let her be a restless sleeper. Don't let her snore.* In truth, he could probably tolerate some restlessness after the night she'd had prior. Too, he wouldn't be overly put out as long as she kept making those sweet little woman sounds. He got an idea when she wormed her ass against his hip. He turned to hold her, hoping she'd feel secure. She seemed content and cozy as blood rushed to settle in his groin.

He could do it, keep her safe in a dark room, on a comfortable bed through the night. He'd enjoy the aching arousal with *BAD* nestled tight, keeping him hard. Every once in a while he could stretch a little, get closer and bring the rest of her soft, naked skin against him. The fragrance of warm woman and perfume wrapped around him, and he pulled covers higher, hoarding even her scent. *A little piece of heaven on earth.*

The pain in his back eased as strained muscles in his shoulders decompressed. Hurlled into sleep too quickly, his entire body convulsed as an image of her on the roof with Cam came to mind.

"John!" she cried out, more asleep than awake.

"Shh, honey, nothing's wrong," he explained. "A muscle cramp, that's all. I didn't mean to scare you."

She mumbled and turned, draping her arm across his side as she cuddled in. He answered her tired ramblings with grunts and partial words, telling her he didn't mind sharing his bed one little bit. Not with a hand full of *BAD* and her breasts pressed against his chest.

"Caila!" John searched the darkness until the bathroom door opened and light took the shadows away. When Caila came close, he grabbed her, dragged her over his body to the mattress, and settled half on top of her. "God, we lost you so many times yesterday, I thought you went missing again."

"I was in the bathroom."

The need for closeness overwhelmed him, and he took her mouth with his tongue. *Peppermint*. He needed to be closer, feel more, and slid himself until he could feel every inch of

her. She should've protested because of the rough handling, but did some attacking of her own instead. He shifted and moved down her neck, carefully biting into flesh and muscle. "You're wet."

"Shower," she replied.

Her body arched beneath him and he pulled the straps of the camisole over her shoulders and down until her breasts were bare. He needed her naked but settled for exposure of important areas as his mouth found a hard nipple. Fingernails biting into his shoulders should've slowed him. It spurred him on. Her feminine cries were like throwing gasoline on flames.

Instinct alone drove him to move down her body. At thirty-four, he'd never been so out of control and aggressive in bed. Caila writhing beneath his mouth and hands only made it worse. He wanted to taste passion.

"John, no," she said, her voice high and strained.

She didn't really mean it, he'd see to it. Damn, he hoped she liked what he'd do because he couldn't stop. Her knees were brought up and pulled apart, before finding what he sought between her thighs. God she was beautiful! Few things in life compared to finding her wet and ready.

"Oh, uh, ahh...John!" she cried out.

Slim fingers buried in his hair, keeping him tightly between her legs. Incredibly passionate and abandoned, he heard and felt her go over the edge. It'd taken mere minutes. The cries of completion should've made him slow down so she could catch her breath. He couldn't.

On his stomach, kissing and tonguing between her legs, his erection pushed into the mattress. He knew how tight she

got during climax and it drove him crazy. Close himself, trying to hold back, he struggled to command an out of control body.

She managed to sit up and press against his shoulders. "On your back. Now."

The woman pushed buttons in him and her little order had him conjuring all sorts of scenarios. Previous women tried ordering him around. None of them ever issued demands in the bedroom. He sort of liked it, her wanting use of his body.

When he rolled to his back, Caila shifted and slid over him. Her knees next to his head, her breasts and torso slithered down his chest and over his abdomen. The strings of his sweats were pulled to loosen the waistband. He actually yelled something out loud when she hooked her thumbs beneath the fabric and pushed the pants down. Exposure. Her breath. What next? Her mouth!

The position was incredibly erotic, her warm and fragrant sex a few inches away from his mouth. He brought her lower body over his chest. Her legs spread and her calves settled against his upper arms to somewhat restrain him.

He did love a challenge and almost stole back control, but weakness spread as she took him into her mouth. A few years of wrestling did nothing for him. Pinned and at her mercy, he tried holding back to savor the pleasure as long as possible. But she had no mercy because her mouth and tongue drove him to the brink.

"Caila," he warned.

She cupped him, held him tight in her hand as her mouth coaxed him over the edge.

"So hot. Your mouth. Don't stop!"

When he could breathe again, his body randomly shuddered. He gathered strength and managed to turn her before bringing her against his chest. Half off the bed, they lay panting and perspiring, making skin stick to skin as lust and compassion battled for an upper hand. He'd been pleased but not satisfied. It'd take a long time to get enough of her that morning.

She lay quietly for a moment before sliding over him, knees straddling his hips. Still hard, he felt soft folds of smooth, slick flesh take him in. He couldn't believe Caila still needed him.

"John?" she asked.

He loved his name coming from her lips. He answered by lifting his pelvis and going as deep as a man could go into a woman. Aggressively, she rolled her hips, grinding against him as she sought release. In the throes of passion, her hair swung, breasts swayed and mouth opened. Perfect. Beautiful. Especially when she came and rode it out.

He became needy himself, and placed her on the bed before coming to his feet. Pulled to the edge, he tucked her knees against his sides and grasped *BAD*. Her other cheek held too, he spread her wide before sliding back into the scented moisture and heat. Her tight little sheath pulled at him, twitched around him perfectly with every stroke.

The orgasm should've felt good after how they'd used each other. It didn't. Grunting, swearing, the pain and ecstasy combined until he erupted. Even after, jolts shot through him as he went through the motions. Eventually his body

understood he'd been satisfied, and began letting go of the strong urge to take more.

Perspiration dripped into his eye and he wiped it away, noticing things after a prolonged void. He forced himself to let go and leave her body. Sense returning, he pulled her up until she sat. On his knees in front of her, wrapping his arms around her waist, he settled his cheek against her breast.

"Caila."

"Shh, you're trembling. Rest against me."

"You're shaking too."

"I know."

"We'll kill each other."

"What a way to go."

He laughed. He'd never been with a woman like her. She stripped his discipline, stole common sense and made him act like an animal. Rather than hold it over his head and complain about how rough he got, she held him. Certain her nails marked him as well, he couldn't decide if their wild antics in bed should cause concern or if he should simply ride out the storm and see where he landed.

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Chapter Seventeen

"Hi, Caila." Officer Reid stood when she entered the room.

Even without a uniform, she remembered him. She and the officer had somewhat of a history. Her gaze went to John, and he held out his hand. Small hesitant steps eventually had her next to him, before he took her arm and eased her onto the long, black leather couch. Officer Reid made himself comfortable across the coffee table in a black leather chair.

After scanning the living room, she realized everything about the large, four bedroom Colonial invited a person to feel welcome and at home. While the furniture looked new, John's manner of decor suggested comfort and functionality. Earth tones and other neutral colors blended with the occasional splash of turquoise, jade, emerald and peach. From the bedroom window, she'd seen the large few acre lot with tame and manicured areas accompanied by patches of wild flowers and tall exotic grasses.

Her attention was drawn back to John and the officer when John said, "Bill's been a friend for years and I thought maybe if we got comfortable, just the three of us, you might be more relaxed and remember what happened."

"Officer," she began before he interrupted.

"Please, Caila, just Bill. I'm not here to interrogate you. Let's talk a little and see if I can help."

She sighed, settled back and tried to unwind. John's arm draped across her shoulders. He seemed at ease as his fingertips rubbed lightly. Bill seemed relaxed too as he

slouched in the chair and put his socked feet against the edge of the coffee table.

"So you were working late. Not so unusual according to John. He says you put in hellish hours so it wasn't strange that you finished around eleven."

"I don't work that late all the time. I was cross training two dispatchers for night shift."

"I know Larry. Who else was there?"

"Dale."

"Did you just hire him?"

"No, we've known him for years."

"All right, cool. So you went in the back to catch some sleep."

He didn't sound official at all. He seemed simply interested in getting the details to a fascinating story. Utterly calm, he didn't hold eye contact as he looked at his jeans before rubbing a particular spot by his knee. She felt less intimidated and tried to focus.

"I took off my boots and thought I'd lie down for an hour."

"Just an hour?"

"Yep, a nap to take the edge off." She fidgeted with her fingers.

"And then back to work?"

"No, not really. I thought after some sleep, I'd get up, shower and get ready for bed."

He laughed. "I've been that tired. It must've been a bad day."

"Not really. Just a hectic few days."

Still smiling, he said, "Okay, so we have a few wild days and you stretch out on the bed to catch a few winks and then," he said, leaving the statement hanging.

"I woke." Her heart started pounding and she tried to think about what happened.

"Close your eyes, Caila. Lean against John and take in a few deep breaths."

She did and after a second, she sat bolt upright, feeling the blood drain from her face. John didn't touch her and Bill hadn't moved. She couldn't believe how quickly she found herself back at the warehouse, scared and in the dark. Just as fast, she came back to the safety of John's house.

Bill sat across from her with a sympathetic smile. "Try again when you're ready. That'll happen after some trauma. It's natural, you brain's way of coping with stuff."

"Yeah?" she asked, embarrassed. "I'd rather not cope right now."

"I know, been through it myself a few times."

"You?"

"Sure. The trick is to remember in a comfortable, non-threatening environment. It beats the hell out of coming awake in the middle of the night when your defenses are down. If you don't get it out of the way like this, it could start haunting you."

"Great," she said. "Terrific. More nightmares."

"More?"

"No, I didn't mean that." *Why did I say it?*

"It's all right, Caila. Do you want to try again?"

"Sure."

"The reason you tensed up was because you were about to remember something. This time when you feel threatened, John's going to say your name and remind you where you are. You just keep your eyes closed and you'll see what happened, but with John beside you."

"I know you're with the police, but you're still just a cop, right?"

Bill glanced at John with a slight smile. "A little perceptive, isn't she?"

John looked at Caila. "He has a degree in psychology and criminal psychology. Plus he didn't lie when he said he's been through some bad times. If you don't want to do this..."

"No, I'm fine. I'm safe and I'm being an idiot, something you're probably getting used to by now."

"You've been very brave. Don't discount what happened."

"So, you were leaning against John, feeling safe," Bill said, "and you were asleep in bed without your boots. What were you dreaming about?"

She settled back in the crook of John's arm. "I wasn't dreaming, too tired." As she relaxed, this time when she remembered waking, she wasn't as scared.

"What woke you?" Bill asked.

"A noise. There's noise all the time but this was unusual. Muffled, sliding, a soft thud. I rolled out of bed and went toward the door. I couldn't really focus and was off balance."

John's arm tightened. "Caila?"

It took some effort but her eyes stayed closed. She swallowed hard. "He came from my left, from the closet. I wasn't scared then, just confused."

"Did you see his face?"

"No, it happened quick. He grabbed me and I kicked him. Somehow I was on my knees. I don't know why. He was standing in front of me but I couldn't move. Wait, someone was behind me and I tasted something sweet before everything went white."

"Not black?"

"Pardon?"

"When memory fades, people generally describe it as a blackness."

"I don't know why I said white."

"You're doing great. What happened next? The very next thing you see is..."

"The attic. I couldn't move by myself and I couldn't scream. They pulled me along by my arms. They knew I woke up. They kept dragging me toward the access ladder and then one went down. The other dropped me over the side; the one on the ground caught me."

"Caila," John said and she took a breath before exhaling.

"Did they say anything?" Bill asked.

"Whispers and something about scaring someone. I thought they were talking about my brothers. I don't know why."

"It doesn't matter. Whatever you think, whatever impressions you have are helpful. Don't worry about exactly what they said. You're doing fine."

"One said something about taking me somewhere. He called me Baby Bitch. He knows me, made fun of what my

brothers call me. My stomach started hurting because the big one carried me over his shoulder."

"Now, Caila, think about their faces. Can you see them?"

"It's dark," she said, her mind drifting, trying to remember. The nightmare came into focus and she suddenly started laughing. They probably thought she'd gone mad.

"Baseball caps and masks. They both had on Ronald Reagan masks. Oh, my God, I was abducted by Ronald Reagan's."

"She has a sick sense of humor," John said.

"I see that. You two are a great pair," Bill replied, her hearing amusement in his voice.

The laughter made it easier to cope; somehow lessened the severity of what happened, and she began blurting out things that became clearer in her mind. "We're at the back door to the warehouse. The shorter one sees Cameron. He says something about a *two-for-one* deal. The big one put me on the ground and turned me toward the parking lot.

Everything outside was foggy, kind of white, but I heard a truck. Cameron was yelling my name. I think I remember seeing him run toward me and then...wait...nothing. That's it. There's nothing until I woke up on the roof."

"What did they want?"

"I...don't know."

"Hang on, don't open your eyes. Lean back and listen to me. Think about the sweet taste. Have you ever tasted it before?"

"No, but it reminded of something with Galen. I can't remember what. Damn, this is frustrating."

"Galen does mechanical stuff, right?"

"Yes."

"Does he use ether?"

"*That's* what it reminded me of. But I've smelled ether, believe me, I haven't tasted it."

"The white fog you described?"

"Yes."

"It probably had something to do with the drug they used. Some form of inhalant."

Her skin roughed up and she felt chilled. "Great. That makes me feel a whole lot better with the red cautions all over the can."

"That's why you didn't stay completely out. Let's talk about what you don't remember."

"This should be quick."

"Why did they put you on the roof? Before you answer, don't try to rationalize anything, just give me an impression. Say whatever comes to mind."

"To scare us." The words came out without thought and she wondered where they came from.

"Not to kill you?"

"This'll sound crazy, but I keep thinking about *high and mighty*."

"What about it."

"We weren't then. Not on the roof, tied up like we were."

"Go on."

"Punish, payback, learn a lesson..." She rubbed her temples before getting to her feet. She couldn't think about it anymore. She needed to think about other things. "Excuse me. I have to finish getting ready for work."

John watched her run up the stairs.

"She did really well," Bill said.

"Yeah." *Considering what happened.*

"What do you think she meant by her last statement? After all that, what *didn't* she want to say?"

"She was dazed yesterday."

"Could be from whatever they used to knock her out."

"Maybe, but she cried for over an hour."

"I doubt that's so unusual given how she'd spent the few hours prior."

"She doesn't cry." He'd been convinced it wasn't something she did often or felt comfortable with.

"You've know her for a while?"

"Her brothers say she doesn't cry. I've dealt with her during some pretty stressful circumstances and not a tear."

"An hour? She could've been that shaken up. She works like a dog from what the men told me."

"Her brothers cornered her yesterday and she started crying again." He didn't know how to say it, felt as if he'd betray a trust if he repeated the information, but the thought disturbed him enough to blurt it out. "She said she felt like she did when she was a kid. Her father wasn't the greatest, and somehow everything rolled together for her, like bad childhood memories and the roof incident were intertwined."

The more he thought about it, the more her parting words seemed to fit. "Her father punished them. She needed to pay back a debt her father made years before, and he hit her so she'd *learn a lesson*. I could be stretching to make pieces fit, but she seems to keep rolling it together."

"I think if you weren't paying attention I'd be chasing my tail," Bill said. "They obviously used a chemical on her and Cameron. Probably something easy to get. It could've been ether or a dozen other things. Anything they might've used wouldn't render someone totally, continuously unconscious. The reason I asked about her impressions was because she probably drifted in and out. I'll bet she heard a lot more of what they said."

"You think it's all related?"

"It could be. I'll do some checking."

When Bill stood, John did too. "Thanks for coming over before your shift," John said.

"I'm a phone call away, you know that."

"You'll have to bring Tina and the kids by. I haven't seen her in months."

"Yeah, well, she's been baking."

"Dear God, another one?"

"This pregnancy's no better than the other four. She's sick as hell."

"Do you want me to send my mom by?"

"Could you? I asked Tina and she said it wasn't as bad this time. That was last week. I bet she'd drink whatever your mother gives her now. She bitches every time about the taste, but quits puking with the first dose. You sure Mom wouldn't mind?"

"Give me a break. She lives to brew up herbal potions." Especially for Bill, his wife or their kids. There'd always been room for him at the dinner table or overnight as they grew up.

"In another life, she would've been a shaman."

"I'm sure you're right."

"Does she know about you and Caila?"

"I didn't spell it out." Bill better not either. Sometimes his sense of humor could be a little warped.

"No wonder. How long are you going to keep her around?"

"It depends on how long she wants to stay."

Bill looked at him and a smile slowly crept up. "Wow, that's a first."

"What?"

"Nothing. You *do* know more than half the men, your men included, think she's the most wonderful woman they've ever met."

"And you're pointing that about because..." John prompted.

"Just letting you know in case you hadn't noticed. There might be some competition and work on your end getting her to stay. Wish I had more time to keep an eye on you and watch. Should be interesting, you in a foreign situation."

"I know how they feel. You know how they feel, and she doesn't have a clue."

"My ass."

"Really. She thinks they're all just being nice. She's so used to the attention, she doesn't see it." They went to the kitchen and Bill sat in a chair to put on his shoes.

"One more thing, John."

"Yeah?"

"She knows who the men were who forced her and Cameron on the roof."

"What makes you think that?"

"Her laughter. The masks were pretty ridiculous but *any* mask should've terrified her, even Bozo the Clown. Somewhere deep down, she recognized them, and at some point, discounted them as a real threat."

"She's crazy then, because where she wound up *was* a real threat."

"She knows that too. I'm going back over the list of people they've fired. Quite a list for a smaller company. She keeps great records with names, addresses, social security numbers, background checks, credit checks. She did half the work for me in seconds by hacking around in her computer and printing off the white pages of discharged employees. Oh, and I'll be speaking with her father."

"Do you really think there's a link?"

"Sure. If she does and you do, it's worth checking out."

Bill went down the stairs into the garage before turning. "Hey," he said.

"Yeah."

"She really trusts you."

"I kind of figured that out after yesterday, but you weren't around to see any of what she did. Why do *you* think she trusts me?"

"Because she sat and talked to me."

"Oh, yeah. Now I get it." If John didn't know him so well, he might've thought Bill maneuvered the conversation to that very moment.

"You told her I was a friend and she did her level best to do everything I asked, including putting past issues to rest."

"What issues?"

"I've arrested Caila before."

"You what!"

"Twice."

"Oh, hell no, you are not walking away from the conversation we're about to have."

Bill let the screen door go. Laughing, he said, "Ask Baby Girl about it. I don't have a damn thing more to say."

He watched Bill walk by the truck and out through the side door, whistling the theme from a popular television show. COPS—*Bad Boys*.

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Chapter Eighteen

An observant person by nature, John covertly watched her throughout the day. Caila handled problems, coordinated things and even ran down to bandage up a careless dock worker. With him paying more attention, she didn't give out one signal she'd be interested in anything more than the business at hand with any of the men. But there was always a smile to go along with the small gestures making her Caila.

When she'd turn too quickly, a few strands of hair might slide into her mouth. She'd brush it away, tuck it behind her ear before running her fingertips slowly down her neck. When she concentrated on something, the tip of her tongue would run back and forth under her top teeth before she'd slowly moisten her bottom lip. Even after signing something, the end of the pen went to her mouth and she'd gently suck it before using it again or laying it down. After taking a sip from her cup, she'd run her tongue over the edge to catch the remaining drop.

Intentional or not, her core mannerisms were incredibly sexual. From the moment he laid eyes on her, she'd intrigued him. His mind kept telling him why he should leave her alone. All the things he refused to focus on before were so clear then, he started getting angry. Her breathy voice, the way she bent over, the way she ate, even the way she held the mouse in her hand. She tended to stroke it and stroke it as she contemplated things. She caressed that little black

mouse, and ran her fingers up and down, up and down. Is that what the others saw?

She stood and stretched, placing her hands at the small of her back before leaning forward, arching and twisting around. About to give her a lecture on why she shouldn't roll her hips like that, she asked, "Are you hungry?"

Yeah, he was hungry. "Why did Bill arrest you?"

He'd managed to wipe the sexy, worn out, bedroom smile right off her face.

"I was wondering when this would happen." She sat down and turned her chair toward him. "He busted me for street racing."

"What happened specifically?"

"I got into a yelling match with someone who told me I was a chicken-shit like my brother. He referred to Galen, who was racing a '69 Camaro at the drag strips at the time. Galen wouldn't race this guy on the street. I did."

"And?"

"I won."

"I was referring to the arrest." The intense stare and the down turn of his lips should've relayed it.

"A lot of people got busted that night. Galen wasn't too upset when he bailed me out. He hated the guy who'd been heckling me. I was in the wrong place, wrong time..."

"Doing the wrong thing," he finished for her. "Yeah, I get it. What else?"

"Else?"

"You were arrested more than once, by Bill in particular."

"Nice guy, by the way. He arrested me for being in the crowd, not reckless op."

"Sure, he's great. Why do you suppose he let you off?"

"He felt sorry for me, knew I'd lose my CDL if he pushed it." She squirmed in the chair, trying to get comfortable and began chewing the side of her thumb.

"You have a CDL?"

"Of course," she said dryly, like he should've known. "I work in a trucking company."

"You don't need a commercial driver's license to operate a computer."

"No, you need one to drive a truck."

"But you don't drive."

"Not lately and not often, but I have."

"The next arrest?" he asked, rubbing his face, feeling irritated, confounded and in a worse mood.

"Disorderly conduct."

"God, I'm afraid to ask."

"Again, your buddy reduced it from assault."

"Assaulting who!"

"A very, very bad person and then..." Her words trailed off.

"Go on, pour it out." He could hardly wait.

"Officer Reid."

No! "Bill!"

"It was an accident. Someone should've warned him about stepping into the middle of a fight."

Disbelieving and wondering what the hell he'd gotten himself into, he leaned back in the chair and stared. She got the message and explained. "Someone hurt Galen."

"So you took him on." He'd believe anything at the moment.

"She. We were out drinking and Miranda slimed her way into the same bar. Everything was fine until she started on me about Galen. I was younger and pretty angry at her for hurting him. I hurt her back."

"You got into a bar fight."

"She started it. When Mannis bailed me out, he was happy I popped her."

"Women just don't," he managed before she interrupted.

"She threw the first punch, and yes, women do. Office Reid happened to be patrolling; heard the ruckus and stepped in right after it started. He grabbed me, spun me and it happened. I apologized and he didn't seem too mad."

"You hit Bill?"

"Punched him actually," she said rather quietly. "In the eye," and like she had to force the last words out, she finished by saying, "really hard. Jesus, he bruised easily."

He groaned, envisioning the incident and ran fingers through his hair. "How old were you when you were street racing?"

"Twenty-one."

"How about when you blackened Bill's eye?"

"Twenty-one."

"Any trouble since?"

"Not because of me," she said almost righteously.

"What do you mean?"

"There's been trouble here from time to time, but I didn't cause it. Well, not really. Usually when someone gets fired, they act up and the police show up, but *they* get arrested."

"Well, that just makes all the difference, doesn't it? What about before you were twenty-one?"

"I'm starving, are you sure you're not hungry? It's after two already. Have you ever considered you get grouchy when you don't eat regularly?" She started to stand.

"A real little hellion, huh?"

Slumped back in the chair, she answered. "No, the usual stuff a kid goes through. You're determined, so let's make it easy, shall we? Fourteen, riding a dirt bike on the road without a license. Fourteen, underage smoking. Fifteen, dirt bike, same road, different cop. Sixteen, bumper skiing."

"What the hell is bumper skiing?" It couldn't be what the name implied.

"It snows in Ohio and children get bored. You know, when the snow's packed tight on the roads, you grab the back of a bumper, hang on and..."

"Bumper skiing!" He sat straighter in the chair.

"Oh, I forgot, fifteen, driving without a license. Seventeen, noise violation for thumping my stereo. Eighteen, excessive speed—twice, but it was the year I got the Chevelle, which doesn't really count." She actually couldn't comprehend his dismay. "Come on, get that look off your face. Eighteen, a 502 Chevy motor, 600 horsepower, blown and injected, red Chevelle with a nitrous oxide set up! That blower whistling, the car stuttering from the cam—well, after the second ticket Liam made Galen take away the blower and nitrous." She

appeared less intense and said, "And you're up to date on the rest."

Her eyes lit up and he swore to God she almost caressed herself when she talked about her car. He could understand the excitement and even the tickets had she been male. After the talk with Galen and her recent admissions, she'd been a very slim, blonde, feminine sort of boy.

"Three years of nothing?"

"I didn't get caught."

"It figures."

"You look kind of sick, John. Were you picturing me growing up having tea parties with my friends and Barbie doll? I played with Barbie," she said, a fake smile on her lips. "I gave the bitch a crew cut and threw her under Liam's truck. She wasn't a very good role model, trading favors to Ken for that Corvette."

She jumped up and walked to the back. What had he expected after her growing up with four older brothers? Still angry, mostly at himself then, he settled down and found her in the kitchen. While she stood at the counter, he wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. "I was surprised when Bill said he'd arrested you. I'm sorry for how I approached it."

"And me giving you the details made your day complete."

"It gives me a little better idea who you were. Who you are now."

"You might want to rethink Theresa's flirting. I bet she never murdered Barbie."

The visual of Caila sticking the doll under the wheels of a semi had him laughing. "I wouldn't trade your tiny work boots parked next to my bed for three pairs of stiletto heels."

"Yeah, well, before you say things like that, remember there'd probably be three gorgeous women in your bed who'd been wearing them."

"I'd rather have you."

"You're a fool."

Her comment was certain, absolute, and he held her tighter. She didn't soften, didn't relax and he turned her around and leaned into her, bending so he could talk close to her ear. He whispered, "I've had other women, the ones with the heels. I've never been this hard, stayed this hard or cared about any of them half as much as I do you."

She wouldn't look at him. "Can't you feel me? We were in bed a few hours ago and I want you again. Right now."

Her body trembled before she shifted and moved against him. Still whispering to her, he said, "Work isn't an inconvenience; it's part of who you are, what holds you to your family. You're not waiting for a man to make your life better because you already have enough. Besides, you're beautiful when you're dirty, when you have just your skimpy underwear on or when you're riding me."

Her kiss turned him on even more. She finally said, "As long as it lasts."

"What?"

"You. As long as you're interested I'll enjoy this."

"How many men, honey?"

"Have I been with?"

"That you've cared about that left."

"None."

"Not one?" Given her prior antics and police record, he found it hard to believe.

"I left them when things changed. It normally only takes a few dates before the questions start about working here, staying close to my brothers, my clothes or my idea of a fun date. One made it for a while, but I did the changing. As long as I didn't wear work boots and behaved, we got along fine."

"Do you realize how many men look at you?"

"Sure, they need their paperwork signed, want a job, want a good load, want pay. All pretty normal reasons to seek me out."

"I'll kick myself for bringing it to your attention, but you should know. They look at you a lot deeper than that."

She huffed which told him she'd dismissed his words.

"Curiosity, viewing something unusual. Not hard to understand really. You were one of them."

"I never..."

"You couldn't tell me why you kissed me the first time."

"That's true. I still can't say exactly why other than I wanted to. It overrode a lot of common sense because of what stood between us. So, it wasn't curiosity, it was attraction. Huge difference."

"You either think fast on your feet or you've already mulled this over." The lady had a nice smile to go along with her quick mind.

"I won't lie, I couldn't figure out what drew me at first. I was looking for the one thing about you that made me hard

and interested. I can tell you now, it's not one thing. It's everything," he said before framing her face with his palms.

"You don't even know what I look like in a dress, or regular clothes, or with my hair done and makeup on. I can do that stuff too and even feel comfortable. I just won't live like that any more because my life's here."

"That's surface stuff. I like who you are under anything you wear or tattoo on your body."

She rubbed her palm over his cheek, down the side of neck and let it rest over his heart. "I don't know what to say."

"Say you'll come home with me again tonight so we can make dinner, shower together and share my bed. That's enough for now."

"Done."

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Chapter Nineteen

John returned from a tow and noticed Caila's truck missing. He entered the building and went to the mechanic's bay. "Rusty, do you know where Caila ran off to?"

His gray hair was neatly combed, face and hands were spotless, and even his work shirt and jeans looked pressed. Somewhere in his late sixties, Rusty gave him a big uncharacteristic grin. "Yeah, son, I do. Her and Galen went to fetch my birthday cakes."

John stepped forward, extended his hand and gave him a firm yet gentle handshake because of the crippling arthritis in Rusty's fingers. "Congratulations on another year, but what makes you so sure she ran off to buy you a cake?"

"Not a cake, boy. Two or maybe three with all your men runnin' in and out. And she won't bring no store bought cakes. Liam's woman was probably up half the night fussin' like she always does. She owned her own bake shop until a while back. I'm surprised Liam's not bustin' out of his britches."

"Well, you've known them a lot longer than me, so if you say you're getting some birthday cakes, I bet they're on the way."

"Caila won't forget my birthday. The girl never has. Just hope she don't figure she owes it to me. That'd make 'em taste bitter."

Rusty worked hard, practically never stopping to shoot the breeze, and it looked like he wanted to. John had time. "I'm

surprised they make you work on your birthday. What kind of company are they running?"

"Oh, hell, boy, my birthday passed last week, but they try trickin' me. The Missus told me today's the day. I don't dare pick up a wrench. Her and the kids think I'm a consultant these days. Consultant, huh."

"Whatever it takes to get them off your back, right?"

"You're a smart boy for bein' so young. That's why you got an eye on Caila." Could his feelings for her be so transparent? The older man hardly seemed to notice the time of day, let alone an attraction John worked to conceal. "You see her like I see Martha, a woman that can give more than she gets."

"Caila can have whatever she wants. All she'd have to do is ask."

"That's the thing though, she don't ask. She's real careful about how she gets stuff. You notice that?"

"She has a way about her." Mulling it over, he found it odd he couldn't recall her asking for anything. *Except in bed*, and her demands weren't opened ended requests. She could be downright insistent.

"You be watchful of her. She's strange that way, not openin' her mouth when she needs somethin'. Even somethin' important."

"Like what?"

"Seein' as Baby Girl's sweet on you, I'll tell you a story and you won't breathe a word 'bout it to no one. Hear?"

"I can be real tight-lipped."

John leaned against the truck in the service area and Rusty made himself comfortable on a high-backed stool. He lit a

cigarette and exhaled. "Twenty years ago, when the boys were just comin' into the picture 'round here, Caila spent her time followin' 'em and *helpin'*. Least that's what she thought she was doin'. Puny for her age, I figured it was cause her mamma pretty much started with the cancer not long after she was born, and it stunted her. Folks don't believe stuff like that no more, but back then we knew such things."

"She was five?"

He spit a piece of tobacco from his mouth. "There 'bouts or maybe even six. Long blonde hair stretchin' down past her waist with the cutest little work boots and coveralls is what she'd wear. She wanted to be like them boys."

Rusy seemed lost for a moment and John waited patiently while he remembered. "Anyway, Liam was just a boy then his-self, eighteen or nineteen with this big ole truckin' business settlin' around him like a noose as his father played in the office with women and booze. Cam, Mannis and Galen were young, but they helped best as they could. Then you have that cute baby girl, gettin' tools, doin' small things, not playin' mind you, but workin'. Her and that raggedy, greasy bear she carried. Called the damn thing Mamma Bear. Figured it was 'cause she was missin' her own mamma."

John wanted to walk away, didn't like the direction of the story. He wasn't keen on hearing more about how she grew up doing all the things a delinquent boy might. It still had him a little rattled. But it was Rusty's birthday and he wanted to offer some advice on Caila.

"I was drivin' at the time and workin' on trucks when there weren't runs. One evenin' Near Christmas-time is when it

happened." He took a long drag on the cigarette and flicked the ashes.

"Duane gone, Liam had another truck waitin' to be fixed and the boys were helpin'. Baby Girl was right there with her bear. She was using some sand paper to scratch the rust off a brake drum. You know, somethin' harmless to keep her out of the way. Well, Liam told her twice to get 'way from the truck and she didn't mind. She sat there singing' Christmas toons, when all of a sudden, that damned old truck came off the lift."

The memory obviously still bothered Rusty. He looked down and swallowed. John swallowed reflexively too, before remembering Caila was whole and healthy.

"Scared the shit clean out of us, but especially Liam. Never seen a truck jacked up so quick. Looked like it landed right on those skinny, little legs, but Baby Girl didn't have a scratch."

The vision turned his stomach. He couldn't imagine his little niece Allyson...

"She couldn't figure out what the ruckus was 'bout and stood there while Liam did what a boy that age would do after havin' a precious thing like her almost smashed. He gave her *what for* and told her baby girl's bleed and die, and if she wasn't more careful, he'd have to throw her in the big trash can. Them boys hardly ever spouted off, keepin' all sorts of things tucked away. Duane made 'em that way. He *taught* 'em how to be men."

John could only imagine. Rusty got quiet and sat there for a few minutes. The memories obviously still bothered him after two decades. Duane McKenna was certainly some piece of work.

"She knew Liam was shook up with all the hard words and him yellin'. And it was her fault." Rusty threw the cigarette down and crushed it under his boot.

"Broke my heart what happened next. Liam's not a cruel man, never a mean kid, but him bein' so young and tired and saddled with that cute little girl all the time—he made sure she knew he meant business. He turned her 'round and gave her two good swats on her butt."

"You were an adult. You couldn't have felt too good about that," John said.

"I believe a kid should get a swat for some things. Her bein' careful couldn't be joked 'bout cause we all knew where she'd be spendin' time. The thought of her bein' squished cause she was in the wrong place—well, she needed to learn. But the look on her face after Liam paddled her...her big, blue eyes kinda looked haunted, like some great secret opened up and stared her in the face. It wasn't a good look. Still gives me the willies."

Rusty adjusted his seat and settled back. His discomfort relaying the story made John stay quiet and wait. Eventually, he said, "Poor little thing just looked at Liam. Tore them boys up to not make nice with her. It was tough not to scoop the little crumb up and cuddle her. We figured when she walked off, she'd go pout for a while as she took the lesson to heart. Found out later she did, 'cept she learned the wrong damn thing." He came forward in the chair to rub his hands on his jeans.

"And so I got a call, a load to Montgomery and headed out. Got most the way to Kentucky when the boys hollered for me

on the radio. Caila'd run off the worst night of the year. A nubbin' like her wouldn't last no time in the snow and cold. I turned 'round and was headed back when I heard somethin'. I pulled into one of them all-night joints, crawled in the sleeper, and found her cuddled with her bear."

"What the hell was she doing?"

"Asked her the same thing. Don't like thinkin' 'bout her answer. When I told the boys I had her, they jumped into a rig and headed out. Hell, Liam had no road time, but I couldn't stop 'em. A few hours later, they pulled in, and I thanked God for watchin' after fools."

He paused, seeming to see everything very clearly. "Caila saw 'em come in. She stood right next to me."

"She went to you for protection. No wonder you care for her so much."

"No, boy, she came to me cause she wasn't goin' back with 'em."

"She was that scared?" John's gut clenched when he visualized a terrified little girl.

"Yep. For her brothers."

"I'm lost."

"You ever love someone, boy?"

"Sure." Everyone did at some point in life.

"Love 'em enough to walk away from important stuff if it'd make a pain in 'em go 'way?"

Without thought or hesitation, he knew he would. To lessen pain for someone you love would be instinctual. For some, the situation probably got sticky weighing the love against "important stuff."

Rusty didn't seem concerned with an answer when he asked, "You believe Caila loves 'em boys?"

"Does the sun rise and set each day?"

Rusty smiled. "Do you believe she needs 'em close to be a whole person?"

"Yes."

"Then you know what she did."

Confused, he shook his head before it dawned on him.

"She ran away to keep from hurting them?"

"She did. Figured she'd stay with me."

"No!"

"Yep. Liam was the one who spanked her, the others didn't stop him, stood by and watched. She knew they all had to be hurtin' inside to do such things. She caused it, and even though she'd die without 'em lovin' her, she walked 'way. Simple as that."

"What happened?" John asked. A kid her age wouldn't turn away from the security her brothers provided. Not after losing a mother and having an ass for a father. Rusty was wrong in his assumption.

"Liam and the others coaxed her, but she wouldn't go to 'em. Didn't cry neither. She knew when she got to cryin', her brothers hurt. She knew a lot. Still does."

"Jesus!" John said. *It tore me up watching her try not to cry. I couldn't imagine a five year old girl fighting down tears.*

"What did they do?"

"Came to an understandin'. They swore the only thing she could ever do to hurt 'em bad again, would be to bleed and

die and wind up in a garbage can. In her little mind, she figured she could keep herself outta the trash."

The story apparently over, Rusty finally chuckled before reaching for another smoke. "Oh, they have words and tear strips from her, but those boys made a deal, and the only thing ever gettin' 'tween any of 'em is death."

"Did she make up with them?"

"Like nothin' happened."

"I wonder what effect that had on a kid like her. Hell, what did it do to the woman?"

"She's one of the happiest gals you'd meet. Oh, she's got a temper which gets 'way from her, but when the storm blows over, there's always a rainbow. You get what I'm sayin', boy?"

"Yeah, I do. Thanks for taking the time." Deep down, the story helped fill in more blanks.

"You seem worth it, and not cause you know your way 'round a truck. That boy, Adam, she took up with liked her good enough, but he was lookin' for a girl, not a woman who knows her own mind. If you ask me, the punk wanted one of those bobble-head dolls so he could drag her 'round. Our girl has spunk. You be good to her if she lets you close, and you might not get your jaw broke."

"I'll remember that."

"You do that boy, and we'll get along fine. Now, I hear my woman and kids out there. I bet they're fussin' with Caila, so why don't you make sure my cakes make it to the break room without gettin' smooshed. Go on, git 'fore I tell you another whopper."

He'd almost left and turned toward Rusty to make sure he'd heard. "You lied?"

"Made the whole damn story up. Now like I said, git going."

He met Caila, Galen and Rusty's family coming up the stairs. Sure enough, there were huge boxes to be carried. He took one from Caila and was surprised at the weight.

"Thanks," she said. "My arms were breaking."

"Rusty said you had cakes for him."

"That old sneak, he always knows! His birthday was last week and we waited so this year, we could surprise him. I bet he's all cleaned up too."

"Like he just came from an ironing board."

She and Galen laughed. "No point in sneaking past the mechanic bays," she began, before saying very loudly, "because he knows we're here and we have *one* cake for him." Everyone in the area laughed.

They made their way to the break room, before Galen introduced him to Rusty's family, all seventeen of them. They took the whole business of birthday celebrating seriously from the food they carried. Crock pots, pans, bags, etc.

He helped when and where he could, and finally found himself and Caila apart from the others. "You ever ride with Rusty when he drove truck?" he asked.

She stopped fussing with napkins and became very still. "Yes, once. It was stupid, I guess. I stowed away. I was a little kid. Why, did he say something?"

"Not much, just something about you and some bear."

"That would be Mamma Bear."

"What happened to Daddy and Baby Bear?"

"She kicked Daddy Bear's ass and threw him to the curb because he was a drunk. Baby Bear's out driving truck, making a living with a family of his own."

He lifted a cake so she could remove the box. After the smile left his face, he said, "You're not normal, honey."

"I know, sorry you figured it out. But wait, you aren't either."

"How could Krista bake all this?"

"Uh, huh, you *have* been talking to Rusty. I thought so. It doesn't matter though. He'd never say anything bad about me. He loves me."

"I think he does."

"I know he does. And to answer your question, my sisters helped."

"Your brother's wives?"

"Yep, sisters, sister-in-laws, whatever you call them. I always wanted sisters, and I happen to like all of them, so I moved them closer on the family tree."

"Are they like you?"

"Oh, heavens no. They're bona fide girlie-girls down to the core, except Caroline. She likes to have fun."

"Galen's wife?"

"Yeah. She was actually my friend before Galen noticed her. I met her during the whole misunderstand at the bar when I was arrested. Bill knows her."

"He didn't mention it."

"She's a police dispatcher."

"So you met her when you went to jail?"

"Before."

"Spill it. This just gets better and better." Intrigued, he viewed her differently. He rather liked the fact she'd filled her childhood with fun, mischief and some wild times. He felt she'd deserved it.

"She saw Galen's ex come at me. I handled her but she had friends and Caroline didn't think the fight was fair so she jumped in."

"You're kidding."

"There's video if you'd like a copy. Caroline got it as a souvenir after everything was over. The bar had trouble, so they kept security cameras rolling."

"It's all on video tape? Does Galen know?"

She laughed. "Actually, she gave it to him as a present on their wedding night. The woman before Caroline really did a number on him, and he regretted her walking away without so much as a rough word. It made him feel better in one respect that she got some sort of payback, but I think he still wonders about Caroline."

"I can see why. Bar fights, assaulting an officer."

"You scared?"

"Honey, I know what I'm getting with you. It's tattooed right on your..."

"John!"

"Bad is one thing. Rotten is another. You know, bad can actually mean really, really good."

"I like your way of thinking but I've toyed with the idea of getting it changed."

"To what?"

"*Not so* BAD?"

"Don't waste your money. Until you can get it wiped out and get 'perfect' put over it, leave it alone. I kind of like *BAD*."

She looked up at him, her eyes dancing with laughter and something more. He said, "I'd kiss you right now but it'd probably be in poor taste."

"You're a good man."

"I'm glad you think so."

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Chapter Twenty

No time to be daydreaming, Caila focused on orchestrating trucks as they danced in and out of the docks. At times, someone needed to physically take charge of the area to make everything happen. Not doing too badly, she walked up to the next truck before standing on the bottom step. "Hello, Whiting International, welcome back. How long have you been sitting in line?"

"Hey there, Caila," the older driver replied. "Just about ten minutes. How big of a backlog you got here?"

"You'll be dropped and heading out in fifteen minutes. I want you to pull around to the end of the back lot and drop there. We'll switch it up later and take care of things. If I remember, you're picking up an empty sitting on the far side of the building. I'll have a man waiting to show you which trailer."

"What's with all the tow trucks?"

"They said something about paying rent and we were short on cash. I had no idea there'd be so many of them." Clem laughed and handed her his paperwork.

"By the time you get re-hooked, I'll have you processed and ready to roll," she said.

"You're a doll."

"Thanks, Clem, you too. And say hi to your wife for me."

"Will do."

She jumped down and went to the next truck in line. God, John looked good sitting behind the wheel of that older

model, black and gold Peterbilt wrecker. She stepped up, folded the clipboard against her chest, leaned on the open window lip and smiled. He wore the coolest sunglasses. "Hey there, Fours Sons Towing. Make a wrong turn and wind up in a traffic jam?"

"No, ma'am," John replied. "Heard there was a blonde working here that had a thing for truck drivers. Thought I'd try my luck."

She saw his eyes and they remained straight ahead. "Well then, baby," she said easing her hand in the cab, running it over his thighs, "I suppose we should get you out of this cattle call and move you right to the front of the line. I heard that blonde's in desperate need of stud service."

His foot slipped off the pedal and the truck jumped. He grabbed her so she wouldn't be thrown. She repositioned the clip board, and asked, "Problem, John?"

"Honey," he said, while restarting the truck, "don't ever mess with a man's legs while he's holding in a worn out clutch."

"I thought you and Alex just re-worked that clutch."

"Yeah, well, hell..."

"Whoa, wait a minute. I seem to recall a certain man saying he'd like a certain blonde to throw him a bone and flirt a little."

"You did, and I did, and I am."

"What?" She shook her head thinking maybe she hadn't heard.

"You did flirt, I did notice it, and I'm hard. I'll make another request. Have some mercy when you flirt. You and I can't do a thing about it right now, so take it easy on me."

"Sorry."

He squeezed her hand before she left. "Don't be. Just take care of me tonight, like last night and the night before."

"I might be too tired."

"Are you tired?"

"No, I'm teasing. I had more cake and I have the best sugar buzz going." She kissed his hand before he placed it on the wheel. "I'll run up and tell Whiting to let you by. Sorry, but you'll have to park in the back forty."

"Where?"

"Just park in front of Paul's truck and you can get out if you need to."

"Where the hell are all my one-tons?"

"The yard's dry so we moved them to the side of the building. They won't sink and we won't have another day like this for a few weeks. Besides, there aren't many here. Your men are out faster than they can get back. Dale's in early to help dispatch. It's raining money, John. Look, they're lined up down the drive. God, I love this!"

"We're moving so you be careful out here. I couldn't stand it if you wound up as a mud flap for one of these rigs."

"I'm careful," she said stepping down. Looking up at him from the ground, she added, "Watch that clutch, it slips."

He glared at her through his sunglasses. She watched him shift in the seat and heard him grind the truck into first gear, the noise agonizing and long. Sure he did it on purpose, she

laughed while running up to the truck ahead, asking Whiting to let him pass.

On the way to the truck behind John, Galen caught her arm. "Caila, let me take over. I see what you're doing and I have some clear bays right now so I'll line them up. The docks are stuffed full and you'll need to get paper flying for drivers soon."

He took the clipboard and she explained what she'd planned. "It looks worse than it is. A lot of trailers are being dropped so it's not like we have to pull them up to the docks. You can see what I did; I drew pictures so I'd remember."

Galen glanced at the sheet of paper on the clipboard and shook his head. "There're really diagrams."

She jogged through the grass to avoid the rigs departing the yard in the opposite lane. An air horn from a truck made her turn. She waved at the Arbor driver. Other trucks joined in and the sound was deafening. *Those poor men must be so bored.*

The docks were rammed and she knew Glenn would be struggling to keep up. She stood quietly and observed, seeing the rhythm, watching workers until she understood where she could help. With paperwork already completed for the group inside, she went to the storage area and hopped on the last forklift.

Liam drove into the area with a tall stack of pallets, and she waited to follow him out. She wished she had his natural ability to drive anything, do it well and make it look effortless. No matter what he drove...

The stack of loaded crates next to him suddenly shifted and swayed. She fired up her forklift, gunned it and went up beside him. With forks extended over the cab, she rammed the tower in an attempt to brace it. Liam spun in the seat, saw what she did and set his forks higher to hold the stack in place.

He looked up, set the brake and jumped off before scaling merchandise. "Get Mannis!" he yelled.

She stood quickly, not understanding, when she saw someone moving through the inventory. The intercom located between rows, she squeezed through and picked up the handset. "Mannis, storage area, now!"

Before the last word came out, crates crashed directly behind her. She whipped around and saw the clutter. Liam started screaming and within what seemed seconds, she heard Mannis yelling too. Scared and thinking the worst, she fought her way up the wood and debris covering her escape route. Up higher, she heard them calling her name.

"Right here," she said. "Back here."

They grunted as things were tossed on the other side of the litter boxing her in. Another lucky break. Both of them were unscathed, otherwise they couldn't have bellowed like they did. While they worked to get her out, she said loudly, "I'm fine so slow down. Actually if you'll take a break, I'll climb over. No use turning our profits into garbage."

"You sure, Baby Girl?" Liam asked.

"Yep, I'm on my way so stand back in case I start a landslide."

She chose her footing before applying weight, and made it almost to the top when she looked up. "Liam, over by the exit. Look at the ceiling. Do you see him?"

From her vantage point, she saw both of them take off at a dead run across the warehouse. They leapt, and climbed with Alex right behind. Afraid for everyone, she stood quietly as they came up on the ventilation hole in the ceiling where the man had crawled.

She watched them head into the space and decided they needed more help. One step forward caused the crate beside her to fall against her side. Her footing lost, she tried to minimize the fall by grabbing something. Everything her hands grasped let loose and followed her down.

Stunned, resting against boxes with a pile of boxes and twenty pound bags of fertilizer on top of her, she sighed and tried to figure out what specifically hurt. The voices she heard then, were muffled by the plastic bags. As she lay there, she noticed a trickle of something sprinkling over her. One whiff and she knew her day was then complete.

Of course John came running along with half the other men on the planet. Of course they tore through the thin plastic bags covering her. *Yep, save Caila. Thank you all so very much!* When a hand grabbed her arm, she spit the fine dust from her mouth before she spat out something more. "Back off, right now."

After the rest of the bags were removed, she tried leveraging herself to stand. Like a drunk, she bobbed first one way and then another before managing to come upright and shake off the fertilizer, sending fragrant dust everywhere. A

look from her made men rethink the hand they offered. Open-mouthed morons lined her escape route as she stumbled her way free of the mess.

The film of sweat that gathered while trapped under the plastic bags made a lot of the fertilizer stick. Her eyes riveted on Liam. "Did you get him?"

"No."

"I want a gun then."

She spat more dust from her mouth. John reached out and she avoided his hand before walking away. When they could only see her back, she said, "Excuse me, I'm having a shitty day. I'll get on that paperwork right after a shower," she called over her shoulder. "It's still daylight gentleman, so find that little jerk and bring me what's left after you get done."

The police were becoming routine visitors at the warehouse, and a few of the officers tried to hide smiles when she gave her statement. She hadn't said a word about the fertilizer breaking open. Obviously afraid to leave out a single detail, Liam told them everything, including why the man got away. Every last one of them had raced to her rescue and neglected to see the stranger leave. At least Bill appeared to take the situation seriously. Because of him, all access points to the attic were now padlocked. That and the security guards arriving at dusk seemed a bit overzealous, but if future harrowing incidents could be avoided, she'd get used to it.

After a few days of quiet performing routine work, everyone seemed to settle down. She wished a few padlocks and some security guards could take away the turning of her

stomach at the moment. *Who celebrated an anniversary on a Thursday evening?*

Another section of hair from the curling iron carefully came unwrapped. Both businesses required all of their attention from early morning until late in the evening. With cash rolling in, payroll in the morning, the biggest company picnic to date a few days away; her nerves were stretched to their limit. John's parent's inviting her to their thirty-fifth wedding anniversary wasn't something she'd look forward to *any* day. His parents hated her.

She knew his brothers, had the opportunity to meet their wives as they came through on occasion. They weren't the problem. His parents visited too. They'd been completely cordial each time, and she'd found endless excuses to make herself invisible. Her brothers disappeared too. None of them disliked John's parents, but dealings between their fathers made the situation awkward.

His parents probably said something to John like, *Oh, and you can bring that girl if you must*. They knew where she'd been spending her evenings. She looked at her reflection critically and felt like starting over. *What in the world is wrong with me!*

John waited downstairs. *He'll probably have a wonderful evening around his family while I perspire, spill stuff down my dress right before I head to the bathroom to throw up.*

She let the strands cool slightly before running her fingers through the mass of curls. After spraying a thin coating of hairspray, she knew time had run out. John would see her for the first time dressed as a woman.

Confident wearing almost anything around anyone, she didn't like the nervousness associated with dressing up around him. Would he be disappointed? He said he'd been around *Ms. Stiletto Heels* before. What if her sandals didn't stack up? Maybe he'd be pleasantly surprised, him joking about the need to get an evening dress from her storage locker. *Jesus, I could've dived down a flight of stairs to avoid this. It would've been less painful. Probably less embarrassing too.*

Her feet slid into the shoes and she pulled the straps up behind her ankles. She ran her palms down the dress to straighten it, before she made sure the thigh-high stockings were smooth. She gathered her courage and left the safety of the bathroom. The same two words kept rushing through her mind. *Run away.*

She found him in the kitchen sipping a can of pop by the sink. She stopped short as misgivings were temporarily forgotten. Shining blue-black hair hung against his collar. He wore a perfect fitting black suit with a white shirt. A crimson tie created a striking contrast. His black dress shoes were polished and the total package astounded her. *My God.*

It was too late for a hasty retreat. His eyes visually skimmed her from head to toe. He stood there completely immobile, like the sight of her in a black cocktail dress was incomprehensible. If he laughed, she'd punch him. But he didn't laugh. He stared, his grey eyes examining every detail.

He came close and began touching. Long fingers stroked her hair before running to her earlobes. She felt the garnet earring move before his fingertips trailed her neck to touch

the diamond and garnet necklace. She forced herself not to shiver when he started at her neck and followed the material of the halter dress, lightly touching the inner most edges of her breasts.

"Beautiful jewelry. Looks so delicate against your throat," he said, appearing engrossed as he casually touched.

"My mother's." She couldn't help shiver when his breath swept over her cleavage.

"You didn't have them in storage, did you?"

"No."

She watched his throat move as he swallowed. His fingers gently touched her chin and she looked up. Indecision or hesitation seemed to keep him from doing something. By his expression, it was serious.

"I'm sorry," he whispered as his lips brushed over hers.

She discovered a man's mouth could be quite gentle. And despite the slow, unhurried, non-demanding kisses, she found them inflaming. Familiar with his touch, the large, warm hands at her waist felt unusual. He handled her differently, barely touching her. Deeply moved by his caution, when the kiss ended, she had a hard time remembering why they stood in the kitchen.

His expression appeared pained and she asked, "What's wrong?"

His arms circled her waist. "You're beautiful."

And in work clothes, I'm...passable? Rather than utter what came to mind, she offered a remedy. "I can change."

Emotional defenses barely came up before he disarmed her. "I've seen you, held you, know how small you are."

Wrapped in black silk, balanced on heels, I feel like a lumbering oaf. I've been so rough with you, Caila."

No, no, no! She liked the man who looked and touched her with greedy intent. The man who treated her like more than some delicate, half-wit fluttering on his arm. The man who stripped off her muddy riding clothes in the sun and shared her passion in the tall grass without a blanket, or wine, or sun block.

"I'll make you a deal," she said, trying to maintain a light-hearted approach to words she hoped would make him see through her costume.

"What deal?" He didn't seem to be paying attention because he looked where his fingers stroked her shoulder.

"We'll get through the first hour, I'll drink too much, do something incredibly rude and you can bring me home."

His gaze snapped to hers. A small sound came from him before it grew. He really did have an incredible smile and great laugh. "You're definitely not normal."

"I can wear my boots."

Behaving more like the man she'd grown to really like, he replied, "Can't."

"I'd embarrass you."

Escorting her toward the door, he held her arm as she went down the stairs. "Nope. The boots are brown. Your dress is black. Wouldn't match at all."

His smile belied the deadpan words. When he opened the door to the black Lexus, she asked, "Not taking the truck tonight?"

"Honey," he replied, helping her in, "I'd appreciate the show when you'd lift your leg to get in. I'd even help you down. But play along just for tonight and pretend I have a little class."

"Is that why you own a car and a truck? Upscale girls get the Lexus and work boot women get the truck?"

The door closed before he came around and got in. "Most upscale women like the Lexus for a reason. They're similar. Good looks, cost some money but really can't do shit. Can't haul a thing, can't pull their weight, couldn't handle a little mud without getting stuck, no four wheel drive when the going gets tough, and probably won't go the distance."

When she stopped laughing, she blotted tears. "So, which am I? Helpless, useless, luxury sedan, or dependable ole half-ton?"

"You're a cross-over. You have the looks and feel of an expensive sedan, with the functionality of a four-wheel drive, one ton with dual wheels."

"Well, I can't think of higher praise."

"Damn straight. Glad you can take a compliment."

Laughter and talking passed the time and soon they pulled up to the valet in front of the downtown Cleveland hotel. They walked to the restaurant at the back of the lobby and passed many elegantly dressed people. She'd been there before, knew what to expect, and although John's maneuvering relayed familiarity, she sensed his growing unease. With the fun portion of the evening over, she stood straighter and prepared for the inevitable. A broken ankle from a tumble down some stairs looked better and better.

The last in the party to arrive, the men rose from their seats as they neared the table. His father opened his hand and she placed hers within for a firm squeeze. Receiving a light kiss on her cheek, she said, "Mr. and Mrs. Thunder, thank you for inviting me."

His mother spoke, made eye contact and had a genuine smile. "We're very glad you came."

John seated her next to Robyn, Alex's wife. Conversations resumed as waiter's came forward to pour wine. Settled back against the comfortable chair, she tried to let the tension drain a little. It'd most likely be impossible to enjoy the evening. She hoped to live through it without drawing attention.

Before long, she fell into an old routine, one she'd had years to practice and perfect. She watched her every move and appeared relaxed while staying completely on guard. When she'd been with Adam, she needed to act a certain way. She could perform again for a few hours. She could behave.

Robyn said, motioning toward John, "He's unique. Isn't he?"

"Very," Caila admitted, "but not too different from my brothers. I guess it comes with the territory. You know, working around trucks."

"I'm surprised, and don't take this wrong, but wow, you clean up well."

She laughed. "Thanks. I think."

"What's it like doing what you do? Running a trucking company?"

"Oh, I don't run anything except my poor brothers into the ground."

"You're modest."

"No, just honest."

She listened to conversations around her before Robyn asked, "I'm an only child. So what's it like having four older brothers?"

"Wonderful. Don't get me wrong, we have our moments, but despite some ups and downs, I'm spoiled and love it." She took a sip of her wine and relaxed a little.

"Spoiled?"

"Sure. The youngest and the only girl? I get lots of attention."

The subject changed when Robyn asked, "Do you need any help with the picnic? I've asked and I know the others have too but you keep refusing. We'd really like to help."

"I know, and thanks, but it's handled. I'm using the same vendors from previous years and they're excellent. I'll need help on Saturday, and that's when I'm putting the men to work."

"What's Alex doing?"

"He'll transport people from the parking lot to the lake. He's taking the first shift and then he'll get relief from Paul so he can have some fun. Everyone gets a break to enjoy. After that, he'll rotate from lifeguard to parking lot."

"They said you got burned a few weeks ago. Are you okay?"

"I wasn't really burned, just sort of overly tanned. It's gone now. No big deal."

"Paul said you were on fire."

"I didn't feel it and can't say I remember much. One minute things were smoky and the next John had an extinguisher blasting over us."

John's hand slid over hers and squeezed. When she glanced over, she found him deep in conversation with his parents. Robyn looked down at his hand. "He's a good man."

"He seems to be."

"I've been with Alex ten years and John's never brought a woman to a family function."

She didn't know what to say and blurted out something she instantly regretted. "The poor guy's stuck. He probably felt like he didn't have a choice."

"John? Stuck? You're kidding, right?"

"No."

"Caila, John does as he damn well pleases. If he didn't feel strongly about you, or didn't want you around, you wouldn't be."

"Things are tangled up right now and their business is homeless until next year."

"That's why he wouldn't get involved with you in particular." Her voice dropped further. "Mom and Dad noticed him take your hand."

She was afraid to turn her attention away from Robyn. "I feel sick."

"Why?"

"They don't like me."

"They didn't at first, but they're open-minded. Besides, they want what's best for their sons, especially what's best for John."

"Why John in particular?"

"Truthfully, they'd like him to settle down. They're happily married and think everyone should be." She couldn't help but like Robyn, trust her a little. "That's how poor Alex got stuck with me. They badgered him into it."

"I doubt that. Alex isn't stupid. I'm sure he figured out for himself what he wanted."

"Maybe John has too."

"We haven't known each other very long."

"Neither did Alex and I. For that matter, his parents married after two months."

"Pretty risky business if you ask me."

"John's been around," she said before taking a sip of her wine. "Like I said before, none of the others made it to a family function. I doubt half of them lasted more than a week."

"I guess there were a few women?"

"Some."

"I wonder why he didn't get serious."

"I knew some of the women he dated. The WOW factor never went beyond the looks. He's not a trusting sort of man because of it."

Conversations ceased when John stood. He didn't seem the least uncomfortable as he raised his glass for a toast. Everyone followed. "A toast to our parents. To our mother; a woman who's never too tired or busy to give any-and-

everything to someone in need. And to our father; a man whose patience, guidance and intelligence are a constant source of strength. May we all come together to celebrate a fiftieth anniversary with each of us healthy and happy."

He turned slightly, giving attention to his parents. "We're blessed to have you in our lives. We see the love and respect you have for each other and may we live up to your high standards. Finally—Mom and Dad, we love both of you despite the years of nagging."

Tears gathered in his mother's eyes as everyone laughed. Wine glasses came together and Caila noticed his father pass his mother a handkerchief. Dabbing at her eyes before sipping the wine, she looked at each of the people gathered. When she glanced at Caila, she tilted her head slightly to the side before a pleasant, welcoming smile lit her face. How could she look like that? How could either of his parents stand to have her seated next to John?

Robyn's palm stroked her arm. "See, everything will be fine."

"I see."

"What's the boo-boo face all about?"

"They really must love him to be so nice to me." She forced the smile to return.

"Your father will get used to the idea and accept John too."

She wondered what it'd be like to have even a single parent loving her enough to accept someone questionable in her life like John's parents had. She'd never felt overly deprived because of her brothers. They never made her feel like a burden either. An older, knowledgeable, female figure

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

to go to with problems was probably overrated. When Mr. Thunder addressed her to ask a question, she put on her brightest, most engaging smile.

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Chapter Twenty-One

"See, that wasn't so bad," John said.

"Your family was very kind to me. Just like you've been," Caila replied.

"You think I've been kind?" He locked the kitchen door and turned to face her.

"Sharing your house and family? Yes, you've been wonderful."

He sensed something wrong but couldn't pinpoint what. He didn't like her near silence on the ride home. Or how she fidgeted with her fingers and avoided looking at him. He initially thought the sadness came from the stress of being surrounded by his family.

"There's something else. Why don't you tell me?"

"I've been here a few weeks now taking up your space." She licked her lips, drew in a breath and blurted out the rest. "I found an apartment."

He'd always been the one to walk away. He learned something. The initial response to rejection was anger followed by a drowning feeling. They hadn't talked about the arrangement and he hadn't placed thought behind it either. She came home with him each night, seemed comfortable, and the house no longer felt lonely. "Why?"

"I know you're worried about me staying at work, my brothers are too. But this has to be like a never-ending first date. My stuff's taking up space in your bathroom, and some nights you sit there waiting for me at work when you could be

home or with your family. Your parents know I'm here, and I bet they're not comfortable with this arrangement. I just..."

"You need space," he offered.

"No. Yes. I don't know. It's just we haven't known each other very long, and we're working together right now. I'm afraid..."

"Are your brothers giving you trouble over staying here?"

"No. Questions sometimes, but they mind their own business beyond that. Your family though—how this must look to them."

"I'm thirty-four. They don't question me." Or at least they hadn't to his face. His brothers liked and accepted her. After spending time and watching her, he knew his parents had a different view.

"I'm not homeless."

"I'm sorry I ever said you were."

"I can afford a place. It's just everything happened so fast, I wanted some time to think about where to live."

He slid his shoes off, closed the distance and brought her close. "Is it really so bad staying here with me?"

"No, it's too comfortable, too quick and I want us to have a chance."

"You think if we live together we'd get sick of each other?"

"It's crossed my mind."

The pounding in his chest lessened. Her reasoning wasn't sound but it didn't seem like a good time to tell her. Not in so many words. After living with her, he didn't want to *date* her. Way beyond that stage of a relationship, he prayed she felt the same down deep. "Do I snore?"

"No."

"Do I bitch about your stuff in the bathroom?"

"No, you've been very tolerant."

Tolerant! She really didn't have a clue.

"Then stay with me. We'll get your stuff out of storage and replace my furniture with yours if it'll make you feel more comfortable. We'll put your things where they belong here." *Best I get it out and start confessing.* He cleared his throat. "I want your clothes next to mine in the closet. I want your silk underwear rubbing against mine in the drawer. I want to walk into the bathroom and smell your perfume lingering there."

He bent and tasted her red lips, savoring how smooth they felt. More to be said, he ended the kiss and whispered the rest. "I don't want to go to bed alone. I like turning in the middle of the night to find you warm and naked beside me. Before I sleep, you cradle me between your legs and rock against me until we both come apart. My eyes don't even open in the morning, and I roll over to find you. You're my last thought at night and my first in the morning. Don't take it away."

"John," she began.

"No," he interrupted. He wouldn't lose her. "Not tonight. Please, Caila."

Her arms folded around his neck. Supporting her at the waist, when he straightened, her feet left the floor. Their faces inches apart, he asked, "Please?"

"No," she said before giving him a light kiss with her perfect lips. "We won't talk about it now."

"Do you want me?" He prayed she did.

"More than ever."

Pulled to his chest, he held fast, savoring relief as it pushed anger and misgiving away. Her chin rested on his shoulder giving his lips access to an exposed neck. Her warmth held against him, the faint scent of spicy perfume surrounded him before seeping in.

She shifted, making it easier for him to taste her soft skin. It never took long for her to respond. Even a light touch aroused her. Sharp little nails raked his scalp as fingers threaded into his hair. God he loved when she did that. He also loved her throaty little sounds when he'd use his teeth against her sensitive flesh.

He'd envisioned a slow, calculated seduction that evening. Apparently she had something else in mind. Her lips found his earlobe before the tip of her wet tongue went inside. Overwhelmed by the probing, he grasped first one thigh and then the other, bringing her up until her legs circled him.

"Hold on tight," he whispered.

One arm across her back, the other under her ass, he turned out lights on the way. By the time they reached the bedroom, his head spun from rushing blood. Every step he'd taken forced her to move, rub against him, and he'd grown hard. The problem came when he couldn't decide where to start.

She slid down the front of him and onto her feet. His shaking fingers found the clasp at the back of her neck and worked it lose. Material fell forward and he smoothed it away. Perfect, soft breasts waited. He took one to taste and tease. His palms running over her sides and ass made her sway and

move. Seductively leaning and squirming, she rubbed against him as her nipple grew hard, lengthening from his mouth.

Her hands ran over him, seeking, measuring over clothes he wanted removed. She smelled so damned good. He dropped to his knees and pushed the hem of the dress up. With the thought of her leaving still fresh, he couldn't restrain the urgency to touch all of her, claim every inch.

He ripped the g-string in haste before stripping it away. Wet flesh waited. So lovely. So hot. When his tongue slipped between soft folds of skin, she cried out.

"Too much. Slow down."

Like hell he would. Only fair to make her ache as badly as he did, he tasted and licked, enjoyed and savored without going too far or giving too much. The closer she got to climax, the more lust-filled he became. He knew that when they came together, they'd burn.

After kissing her a final time and drawing back, he looked up to find her skin flushed with warmth. Her small whimpers confirmed a need as great as his. "Take off the dress," he said as he stood.

A fine trembling in her fingers hampered the effort but she eventually managed. He stripped off the suit coat and tie before throwing them a foot away. She helped him unfasten his shirt, and ripped two buttons in haste. She spread it and kissed his chest. She was all over him, kissing, licking, teasing.

Jesus, if she bites me again I'll come. "Do it, Caila. You get me so hot when you get wild like this."

"Please," she said, biting him gently, opening the closure of his pants. "Can't wait."

He reached back and turned the chair by the desk. Her trembling hands pushed the pants down and she urged him back toward the chair. He sat. With shoes and thigh-high nylons still in place, he grabbed her hips when she straddled his lap. He helped guide her as she made her descent.

Her body gripped him with slickened flesh as the scent of female arousal took him to the brink. He yelled out and his neck went against the back of the chair when she captured the last inch. Her fingernails tested his shoulders as he learned how passionate a woman could be and how much strength she could have in her quest for pleasure.

He suffered, held back, waited for her until it happened. His vision went dark as she gripped him in climax. "Damn it, Caila, don't stop."

Mindlessly driven by the promise of release, his hips drove upward, working in counterpoint until he erupted. She knew he was coming and made it good by getting rougher, more demanding. He fought the urge to cry out harsh words to convey the intense pleasure.

When it ended and he felt near dead, she came forward to lazily taste and touch his chest. A twinge of guilt surfaced. He hadn't waited long enough to fully undress either of them. Why did they always get so vicious with each other? He'd wanted to go slow, especially with her wrapped in the delicate dress and sexy heels. And the thigh-high nylons with the g-string panties! He promised himself, thought about it most of the evening, and had it mapped out in his mind. That was

before her wet tongue went into his ear which had both of them ripping clothes.

Her nipples were no longer pink. A blush from his mouth surrounded the hard points. Her hair was slightly mussed but still perfect. Her makeup still all in place, he ran his hands over her thighs, feeling first lace and then silk. She was a person you'd want as a friend, and a woman any man would want as a lover. He suddenly couldn't imagine what he'd done in the years prior to her. He'd existed. Period.

Ready to take things slower, he helped her to her feet. When he stood, the pants slid down and were kicked away. She reached to remove a stocking but he stopped her. They could stay and so could the sexy little sandals.

After placing her on the bed with infinite care, he looked for marks. If she didn't have any then, they'd surface by morning. He swore it'd be the last time a careless nip or too urgent a kiss would take a toll on her skin. The small nail wounds on him healed fast, and until they did, were a sweet reminder of how utterly perfect she could be.

He no sooner placed a knee on the bed before she opened herself and welcomed him. Held by slender arms against her warm skin, he slid flawlessly back into her body. They were made to come together like this. Feeling better able to keep himself in check, he ventured they'd finally have the evening he originally envisioned. Long sighs surrounded him as her body stretched to receive him. He took the time to kiss and touch, while memorizing the color of her eyes. So blue and then darker as desire grew. It amazed him how quickly her passion rose, how much she seemed to feel. Her jaw

clenched, eyelids squeezed shut, before the incredible expression of ecstasy bathed her face. Red lips parted for deep gasps as she twisted and moaned, trusting him to make it good, make it last.

She settled, grew tired but it wasn't enough. She needed more, they both did. He wanted to stay inside of her until she understood how perfect they were together. Much later as he found completion and surged against her womb, he said, "Don't leave me."

"I won't. Oh, John," she gasped, her words catching. "I won't."

He believed her, knew she wasn't careless with promises. More words formed in his mind and in his heart. He'd never said them to a lover because he'd never had one. He'd been with women and had sex. The difference completely clear then, he needed to tell her the rest. "Caila!" he cried, as another wave of release went deeply into her. She kissed him. Breathing hard but more able to say the words, he whispered, "I love you."

"I love you too." A sharp contraction took her and she unraveled in his arms. "So much."

He kept her there, on her back with her legs wrapped around his hips, her bottom slightly raised to give fate a chance. A week overdue for an injection, she'd missed the appointment and also hadn't gone since.

If they conceived, she needed to know and understand he'd keep her safe and love her.

For as long as it lasts.

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Chapter Twenty-Two

At five in the morning, John stood nursing a cup of coffee as Caila pulled people together to make things happen. With the help of seven brothers and a number of vendors, the area around the lake began taking shape for the annual picnic. He loved watching her work. He would've pulled his hair out or at least lost his temper with the constant questions and confusion. She remained a rational and organized ring leader and the craziness didn't bother her in the least.

The party hit full-tilt by five that evening. Workers still arrived, and some who'd been there since eleven in the morning, filed out to catch a ride to the cars. The casually dressed, rented security guards tried to blend in. No one commented on their presence and it didn't dampen the fun.

People relaxed, played, swam, and ate. Never having the opportunity to view employees outside the work atmosphere, he took mental notes of issues his men never spoke of. Justin's daughter had an artificial leg, taken from an accident. No wonder Tom raced out the door every evening. The kid was young, his wife younger and pregnant. Ken never said a word about his wife being ill. John needed to supply better health insurance and a plan that didn't have a pre-existing condition clause in order to better care for those who drew a paycheck. The observations were endless and eye opening.

People changed as the hour grew late, the afternoon sun starting its descent. Swimmers traded wet swimwear for jeans and t-shirts in changing tents. The band set up to play

and families took spots on the grass. They gathered for the main event. Caila got the kids in position and he noticed again how his little seven year old niece, Allyson followed her. Painfully shy, it took her a long time to warm up to people. Caila managed to win her over in minutes.

When the *Chicken Dance*, a popular tune played at weddings began, Four Sons workers laughed. Apparently, McKenna employees knew what to expect and clapped in unison for the small performers. Little tykes from diapers right up to kids nearly ten, lined the grass and faced the audience.

The kids laughed and had a ball jiggling, wiggling, clapping and stomping. The show lasted a full five minutes before they took a bow. More than three hundred proud parents and relatives gave them a standing ovation. Allyson ran to him after for a kiss and some hugs. She practically burst from excitement. "Uncle John, did you see me? Huh, did you?"

He brushed long black strands of hair away from her face and cuddled her close. "I sure did. I watched you and Bronson the whole time."

"I won these beads," she said, holding four strands out from around her neck. "Our team won volleyball and horseshoes and racing and a treasure hunt. Caila said I have invisible wings on my back that make me run fast."

He noticed each of the kids had four strands of beads and wondered how she'd managed to make the teams win equally.

"Will you keep her, Uncle?"

He'd been watching Caila talk to parents claiming children. She'd managed more than thirty kids throughout the day.

"Sorry, sweetie, I didn't hear you."

She twisted in his arms to look where he did. "Will you keep her?"

"Who?" he asked, still only partially listening.

"Caila." She gained his full attention by then.

"What do you mean, will I keep her?"

"Will you marry her? I saw you kiss her."

"You did?"

"When she came to get a hamburger. Grandma and Grandpa saw too."

"Since when do you spy on your uncle?" he said tickling her.

After she stopped laughing, she laid her head on his shoulder. "You did it in front of everyone, I wasn't spying. A lot of people saw you."

It suited him fine, making the relationship more public. "I like her, Allyson."

"Me too. I wouldn't mind calling her Aunt Kay like her other kids do."

"You mean her nieces and nephews?"

"Yes, that's what they call her. Do you call her Kay or Caila?"

"I call her funny face," he said, tickling her again. "And ma'am. That's what I call her."

"You do not, you call her *honey*."

"You are one observant little princess. I'll tell you a secret, if you don't repeat it."

"Oh, I would never tell. Between me and you, forever and always." She crossed her fingers.

"I like her a whole bunch."

"So, will you keep her?"

"You don't *keep* another person, Allyson. You treat them well, tell them and show them how much you care, and hope they feel the same. That way the other person just stays without all that *keeping* business. Get me?"

Allyson ducked her head against his neck as Liam joined them. "Your uncle's a very smart man. Caila's my sister and I wouldn't put up with someone keeping her. Anyone who wants to be around her has to share."

Allyson straightened. "You're her brother?"

"Her biggest, older brother."

"She said you let her play with trucks and with a computer and stuff like that."

"We sure did until she grew and finished school. Now she works with us and looks after us. She's the best baby sister a guy could have."

"Oh, but she's a grown up. She's not a baby."

He looked John in the eye, smiled and gave her a little pat. "I noticed. I'm glad your uncle noticed too. I think I might be able to stand it if she likes him back."

Liam walked away when Alex moved toward them. "Allyson," he said. "You can't expect Uncle to hold you all night long."

Alex reached for her and she cuddled tighter against John. "Sure she can. My arms were aching for a little girl. She

hasn't stopped long enough to give me a hug, too busy running around with that pack of kids."

Her playing all day without seeking out family was unusual. It appeared she might be making progress with her shyness. A short distance away, Caila turned summersaults with a few toddlers. It occurred to him maybe Allyson simply found the right mix of people to play with. He couldn't be more pleased—Caila liking kids.

Bronson, Allyson's younger brother came up and tugged on his jeans. "Well, little buddy; you want a view from up here, too?"

He nodded and John scooped him into his other arm. "You don't normally stop by unless you want to play. No time for this sissy stuff for you."

At four, the little guy didn't like lap time or hugs. He wanted to get down and dirty, play war, rough house and tear through the yard. John looked at his sleepy eyes and started swaying, a bundle in each arm. Alex rubbed his son's head as they turned to watch the band warm up.

Mannis wandered close with his daughter sleeping peacefully against his chest. John decided to ask a question that became more important with each passing minute. "Who's Caila talking to?"

Mannis turned to see. A glint of something distinctly unpleasant darkened his features. "That would Adam, Caila's ex."

"Why's he here?" John kept his voice neutral.

"You'll see." To Alex he added, "I think John's doing a fine job holding your kids. You might want to leave them right

where they are for a minute until he has a nicer expression on his face."

"Yep, the kids are comfortable," Alex agreed.

The three of them watched as the tall, blonde, well built man took a step closer, crowding Caila. The casual touching he seemed to think appropriate made John tense. And the closer he got, the more John glared.

"You uncomfortable, John?" Mannis asked.

"I'm getting there."

"Then let's take the edge off."

A high pitched short whistle came from Mannis which gained the immediate attention of Liam and Cam. Mannis motioned his head slightly in Caila's direction. They turned, saw Caila and smiled before walking toward her.

When they reached her and took a spot on either side, Adam took two casual steps back. John asked, "You have problems with him before?"

"Yeah, but probably not what you're thinking." Still swaying, the kids almost asleep, he turned slightly toward Mannis.

"We didn't like who Baby Girl was when he was around. He's older than her and the kid has charisma. Goofy blonde hair, goatee, tattoos and earrings make women interested. What else he does cinches it for him. She was young and impressed, and he liked the fact that she was young and impressionable. He wanted a trophy hanging on his arm, not necessarily someone strong-willed like Caila."

"What happened?"

"She spent a few years growing up, playing dress up and hanging with him. The more confidence she got, the less he appealed to her. I don't think the little punk ever figured out what happened. He dumps women, not the other way around." The comment hit a nerve and John's teeth gnashed together. "He likes people who follow and she cut bait and left. He still sends her flowers and notes, letting her know what she gave up."

"Some ego." John knew his wasn't that big.

"I suppose he's entitled, but look at her. A guy could hope."

Adam left her and went up on stage. The band started playing and John groaned, knowing the music. His voice a little louder to be heard over the band, he asked, "She dated the lead singer of Institution?"

"Adam Riley."

"And he plays your company picnic."

"To see Caila."

"And she invites him."

"His tickets sell for lots of money. He does this gig free."

"And she gets to see him."

"She puts up with him for free music."

John stared as another wagon full of people rolled up. Apparently some of the workers came late for the band. Galen shouted from the tractor, "Another load on the next trip. You might want to stoke up the grill."

Alex took his sleeping daughter. Mannis smiled and looked from John to Caila. "Such a scowl on your once happy face."

You do see my sister over there drooling, wishing she could still be with him, don't you?"

Caila moved between people, ushering them forward as she made her way to the back of the crowd. She picked up little ones to give them a hug before giving them back to parents. On her way, she scooped up Liam's son and bounced him on her hip as she walked. Astonished, he said, "She's not interested."

"She likes the music. Actually, she probably still likes Adam. He can be a charming shit when he wants. She doesn't like Adam too close though. As a matter of fact, she's pretty funny about most men getting too close." John drew a breath and let it go. Anger drained with it. "I asked but didn't get an answer from her, so I'll try you. How long will she be staying at your place?" Mannis asked.

Alex raised his eyebrows, probably curious himself, but not stupid enough to ask.

"As long as she wants."

Mannis laughed. "I'll clue you in on something, John, and God only knows why because I could get a lot of mileage out of it myself. You could have a better grip on yourself when it comes to my sister."

"What do you mean?"

"The guys see it doesn't take much to wind you up when it comes to Caila. They might use that to have a little fun at your expense."

"Oh, that probably wouldn't be such a great idea."

"I know that, and you know that, but give some overworked men an avenue to have some laughs at the

boss's expense, and anything can happen. It's just a suggestion."

It didn't take Alex kicking him to understand. Mannis actually made sense and helped him avoid some potential grief down the road. "Thanks for watching my back. I get it. If I get stupid, remind me."

"We all will," Alex said.

People started dancing and drinking as the band grew louder. She never once mentioned who she'd dated. She'd also never mentioned he'd be there. The guy could sing, had a great stage presence, probably had more money than both companies put together, but was too stupid to give Caila a little freedom to be herself.

Everything could've been different if the kid gave her some room. He'd need to remember that. Maybe her wanting an apartment wasn't such a bad idea after all. She claimed she wanted to give him back his space. He'd convinced her he liked things the way they were. They'd talk again, and the next time, he wouldn't do what Allyson accused. Trying to *keep* her would probably be the one thing that'd make her run off.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Caila sat up and rubbed her eyes. Slivers of sunlight crept through the drawn shades and she checked the clock. At ten in the morning, they'd only been asleep a few hours. She swung her legs over the side of the bed and saw the note next to the clock.

McKenna truck broke. Towing it in. Lexus in the garage—use it. Sleep, eat and sleep. DO NOT use my car to go to work. Use our car to shop if bored. Miss you already. Love, John.

She was still tired but didn't want to lie in the bed alone, so she showered and dressed. Brian called during the picnic and said her father asked that she visit. He hadn't wanted to see any of them until now. With his health deteriorating, she couldn't deny the request. Excellent around-the-clock nurses cared for him, and despite his bad behavior, she regretted not seeing him.

After arriving at the large house, she used her key to unlock the door, and closed it quietly before walking down the hall. The grandfather clock chimed and startled her. The last several years in the house hadn't been pleasant. She needed to get a grip. She doubted he could terrorize anyone in his current condition.

She opened the doors to the study. Brian said her father had taken up residence there because the trips up and down the stairs had become impossible. She found a nurse sitting in the wing backed chair. The middle-aged woman with a

pleasant smile silently greeted her. As Caila crept toward the bed, she asked, "Dad?"

His eyes opened. "Caila." An oxygen machined huffed and puffed, feeding the tubing under his nose. His eyes followed her and she wasn't sure what to expect. She exhaled and tried to appear relaxed. "You look good, girl."

"You too, Dad. Are you comfortable?"

"Sure, sure," he said before catching his breath. "How'd the party go?"

"Fine. No rain."

"Liam's woman?"

"She's good. The baby's growing. She'll be here right after Christmas."

"Cam?"

"He and Eva are okay. The kids are healthy and smart."

"Galen?"

"The best mechanic we have."

"My company?" His neglect of Mannis wasn't unusual but it still hurt.

"We had a record month."

"How much?"

"I don't have the net figures yet because of the picnic."

"Lazy bitch."

"Sorry, Dad."

His pallor was disturbing. He closed his eyes as he drew deep breaths. Obviously, there wasn't much time. No matter how cruel he'd been, a father was a father, and it hurt to watch him suffer.

Scared she'd upset him too much, she said, "I'll go now. Rest. I'll come back later."

"Stay."

"Are you sure?"

"That stupid bear."

"I know, don't worry about it."

"Had to."

"I know, to make me grow up."

She forgave him for burning Mamma Bear. It happened eighteen years ago. It didn't hurt any more.

"That boy."

"Mannis?"

"Too weak."

Finally, an answer after an eternity of wondering why he'd singled out Mannis for so many beatings. *To make him tough.* Her brother became strong because of anger and hatred over the abuse. She couldn't forgive her father. She also couldn't tell him what a monster he'd been.

"Big degree, little brains."

"That's me, Dad. I needed the education to make up for being stupid."

"Slut."

Another direct hit, but he knew it would be. She dated Adam and even before anything physical happened between them, he'd accused her. It didn't matter. She was stronger than a frail, ill man. Such hatred he carried, such unhappiness. He'd summoned her to vent and she wondered how long she could take it.

The nurse came to stand beside her and placed an arm across her back. She received more compassion from a stranger than from a father. That wasn't anything new.

"Stupid bitch."

"Dad?"

"Dumb, stupid bitch."

"He doesn't know what he's saying," the nurse offered.

"Yes he does. Can he have something for pain? His hand is over his heart and he's sweating."

"I'll get it."

"Dad?"

"Stand and take it."

She'd been trained to do exactly that. Too many years of acting a particular way in certain situations didn't stop because she willed it.

"I'm right here but I'll leave if you get any more upset. I won't be the reason you die."

"You are."

"I didn't make your heart weak." She held her breath, hadn't meant to say anything about his ill-health. A year ago, if she would've uttered anything remotely similar, he would've countered the remark with a demonstration.

"You did. Killed your mother too."

"Cancer took her."

"You."

Something new added to her list of wrongdoings. Did he really believe it? Did she?

"I'm going now, Dad. You can sleep and you'll feel better."

The nurse gave him a shot in the arm and Caila backed away from the bed.

"Caila?"

She wanted to leave but couldn't. She also wouldn't turn from a wounded and dying animal, even if it'd bitten her in the past. "I'm here, Dad."

His hand opened and she felt sick. Her skin grew cold because of his simple, silent request. He hadn't touched her in years, and never with affection. Until recently, he hadn't really hurt her. Not physically. She swallowed before making herself close the gap. His hand remained open. Hesitantly, she touched his palm. His fingers gently captured hers.

Her eyes closed as she waited for pain. He held her lightly while his thumb caressed the top of her hand. She'd waited so many years for a pat on the head, yearning for a small affirmation that she mattered. She remained completely still as he settled into what appeared a deep sleep. The nurse went around the bed and placed the stethoscope in her ears. Seconds ticked by as Caila watched his still chest, peaceful expression and non-flickering eyelids.

The quarter hour chimed from the large grandfather clock and the tick-tock of the pendulum became deafening. The nurse removed the stethoscope before bringing the sheet up close to his face. The woman spared a glance and offered a sympathetic smile before slowly shaking her head. *Dead? Gone?*

Her fingers unclenched but his seemed to hold fast. He wasn't breathing, wasn't moving, yet he wouldn't let go.

"Dear? I'm so sorry. He's finally at peace," the nurse said.

Caila couldn't reply because thoughts started swarming her mind. He died virtually homeless because she'd sold the house to Brian to settle a portion of the debt. *Stupid bitch.*

Slut. She stayed with John, made love with him, Martin Thunder's eldest son. Is a daughter who sleeps with a father's enemy a slut?

Murderer. You killed your mother. She didn't! Cancer killed her. You don't get cancer from childbirth. *God damn it, Caila, you killed your mother!*

She heard familiar voices, her family condemning her as the *tic-tock* of the clock grew louder and louder. *I thought I told you to stay put! For the love of God, Baby Girl, what did you do? Don't bleed and die or I'll have to put you in the garbage can.*

She couldn't get her hand away. He wouldn't let go. *Get away from there, Baby Girl! That bear isn't your mother, you idiot. Don't touch that. Jesus, Caila, where's your common sense? Stupid bitch! Brush that hair before I cut it off. You're where...the police station! God damn it, Caila! Slut. God damn it, Caila. You stupid bitch! God damn it, Caila!*

The last place John wanted to see was the inside of the house where Caila grew up. He'd no sooner finished unhooking the disabled tractor trailer when Cam called. He didn't get details, just an urgent request go to the McKenna family home. Not wasting time switching out vehicles, he got in the big rig and left.

After clearing the gates surrounding the property, he pulled up and eased the truck to a stop before jumping from the cab. He walked past the line of cars and found his Lexus

closest to the house. Mannis and Barb stood outside the front door, each holding a child.

"You didn't waste time getting here. Thanks, John," Mannis said.

"What's the problem? Where's Caila?"

"She's the problem. She's inside."

"You all right?" John asked. Mannis looked pasty and more pissed off than normal.

"Yeah, we wanted some air. Go in, you'll find her."

He went down the hall and greeted Caila's *sisters*. They pointed him to where Cam and Galen stood next to a set of open doors. Inside, he saw the hospital bed with a body under a sheet.

"John," Galen said, "thanks. She's been asking for you. Take the hall and follow the stairs up. You'll find them."

He left and made it to the winding staircase. After reaching the upper landing, he saw Liam standing with a woman down the hall. When he neared, Liam extended his hand, looking relieved. They shook as Liam said, "She asked for you."

"Where?" John asked, refusing to get upset before he knew exactly what happened.

"The doctor's in with her now," Liam replied. He gestured toward the woman. "John, this Peggy, one of Dad's home care nurses. She was explaining what happened with Dad and Caila."

Whatever took place couldn't be good, Caila needing a doctor and her father obviously not doing too well himself. All sorts of thoughts raced through his mind but he put a damper on them.

"The poor woman," Peggy said. "Mr. McKenna hasn't talked much, but when she came in, he managed some brief words. At first he asked about people. I'm afraid he became delusional and said some pretty awful things. She seemed fine; ignoring the names he called her. That's why I didn't pay more attention. She was sympathetic and understanding; like she knew he didn't mean any of it."

"More like she expected it," Liam said, almost mumbling the words.

"Yes, it was like she knew he'd be that way. She was holding his hand when he passed. It's when I brought the sheet up that she went out cold. I'm sorry, but I'm not new at hospice care, and she really seemed fine. Please tell me she doesn't have a medical condition that would've brought this on."

"No, she's healthy."

"Thank heavens, because I hesitated before calling an ambulance. When she wouldn't come to, I was about to place the call when Mr. McKenna's doctor arrived. She woke up then and starting asking for all of you."

The door opened and a thin, older man came out. Liam extended his hand. "Doctor, I'm her brother, Liam, and this is John."

They shook hands.

"How is she?" John asked.

"Her heart rate, breathing, blood pressure and temperature are normal. She's much better now. I think she simply had a good shock. Death isn't easy. You'd be surprised how much of this sort of thing happens. If you'd feel better,

you could bring her down to the hospital for a night of observation. I'd be happy to get her directly admitted so you wouldn't spend hours in the emergency room."

"We'll get a look at her first. Thanks for taking care of her, and everything you did for our father," Liam said.

Liam entered the room and John followed. She sat on the edge of the bed with her arms crossed. She gripped herself with trembling hands. Her face held no color and when she looked up; her eyes were huge, dazed and vacant.

He sat on one side of her, Liam on the other. Liam touched her face. John placed his hand over one of hers and was shocked to feel her cold skin. She'd been tied up and left on a roof overnight and hadn't looked this bad. Maybe a night in a hospital wouldn't hurt.

Liam pulled a throw from the end of the bed, shook it out and wrapped it around her shoulders.

She shivered and drew it close. "Thank you," She said. He wanted to ask how she felt, but knew she'd definitely been better. "Can I go home now?"

"How about if you stay for a little while? The others are downstairs and we won't leave you alone," Liam replied.

"All right." Her eyes scanned the room and the shaking got worse.

"What did he say to you, Baby Girl?"

Her gaze became fixed on the closet doors. Her lips moved slowly but she didn't utter a sound. She appeared to be terrified and John couldn't bear seeing it. He stood and helped her to her feet.

"She wants to go home. I'm taking her," he said.

Liam stood and brushed hair from her face, placing it behind an ear. "Do you want to go with John?"

"Yes," she said, her shoulders moving beneath the blanket. "Safe."

"You're safe. He's gone." She kept staring at the closet. "What's wrong, sweetheart? There's nothing in there, you know that."

"Should've kept the stupid bitch locked up. Killed her mother, then her father. Stupid slut." Her chest rose and fell, the blanket moving with her as she gazed at Liam. She looked hurt, confused and shook her head as if denying what she'd just uttered.

Liam's expression mirrored the anger and adrenaline rushing through John. What did the bastard say to her? Too bright and sensible to come up with crap like that on her own; he believed he knew. Duane couldn't just die and leave them alone; he'd obviously given her a few final wounds to remember him by.

"Liam?" he asked, also slightly concerned with the aggression on her brother's face. Caila appeared emotionally crippled and Liam didn't seem far behind.

"Get her out of here, John. We'll stop by after we finish." His voice was too quiet, and too calm.

John glanced back one final time and saw Liam's chest grow large and tight, his hands bunching into fists. Half way down the stairs, John heard the door slam shut. A cry of rage accompanied by the sound of breaking wood echoed through the house. Caila jerked and turned, but he kept her heading down the stairs, making sure she didn't trip or lose balance.

Again and again something beat against wood until a loud crack resonated.

He held her as the others rushed by. She appeared unaware of the commotion, and the closer they got to the front door, the quicker she moved. Cam's wife, Eva, ran out of the house and said, "Mannis, help Cam and Galen. Liam's lost it."

Caila's legs gave way and she sat down in the grass, reaching for her niece. Mannis handed his daughter to her and left. Caila still looked pale, but at least her eyes appeared more alert.

"Would you help? I'll stay put, right here," she said.

With both Barb and Eva there, he went back in the house and up the stairs. She'd be fine for a few minutes, and from the sound coming from the second floor, it might take more than three men to get Liam into a rational state.

By the time he arrived, all four were winded but still going strong. Only one went at Liam at a time, first trying to talk, before blocking punches and then throwing some of their own. Firmly believing that family matters should be settled by family, he waited until an outsider might be needed.

John grimaced and cringed with the force some of the punches landed. He'd had physical altercations with his own brothers, but nothing compared to what the McKennas dished out to each other. A lot of hostility flowed through the room at the moment, and he couldn't understand where it came from. They typically respected each other.

After a few minutes, he grasped what he thought might be happening. Undoubtedly Liam was out of control and couldn't

hold back his rage. The others took turns taking a jab at him, offering a target to vent. With bloody marks on all of them, he finally glimpsed where most of it came from. Liam's hands. They were keeping him from pounding more wood. *Idiots!*

They probably needed to finish in their own way, but he'd been asked to help and would. "Liam," he said.

Liam turned to him. Before he could draw his arm back, John stepped close, swung his leg and swiped Liam's out from under him. Two hundred pounds of exhausted fury headed toward the floor. John barely caught him, trying to slow the descent.

John had Liam pinned in seconds. Despite the recent exertion, he felt Liam tense and knew what would happen. "Um, boys," John said, struggling to keep him restrained. "Let's make sure he stays down until his brain starts working."

They pounced right before Liam got serious about getting up. It took a lot of muscle to hold him but they managed. He remembered hearing once that a crazy person could be stronger than someone rational. He knew it for a fact just then.

The others effectively held him as John rolled to his side and came to his knees. The remnants of wooden closet doors littered the room. Mannis held down Liam's right hand which looked like raw meat. John said, "Turn it over and let's see the damage."

He winced at the sight of blood and bone. "Until he's worn out, keep that hand down. It's bad enough."

The room filled with the sound of grunting and heavy breathing. Liam jerked, and a loud *crack* made John turn. As Galen crashed to the floor, he yelled, "Jesus, John, you think you could help!"

John moved over Liam, put a knee on his wrist and settled his weight. From what he could see, Liam's left hand appeared in better shape than the other. Probably not broken, he'd be hard-pressed to use it for a long time.

John started releasing pressure as Liam calmed. Able to tell by the lessened tension in his body, Liam gave in. *About damn time.*

"Feeling better?" John asked.

The others released their hold, but stayed close.

"Yeah, thanks. I feel great," Liam replied.

They all sat back and let Liam lay there and catch his breath.

Cam made an agonizing face as he straightened his right leg out. "Dad got Caila one last time? Is that what this was all about?"

"Sure, and she was stupid enough to come over here by herself," Liam replied.

"Don't start that bullshit, Liam," Galen said. "He didn't ask for just any of us. He asked for her. You know what she expected when she showed up."

Silence. Breathing. Mannis said, "And he got all of us. He gave it to her, and you've got some broken hands, Galen's going to have a black eye, Cam's not going to walk right for a few days, and you son of a bitch, you loosened one of my teeth."

"Christ," Liam said, sitting up, resting his useless hands on his knees. "I'm sorry."

"Too bad you didn't use your head on those doors. You need your hands to drive and we all know you can do it without brains."

With deflated anger, Liam said, "It was the doors or Dad. And folks definitely wouldn't think I was right if I beat him now."

"Shit," Cam said, something apparently dawning. "It's over."

John watched as they became utterly still. Each looked disbelieving and then relieved. The tension evaporated. How could one man cause so much negative emotion? To have his sons feel such relief from his death told its own story.

Galen looked at Liam. "John can take Caila home. Mannis can take you to the hospital to get your hands sewn up while me and Cam stay with Brian to make arrangements."

Mannis asked John, "Do you want one of us to go with you? God knows what he said to her."

John wiped the blood from his hands onto his jeans before he got off the floor. "We'll be fine. I'll give you a call later. And she's taking a few days off. She needs a break."

"She'll be at work tomorrow," Mannis said.

"I doubt it." She'd been through enough. He'd make sure she'd get some rest.

"A hundred says she'll be there before noon."

"You're sick."

"No, I just know Baby Girl. Give it some time, John and you'll figure her out."

"Don't take the bet, John," Galen said. "Although I don't know why I'm stopping you. If you would've knocked Liam down thirty seconds earlier, my eye wouldn't be swelling shut."

"She's staying home." *What the hell is wrong with them? This isn't something to joke about.*

Mannis smiled. "Put your money where your mouth is. A hundred comes my way if she's in the shop before noon."

"You're on." Anger made him do it.

All four brothers laughed. Caila would listen to reason. Hell, she'd listen to him. After falling over and in a state of shock, she damn well *better* take a few days to rest.

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Chapter Twenty-Four

"How long has it been since you've had a vacation?" John asked, sitting across the table from Caila.

The waitress stopped by and poured more coffee. Caila was ready to go to work and he appeared unconcerned with the time of day. Past ten-thirty in the morning, she knew their respective brothers would be pulling double duty and her leg bounced in anxiety. They'd eaten breakfast at the small restaurant and he sat slumped in the booth like nothing mattered.

"Vacation? I don't know. When was the last time you had one?"

"Probably six or seven years ago I took a week off."

"Yeah? Where did you go?"

"To the hospital. Appendix."

"Is that where you got the scar?"

"Yep."

Since he wasn't in a hurry, she took advantage. "What about the one on your shoulder?"

"I raced a drag bike for a while."

"Crash?"

"No, nothing like that. A hot exhaust got me." Without phones or people interrupting, his undivided attention unnerved her a little after how she'd acted the day before. "Now will you answer my question? What about a vacation—when was your last one?"

"I take time every year to get away."

"Yeah? When? You haven't budged from that office since I met you."

"I usually go to the Good Guy's Rod Show in Columbus and then we do an overnight to Michigan once a year for a NASCAR race. I try to ride some of the smaller local bike competitions. Oh, and we usually run a few cars at the fair in the derby."

"Demolition derby?"

"Yep, it's a great way to relieve tension."

"You play pit crew for your brothers?"

"No, they're my pit crew."

"No," he said, staring at her. She thought he'd be shockproof by now.

"Sure, why not?"

"They strap you into a car and let you crash into people."

"We all build the cars. I strap myself in and get a year's worth of frustration out in mere minutes. It's safe, fun and the other drivers are great."

Well, what put the angry look on his face? Poor, John. Happy one minute, upset the next. She really needed to get to work. She wanted to finalize the caterer's for that evening and finish making arrangements.

"What happened yesterday?" he asked.

She probably owed him an explanation, but wasn't sure herself why she'd gotten so confused. "He asked for me, I went, we talked, he died."

"You went to him expecting an apology."

"No," she said, stirring sweetener and cream into the coffee. "Maybe. I'm not sure. I had no real expectation other

than a few minutes of quiet with him. Brian said he wasn't talking very much. I hoped—well, I hoped I could go and maybe see regret in his eyes, or, I guess I thought there'd be more time."

"Did you go to forgive him?"

"No. I felt bad he'd been with strangers since he threw me out."

"He did it, not you. He chose the way he spent his last weeks."

"I know. I also remember how important it was for my mother to have us close when she died. Two different people, I guess." She looked down at her plate. She hoped her mother found a happy place in the after-life. Not remembering their father ever hitting her, Caila distinctly remembered his absence the last weeks as her mother struggled and fought the pain. She called out for him and he never came.

"Are you sure Mannis got everything you wanted from the house?" She put the fuzzy memories aside and found him gazing at her, an empathetic expression on his face.

"He said he did when he called this morning. There's nothing more we want. Brian can auction off what's left."

"I don't see how they could've gotten everything in a few hours."

"It probably took minutes."

"How old were you when you left home?"

"I don't know, maybe nine or ten. Liam took me and I stayed with him and Galen. Liam married and I moved in with Cameron. Galen got his own place. When Cameron married, I

barged in on Mannis. I grew up and got my own place before poor Galen had to put up with me."

"What did Mannis get from the house for you?"

"A box."

"What's in it?"

"Contraband treasures." She smiled, remembering how careful they'd been to hide the items from their father. It probably seemed weird to an outsider. She shrugged her shoulders in resignation, realizing she should probably explain. "Some kids have security blankets or a favorite stuffed animal. We each had a box with things we needed."

"What did yours have?"

She remembered every piece of junk. "A tiny set of stuffed bears. Four boys and a little girl. When Mamma Bear got burned up, Mannis bought them for me."

"What happened to your bear?"

"Horrible thing. She committed suicide by jumping in the fireplace." He didn't seem amused so she clarified. "My father got rid of her. I was too attached and wouldn't grow up as long as she was around. One day, she wasn't."

"What else is in the box?"

"A plastic aspirin bottle filled with pills. One of them put candy pills in it and told me they were magic, and if I chewed one whenever I got upset, I'd feel good in five minutes. It worked every time and no matter how many I ate, there'd always be more. I was a pretty bright kid, huh."

"Sounds like you all found a way to cope. Anything else?"

"A picture of my mother. A magic card that opens doors...don't ask. Keys to the Whitehouse so I could get in

when Liam became President. My lucky charms which were odd colored stones. A voodoo doll complete with hat pins. Oh, and there's a handful of gold doubloons in case I ever needed money. They probably came from a bubble gum machine but I liked the weight, the shine and how they sounded in my hands. They made me feel rich until I got old enough to know better."

A crust of toast looked appealing and she picked it from the plate and nibbled on the end. She remembered something else and said, "Oh, and my hair. It took us hours, but Galen sat with me while we lined it up, tied one end, braided it and put a ribbon on the other end. I was heartbroken when my dad cut it. I was a strange kid."

John's expression bothered her and she tried to think about what she'd said from his perspective. "Oh my God, how all that sounded! I'm sorry, I didn't think." Her fingertips rubbed her temples before she said, "My brain isn't wired to my mouth this morning."

He reached across the table and opened his hands. Once her palms settled against his, he said, "Don't apologize, I asked and you answered."

"But it sounds so creepy and weird like I grew up in a cardboard box or something. You saw the house. Compared to most places, it was a mansion."

"You lived in a house without toys, without love and grew up in fear."

"You have it all wrong. I got more love and understanding from one of my brothers than most people get from two

parents in a lifetime. You heard about my arrest record. I was spoiled rotten."

He appeared to be thinking. She didn't feel what she'd said required so much thought. "What did you have? You probably didn't have a box full of junk, so what kinds of things do you still have from your childhood?"

"Sparring gear, wrestling gear, football gear mostly. Albums rammed with pictures, most of which you'll never see, so don't ask my mom about it. Ever." She couldn't help smile. "An attic full of first-this, and first-that type stuff."

"Like what?"

"Christening blanket, first sleeper, first pair of jeans. Honey, the list is endless. There's weird stuff too, like body parts."

"No!"

"All of our teeth are rattling around somewhere in little glass bottles. She saved first haircuts, the crappy picture I made her in first grade, every trophy accompanied by hours, days, weeks and months of video tape. She even has the cast from when I broke an arm. I was in third grade. I bet that smells."

"How wonderful. Did you have a stuffed animal?"

"Hell no, I slept with model tow trucks. You don't get to be a bastard playing with cute, fuzzy things."

"So the pink bear on your desk when I first met you wasn't yours?"

He glared and she laughed. "No, the bear wasn't mine. I had a lamb. Satisfied?"

"Really?"

"Really. I guess I carried her around so much that one day her poor little head fell off. Mom reattached it, but she gave me the creeps after that. She's probably cocooned somewhere in the attic with the rest of it."

"I bet you were a sweet kid."

"Yeah, so I've been told."

She pictured a small little boy with a girl lamb that he drug around until he wore it out. He wasn't always so tough and confident. She wondered when the changes came and how many times a little kid with a lamb would have to get hurt before he turned into John.

"I have one more question, honey. Answer and I'll leave you alone."

"Uh, oh. Sounds serious."

"It is. With your father being the type of person he was, how did you take the company over?"

"Great question but it has a complicated answer. You sure you want to know?"

"I asked," he said before sipping coffee.

"He barely showed up at work anymore, his health going downhill. We didn't want him there either because he caused trouble. We made him an offer he couldn't refuse. He titled everything to us and we gave him half the net profit at the end of each quarter. Dad divided the land years before and kept the parcel you're building on free and clear. We re-mortgaged, consolidated and invested. The company also paid his living expenses such as health insurance, life insurance, utilities, property taxes, etc."

"That's what he got. What did you get besides bigger debt?"

"The ability to do what we needed to with the business. We also got the house put into a trust. Brian worked through the legalities of it and when he bought it, he amended the agreement so he owned it upon Dad's death. In other words, we kept Dad comfortable. Now that he's dead, it comes back to us. He wasn't wild about that stipulation, but we threatened to all walk away. Without us, he'd scrape to live modestly."

"So you have a few bucks coming to help run the business."

"What's coming should pay off house mortgages for my brothers, pay off the mortgage on the business, the balance of what you're owed, with enough left to pay cash for an expansion to the back of our lot. We'll build another warehouse to alleviate the congestion at the dock."

"How's that possible if you only got control a few years ago?"

"Great investments, a smart attorney, a large insurance policy we increased when money permitted. I've been lucky to have some honest and really smart people helping me."

"Do your brothers know?"

"Liam understands most of it. He actually got mad the last time I increased Dad's life insurance. He didn't want us to profit from his death. At the time, we had no idea how much the other funds would grow, so I made sure when he died, there'd be enough to at least pay off our existing mortgage. He created the debt and added to it when we bought him out."

I knew the company would experience some relief when he died, but with the economy, I couldn't gamble so I did what I had to."

"Your troubles are over."

"Money's not a problem for the moment. After I work things out, my brothers can put away to educate the kids and get a nice retirement for themselves."

"What about you?"

"I'm a few years younger. I have time."

"You know the debt between McKenna and Four Sons is settled," he said, looking at her until she felt uncomfortable and fidgeted with silverware.

"There's still a balance."

"It's settled."

"I don't believe your parents know the last hundred-thousand bought the removal of some clothes and some conversation over dinner. Will you tell them?"

He avoided answering by asking, "If your father was sick and you knew this money was coming your way, why didn't you throw it on the table when you bargained with me?"

"It wasn't relevant. He was sick, not dead. McKenna pays its debts. They were completely separate issues. Besides, how else could I get you to share an office with me?"

"That was your brother's idea. You weren't crazy about it at the time."

"I'm crazy about it now. I like having you and your family around." She checked her watch. "Can we go? I need to get to work, handle a few things and head back out."

"Why?"

"Galen asked if I'd stop by the funeral home to pick out 'girl' things. He wanted me to choose flowers, the suit my father will be buried in and set times for the service."

"Why the rush? He died yesterday morning."

"It's how things were done with my mother. *Quick, hurry, get her in the ground.* We all agreed to show him the same courtesy."

From what Galen said, even the funeral director questioned their actions. They weren't being disrespectful. They simply were taking care of him in the same manner he'd delivered their mother to the grave.

"We'll stop by the funeral home on the way to work so you don't have to leave again. I'll help so you don't have to do it alone. It'll be almost one by then. How about we pick up pizza for the guys on the way? I have a hundred dollars coming when I get there and I'd like to spend it."

He didn't make a bit of sense but looked pretty pleased with himself. She didn't ask any questions. *And people think I behave strangely at times.*

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Chapter Twenty-Five

"I'm telling you the cops know something. They came back again," Mike Turner said.

"And I'm telling you they don't know shit," Troy Armstrong replied. For such a big guy, he ran scared at the slightest thing. "A cop visits you a few times and you let it spoil all the fun."

"That bullshit in the warehouse made them come back. What in the hell were you thinking?"

"I was thinking how much I'd like one of them to get hurt."

"I'll tell you what; you keep having your fun because there won't be any more money now, so I'm out of this. The old man died yesterday. There's no point."

"Probably not for you," he said, stroking Stephanie's hair, liking the way she closed her eyes to get away from him. He loved dominating people and she offered it up sweetly, with hot little tears and perfect sounding whimpers. Only the sounds of her sniveling were better, hotter.

"We got paid to give them some grief and stir things up, not really hurt one of them," Mike said.

Given *permission* to terrorize, getting money to do what came naturally, made Troy feel like some dark punishing force, justified in revenge seeking. A family of greedy, power hungry and too damn self-important assholes deserved a little trouble from time to time. "You want out, get out."

"What about you? You'll back off, right?"

"Sure, Mike." He could hear the sigh of relief come from the big lummo.

How could a man like Mike be so gutless? When he included Mike in the game, he hadn't counted on him being such a baby. He'd been a tremendous asset in getting Cameron on the roof but that's where his usefulness ended. A lot more should've happened that night, having two of them bound up and ready to play. Troy especially wanted to play with Caila.

Bigger plans rolled around in his brain. Oh, there'd be more paydays if he had his way about it, and every single situation included Baby Bitch. Mannis was the only McKenna he somewhat respected. Their blood had the same ingredients, ran in the same fast manner because they'd been similarly conditioned. He sensed violence riding just beneath the surface along with anger and hatred. A man he could admire.

"Hey, Mike?" Troy asked.

"Yeah?"

"You ever find Stephanie?" He smiled, knowing the answer. It almost wasn't fun playing with Mike because sometimes he didn't realize he'd been the brunt of a joke.

"She won't return calls and won't even open the door when I go over there. She's really pissed about me getting involved in all this shit. I probably should've listened to her."

"No, she should've listened to us," Troy said. "We all got shit-canned and she should've been stronger and got behind us. That's a woman's place, Mike, behind her man. You need

to teach her that when you find her. You'll both be a lot happier."

"Look, you and Stephanie got nailed for stealing and they didn't prosecute. Sure I was mad when they fired me, but I paid the McKenna's a visit for money, not revenge. I still think about Cam or Caila taking a fall off the roof and it makes me get all sweaty."

"Hang on a second, Mike." Troy covered the mouth-piece of the phone. He caught Stephanie just as she reached the door. A handful of hair, a good jerk, and she stumbled backward. He made her sit. His fingers applied steady pressure to her throat, making sure she behaved until he finished with Mike. "Sorry, this stupid dog won't sit still today. She's wound up and ready to play so I'll let you go."

"If you hear from Steph, give me a call. I'll take a wander by her parents and see if they won't tell her to talk to me."

"You do that, Mike."

John stayed later than the others, waiting for Larry to arrive. He'd also called Caila twice, making sure she could cope with being in the house again. He used the bathroom at the company to clean and change before attending the wake.

He arrived late that evening. Men with flashlights directed him where to park. Most of the front and side yards were already filled with cars. Duane McKenna's body had been taken to the funeral home for preparation. He wondered why they didn't hold the wake there. When he'd asked Galen about it, he said something about it being a custom.

Liam greeted him near the door. He couldn't shake hands so John touched his shoulder in greeting. "How bad do they hurt?"

John noticed his eyes were glazed and he had a lopsided grin. "It doesn't. Little James thinks the black cast is great. Krista said it matches the suit."

"They hooked you up with some great pain medication, I see."

"Damned straight they did." He gestured down the hall. "Your parents and brothers are here. You might want to encourage a hasty retreat. The service will start in about ten minutes. Actually, I bet Caila wouldn't mind if you ditched out for a while."

"I'll tell them, but we'll probably stay."

"Go in then. If you go to the staircase and hang a left, most folks are in the kitchen and dining room."

"Where's Caila?"

"In with *him*."

John made his way through the people and greeted workers, and McKennas. He noticed sheets draped over mirrors, and when Barb saw him looking at one in particular, she smiled and said, "I noticed and asked about it. One of their aunts said something about tradition. I didn't get another word in for twenty minutes so I didn't get an explanation." Her smile brightened. "How are you, John?"

"Fine. How are you holding up? How's Mannis?"

She took his arm and they began walking slowly. "He's been better. They all have. They're smiling and talking, doing what they need to, but I'm surprised how much this affected

them. Caila seems really good. Almost too good. Is she all right?"

Initially concerned over her nonsensical words the night before, when she woke that morning she seemed fine. Actually, as Barb aptly described, almost too normal considering the circumstances. "She's coping," he finally said.

"They always do. I'm glad she has you to lean on."

In the study, he found the coffin placed in front of an open window with candles surrounding it. Soft music played in the background. Caila stood close to his mother and father. Hair gathered on top of her head, wisps and curls surrounding her face and neck, it occurred to him once again how beautiful she was. Hiding herself in men's work clothes was a crime. He also knew if she dressed like a woman, not a damn thing would get done at work. Men would be focused on her, not their jobs.

A priest in full robes went near and touched her arm. The woman playing piano in the corner of the room stopped abruptly and her brothers began filing in. Many people followed until the room was full. Barb took her daughter from an elderly woman and stood close to him. His brothers, their wives, and the McKenna wives came together as the McKenna siblings gathered near the casket.

Each of the McKenna men sported bruises. With Galen's eye swollen shut, Mannis' jaw puffy and red, Cameron's distinct limp and Liam's hands; Caila looked like a golden-haired waif among street tough men. She went to the foot of the coffin and her brothers took spots behind her.

John's mother stood next to him as the room grew quiet. The priest blessed the body and said prayers with an Irish brogue. After a final "amen," most people made the sign of the cross.

The soft tones of a flute commenced and Liam cleared his throat. Caila turned and placed her hand on his arm. He began speaking slowly in what John thought to be Gaelic. When he'd stop or his voice trailed off, Caila quietly prompted him. The longer he spoke, the stronger his voice became as if the words were getting easier to remember. When he finished, their heads bowed.

The pianist played as the flute drifted in to create a sad and flowing harmony. Its simplicity and beauty were indescribable. The five McKennas went to their knees, Cam after some effort. Caila began singing and John's arms roughened in gooseflesh beneath the suit. She'd become an angel, weeping out delicate sounds, perfect notes while forming intricate words in a foreign tongue.

Her brothers joined in for a refrain. As if brought together on earth for the sole purpose of blending together and harmonizing, he remembered that less than twenty-four hours prior, they'd pulverized each other. The hymn offered another avenue to see how closely linked the five of them were. Their voices came together to form a tightly woven unit; a small choir that would always be better together than separate.

He removed the handkerchief from his back pocket and handed it to his mother. For once he understood the tears. His delicate woman and her battered brothers made emotions

rise in him as well. They'd suffered together, they'd grieve together and they'd remain forever bound.

Caila stood and went to the coffin. She carefully laced a rosary between her father's hands. Her fingertips touched his eyes as if closing them before bringing her hands together. As she sang, her arms spread wide and she raised her face to the ceiling, her palms turned upward. The gesture conveyed his release. Duane didn't deserve a second thought let alone the utter respect and reverence his children displayed.

The priest went to her side, saying words as she sang, translating so those not familiar could understand the meaning. "May God take your soul, embrace you and forgive past sins. Join those who've traveled before you to the garden, the place of eternal peace and happiness. Trouble no more over petty things. For we shall embrace each other with love and carry on with light hearts, good intentions, and great joy."

The song ending, the priest said, "It's usual for the eldest son to close the coffin, but Liam might make a muddle of it." Everyone laughed; no one harder than Caila and her brothers. "So we'll work with what he have and get them all to do it."

An older woman came forward holding a huge tray of filled shot glasses. Caila left her brothers and came to stand in front of John and his parents. She spoke to his father. "Mr. Thunder, please don't feel you have to, but we'd like for you and your family to join us. Before the casket closes, we'll drink a toast. It represents letting go of sins my dad committed in life. His soul isn't here anymore and we'll bury bad deeds with the body. Evil shouldn't remain bound to the

living. I'd understand if you don't want to or wouldn't feel comfortable."

His father gently stroked his thumb over her cheek. "We'd be honored to finish laying bad history to rest. We don't need negative things getting in the way of our futures."

She smiled. "Working so closely with all of you, my brothers and I hoped we could move past—what happened." She looked down and finished quietly. "Thank you."

The men from the funeral home moved the casket away from the window after extinguishing candles.

"Why are they moving him?" John asked.

"The window was open so he could leave. The prayers released him and all that's left is a shell. They're making room so you can all be close. He wronged your family most of all and the *salute* should be given before the casket closes. Anyone else he hurt can drink after, because the grievances are smaller and can seep in."

"Another custom?"

"Pretty strange, but that's how it's done."

They went and stood around the coffin while her brothers lowered the lid and held it a foot from being closed. The tray of shots made it around and another woman came into the room with more. Liam used his elbow to hold his portion of the lid and barely managed to clutch the shot glass with his hand.

Liam said, "We lay to rest the worst of it here and now, never to darken our lives or futures. May God rest his soul."

Heads went back as shots went down before a lot of deep breaths were drawn and his mother coughed. The whiskey

was smooth and didn't bite. Like nothing he'd ever sampled, the fine liquor should've been sipped and savored.

The lid dropped and McKennas slammed shot glasses down on the coffin before others followed suit. Cam passed John's father another glass and said, "At least two, Mr. Thunder. One couldn't possibly be enough."

Each of the McKennas took another and raised the glasses. "The worst is gone and now for what remains," Liam said.

Again the liquid went down and more shot glasses slammed the coffin. When the woman offered more, a number of hands went up in refusal, his included. He didn't know Duane, just witnessed the carnage left in his wake. It wouldn't be an issue for him in the future.

The McKennas looked at John's father who put up a hand. Cam grabbed a glass and offered Caila who shook her head. Liam accepted and so did the other sons. A third round went down and then a fourth before Cam signaled he'd had enough. Galen stopped after five and Liam after eight. They all looked at Mannis.

"Would you like a bottle?" Liam asked.

Almost everyone laughed. John didn't, wondering how much pain Mannis needed to drink away. Did each shot alleviate a certain incident, or was it a specific period of abuse?

Caila's eyes became moist and with each shot, the knuckles on her fisted hands grew a bit more colorless. He could read her mind, knew she relived the pain with him and willed him to let it go. Mannis downed another and another

and finally another before taking a deep breath, placing an open hand on the coffin and proclaiming, "Done."

Caila hugged him. "Really?"

"To be buried with the rest of him." He kissed her forehead.

Light, lively, Irish music started playing and when Liam let out a holler, others chimed in, including the priest. The atmosphere changed instantly as they stood back from the coffin. People took their place, before shots were distributed.

Caila joined John. "Hell of a line waiting to drink," he said.

"We expected this. There's a case of whiskey in the kitchen."

An elderly woman, who'd just finished a shot, placed a hand on Caila's shoulder.

"Auntie May, thank you for coming," Caila said.

"Your man, sweetheart?" the older woman asked in a thick brogue.

"Yes, Auntie, John Thunder." Turning to him, she said, "John, this is my Aunt May."

He took her hand for a light embrace and her green eyes surveyed him critically before she smiled and looked at Caila. "Liam tells me much good." To him, she said, "You'll be kind to our wee calin?"

Understanding the gist of it, he replied, "I will."

Galen snuck up behind May and snaked his arms around her waist. She shrieked and spun around, capturing his shoulders in her hands. "Imigh sa diabhal, Galen!"

Leaning down, Galen kissed her forehead. "Whatever name you called me is probably appropriate."

"She told you to go to the devil, or something like that," Caila replied.

"I'm actually going to the kitchen with my favorite aunt. I'm hungry and she needs to feed me."

May ruffled Galen's hair, trying to look stern. "You've a wife, Galen, no?"

The pout on his face comical, he said in a whining voice, "She doesn't feed me, Auntie. And I'm hungry."

"Oh, you wee boy! Such lies!" Before Galen could drag her away, she turned back and said, "We'll speak again, John. But now I've a hungry boy to spoil."

He gave her a smile before they left. Caila turned when he touched her arm. "Sign language *and* bilingual?" he asked.

"Not really. I understand some of it, catching the meaning, but I can't really speak and make myself understood. The last time I tried, I slaughtered a very innocent question."

"You helped Liam with words during the service."

"Prayers. They stuck from when I was little. The hymns too. My mother sang them, said the prayers and Liam recorded them. A few hours of her locked up on a cassette tape put me to sleep for a long time."

The memory obviously bittersweet, he changed the subject and tried to lighten her mood. Women filtered through the room with trays of beverages and hors d'oeuvres. "How did you slap this together in a day?"

"Caterers and help from sisters. Have you made it to the dining room yet?"

"No, I got here right before the service. Will there be another tomorrow before the burial?"

"No, it's over. Liam will go to the gravesite and stay with him until he's buried. The rest of us are done. And because you didn't get past here, there's real food right down the hall. You must be starved."

Before they left, he checked on his parents. Caila turned too and they watched as their families talked and laughed. They appeared to be old friends.

"Your brothers are wonderful and your parents are amazing."

"They are," he said, realizing he should count his blessings.

His mother examined Liam's hands. Liam looked uncomfortable at first, but his mother had a way about her. Before long he seemed to relax. Also a sucker for an underdog, she focused on Mannis when he strayed too close. Mistrust and unease seeped from him and his mother loved to take pain from angry, cornered creatures.

"God help all of you," he said automatically.

"Why?"

"You're on Mom's radar."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"You're all orphaned now and she has this thing about kids needing family."

"You're joking, right?"

"No."

"We're adults, not orphans. Liam's going to be thirty-nine."

"She's also figuring out what type of father Duane was."

She drew his attention by touching his wrist. "We're very close. We have each other."

"And now you'll have her and my father. Face it, honey, everything's tangled up between our families worse than Liam's truck with that tanker. When you made the deal to have us next door, when you let me get close, you signed on for everything that comes with it. I have baggage too, so suck it up and smile."

She continued to watch as his mother paid close attention to Mannis. "She might be setting herself up for failure," Caila said.

"With Mannis?"

"Yes."

"He needs her most of all and she knows it."

Mannis took his daughter from Barb. John's mother began cooing and making a fuss. Mannis seemed to relax, having the attention deflected.

"She does it too," John said, suddenly seeing the trait in his mother.

"What?"

"Manipulates."

"Why do you say that?"

"Watch her get close to your brother. She's probably delighted with Jordan, she's a beautiful kid, but watch how my mom worms her way in. See?"

Pretty soon his mother had her hands on Mannis's arm and then on his back to casually pat and stroke. She believed in the power of touch and used her calm, pleasant voice to finish disarming him. She could work magic.

"You have it too."

"What?" he asked.

"A way of looking and charming people."

"Sure, it's called a grouchy look that makes them scatter."

"I didn't run."

"You were desensitized because of your brothers."

"If that's what you want to believe, fine."

He faced her then. He couldn't decide if her eyes were glassy from fatigue, a little too much to drink or because of her father. "I don't care why you didn't slap my face after that first kiss. I'm also not questioning why you let me closer. The only thing I care about is how long you'll put up with me."

"Probably a long time," she replied.

"Yeah?"

"Sure. You have a nice house."

His ego suffered a little before he saw a distinct gleam in her eyes. "You're using me to live in my house?"

"Sorry, John, but it's a really, really nice house. Plus you own a company."

"You do too."

"But you're the boss. I like powerful men."

Definitely not perfect timing, he knew he'd mention it and knew what she'd probably say. "Enough to make things legal?"

"Between us?"

He could laugh and salvage the remainder of his ego, but he didn't. "Your brothers would approve."

"Marriage?"

Why the hell did she sound so shocked? They shared a lot more than sex. What he felt couldn't be one-sided. "To me, that way you'd never leave that house you like so much."

"You're joking."

"I've never been more serious in my life. Caila, would you? Marry me?" Emotions swept over her face. He'd been a thoughtless bastard, cornering her. "Don't think about it now, honey. We'll talk again later, when everything settles down."

"No. I mean yes. I'll marry you."

Astounded, he asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded. He bent down and kissed her soft lips very gently. "You let me know when you're ready and I'll make it happen."

"I'm just worried because you don't know that much about me."

He'd never felt more connected to a woman. The type of attraction they shared came around once in a lifetime. He wasn't a fool. "You're a good woman, the one I've spent a lot of years learning about from a lot of mistakes. I know who you are deep down. We'll have years and years to figure out the rest."

"I love you," she said.

"I know you do and it scares me. I love you too and that scares me more."

The brightness still in her eyes, she said, "You're not afraid of anything."

"Honey, about the only thing in my life right now that *does* scare me is losing someone close. You're on the top of my list."

"Then take a break and relax. You're stuck with me." She took his hand and led him from the room. "We'll get you some food and something more to drink. I'll have to keep you good and drunk for a while before we actually tie the knot."

"You think I'm drunk?"

"Yep, at least that's what I'll tell myself when you wake up tomorrow and change your mind."

"You'll be disappointed when I start bugging you to set a date."

"I'll be delighted if it happens."

She joked about it, but he knew somewhere deep down she had doubts. Before they took vows, she'd be one hundred percent certain about his level of commitment. He'd wait as long as it took.

An engagement ring on her finger would settle some issues in his mind, and hers too. A side-effect of the ring would probably make her brothers less concerned about their current living arrangement. They could go to hell as far as he was concerned, but he wasn't oblivious to the fact that when her brothers didn't like something, it caused Caila distress. She didn't need more on her plate. They needed time for life settle down, find a routine and enjoy the peace together. She deserved it. They both did.

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Chapter Twenty-Six

"What do you mean *she's* bringing the truck out?" John asked.

"I didn't stutter," Cam replied, "Caila said she'd run it out so I could hook up and head out. She'll catch a ride back to the shop with you."

"It's dark."

"Yep, the sun does go down around nine at night."

"We're sixty miles out." Every last McKenna male possessed a blind spot where Caila was concerned. No wonder she got into so much trouble as a kid.

"She can drive otherwise she wouldn't be on her way."

"Why the hell didn't you say something earlier?"

"Why should we call in a driver for this? She was sitting at the shop doing nothing. Larry's there and she was probably bored. What's your problem, John?"

"Caila driving a truck."

"She's not pulling an overweight trailer, hell she's not pulling *any* trailer."

John finished securing Cam's truck to the back of the wrecker, muttering a number of things under his breath.

Before long, he saw the red and black Kenworth cruise into the rest stop. She didn't waste time wondering what to do, just pulled up so they could hook to it. He gave hand signals as she smoothly backed up, lining up on the first try. As they worked, Cam said, "I told you she could drive."

"Yeah, well, she shouldn't," John replied.

"Why not? Explain it to me."

"I clean up wrecks for a living. Just because you're in a big steel container doesn't mean you're safe. As a matter of fact, when the accident happens, there's a lot more that can fold in and kill you. She doesn't drive every day and that increases the odds of something bad happening."

"Do you have a problem with her riding a bike?"

Silence.

"You know she likes racing and not just sitting in the stands. Before she got rid of the Chevelle, she used to play a few times a year on the quarter mile."

"Figures."

"Pardon me? I don't think I heard you."

"Nothing."

Best to keep his mouth shut at the moment, John tried not to envision her strapped into a flame red, high performance car racing down a track where any little mistake could cost her life.

"You need to rethink things with Caila," Cam said.

"There're plenty of other women who'd scratch your itch, keep you company and not threaten your ego."

John rammed him against the front of the trailer with two fists and pinned him there by the shirt. "You ever make a remark about how Caila and I spend our time and you'll be missing teeth. Front ones."

"Take it easy. I'm just trying to figure you out. Whatever you and Caila do is your business until I see you trying to make her change. That's not what you're doing. Is it?"

After releasing him, John stood there dumbstruck. He rubbed his face and ran a hand through his hair as the anger left. "I don't want her to change. I just can't stand the thought of something else happening to her."

"She's had a lot of years doing fun stuff and she's a bundle of energy. Her day-to-day is filled with computers and paperwork and when she goes on the docks or cuts loose on a bike, she's making up for it. None of us had the patience or desire to be chained to a desk. She probably didn't either but filled the need. I think if she had the choice, she'd be doing something physical. If you stay with her, you'll need to get your brain straight about it. Besides, she sucks as a mechanic."

"Yeah, I know. Hell, that's half the reason I'm crazy about her, but when it hits me she's a woman, I go nuts thinking about all the ways she isn't as strong, shouldn't be doing half the crazy shit all of you think is normal." John rubbed his neck before kicking stones across asphalt.

"So you realize what's down the road if she lets you hang around."

"Yeah, I do." John looked around. "Where is she?"

"In the truck. She won't get between a tractor and trailer, and she won't leave the truck running with us back here. She's smart about some stuff."

"About most stuff."

"Actually she is. I hope you're smart about her. I think you two might be good for each other. And she's worth your heart stopping every once in a while from something she does."

"I know and I wouldn't be too upset if you and the others remind me when I lose sight."

John slapped him on the shoulder before they finished hooking up. He used a flashlight to scan the area to make sure he hadn't left tools before coming around the side of the truck. Her brother reached up when the door opened and he swung her down. Of course Cam meant nothing by the comment about Caila *scratching an itch* other than to get a rise out of him. Which he did, damn it.

Liam seemed most concerned about her safety. Cam and Galen were mostly responsible for the motorcycles, cars and fun stuff. Mannis appeared to know by a look what she felt, and responded to it. John cared about her differently, and if her brothers could manage to give her the freedom to express herself, he'd learn too. After all, he loved who she was, not who she could become.

He walked up to them and put his arm around her. She squeezed him back before going on tip-toe to kiss her brother's cheek. "Be careful, would you?" she asked.

"Always. John, take it slow going back. I'll see you both sometime tomorrow."

Situated in his truck, Caila buckled herself in and started looking. Like a curious kid, he could practically see her mind working, ticking off what everything was for.

"Have you ever driven something this old?" he asked.

"Sure. Liam taught me in a truck that was older."

"You want to drive?"

"Are you kidding?"

They got out and switched places. He buckled up, sat back and let her get set up. He'd open his mouth when she needed help and not before. After pulling the seat forward, she adjusted mirrors, got comfortable, started the truck and drove smoothly onto the interstate.

Her smile made him laugh when she flipped the switch for the lights. She said, "I always wanted to drive something with flashing lights."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. I figured something like a fire engine but that's probably not going to happen."

Not one missed shift, no jerking from the tricky clutch, she never once looked down at the tachometer to gauge the shift using the RPM's. She did it by sound.

"She's swaying a little but there's no wind. How come?" she asked.

"It's not the same as dragging a trailer. Your pivot point and center of gravity on a tow vehicle is higher and you get sway. The front end of the truck we're dragging has less suspension than a rear-end pulled tractor, which makes the ride a little squishy. But it beats taking the axles out and running air to it for a sixty mile trip. Take it up to sixty and see if she doesn't straighten out."

He felt the cab stabilize and watched her relax for the ride back. Her eyes scanned the mirrors, watching to see how the cab tracked. They started on a long downhill stretch of road and before he could warn her, she accelerated slightly so the truck behind wasn't *pushing* them. Amazed she felt it and adjusted automatically, he said, "You're a natural."

"I'd love to do this for a living."

"You would?"

"Sure, but I'd need a beefcake like you along to hook my tows."

He asked, "How come?"

"I know the longer chains probably weight more than a hundred pounds, not that you have to carry the whole thing at any given time, but my poor arms would be rubber if I had to manhandle them too much."

"You could probably manage."

"My arms would be as big as my thighs if I had to do it too often. You know," she said, "the newer wrecker's make it a whole lot easier to hook and run."

Yeah, technology had come a long way since the design of some of his equipment. "Sure, but it's like my computer. You get comfortable with particular stuff and it takes a while to talk yourself into letting go of security blankets. We're getting there by replacing equipment as we need to. Besides, I like the look of disbelief when I roll up to a wreck in this. I really like it when people see what this old girl can do."

He liked her a whole lot more because she knew how to drive and had the sense to *finesse* his older truck. "You know, you're kind of hot when you're driving a two vehicle combination."

"Really? I thought heels and thigh-highs got your blood going."

Truthfully, watching her casually tow one of her trucks while sitting in his seat controlling the vehicles with

confidence got him hard. "They do, but I'm finding I like unusual stuff these days."

A little over an hour later, Caila dropped the truck with John's help. Working in the darkened back lot, she couldn't help touch and stroke him when his hands and arms were busy carrying chains. He wouldn't let her lift much and she *punished* him for not letting her finish the job. When he bent to pick something up, she'd rub against him or reach over to massage his thighs. She wanted to play.

With the truck parked, and nothing but night and crickets around; when she reached for the door handle to lock the truck, he grabbed her from behind. His arm came around her waist before he moved hair aside. He got in close to her neck for a taste. Trapped between the vehicle and John, she squirmed against him. Voices came from the building and she glanced over. Glenn and two other men were leaving for the night.

"Shhh," John whispered into her ear.

She remained quiet and trapped as his breath wash over her neck. His lips nibbled as his gloved hands felt every inch of her. Soon, the lot became vacant and quiet. The security lights didn't even reach them.

He finally stepped back, opened the door and turned out the dome light. He held her waist and pushed so she'd take a step up. That's where he stopped her. Staring into the cab, she saw his dirty work gloves hit the floor before he reached around to the front of her jeans.

The button and zipper came down and soon her jeans did too. His warm breath and large hands stroked. When her

panties grazed her thighs, she moaned and wiggled, feeling exposed and wicked.

"Lean in over the seat."

She did and groaned when his fingers rubbed between her legs. Hot, slick and needing more, she begged, "Please, John, I want you."

"You have me."

"Like you promised that first night. Come up behind me."

When he did, her mind started conjuring all sorts of situations. His hands smoothed over her hips before coming forward. Drawn roughly against him, *BAD* and her other cheek rested firmly against the front of his straining jeans.

The smell of diesel fuel, greasy rags and old coffee should've put a damper on her arousal. Instead it came together with his callused hands on her hips to set her on fire. Fingertips moved forward and down to part aching flesh. His other hand slid between her and the seat to hold a breast smothered in work shirt and camisole.

"Damn, you're wet."

"Please," she said, opening her legs as far as the denim at her knees allowed.

"Caila?"

"Yeah," she answered, concentrating on where his fingers hovered and lightly rubbed.

"You'll have to be quiet. Okay?"

She'd promise anything just then. "Yes."

His fingers sank deep and through the material, he found and pinched a nipple with precision. Her body exploded in a

mind-shattering orgasm. Rocking against him, she experienced indescribable pleasure.

"John. Oh, John!"

"Shh, ride it out," he said, a thumb finding the nub high on her sex.

Sandwiched between the seat and his groin, she bucked and obeyed. Minutes swept by and when the pleasure slowed, so did the demands of his hands and fingers. Exhausted, she wanted nothing more than to turn, remove her clothes and let John sink into her.

He stepped down and brought her underwear back up, tucking the scrap of cloth between her cheeks.

The jeans followed, and after tucking in her shirt, he zipped and fastened them.

"John?"

"Yeah?"

"I still...what about you?"

"You need me, honey?" His voice sounded knowing and she bet he had a smile on his face.

"Bad," she admitted.

"Good."

She turned on the step and his hands grabbed her waist before lifting her down. "I don't understand."

"We'll finish at home. You keep thinking about how much I want you and what'll happen when we get there."

"I can't wait that long."

The door slammed shut and he grabbed a handful of *BAD*, giving a solid squeeze before pushing her forward to walk back to the warehouse. "You can do it. You're tough."

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

They walked toward the building and he'd stop every so often to bring her close, wrap her in his arms and kiss her breathless.

She wondered, after dropping the keys in the office, if they'd actually make it the whole way home.

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Chapter Twenty-Seven

The days of peace turned into a few uneventful weeks for Caila. Despite Bill stopping by to make sure nothing more happened, the attacks faded to simply a few bad memories. Not surprised that it ended when her father died, she never voiced the suspicion he somehow managed to cause the trouble.

Their engagement was made public, and her brothers immediately began treating John like one of the family. No longer hedging around a subject, John seemed to appreciate their blunt opinions on issues. Too, he didn't hold back when he wanted to make a statement. The cordial manner in which they interacted turned into something much more familiar, as if they'd all let their guard down. A wedding in their future, she and John suddenly found themselves with seven brothers, their wives and a hoard of nieces and nephews. Life couldn't be better.

The data transfer hadn't taken long and, as she predicted, John turned out to be an excellent student. He fired rapid, non-stop questions, and within an hour he navigated the new software almost effortlessly.

"I told you it wouldn't be hard," she said.

"If you only knew how many times I've lost stuff into hyper-space, you'd laugh."

"Have you ever thought of an employer-based retirement fund for your employees?" As he scrolled, she looked at numbers and made calculations in her head.

"We've talked about it, but wrecker drivers are like a band of gypsies. They tend to ramble from one company to the next on a whim. There aren't huge money differences. We stay competitive but some leave for equipment, or the type of tows they'll get."

"You have a core group that stay with you though, right?"

"Maybe twenty have some years in."

"We had the same problem, drivers running for the next company because of a one cent a mile difference. That stopped when we offered the pension and started handing out Christmas bonuses."

Her hand came over his, rolled the wheel on the mouse and clicked in a particular cell on the spreadsheet. Adjusting the formula so it would automatically subtract and give a balance, she ran her hand up his arm and stroked his face. She loved watching his intense gray eyes soak up every little trick she demonstrated.

He looked at her while she hovered and she took a step back. Maybe getting too comfortable with him wasn't such a great idea. She said, "I'm sorry, I get goofy about this stuff."

"With the cost of health insurance, how do you offer dental and vision benefits?"

The question was so unexpected; it took her a second before she answered. "I calculated the time and expense we put into training a new hire. I also calculated my failure rate with having to fire drivers and start over. Anyone who makes it past the eighteen month mark pays for himself. Even with price increases, I keep funds separate, and so far, with our

rate of return, the cost is negligible. That could change, but for now we can afford it."

The questions kept coming and before long, she sat at her computer with *him* doing the hovering. Driver's came through, the occasional call interrupted, but she kept explaining and showing until after five in the evening, managing questions of her own. She gained a fresh perspective and as they talked, she started thinking about new approaches to things she'd taken for granted.

He said finally, "Maybe I should go back to school and get my Masters."

"A lot of what I learned was from my Dad and our accountant. Dad was never patient but Clarence is. He's a lot older and really smart. Plus I have Brian as an attorney. His son and Liam grew up together and he's never let us down."

"But you put it together and make it work."

She knew where the credit should go and smiled. "I'm great at cheating. I saw the way Dad did things, found out what the workers needed and asked questions. Talking to you, seeing what you do to run Four Son's, gave me more ideas and I'll use them. I'll only ever be valuable if I think about what I'm doing, stay on top of things, and get a few more years of experience under my belt."

He stared at her before touching her hair. She felt the need to apologize. "Some fun we had today, me rambling about computers and McKenna Trucking."

"You're fascinating."

She looked down, embarrassed. She'd been like a little kid who'd gotten some attention and feared she'd gone on and

on. Liam listened but after a certain point, he'd tell her how they all trusted her before patting her head and leaving her alone to figure it out. John's rapt attention, him asking questions and offering up opinions, made her forget how boring it all could be.

"Sorry," she said.

"For what? Me prying information out of you?"

"Sure, if you call *prying* opening a shook up can of pop. You wanted a taste and the can gushed all over you."

"You don't hold back."

His observation stung a little. "I can when I want to."

"You don't with me, not like when we first met."

"Sorry."

"Stop apologizing. I want you just the way you are, nothing held back; open so I know who I'm dealing with."

She considered that for a moment. It'd do little good to try and act differently. She'd been down that road before, kept herself in check and behaved. Nothing but grief came of it. After the breakup with Adam, Mannis helped rationalize what went wrong. He told her one day someone would come along that'd find her oddities not only acceptable, but appealing.

John's cell rang and he answered it. After he closed the lid, he took her elbow and helped her stand. "David's back. I'm sorry this didn't happen sooner, but it's been busy around here."

"What?"

His kiss was simple and sweet, the smile he gave made butterflies dance in her stomach. He looked pleased about something and she liked it. He didn't offer an explanation

before placing his hand at the small of her back and gently pushed her from the office. The few remaining workers followed them out the back door into the parking lot.

Once outside, she watched as Galen drove her Chevelle off the back of a tilt bed. He gave the car gas and a throaty roar made her bite her bottom lip as tears gathered in her eyes. "She's home," she whispered.

Liam and Mannis stood next to David as Galen smoked the back tires, bringing the car close. The distinct stutter from the high performance cam made her chest tighten. She was blinded by the glare of sun reflecting off chrome wheels, the glistening flakes in the metallic red paint, and the high gloss of the clear overcoat. More beautiful than she remembered, the sound of her powerful engine filled her with emotion.

She never thought she'd see her car again. She'd rationalized that the sacrifice of a house and car brought John into her life. It hadn't been hard to transition from thinking about losses to enjoying what she'd gained. Galen opened the door and stepped up to her and John. He caressed her cheek and said, "John found her and had her brought home."

She didn't care about looking like an idiot with tears streaming down her face. She loved her car because of the men who painstakingly pieced her together. She also loved the man who gave her lost treasure back.

When she turned to John, he held her face in his palms and brushed wetness away with his thumbs. Her mouth opened to express gratitude and he said quietly, "Don't. I'm the reason you sold her and I don't think I could stand it if you said one word right now."

John saw the surprise and delight in her expression. That and the tears on her cheeks were priceless. When he released her, she got behind the wheel, gave the car gas and closed her eyes, apparently thrilled by the sound.

Men came forward and John went to the passenger side. He'd seen her little showpiece at night, but never inspected beyond the perfect exterior and custom paint. The interior basically intact, he noticed the roll bar, the hooks for window netting, special gauges and everything else a weekend racer might want to take her street legal toy out for a quarter mile run.

She noticed the pendant dangling from the end of the chain roped around the rear view mirror. Immediately looking up to find him, she held the St. Christopher medal in her palm. "Do you think this'll help?"

"It'll make me feel better."

Hell, any little piece of insurance that'd give him a measure of comfort was worth it. Summer wasn't over and with the drag strips still open, he'd found endless excuses before sending David to get the car. He'd even thought about bringing it back after the first snow, prolonging the potential of her flying as fast as she could down a race track.

He watched her reverently touch everything inside and found it hard to swallow from the lump in his throat. She wasn't a woman enamored with possessions. He knew the car was more than status or even a toy. He envisioned how she probably looked the day she saw it roll away and his stomach sank. And she never said a word.

"Hi, Mike," Caila said, wishing John were sitting next to her.

"Caila," he replied.

He handed over paperwork and she saw he had a load from Quick Time Trucking. The Southern Ohio-based company infrequently had dealings with McKenna. Where were her brothers when she needed them? Even Theresa was out for lunch.

"You nervous 'cause I'm here?" he asked.

"No, why," she lied.

"You stamped the wrong paper."

"Sorry," she said, trying to keep her hands steady. "Been a hellish few weeks."

"I heard Glenn has his hands full on the docks."

"Like I said, we've been rammed." Broad daylight, men working in the warehouse and mechanic bays, she tried to stomp down the uneasiness, process him and get him on his way.

"I'm sorry to hear about your dad."

"Thanks."

She corrected and handed the paperwork back before typing the drop into the system. He took it and began folding the papers slowly. His hesitance kicked up her wariness another notch. The last time she saw him, he'd done a great job giving five grown men trouble. A large man in his mid-thirties, his arms could look like clubs when he made a fist. She wasn't comfortable at all with his two hundred and fifty pounds of muscle standing there.

"I'll leave. I came to drop a load, not make trouble."

She felt like an idiot. He'd lost his temper once too often and they couldn't take any more fights on company property. Prior to firing him, he'd been nothing but polite, a little shy around her and very respectful. "Are you doing okay, Mike?"

"Sure. The new place doesn't pay as well but it's a job. By the way, thanks for the reference."

"There was never a problem with your work."

His hand came up in a gesture like he wanted to say something before it appeared he thought better of it.

"Mike?"

"Nothing," he said, turning to leave. "I'm sorry I scared you."

"Take it easy and I'll see you next time." Relief swept over her after another scare. He stopped at the door, reached for it and closed it as he remained in the office. She stood. There wasn't a reason in the world to be alone with him and he'd managed to terrify her.

His head hung slightly before he turned to face her. He looked sad and determined. "I really am sorry."

She didn't wait to find out why. She ran around the corner and down the hall. Inside her room, she slammed and locked the door. Frantic, she went to the closet and closed herself in, twisting a coat hanger around the handles to secure it. Grabbing the bar, using her feet against the side of the wall, she pulled herself up to the shelf and began using her palm to beat against the locked trap door in the ceiling.

"Oh, God!" she screamed as the bedroom door crashed open.

In a fit of desperation, she wedged herself up as high as she could and pounded against the wood.

Someone must've heard the door being broken down. All of her brothers were downstairs, and she prayed they'd get to her fast. The closet doors shook as Mike tried breaking through.

"Come out, Caila. I don't want to hurt you."

Like hell she would! Her foot slipped and she screamed before catching herself and leaning onto the shelf.

"I'm coming in."

After some hammering on the door, he did. Using the shelf for leverage, she pushed against it and the wood by the lock splintered. She screamed when he grabbed her waist, and dragged her to the floor. The kicking and struggling finally made him shove her away. She wound up standing in the middle of the room. A diesel motor revved from below and the chance of being heard vanished.

Winded from the struggle, he said, "Please, Caila. I need you. You have to come with me."

Mike stood like a mountain between her and the door opening. She refused to make anything easy and did the only thing she could. Rushing him, the element of surprise gave her the opportunity to get in one punch which landed against his nose. Sure she'd broken her knuckles and hopefully his nose, she made a wild dash for the hallway. His ridiculously long arm reached out and snagged her. She slammed against him when her feet left the floor.

She wasn't nearly done fighting even having the wind knocked from her lungs. His arm tightened and tightened

until stars filled her vision. The room started going dark and when her body went limp; she fell to the floor. He didn't waste time before jerking her up. *Resist, struggle, do something!* Her brain fired on all cylinders. Her body couldn't. "Mike, stop!"

He effortlessly dragged her from the room and down the hall. "Please be quiet, Caila."

"Let me go and then go to hell!" she screamed before a mammoth hand covered her mouth.

When they reached the kitchen door, she was pulled against his side. His arm crushed her upper body before he straightened. Her feet dangled, not touching the floor. No matter how hard she flailed, he kept moving out of the building and down the stairs. *Someone see me! I'm here. Help!*

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Chapter Twenty-Eight

John stood in the corner of the room trying to stay calm. Mannis was on one phone and Bill was talking on his police radio. Liam paced as Cam sat at Caila's desk with the phone stuck to his ear, waiting for an answer from Quick Time Trucking. They'd found the last partial entry in the computer and tried piecing together what happened. She wasn't in the building and no one saw her leave.

Galen stood in the reception area with Alex and David, wanting to be close when word came. Paul radioed in and said he'd be back as soon as possible. It made no difference because all they'd done was stand around while the police did their work.

Theresa hadn't noticed Caila missing until forty-five minutes after her lunch break when a driver needed paperwork signed. She phoned police and paged Liam. The rest of them walked into the mess.

Mannis slammed the phone down and rested his elbows on the desk, his head in his hands. "The Whiting driver was in here at five after twelve. He said he got paperwork signed without a problem and Caila looked better than ever. We've known the guy for years."

"All right, we've narrowed down the window of time to roughly forty-five minutes," Bill said. "Cameron's checking the only driver through in that time frame, so hang in there."

Cam covered the receiver. "Quick Time didn't send us a load."

Cam tried navigating the system before throwing up his hands. Liam motioned for him to stand and John put a hand on Liam's arm, maneuvering around him to sit at her desk. The best Liam could manage would be to hunt and peck. As John searched, Bill said to Cam, "Let me have the phone."

Cam turned it over and Bill started talking, asking who he was speaking to before asking for the owner. Bill went to the dry erase board in the office and wiped out Caila's second shift drop schedule.

She'd shown him enough and John started running inquiries as fast as his mind could formulate questions. "The last load from Quick Time was over three months ago and the driver was Jason Blye. She never recorded a driver's name on today's drop. She didn't scan any paperwork either. It's like she got started and didn't finish. I can track the beginning of her day through noon. There's nothing else here."

Liam asked, "Cam, you were on the docks with Mannis. Do you remember seeing the truck?"

"I told you, there wasn't a truck."

"There was God damn paperwork for a truck."

Mannis said, "There wasn't a truck. Me and Cam were running forklifts but there wasn't a Quick Time truck in here. They run those goofy colors—baby blue with puke pink. They weren't here. You and Galen were in the service bays and I know at least one door was open. Did you see a truck?"

"Hell no, not that stands out," Liam replied. "There were thirty people in the building. How the hell could we've all missed a truck rolling in and rolling out?"

John said, "You can damn well bet those security cameras won't ever be turned off again. Why the hell do you only use them at night?"

"Because no one's ever kidnapped one of us in broad daylight before," Liam said.

Their voices grew loud in frustration. Bill hushed them as he continued to write with a squeaky marker. The woman detective came from the back and they all settled down. Apparently she waited for Bill, leaning against the hallway opening with her lips sealed. When Bill thanked whomever he'd been speaking with, he recapped the marker, turned and said, "What do you have, Jenna?" She looked around the room at everyone standing there. "Talk. Maybe something you found will click and I can almost guarantee no one here is involved."

"Well," she began, her hand resting on the grip of the firearm at her hip. "It looks like she went into the bedroom across from the bathroom. It had a standard lock on the knob. She probably headed toward the closet right after getting in the room."

"Why?"

"He took out the door without too much trouble. It was kicked probably twice before it ripped away from the frame. He had to be big and powerful. We got a partial print and we're guessing at a size fourteen tennis shoe."

"All right, go on."

"We think Miss McKenna got into the closet and closed the door. She must've wrapped the coat hanger around the knobs before using the wall and bar to swing up to the shelf. We

found smaller partial work boot prints and scuffs on the wall, like someone made a few attempts to climb up, having their foot slip. The panel on the ceiling of the closet looked like she tried to get in. A little more pressure and the hasp would've broken."

She glanced at Liam's hands before Bill prompted her, "The rest?"

"He was a lot more careful getting into the closet. The kicks to the door were lower and he used more of them to get inside. He knew where she went and was cautious about getting her; otherwise he would've plowed through that door like it was nothing. That's probably where he got her. We believe the mess in the room is the struggle that followed."

John leaned back in the chair and closed his eyes. All he saw behind eyelids was the color red. The thought of anyone grabbing or hurting her brought acid to his stomach and throat.

"She must've gotten in a few blows because the blood spatter suggests it was the abductor's blood," Jenna said. "The initial mark starts beyond six feet from the ground and travels upward; like he was hit from a lower angle and his head went back. We're not discounting other things, but they just don't add up. The blood on the way through the kitchen is all on the floor, nothing higher. Too, the tread in some of the blood is tennis shoe, not work boot which leads me to believe it was the man bleeding. With the amount of blood I'll bet she got him in the nose. It'd bleed like hell."

"And after?"

"The trail leads down the back stairs to this side of the building."

Liam said, "If he pulled around to the side, we might've missed a truck."

"Why do you think he was in a truck?" Jenna asked.

"Looking at her computer, she didn't finish an entry. She stopped before logging in the whole ticket."

Bill said, redirecting the conversation, "So what we have so far, is the man had paperwork from Quick Time. He's a big guy, got through the door to the room like a jackhammer and when he goes to get her out of the closet, he's careful. Why would he be careful?" He seemed to be thinking out loud, rationalizing exactly what happened.

"If he knew her, she didn't know him," John said. "Why would she start to enter a ticket if she felt threatened?"

"Because," Liam said, slamming his cast against the board where Bill had been writing earlier, pointing at a name, "she did know him and probably didn't see him as a threat."

"Why?" Bill asked.

"Mike Turner's name is here. She knows him because we fired him."

"That's a list of employees from Quick Time," Bill said.

"He should've been on the list of terminations Caila printed," John said.

"I didn't personally check him out but he didn't raise suspicion." Turning to Liam, he asked, "Can you tell me about him?"

"Big son of a bitch. He's probably six feet, seven inches. Goes two-sixty to two hundred and eighty pounds. We fired

him for fighting. It took five guys to hold him and a good ten minutes before he decided to give up. His third fight with a dock worker cinched his termination. He didn't really hurt the kid, although he could've."

"Why do you say that?"

"He could've snapped Timmy in two, but chose to just slap him around; you know, humiliate and teach him a lesson. Most of us listen to the kid talk and brush it off. Mike didn't. Guys just making comments set Mike off before."

"How was he the rest of the time?"

"Passive, hard working, quiet when he talked if that makes sense. I try to never judge a book by its cover, but he seemed a little slow about some things."

"Like what?"

"Numbers," Liam began.

Galen interrupted, "His paychecks. He couldn't figure out how to read them."

"Are they complicated?" Bill asked.

"No, the same as any other place. It's spelled out. Caila sat with him three weeks in a row going over it. She even typed him out a cheat-sheet so he could look at it by himself until it made sense."

Bill raised his eyebrows. "That's pretty slow. How come you kept him?"

Liam answered, "He had a spotless driving record, babied the equipment, and could outwork any man on the dock. In particular, Caila hated firing him. She thought he seemed kind of lost. We all warned him and he knew the last fight was his termination."

"Then why all the problems after you told him he was fired?"

"I'd actually thought about giving him another chance until he fought like the devil to get up the office stairs. He'd said something about going to apologize before he left. Knowing he was that determined to see Caila made the decision easier." Liam's words flowed with emotion and increasing menace.

Bill said, "Hold on, Liam, slow down."

"Do you understand who has her? He probably wasn't mad getting her out of the bedroom, but if she pisses him off, he'll rip her apart!"

"That explains how Cameron got up on the roof if Turner's as strong as you say, but there were two people according to Caila. Also, if he wanted to hurt her, he would've done it before this. Remember Caila and Cameron were just left up there."

John asked, "Do you think he'd be able to pull off something like the dumpster incident?"

Cam piped up. "No way, not Mike."

"So who's working with him?" John asked.

Bill got back on the phone as they listened. Within a moment, he hung up and said, "He's off today, doesn't have access to a company truck." To Jenna he said, "I'm heading out, you stay and finish processing the area."

By ten o'clock that night, the McKenna wives showed up to wait with husbands. John didn't know who arranged it, but his own sisters-in-law and his mother wound up going to watch the children. The men seemed distracted with the women

making coffee and food as they waited. Appetites were non-existent but simply going into the kitchen and standing a few minutes seemed to take the edge off.

The rented security made rounds while two trucks were off-loaded. How could they've been so stupid thinking bad things only happened at night? Bill came back in uniform and brought two other policemen with him. Turner couldn't be found and his car was missing. There was an APB out, and if they got real lucky, they'd find him.

He'd been walking the warehouse again trying to clear his head and stay focused when his father came up. He resisted the urge to shrug off his father's hand after it clasped his shoulder. "They'll find her."

A lot of negativity wanted to come out. He managed to keep it to himself. His parents firmly believed that surrounding yourself with negativity drew harmful energy toward you. If there was a reason in the world to be positive, it'd be Caila. "It's hard," he said.

"God knows what you're feeling, son, but she's been given back to you twice before. I can't imagine it was to take her from you like this."

"Three times."

"Pardon?"

"When she went into the wreck after Liam—when I held her hand before Liam managed to free her legs, I felt it—like she was a gift. She trusted me to save her and Liam. I wonder if she's begging for me now. Asking me to find her."

"Don't, John."

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

Years of practiced restraint all changed with Caila. One minute his heart would break, picturing a small girl hidden in a closet, afraid to come out and find a brother hurt. The next minute he'd be consumed with wanting and lust for a woman who couldn't seem to get enough of him. Her dirty face and work boots, beauty when she grieved, her ability to forgive...

"You love her very much."

He could no longer imagine a future without her. "I do."

"Then have faith."

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Chapter Twenty-Nine

"We've got Turner," John heard Bill say over the phone. That'd been four hours ago.

Twenty-four hours since Caila disappeared, he suffered through each hour, every stinking minute wondering if she'd been hurt, if she'd eaten, if she was scared. They took turns on the phone, making both companies limp through the day.

Bill finally made an appearance slightly after one in the afternoon. Eight questions were fired at once and Bill raised his hand until everyone quieted. He shut the door to the office and they either leaned against a wall or sat. Bill looked at Liam. "Tell me about Troy Armstrong."

"Is that who has her?" Liam asked.

Hesitantly, Bill replied, "Yeah, from what Mike Turner says."

"We fired him a few months back, maybe not even that long. Cam got suspicious about merchandise. He and Caila went over bills and found he was ripping us off. Our secretary at the time got the boot too for covering it up."

"What type of guy is he?"

Cam answered. "Caila mentioned a felony charge being dropped to a misdemeanor and was concerned about firing him. He didn't disappoint us and put up a hell of a ruckus when it happened. Prior to that, he didn't draw attention, drove the truck, dropped loads, kept his log and records up to date. An average employee who didn't cause trouble."

"What about Stephanie Gainer?"

"Quiet, kind of skittish when a problem came up, but competent. We watched out for her, made sure none of the guys gave her trouble. Why?"

Bill scratched his scalp before smoothing his short brown hair. "I talked to Mike before he went into surgery. Stephanie helped fill in the blanks." His eyes narrowed and he held out his hand toward the hall. "Why don't we get comfortable in the kitchen for this? All right?"

They filed past but John hung back. Alone, Bill asked, "From what you explained, Liam has a temper."

"We all do about now. What's wrong?"

"If he gets riled up, can you and others sit on him? I don't want more cops up here for this, but if I need to, I'll call them in."

"He won't give you a problem." On a hair trigger himself, if the news made Bill worry about Liam losing his temper, it might make them all blow their composure.

"You sure?"

"I'll guarantee it."

He appeared apprehensive but they went to the back. Bill stopped at the coffeepot and began talking as he put sugar and cream into the potent black brew. Bill started talking in a casual manner. "Mike Turner got fired and you mentioned him trying to get back up the stairs to see Caila. That isn't why he got so rowdy. He wanted to see Stephanie. They were an item."

Cam said, "They're like night and day."

"Mike offered her something she couldn't pass up." They patiently waited. He gazed at each of them. "Protection. She

figured she could avoid some payback from an old employer with Mike around. She wasn't always a great secretary. But we won't go into her sordid past."

Bill turned and leaned against the counter. He took a sip of coffee. "So, you have Mike fired and not too long after, Troy and Stephanie get the boot. About that time, you all agreed to partner up and started shifting Four Son's over to McKenna, correct?"

"It happened shortly after, but in the same relative time," Cam replied.

"And your father was too sick to actually get down here?"

"That's right."

"This is the piece of the puzzle I can't figure out. I personally talked to Duane after the roof incident and he told me he wasn't speaking with any of you. Who would feed Duane information about what was going on down here? He seemed to know."

No one said a word and not one of them looked to the others for a sign. It clearly hadn't come from anyone in the room.

"We'll think about that later," Bill said. "The story Mike told was that Duane contacted Troy and offered cash to cause some trouble. After partnering with Mike, Troy orchestrated the roof job. He and Mike came to blows when Troy wanted to take it further. Seems he wanted Caila to go with them."

"Why?" Cam asked. "Sure, she fired him, but it was me who caught him stealing. Is it because she'd be the easiest to grab?"

"I guess your father said there'd be a bonus to really scare her. Troy took it seriously. I've done some checking and his past is," his voice trailed off. John knew his friend chose words carefully. "Assault charges against him were eventually dropped. It happened twice. First his mother and then a girlfriend."

"His mother?" Liam asked.

John's head began throbbing. The story got worse and worse.

"I checked it out. He beat them both pretty bad."

"And that's who has Caila?" Liam's voice shook while his right eye twitched.

"That's what Stephanie told us."

"So you picked Stephanie up with Mike?"

Although Bill stood there casually drinking coffee, John watched him scan the men's reactions. "I questioned them at the hospital. Mike got them into the Emergency Room and had the police called. He wanted us to know what happened so we could get Caila."

Caila wasn't with them! John felt like beating the rest of it out of Bill. He purposely gave information in slow, measured doses, not for effect but to make sure they could handle more. John's patience drew dangerously close to its limit.

When no one visibly reacted, Bill said, "Troy had Stephanie and made a deal with Mike."

John jumped to a conclusion. "Mike traded Caila for Stephanie."

Liam asked in a voice sounding deadly, "Where's Mike now?"

"Surgery. They're trying to get a bullet out of his stomach." Liam stood and walked over to the door and stared outside. "When I left, Stephanie was heading into another operating room."

"Why?" Cam asked.

"Broken wrist and some other stuff."

Everyone stared at Bill. John finally looked down. A gun involved, a man not afraid to use it and a woman needing surgery pretty much spelled in out.

"What happened to her?" Liam didn't turn when he spoke.

"Troy bloodied her up to make a point. He needed Mike's help again and made sure Mike knew Stephanie would pay if he didn't get Caila. He probably won't hurt her."

"What'd he do to Stephanie?" Liam asked.

Positive Bill tried to avoid telling them, he eventually said, "Wrist broken and some fingers too. Her face needs some work but she'll survive."

"Do you have any idea where Troy might've taken Caila?" Cam asked.

"Half the battle is knowing who has her and why. Money motivated him before and we're pretty sure that's why he has her now. With Duane dead and all the construction around here, he probably figured he could cash in and get money. Running scenarios with senior detectives, we figure he'll contact you soon with a demand."

Cam sat on the arm of the couch. His shoulders shook as he braced his hands against his legs. "So we sit around and wait for a phone call, knowing what he did to his mother, a

girlfriend and Stephanie. Yeah," he said, his fingers curled into fists, "sounds like a plan."

"Settle down, Cameron and use your head," Bill cautioned. "He wants money and Caila's the merchandise. You don't break something you want to sell."

John prayed the thoughts rolling through his mind didn't occur to anyone else. A lot of things could be done to a woman by a man that'd hurt and not leave her *broken*. He stood and walked from the room. He kept walking until he cleared the offices, warehouse and finally the back lot. Stopping, staring into the woods, he tried to let go of the dark images swirling in his mind. Would he bloody Caila up a little so they'd be more inclined to pay and get her back?

Some long moments later, Mannis walked up beside him. He didn't say a thing, just stood for a minute before he took out a pack of cigarettes and offered one. John grabbed it and the lighter. Neither one spoke as he contemplated how much longer he'd be able to hold on before snapping.

"Are you comfortable?" Troy asked.

"Yes, thank you," Caila replied.

The first few hours with him taught her a great deal about what to say, what not to say, and how to respond. He remained even tempered and almost civil as long as she stayed calm and talked softly. She wanted to kick him in the face but the satisfaction would be temporary. She wouldn't get far.

"You seem different with just the two of us. You're even polite, now that I have your undivided attention."

"I wasn't polite to you at work?" she asked.

"Not particularly. Not like you are now."

"There's a lot of stress there," she said, offering an excuse.

The game was getting old. Tired, with an upset stomach, she wanted to sleep but didn't dare. When she drifted off earlier, she woke to his hands on her breasts, her shirt gone, having been cut from her body. It lay in tatters in the corner. He'd done it to terrify her, make sure she didn't nod off again. He wanted her worn-out and disoriented. He didn't want use of her body. Troy disgusted her and deep down, she knew he felt the same about her.

"Troy?"

"Yeah?" he replied as he ran his index finger and thumb up and down the strap of her camisole.

"Can you please undo the ropes again so I can go to the bathroom?"

"Sure. You know you're not leaving, right?"

"Yes."

"Do you really understand?"

"I get it. The windows and doors are wired. I'm trapped unless I want away from you permanently."

He laughed. "I can't picture you ever getting that desperate—purposely blowing yourself to bits. Besides, I've been nice so far."

"The ropes?"

He jerked her arm, turning her sideways before working the binding loose. Once her wrists were free, she brought them forward to rub the chafed skin. She calculated how much damage she could inflict before he'd turn the tables and

really get violent. He'd eaten, she hadn't. He'd slept, she hadn't.

"You want to rip my eyes out, don't you?" he asked, grinning.

Too tired to conceal what must be written on her face, she sneered before he slapped her hard enough to snap her head to the side. Shoved against the wall, he pinned her with his body as a hand grasped her throat and squeezed.

She didn't yell out or struggle, simply went limp and gave him the same kind of emotionless surrender that'd worked before. Close to her ear, he said, "I bet I could make you cry, you cold, bitch."

She doubted it. Her anger, on the other hand, threatened to explode.

"What do you suppose will happen when Mannis and Thunder get here?" he asked.

Her heart leapt and she swallowed. He felt it, he had to. "They won't come."

"To save you? Sure they will."

"They'll bring police and..."

"I doubt it. They're real anxious to get you back. They'll do whatever I tell them."

They'd be sitting ducks if they came unarmed to the abandoned house in the middle of nowhere. "What then? If they show up?"

"I get paid and they can try to get you. What do think will happen, Caila?"

Her legs trembled and he stroked her arm with his free hand. She felt like puking. "Don't know. Tell me."

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

"When I walk out the door, I'm arming the house. If they give me enough time, I won't be able to make Caila go boom. But that leaves you dangling like a carrot. You'll be tied up, but I'll give you some play in the rope. Maybe you'll get free. If you manage it—if you don't panic and rush the door yourself, you can try and keep them away. Wonder how you'd do it? Should be interesting. Wish I could watch. If they're smart and careful, someone might actually figure out how to disarm the switches."

Would they wait? If she got loose, could she stop them? She shoved him suddenly. Apparently, he'd been expecting it and tightened his hold on her throat. Maybe he'd go too far and wouldn't have her alive to dangle in front of them.

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Chapter Thirty

John stood next to Mannis who threw the duffle bag on the ground. Troy casually sauntered up. After unzipping it, he started pulling out stacks of bills, checking them closely before stuffing them into his own bag. Mannis reached out but John stopped him. Troy noticed. "One stupid move and you'll have a perfect view as she falls apart. Literally. Is that what you want?"

"No," Mannis said glaring.

John wanted to rip the little asshole to shreds too. With Caila less than twenty yards away through a pane of glass, they could stay sane for a few more minutes. Being cautioned from the hidden earpieces to *play it cool*, took a lot of restraint.

"What guarantee do we have she'll be safe when you leave?" Mannis asked.

"There's only so much range on this trigger. You give me five minutes and I'll be too far away. You can get her then. Besides, when times get tough, I'd like to think we might cross paths again."

Caila sat in front of the picture window on a chair facing them with her arms stretched behind her back. Dim lighting in the room allowed them to watch her struggle. They'd have her back in minutes. *Less than five minutes, honey.*

Without another word, almost as if he could sense the tension building, Troy jogged around the side of the abandoned house before they heard a motorcycle come to

life. Mannis started walking but John grabbed his arm as Bill's voice grew loud in his ear. "Stay put! We'll be there in two minutes. You don't know if he's booby-trapped the yard."

John knew Bill watched from a distance up the road through long range, night vision binoculars as the cash exchanged hands. Bill finally gave in and let them have their way, doing the things Troy scripted. Troy promised if he even *smelled* trouble, Caila would be executed.

They had to helplessly stand and watch as she screamed and tried to get free. John fought the growing urge to go to her. Instead, he pushed Mannis sideways into headlight beams. "Tell her to stop. Tell her it's all right."

"She won't hear me any better than we hear her."

"Show her the words. Make her understand."

Mannis started signing and after a few seconds she stilled and watched. Mannis spoke so John could hear what he said. "Three minutes and we'll have you. Three."

She became hysterical and thrashed even harder. "Something's wrong," John said, her struggles increasing the rush of adrenaline in him. "We're not waiting for Bill."

Before he gained eight feet, Caila's hands came forward in a gesture to stop. Rope dangled from a wrist as blood ran down her arms. She began frantically signing and Mannis relayed what she said. "Doors, windows, porch, all wired. Not safe."

He understood the rest when her fists opened into stretched fingers before her arms went wide. "Explode," Bill said in his ear, the headlights from half a dozen police cars rolling up. "We'll handle it."

Bill emerged from the passenger seat of the first cruiser and stood beside him. John took out the earpiece. "How do you handle something like this?"

"By doing it right." To Mannis he said, "I need you to ask her questions while we get some people out here who know what they're doing. Can you talk to her for me?" Mannis nodded. "Good. First question, does the device have a timer?"

After asking the question, she wrapped her arms around herself and left the window. John wouldn't think about anything else but getting her out safely. He absolutely couldn't afford to react to what they'd seen. Once she was out of view, Mannis verbalized John's thoughts through clenched teeth. "Where the hell is her shirt?"

Bill warned, "Don't react, don't let her think about things. Keep her focused. Don't ask if she's all right, if she's hurt—nothing." When Mannis didn't respond, Bill released some of his own aggression, "Do you get me, McKenna, or do we get you the hell out of here?"

"Yeah, I get it."

"Don't use nicknames for her, don't look hurt or concerned either." Bill rushed to explain. "You're just going to talk to her. When you refer to her, use the term 'you,' nothing more. When you ask a question, don't embellish, relay exactly what I say."

"All right."

Back in the window, she slowly shook her head before signing a message. "Little switches. Windows. Doors," Mannis relayed.

"Ask if she's checked every single door and window." He did and she stood unmoving, staring. Something about her demeanor changed and John's blood started rushing. She should be animated, hopeful, excited. She appeared more exhausted, resigned and sad. "Keep trying," Bill said.

They could see her shaking and she started hesitantly toward the door, then stopped. She kept looking between them and the door. His gut clenched when he realized what was happening. In his heart he knew what she contemplated. *Oh, God, Caila, no!* She wondered if they stood far enough away to be safe from an explosion.

John spoke without thought. "She's not going to check. She's coming out."

Mannis yelled and started heading toward the house before Bill and two officers grabbed him. No one paid attention to John. By the time they noticed him, he'd cleared half the distance between Mannis and Caila. When she finally turned in his direction, he stopped. Everyone behind him yelled to back away but he held his ground. He stared, taking in every detail of how bad she looked, how tired she appeared. *You're strong and the worst is over. I won't let you go. Ever.* She turned toward the door and he took a few more steps. She noticed and faced him again.

"Go back," he saw her say and somewhat heard through the glass.

He shook his head. She needed to understand if she opened the door, he'd be right on the other side. Whatever took place would happen to both of them. He wouldn't let her die alone and frightened. Both of them motionless, they'd

reached an impasse. As he waited for what she'd do, he forgave her if she couldn't be strong right then.

The strain seemed to lessen as her shoulders drooped. She began rubbing her arms as if she'd suddenly felt cold. Her eyes seemed more focused and she looked beyond him at Mannis. She signed and Mannis said, "She wants you to back away."

"Tell her I like where I'm at."

She watched behind him before her gaze came back. She mouthed the word, "Please." She pointed to herself and gave him an "ok" sign.

He took his time and gauged her ability to keep going. She seemed rational and more in control. He pointed at her and said quietly, "Stay with me."

A softer expression on her face, she nodded. He slowly backed away because he believed her. She held up an index finger before leaving the window. Bill asked, "How long do think she's got before she makes a run at the door?"

"As long as it takes."

When she came back some minutes later, she began signing quickly and Mannis had a hard time keeping up. He blurted out what he saw. "Wood level, bubble, balanced, thermostat. She keeps repeating—and now, planet? Bubble?"

She threw her hands up and John asked, "Mercury?"

Mannis asked and she confirmed by nodding.

Bill said, "Mercury switches. Shit, they're twitchy, unstable...tell her to stay put. Don't go near any of them."

Mannis translated before he gave her reply. "All over. Wires everywhere. Big box." Mannis asked, almost under his

breath, "How the hell does a truck driver get explosives and Mercury switches?"

"Hell, if you want it bad enough, almost anyone can get dynamite. The switches are probably homemade. All you need is a thermostat and the right web page," Bill replied.

Mannis said, "She wants to know what to do. Should she try moving one?"

"No," Bill said, "tell her no!"

Mannis did. She put her index finger and thumb close together and raised her shoulders a little. John and Mannis both started laughing as some of the tension drained.

"Are you crazy?" Bill asked.

"Look at her. She's joking," John replied.

The wind picked up and they felt the tremble from distant thunder. A quick burst of rain hit, then stopped. John turned away from her. "How long until your specialists get here?"

Bill looked up and saw flashes of light in the distance and didn't reply. John asked the next most obvious question. "How twitchy is twitchy? Like thunder vibrating an old, abandoned house, twitchy?"

Mannis said, relaying what her hands signaled, "Get me out. Now. Please. Get me out. Roof?"

"Can she get to the roof?" Bill asked.

After it was conveyed and she replied, Mannis translated and said, "No. Chop through?"

Mannis had the answer and told her as he spoke out loud. "No. Don't know if it's solid. Come through, go..." again the exploding gesture.

John turned to Mannis. "What about the basement? The house is sitting on a foundation. Ask her."

He did and she left the window. When she came back, Mannis repeated, "Door down, no device, dirt floor, no windows." She demonstrated a crawling motion with her fingers.

"Crawl space," John concluded. "Mannis, stay with her."

Bill followed as he maintained a twenty foot distance from the house. They walked the perimeter, stopping on the east side. "No windows or doors here. Let's try it."

"John, it could cause an explosion."

"Can you guarantee she'll make it through a storm? It looks like we're in for one hell of a downpour."

Bill surveyed the structure. His eyebrows knotting together gave the answer.

John sat on the ground. "Take a hike, family man."

"She's small. Two blocks at most," Bill replied. Kneeling behind him and bracing his back, John used the heel of his boot to press against a cement block.

Gently but firmly, he kicked at the block and slowly, inch by inch it moved until falling inward. "The next block—from above or below?" John asked.

They both looked and John chose to go lower. His right leg cramped and he switched to his left. The entire sky lit above them before thunder boomed. Bill ran to the front of the house as John continued to kick another block free. This one more stubborn than the last, Bill and Mannis joined him before he heard from inside the hole, "I can fit. I swear."

"Stand back, Caila. You'll be out after I get another block out."

Focused on the task, he tried to ignore her words because they hurt. "Thank you. Oh, thank you so much, John. Just a little more. Please, hurry. Please."

When the block went into the hole, he heard, "Ouch!"

"Are you hurt?" he and Mannis both asked.

John had a vague feeling of familiarity. "Reach up, give me your hands."

She grunted and soon he saw fingertips before hands. When he grabbed hold, Mannis said, "Pull her out."

"Wait. Shit, I'm stuck."

The replay too familiar, he tried to focus on the fact that everything turned out the first time. Their luck would hold.

"What're you stuck on?"

"Dirt beneath me. A beam above." After another round of thunder vibrating the structure, she yelled, "I don't care, rip me to shreds. Get me out of here! Please?"

He braced his feet against the wall and applied constant, careful pressure until her arms came out and then her head. Turned almost sideways, she seemed wedged in tight. She shifted and squirmed and said, "Heave ho. Dislocate a shoulder if you have to. Take me out in pieces. I don't care!"

Mannis sat down next to him and took one of her hands. They pulled evenly and she whimpered. Bill apologized. Like a cork in a bottle, the rest of her slipped free all at once. She didn't move before they each grabbed an arm and drug her away.

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

Lightning flashed, thunder roared and once they made it to the front of the house, the wind kicked up as rain pelted down. Mannis climbed behind the wheel and John stepped into the passenger side of the McKenna company truck with Caila in his arms. They didn't waste time leaving. Mannis spun the truck around in the overgrown gravel drive. He avoided the police vehicles by forging a bumpy trail out to the road.

Mannis maneuvered the heavy truck as it slid and fishtailed over wet grass and mud. Lightning flashed again and again, striking around them with a brilliant strobe-like effect. Once the display ended, the night seemed darker like they'd been swallowed up. Even the headlights couldn't effectively cut through the gloom.

John let out a breath as they neared the road. The split second of relief ended as a low-pitched growl surrounded them. The rumble grew to a resonant booming and echo of thunder which shook the truck. The claps grew in intensity until light poured into the cab from the rear window. He squeezed Caila and held her tight as the light faded and debris from the house thumped and clanked over the roof and hood of the truck.

John sat paralyzed with the wipers slapping back and forth. Movement made him look toward Mannis. He took a shaking hand from the wheel, made the sign of the cross before touching Caila's leg.

John tried to speak twice before his voice actually worked. "You hurt?"

She lay unmoving. "Nothing some peroxide won't fix. Wait, I have half a basement down the front of my pants and it

feels like it's crawling." She started trembling before moving her legs. "I'm not joking." And then she panicked. "Jesus, stop, stop!"

Mannis eventually stopped a distance down the road and John opened the door. She scrambled over him to get outside. He jumped out behind her. No real streetlights, the road fairly dark other than the police cars coming up, she didn't seem to care as she stripped off her pants. The cab light revealed the problem as centipedes and roaches scattered.

When the first patrol car stopped behind them, Bill jumped from the passenger side and ran up to the truck. Caila was in a full fit by then, screaming and swiping at her legs. John dropped to his knees and helped remove remnant bugs and worms. Once her legs and ass were free from crawling things, it occurred to him what she had on. Probably occurred to her too when she froze in place.

He stood and blocked her from Bill. Little good it did then, his friend probably already got an eye full. He removed his shirt and held it for her. She stuffed her arms in and wrapped the rest tightly around her body. It came down to her thighs and he gave her one last look, making sure she was bundled up before he grabbed her pants. He took a step away and shook them.

Bill's voice relayed nothing but total compassion. "Are you all right, Caila? Just bugs?"

John glanced over and she nodded, looking kind of small. Mannis probably didn't get a clear view, probably turned away

on purpose. He knew differently about Bill. John grumbled and said, "Show's over, move along."

"You taking her home?" Bill asked.

"Yeah."

"No hospital?"

"If she needs one, we'll go. The woman's had a bad day, needs a shower and some food. Probably a few drinks."

"Amen," came from inside the truck.

"We need to talk," Bill said.

"Tonight?"

"It'd help."

"Give us an hour. Hell, be a sport and make it two!"

Her little hand came up to his face. "John, are you all right?"

With the adrenalin rush over, he felt drunk. A massive blast of thunder shook the ground. He finally noticed the rain pouring down, soaking them. He threw her jeans into a heap on the side of the road, kissed her and then lifted her into the truck.

"Just fine, honey. Let's get you home."

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Chapter Thirty-One

Caila answered at least two hundred questions over the next several hours, redirecting the conversation when Mannis quietly asked about her shirt. She verbally side-stepped him and Bill promised to get her alone and get some answers. If she'd been raped, she needed to be in a hospital. Bill finally managed to maneuver her into the kitchen. He had a way of getting responses others couldn't. His training allowed him to get around touchy subjects and find things out.

John stood in the midst of family, pretending to pay attention. Ice water flowed through his veins as he waited for Bill. When they came back, Bill spared him a glance and slowly shook his head. Caila hadn't been raped. John excused himself and went upstairs for a few minutes to clear his head and calm down. He felt like passing out after the emotional rollercoaster.

Finally alone at six in the morning, she changed into a work shirt and jeans before coming back downstairs. She said, "You look tired. How about if I go in and take care of payroll and then I'll come home." She'd said *home*. The last knot seemed to loosen in his back.

"I'll take you down."

"Really, you don't have to. I'll be done in a few hours. I'm sure Theresa can handle the rest with Liam helping. When Liam gets too tired, Mannis said he'd take over."

"I need to go in too."

"Is there a problem?"

"Yeah, and I'll explain when we get there. You ready?"

"Yes."

With dark half circles beneath her eyes, he wondered how she stayed on her feet. Barely keeping his own eyes open, he finished the cup of coffee. Payroll wouldn't take long and he'd get David to watch the towing end of things for the remainder of the day.

In the truck and on the road, she began humming as she stared out the window. He didn't recognize the song but the melody made a chill run down his spine. Devastatingly sad and morose, she seemed lost in thought.

He should've taken her to bed. He wanted nothing more than to hold her until they both drifted off. He also knew she'd want the workers paid, and decided not to argue. For the time being, he'd do whatever she wanted within reason. She deserved some peace of mind and taking care of her responsibilities at work would afford it.

He turned onto the company drive. "How're you holding up? You sure you want to play with paychecks right now?"

"Sure, have to do payroll," she answered in a distracted manner.

He parked the truck and held her elbow as they made their way into the building. The self-absorbed humming stopped and a bright smile greeted everyone they passed. Entering the office, she said, "Good morning, Theresa. Thanks for everything while I was away. Liam said you did a great job."

"You're so welcome, Caila. I'm glad you're okay. I wasn't expecting to see you though, and neither was Liam."

"Liam?"

"Shh, listen."

They looked through the door as Liam sat behind her desk. *Click*, "Damn it," before *click, click*, "you piece of shit," and then, *click, click, click, bang, click, click*, "I hate you. I'll break you into little pieces."

She walked in and interrupted his obvious attempt to do payroll. "It's okay, Liam, I'll get it. You know my computer hates you."

"Baby Girl, what the hell are you doing here?"

The question more directed at him, John replied, "She wanted to pay the men and I bet she knew somehow you were being mean to her computer."

Liam stood and she sat down. Within a few clicks, she said, "You just had a hard time because your fingers still don't work right. All you had to do was," *click, click, CLICK, click-click-click-CLICK!*

John knew the problem and went to her. They'd purposely left out a small bit of information when explanations were given. He put his hand over hers to quiet her fingers. "Alex is making a deposit into the account this morning. Go ahead and get the paychecks ready. The transfer will be complete by noon, plenty of time before anyone can get to a bank. If they use direct deposit, the money should be there before the account will be tapped to pay out."

"The money. Where is it? It's gone."

"Slow down, Caila," he said, "there's still a lot we have to talk about."

Liam asked quietly, "You didn't tell her?"

"Tell me what? What's going on?"

She sounded frantic and he rubbed her back as Liam went to her other side, crouched down and took her hand into his still-broken ones. "We cashed out the payroll account but John's covering it for us. Go ahead and do what John said, make out the checks. They won't bounce."

"But over a hundred thousand dollars is missing!" John knew she'd be upset but hadn't counted on how much it'd bother him.

"We took what we could get from here and John's floating us the rest."

"It wasn't a loan so don't tell her it is," John said. "God knows what she'll sell to pay it back." He instantly regretted every stupid, thoughtless word that came from a sleep deprived brain. "God, Caila, I'm sorry. I didn't mean it."

"To pay what back? I don't understand. Where's the money?"

Liam pulled the chair and turned it toward him. "Settle down, it's no big deal. We used the cash to pay part of the ransom. John covered what we couldn't."

"How much? How much did you give him?"

"Don't worry about it right now."

"But they're building and they need the money. If you used that much from the account, how much did you give Troy? Two hundred?"

Liam stayed where he was and didn't speak. She turned to look at him and he averted his eyes, not liking the panic in hers. She asked, "More? More than that? John, what did you do?"

He took her other hand and crouched down to get close. Liam on one side with one hand, him on the other, he answered, "Not much more than that."

"But how could you? That money belongs to the business, to your family."

"There weren't any arguments. My father told me to use it with blessings from each of my brothers. It's not a big deal. When the police get Troy, we'll get it back."

"No, no wait, the insurance money's coming and the receivables are due. I can use the bonus account to float the payroll account and the health insurance premiums aren't due yet, so if I took from each of those, I could fix this."

Caila's head was spinning. She tried to get her hands on the computer but John and Liam wouldn't let go. She needed to navigate, play Robin Hood and rob the rich accounts and give to the poor. She'd done it before. But they needed to let her go!

"Stop, Baby Girl. Just stop."

Her eyes fixed on the bottom line of the computer screen; she suddenly couldn't fathom how to fix it. John talked so slowly, she could barely make out the words. "It's handled. Don't worry."

"How much?" she asked.

"Baby Girl..."

"How much?"

She could sense them looking at each other. "I'll find out so tell me."

Liam said, "Five hundred."

"Thousand? Dollars!"

"Yes."

"Half a million dollars?" Hysterical laughter erupted before she swallowed it back up.

"Honey..." John started to say.

"No, it's okay. I'll just do the payroll." She shook her head trying to make herself think. She looked at each of them before they let go. "I'll take care of it, really." Her hands felt a little numb and her lips felt really cold. "You didn't say anything and I was surprised. I didn't know. Half a million?"

She laughed again suddenly before starting the process of paying employees. *No paycheck for me this week! Maybe not ever. If John marries me, I hope he wasn't counting on a second income.*

The situation comical, she couldn't imagine what they'd been thinking. She finagled and wormed her way through one catastrophe, did they think she could do it again? Only five hundred thousand? Compared to four million, the amount was trifling. Her life in exchange for the future education of all her little nieces and nephews. *Won't they just love their Auntie Kay when they find out!* Wait, maybe they could erect a shrine where the new warehouse would've gone to commemorate the non-building. What a nice touch that would be!

Since she owed him again, would John still want her? Probably not, considering how their whole relationship began. Her right leg bounced as she pointed and clicked, tallied hours, rates, taxes, deductions and focused on payroll, using money that wasn't there—yet. A few bounced paychecks? No problem!

They sounded concerned and she smiled, made it a point not to laugh and said appropriate things in response. Wholly engaged in the weekly chore, she began humming as John and Liam drifted away. *One task at a time, you little idiot. Too damned stupid to do more than one. You'll screw it up.*

So little time to accomplish so much! Sunday morning. Tomorrow would be Monday. Back to work in a little over twenty-four hours. Two in the morning on a Sunday seemed a splendid time to do laundry. She'd tried sleeping again and the moment sleep came, she woke with her heart hammering. At least she hadn't wakened John that time. His eyes were stained red and he'd been very quiet around her. The poor man needed sleep.

After starting the half load, she went back upstairs to the living room. She'd no sooner sat down before she jumped up and prowled the kitchen. Her brain wouldn't shut down; everything seemed so bright, like she'd been given extraordinary clarity and energy.

She took the notebook from the counter, sat at the table and ran calculations. She could really use a strong computer at home to run the accounting programs. All the numbers from the various accounts remembered, she began adding, subtracting and multiplying rapidly, balancing accounts so she could be ahead of herself when she went back Monday. *Monday is tomorrow.*

Engrossed in numbers, the pen dropped from her hand as her heart sped up. The Lexus! He obviously liked the car but black was a tough color to keep looking good. She ran to the garage and found the paste wax and started at the front

bumper. More than an hour later, almost done, she heard John ask, "Caila?"

"Over here. What are you doing up? Why aren't you sleeping? It's only three or four in the morning. I couldn't sleep. The car needed waxing. I used the good stuff, not the other wax on the shelf. Hope you don't mind. Found some cheesecloth so I used it too. Used a lot but I'll wash it." She rubbed the last of the wax off quickly, making sure she'd finished. Thank God! She'd started so many things and got side tracked. Better now. *Yes, I'm much better, calmer.*

"Caila, honey, come back in the house."

"Almost done." *No, I forgot the spot above the tail light!*

"I'm hungry. Let's make something to eat."

"Sure," she said, dropping the cloth and heading toward the door before running back and picking it up. She gathered the many used cloths into her hands and froze, trying to focus.

"Caila?"

Remembering, she placed everything down on a workbench and said, "Yes, dinner was hours ago. I could make something."

Up the stairs and in the kitchen, she realized she'd been in the garage without shoes. She wet paper towels and wiped the bottoms of her feet so the carpets wouldn't get dirty. After washing her hands, taking things from the refrigerator, she put them on the table and twisted the knob to heat the flat top cook surface. She found a pan and brought it out.

What's next? The next thing she'd needed would be...cake! Yes cake. She could bake a cake and frost it and when

someone stopped by she could offer it. Someone always seemed to be stopping by and she never had anything to offer. She did, but not homemade. Wasn't homemade better? The commercials said so, or Betty Crocker or some other bitch said so, and people bought that stuff. Damn it, she'd forgotten the laundry. She needed to get it into the dryer. Taking out a bowl, she wondered if she could get the cake done before the laundry. "Damn, no cake mix," she said, mumbling most of it.

She should run to the store but with the rain, the Lexus would get water spots. She could dry it before baking the cake, after the laundry, before fixing John something to eat. Plenty of time to get everything done. Better yet, she could take her car and when she went to the board to get her keys, she noticed them gone. Confused for a moment, she asked, "Why did Cameron take my car again?"

"To fix it."

"Strange thing, Cameron taking the car. Normally Galen fixes it." *When did it break?* She couldn't remember. "Did I lose the keys to the Lexus? They're not on the board where you hang them. Wait, maybe they're in the car."

The stove! She spun around, went to the stove and reached out. Startled when John suddenly grabbed her, she jerked but he held her wrist very tight.

"John?" she asked, afraid of him because of how quickly he moved and how hard he held on.

"Shh, you didn't get burned. You're okay. I've got you," he said, letting go of her wrist and drawing her close.

Her eyes felt sleepy. Her body got soggy, like she had no bones. Oh, she loved when he rubbed her back. She could feel his breath against her ear. Her mind drifted along on a blissful stream of floating, soft and squishy thoughts.

The back door opened and Mrs. Thunder came in. Such a beautiful woman. John resembled her. Resembled his father too. She had a bag and Caila went to take it from her. "It's all right, sweetheart. I've got it."

She knew things were fine. Better than ever. The best. Why did everyone keep saying it over and over like she needed reminding? *Good. All right. Okay. Fine. Awesome.* "Jim dandy!" she exclaimed, coming to her senses, urgency driving her to act fast and talk faster. "I was just fixing John something to eat. Would you like something? Can I get you some coffee? Wait, I need to put the laundry in the dryer."

John held her around the waist and started rocking back and forth. She clamped her teeth together to stop the chattering. She wasn't cold. Mrs. Thunder blurred, like she wasn't really there in the first place. Wasn't the first time she'd seen something strange in the last few hours. Or maybe it'd been days.

"Why don't you sit with John and let me make you something? You can keep me company."

Caila became fully alert. "I can do it, whatever you want. Just tell me and I can do it. Love to. It'd be an honor."

The room blurred again and she lost her train of thought before John said, "Caila, I need help." It sounded serious. Up for the challenge, feeling like a super-hero again, she wet her lips, cleared her head and turned to stare at him. *Pay*

attention, John needs you. Listen, concentrate. "Sit with me and balance the figures for last quarter. Focus and remember the balances in the accounts and give me a guess at the net worth of Four Son's right now. I need it." Numbers started rolling in, clouding her vision. "Right now."

She sat, picked up the pen, flipped to a clean page and began writing. She could do it and get all the other stuff in a minute. It'd only take a little while. She wrote each number, carefully putting them in columns. Debits, credits, expenses, tax deposits, uniforms, parts and payroll were accounted for.

"I can't remember the final amount in payables. I see it, it's just not clear. And I can't remember if you said you calculated depreciation annually or quarterly. Did you even tell me? What depreciation scale are you using? Is it a percentage or are you using a book value on the trucks because if you are, some of them have depreciated entirely because of their age and you can't continue to devalue them because that would be fraud. Must be careful about fraud. Get you thrown in the pokey."

A hundred—no, two hundred more questions came and she started organizing them in her head so he could give "yes" or "no" answers. Those having the most impact on the bottom line would come first.

"Here, sweetheart, have some tea. It's not too hot now and let me know if you like it."

She accepted the cup from some lady and sipped. Ticking off ingredients in her head, she sipped again and got confused and started over. She recognized cinnamon, honey,

peppermint, something bitter, tasted like lemon, but not quite.

John rubbed his hands over his face in exhaustion before taking the cup, and handing it back so she'd drink more. Gauze still wrapped around her wrists, he could barely believe it was Caila sitting beside him. Her behavior becoming more and more bizarre, he'd run out of options and called his mother. She'd offered to make a special potion the night before, but he'd been certain Caila would finally sleep.

"See," his mother said. "Just a little more."

He sighed and helped Caila drink, because her eyes were already half closed. "I'm sorry I waited."

"It's not your fault. It probably wouldn't have worked yesterday. She's got a very strong will."

"Maybe Bill's right."

He didn't believe she needed a psychiatrist but after almost burning her hand and waxing the car in the middle of the night, he reconsidered.

"If you think she needs to see someone, take her. For the time being, why don't you see if she's not more rational after a nap?"

"How long will she be out?"

"The tea helps relax muscles and causes drowsiness. She'll do the rest on her own."

"Mom, I'm sorry about calling."

"Don't say another word, John."

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

Caila mostly asleep, they sat patiently as her head went down on the table slowly while she continued to mumble and try to write. His mother said, "That notebook's practically filled. It was smart of you to give her something to occupy her mind so she wouldn't think about sitting and letting the tea take effect."

"She's been working on McKenna accounts too." John yawned and stretched his arms over his head.

"The poor dear. You might want to get rid of the notebook so she doesn't recall how confused she's been."

"Confused?"

"All those numbers. Columns and columns of them."

"Mom, she was calculating our net worth. She installed some new software and helped set up the accounts. She knows the balances."

"Wasn't that a while ago?"

"Not that long," he said, picking up the notebook. "I'd say she's dead on with a lot of the figures and damned close with the rest."

"She worked with the numbers for one day?"

"One afternoon. I'd need a calculator, but it looks like her math isn't too shabby either."

"Let me see."

She'd kept books for the company while his father ran the business. He watched her calculate quickly in her head before eventually laying the notebook down. She stared at Caila, realizing something he'd known for a while. His future wife was incredibly gifted.

She stood up behind him. Her hands on his shoulders with fingers rubbing deep, felt good. His mother witnessing Caila's eerie behavior, writing it off and silently offering reassurance made a lot of tension leave.

"Keep the rest of the tea on the stove at room temperature. If she wakes, give her more and let her sleep. You should have some too after the last three days. It wouldn't hurt."

"You're leaving?"

"Go to sleep and call me when you wake. I want to know how both of you are doing. And sweetheart?"

"Yeah, Mom?"

"I love you."

"I don't say it enough, but I love you too."

"You'll both be fine, I promise."

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Chapter Thirty-Two

After brushing her teeth and washing her face, Caila lay back down. Her body hurt like she'd been riding a motocross course for hours and hours. She had no idea the time or even the day and didn't particularly care. John's hands found her as she burrowed into the warmth of the bed. He rubbed her shoulders and she turned, laying face down as he gently worked every sore muscle in her back.

"Oh," she said, moaning when his hands ran over her hips.

"Did I hurt you?"

"Again, please."

He massaged and rubbed until she felt relaxed and at peace.

"Lower?" she asked.

"Here?" His hands stroked her cheeks, kneading strained muscles.

"Lower."

Hands went to her thighs and she moaned again.

Delicious. "Deeper," she whispered.

His fingers roamed, discovered wetness and opened her. She braced herself on forearms and the room spun as she involuntarily clenched his thick fingers. "That's it, honey, let it happen. God, I've missed you."

"More, please more," she said, going to her knees, making herself accessible.

His hands held her hips as he came up behind. Hard and ready, he entered, stretching everything as he did. She

couldn't stop the sounds that came out. It'd been forever since they'd made love.

"Is it good?"

"Yes, oh, yes. John!"

"I feel you coming. I've waited for this—for you."

"Harder. Now, right now. Oh, please!"

They were swept along on waves of release. She still needed him and stretched out on the bed on her back. They had to get closer, nothing in between them. He said, "I'm too heavy."

"Come down on me. I want all of you."

He eased lower, giving her more weight before kissing her lips, mouth, neck, ears and shoulders. His scent and the scent of their lovemaking swirled in the dark room, blending to make her feel secure. When he touched her breast she tensed.

"I'm with you now, Caila. It's my hand and mouth touching you. Please, honey, don't let him in here with us."

"I'm sorry. Didn't mean to." *Nothing happened with Troy. Stop thinking about it.*

"Shh, feel me. My breath," he said before warmth passed over a nipple. "My lips," he brushed against her gently, repeatedly. "My mouth loving you."

She twisted and arched. So hot, so gentle her lover was. Safe in his arms. Safe in their bed. Safe beneath his body.

"You're beautiful, Caila. Hold me again, deep like before." When she did, he whispered, "Your sweet little ass coming up like that makes me crazy. Come harder this time and cry out for me."

"Mmm, more. Anything you want. I'm so close."

His hips rolled and she fell over the edge. Again. With every pulse of orgasm he went deep until she rocked herself against him and cried out.

"Shit," he breathed, pushing in a final time to grind against her. "Oh, Christ," he cried before releasing a massive exhale. He groaned and pumped into her with harsh motions, holding her tighter.

His mouth fit against hers and his tongue pushed inside. He kept making satisfied sounds as his hips rocked. "Mmm," he said. "Sweet woman."

He shifted and settled next to her with his cheek resting against her stomach. His fingers began parting tender flesh before she managed to say, "John, I'll be back. Please, let me up."

"Lay still for a while. I'm feeling lucky."

"Lucky about what?"

"Shh, relax."

The kiss on her stomach made her smile. A fingertip rubbed gently at the top of her sex. He kissed and touched and *played*. It hurt and ached in such a painless way. She loved the man who came over her, all muscle and intensity, forcing her body to experience intense pleasure. And then the younger-looking man, with sleepy eyes and mussed hair that lay against her stomach to watch his fingers tease.

"Lie there nice and quiet, honey. Let's see if you've really had enough or if you might need something else." The small circles he made with increasing pressure caused her to moan

and open a little. "The slightest touch makes you clench down. Do you feel how swollen you are inside?"

"Oh, and sensitive. I'm so sensitive."

"And responsive," he whispered, gently bringing her to climax.

John kept at her, lightly rubbing while making sure she didn't get sore from the stimulation. A little in awe at how fast she came, her hips barely stilled before she started moving urgently against his touch.

Moans and cries got him hard and before she climaxed, he placed two pillows under her bottom, giving them just the right angle. When he slid into her, she clenched down perfectly. He thought he could last forever, pumping into her gently like that. But it didn't take long until the contractions surrounding his erection squeezed and coaxed him to follow. How could one small woman make him ten feet tall?

He withdrew carefully and covered them both with the sheet and comforter. Held against his side, he turned to rub her stomach and abdomen. Most of his prayers were answered when she came out of the house having suffered only minor scratches; he figured he'd try for the rest of what he wanted. Caila loved kids. So did he.

When she moved, he put his leg over her and held her still.
"John?"

"Give it a chance."

"I'm still tired or something. I'm not following."

He kissed her gently and said, "A child. Our child."

"I doubt it could happen this quick."

"I love you," he said, kissing her, cradling her head with his arm. He felt beyond lucky. "You'd make a perfect baby, pink and healthy with blonde hair and the biggest blue eyes. I'd love you both so much."

For so many years he believed he'd been meant to watch his brother's blessings. Thankful for the tiny nieces and nephews, he feared he'd only touch such gifts as an uncle, never a father. He believed differently with Caila next to him whole and alive. His father told him Caila hadn't been given to him to be taken away cruelly. Sometimes the good things took a while to penetrate, especially because he'd been waiting years for this one special woman.

Two weeks later, a city hall wedding took place after helping her pick a modest white dress that came down to her calves. Trimmed in lace, the backless halter-top revealed her perfect skin and delicate bones. He wore a black suit as they stood together and within thirty minutes, their union became legal.

Each time he glanced at her in the passenger seat, his throat constricted. *Mine*. He looked at the white, high-heeled sandals and from there; she was wrapped in white lace and pearls. He really should be making more of an effort to remember their wedding day. Instead he wondered why the hell she married him.

The ring on her finger seemed large, although he'd wanted her to have something better. He conceded on her choice and she finally accepted the pearls circling her neck and wrist along with the earrings. The first day of a marriage happened

once. He made sure that every time she wore the pearls, they'd remember it.

She wore a smile but he sensed she still felt bad about the secrecy. He thought for sure she'd tell at least one of her brothers. She hadn't and it made him swell with pride and trust. Apparently he'd been more important than her brothers that day.

After pulling up and putting the car in park, he went around and helped her out. No valet or other stranger would touch her. Not today. When she took his hand and stood, her scent came to him and his knees grew weak. *Forever and ever, amen.*

He stopped her inside the hotel. She said, "We don't have to stay here. We can have dinner and go home."

He smiled and touched her cheek. *Sensitive, intelligent, mine.* "Whatever you want."

She took his arm as he led her through the hotel. His posture became a little straighter as both men and women did more than glance. At the doorway to the private dining room, he heard a man announce, "Mr. and Mrs. John Martin Thunder."

Her hand shook in surprise so he held her a little tighter when they walked in. She came to an abrupt stop when everyone inside applauded. Color came to her cheeks as he watched pleasure and surprise light her eyes.

"You said we'd tell them later," she said.

Her eyes were glassy but he was sure the surprise agreed with her. "It's later."

She stretched on tiptoe to give him a kiss. He pulled her into his arms and gave his mouth. Their families clapped louder and she swiped at errant tears. His father and mother welcomed her to the family as her four brothers shook his hand; Liam thumped him with a cast in greeting.

The room comfortably accommodated the two hundred people in attendance. The invitation open, he'd expected half as many. The hotel had been prepared thanks to Liam's foresight. John never expected so many would want to celebrate the occasion.

He was engaged in conversation with Liam and Alex, when Caila and Mannis walked over to the cake. Mannis had her alone and she looked upset. Liam noticed and excused himself. All her brothers converged on the same spot. They circled her and he didn't like the look of the situation. While politely greeting people, he worked his way closer.

He stood near and listened as Liam cleared his throat. "Caila, we wanted a moment with you and this is as good as it gets. You know what's coming, so here it goes." She laughed nervously and wiped a tear. "As your oldest brother, I give you to John with the knowledge he'll care for and love you as I do. I'll be close if you need me. My love for you won't change. I'm forever your brother."

He kissed her forehead and she took his healed left hand and casted right one into hers before bowing her head. "One family, one love."

Cam stood in front of her next. "Baby Girl, I accept your choice and he'll be a brother to us now. I'll stand by you both

through the good and bad. You know my love for you won't change. I'm forever your brother."

He kissed her forehead before she took his hands and bowed. "One family, one love," she said.

Krista came close to John and placed her hands on his arm. He reached into his back pocket automatically and handed over his clean handkerchief. As she dabbed her eyes, he realized more people were focused on the McKennas as he watched.

Mannis came to stand in front of her with a pained expression on his face. "My only sister," he began before stopping and looking down. "The words are hard, not because of your choice, but because you chose. He's a brother to me and I'm proud of you, not only today, but always. My love for you won't change. I'm forever your brother and protector."

He kissed her forehead and stroked her cheek before she took his hands. "One family," she said before she wiped a tear. "One love."

Barb came up and took John's other arm and watched as Galen went to stand in front of her with a big grin on his face. "Dearest brat sister," he began. Everyone laughed. "I guess he's all right because he thinks he can put up with you."

The laughter grew before he held the sides of her face in his palms. "He's a brother to me now and you..." Galen's wife went up behind him and began rubbing his back. His shoulders moved as he took a deep breath and blurted out the rest. "You're my fondest memory of childhood. My love for you won't change. I'm forever your Chevelle's mechanic."

Mannis hit him on the back of the head. Galen gave her a loud smacking kiss on the forehead and she took his hands, twisting them a little before she said, "One family, one love, and you remember that, Galen."

Krista shook her head. "Sorry, John but you're stuck like the rest of us who married into this."

"You don't seem too unhappy."

She smiled and absently rubbed her expanded abdomen before saying, "I wouldn't trade a single moment or any one of them, not for a million dollars...Oh, shit, I'm so sorry!"

He laughed hard before he said, "Mine was on sale."

"Well, you'll fit right in. Welcome to the asylum." His parents came closer and Krista hugged his mother before touching his father's arm. "They'll grow on you, unfortunately."

"Sweetheart," his mother said, smiling, looking the McKennas over, "they already have."

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Thirty-three

"Mrs. Thunder?" Bill asked.

"Yes, Officer Reid?" Cailla replied. He could be quite charming when he wasn't arresting her.

"I asked the others to come up. I have some news for you."

"Good news?"

"I'm smiling."

All their brothers filed in and went to the kitchen area. Everyone getting comfortable, John leaned against the counter, spread his legs and pulled her between so she faced the group. Liam shrugged in their direction before saying, "Newlyweds."

"You're just jealous Krista isn't this close every day," John replied.

Bill cleared his throat and when they settled, he began. "We caught Troy Armstrong."

John's arms tightened around her waist and she squeezed him tightly with her hands. She hoped he'd be caught, but having it done made her weak with relief.

"You okay?" John whispered.

She nodded. Troy being on the loose hadn't ruled their lives in any significant way, but all of them felt the need to keep a constant vigil when she worked. They'd been wonderful, making it appear by chance when one of them had to leave, another man took his place. Many *shadows*

protected her throughout the days with none more prevalent than John. Things could finally get back to normal.

"That's the good news," Bill said. "The not so good news is we only recovered a portion of the ransom."

"It doesn't matter," John said quickly, giving her a squeeze.

The others mumbled agreement before she said, "Wait, yes it does. How much?"

Groans and laughter were heard as their brothers shook their heads. They could laugh if they wanted. *She* didn't see the humor in it. Any portion of the funds being returned would lessen the feelings of guilt she carried.

"We only retrieved four hundred and sixty-five thousand and some change. You should have it back within fourteen days."

"Only?" Caila asked. "Gentlemen, Christmas came early this year."

"Not so fast," Bill said. "There's a lot more down the road. Testimony, probably separate trials when Mike recovers, along with the matter of what to do about Stephanie."

"She wasn't part of it and she went through enough. Can't we do something?" she asked.

"We'll work it out if that's how you feel." Almost everyone agreed. "Now, for another little matter. We need to talk about who fed information to your father," Bill said. The room became very quiet. "It appears your attorney, Brian Foster was the one."

Liam spoke up. "Impossible."

"Think about it. When you factor in he bought your father's house for almost a half million under market value, he had motive. Sleazy practices and deals like that could get him disbarred."

"We were pretty desperate at the time," Caila said. "We knew the house was worth more. He agreed to our conditions and transferred cash, not knowing how long Dad would live."

"Think it over but I'd seriously consider everything before using his services in the future. Talk about it and let me know if you want to pursue legal action. I'll help in any way I can."

Theresa knocked and opened the door. "Caila, you have a call. They said to interrupt."

She walked out and went to her desk. "This is Caila."

"Congratulations, Mrs. Thunder!" the woman said.

Her stomach sank and she felt a little sick. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm so happy for you. Why don't you come back on Friday and we'll get things going on this end."

"Um...sure. Okay."

The woman gave her a time and she hung up. Her brothers walked by and she smiled, trying to act normal. *Normal*. She'd refused to believe the physician and blocked it out until the blood test confirmed what he'd said during her appointment. *Pregnant*.

With most of her belongings still in storage, her kidnapper just caught, her wrists still pink from where they'd been damaged—would a baby seat work in the Chevelle?

"Hey, Baby Girl?" Galen asked.

"Yes?" she replied, looking up to find her brother's standing in the office.

"I wanted all of you to hear and there couldn't be a better time. Caroline's expecting."

They all had pats on the back and congratulations for him. She gave him a hug. "Are you happy?"

"You can't imagine," Galen replied.

"I'm so glad for the two of you."

John and Bill came into the room and Galen relayed his news. After handshakes, he said, "Sorry, Bill, but you'll be losing a dispatcher in about seven months."

"A shame, because she's a bright spot for all of us, but I understand."

"She's quitting?" Caila asked.

"Sure," Galen answered. "We're not putting our child in day care. Her first responsibility is to the baby." He smiled and added, "Right after me."

Everyone laughed but the humor escaped Caila. John placed a hand on her shoulder and brought her close. "You wouldn't want your niece or nephew being handled by strangers."

"Of course not."

"A mother should be home where she can take care of herself and a baby."

A bit of good news followed by a slap to the head. Why couldn't it ever be just the good? Of course he meant *other* mothers because their jobs were inflexible and wouldn't accommodate a crib and playpen in the company office. There weren't beds and bedrooms a few steps away with a kitchen. *Or phones ringing, people with germs traipsing in and out, the lovely sound of diesels groaning and grabbing gears with*

a full load on. She couldn't stay at home and she wouldn't leave her baby.

She made her way back to her chair and sat down heavily. John appeared in front of her. Crouched to her level, holding the arms of the chair, he asked, "You okay?"

"Sure. Fine."

"You look a little green."

"Something I ate."

"Call if you need us," Cameron said before they left.

"Honey?"

"If I were pregnant, you wouldn't expect me to stay home. Would you?"

"Yeah, I would. You wouldn't want to stay with a baby? You'd want our child in day care?"

"No, nothing like that. But what about here?"

"Bring an infant into a trucking company?"

Since he said it like that... "I grew up here."

"Because your mother wasn't home for you."

Did a baby mean giving up her job, being close to her family? Unable to fathom making a choice, she felt a little weaker.

"Caila, are you pregnant?" She wasn't surprised he sounded suspicious. She nodded tiredly. "You sure?" His hands felt warm against her suddenly cold fingers.

She nodded again.

He gathered her up, turned and sat in the chair before making her comfortable in his lap. "We'll figure it out," he said quietly. He chuckled slightly and brought her close.

"Have I told you today how much I love you?"

"Yep, this morning." And every morning for that matter. Actually she'd know, even if he didn't utter a word. Deep down she could only be glad John got his way. She loved children.

"I'll have to tell you twice as much now. Is everything else all right?"

"Yes."

"When do you go back to the doctor?"

"Friday at noon."

"I'll go with you." He might look tough but he could be so gentle. His rough fingertips smoothing her scalp felt good.

"You don't have to."

"I know, but I will."

She sat quietly, letting more changes sink in. "John?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you want a boy or girl?"

"Either, as long as it's healthy. But we'll take whatever we get. How about you? Are you hoping for one or the other?"

"A boy, just like you. Well, even a girl if she's just like you."

"You mean dark haired and dark skinned?"

"No, I mean tough like you. Someone we can take drag racing and ride motocross with. A child who's smart and interested in the businesses. And one who'd figure out new ways to do things to build a better future for our grandchildren."

He stroked her arm. "My daughter won't be racing bikes or cars, driving trucks, getting arrested or tattooing words on her ass, honey."

Damn, that hurt. "You'd be disappointed if she did?"

His cheek brushed hair away from her forehead. "No. She'll probably teach us a hundred new things if she has your quick wit and my stubbornness. God, I wonder exactly what we *are* in for."

"More gray hairs. They'll match your eyes."

"Don't joke. I've been pulling out gray hairs since Liam had that accident." He reached over and hit the intercom button.

"Theresa?"

"Yes, John?"

"Mind the shop. We'll be in back."

"No problem."

"Wait," she said as he got up, holding her close. "What's up?"

"Me."

"John?" He started walking. "Where're we going?"

"The lock's been fixed on your old room. We're newlyweds. I want my wife."

"But..." His mouth hushed her. And it remained that way over the next hour.

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About the author...

Kathleen Lash wrote a first novel with a friend at thirteen. She eventually married the "bad boy" who, more than twenty-five years later, provides wild times and stability. Working full time as a supervisor in health care, she holds a Bachelors in Business and continues to rebuild the highly affordable, unique, fixer-upper near Cleveland, Ohio. Leisure hours are packed with writing, stock car racing, demolition derby driving, Toyota bonfires (cutting torch plus fuel line equals hysterical laughter and a newspaper article in the local paper—sorry, sweetie), motorcycle and horseback rides, trips to various states and Mexico.

Affiliations with the Romance Writers of America and the Northeastern Ohio Romance Writers groups have allowed her to hone skills and give characters a rich past and precarious future.

Visit Kathleen at www.kathleenlash.com

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CATASTROPHE by Sharon Buchbinder. Cats! Twenty-three! Being evicted! Their handsome neighbor doesn't want to lose their curly-haired, curvaceous owner. So what's the rescue plan?

HIBISCUS BAY by Debby Allen. Picture love on a sun-drenched white sand beach surrounded by hibiscus-covered cliffs, with your yacht anchored in a blue Mediterranean Sea.

TASMANIAN RAINBOW by Pinkie Paranya. A concert violinist grapples with remote ranch life, intrigue and the mystery of a missing diary, the peril of a flood in which all could be lost, and the undeniable attraction of the man who would do anything to protect his son.

THREE'S THE CHARM by Ellen Dye. Rachel vowed never to speak to her ex-husband again. When her beloved horse needs a vet and Heath is the only one within three counties of West Virginia mountains, some vows need to be broken.

SEE MEGAN RUN by Melissa Blue. City-successful Megan returns to the boonies to save her childhood home but finds she must not only agree to stay for her mother's wedding but also deal with the man she left when she hitchhiked out 12 years ago.

Forbidden Thunder
by Kathleen Lash

A MOTHER'S HEART by Misty Simon. Carrie wants a simple life. Helping Gran with the animal shelter: complication. When the new neighbor with two kids comes in for a dog, life goes out of control.

PIGMALION by Sharon Buchbinder. A dream job is almost within Sam's reach, but only Levisa can teach him to speak so he can win it—perhaps they can each learn something.
