



COBBLESTONE
PRESS

ANNA LEIGH
KEATON

WHERE THERE'S
SMOKE...

Anna Leigh Keaton

Where There's Smoke

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

Where There's Smoke

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Where There's Smoke

Copyright© 2006 Anna Leigh Keaton

ISBN: 978-1-60088-090-2

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Melissa Darnell

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Anna Leigh Keaton

Dedication

This book is for every woman who has ever been hurt, who has had to struggle to remain strong and keep going, and for the men who love them.

Chapter One

Kate Darby perched on her favorite bar stool and cast a worried gaze over the crowd. There were a few known troublemakers in the pub tonight, but so far they were behaving themselves. She hoped the atmosphere stayed calm. She couldn't afford any more repairs right now.

All the hard work was starting to pay off. Darby's clientele was expanding, and putting the books into the black was finally within reach. But right now every wasted penny hurt like hell.

Running a pub in Cooper Valley, a city of only twenty thousand residents, took more than serving pints of Guinness and fine Irish whiskey. It took initiative and imagination.

Since her dad's death a little over a year ago, Kate had jumped in with both feet. She'd nearly made it up from the pit of debt her father had accrued. In another six months, she'd make her first goal. A profit.

"Lover boy is here," Drake said, leaning slightly over the bar toward her and wiggling his eyebrows.

Her heart fluttered, even as she sent the bartender a scowl. "Don't you have some glasses to polish?"

Drake chuckled and winked. "Come on, boss. I'd love to see you get laid."

"Chuck is kinda cute," she said with a smirk. "Maybe he's getting tired of you."

With a feigned look of horror, Drake laid his hand over his chest. "Honey, you don't have what it takes to make Chuck a happy man."

Grinning, she took a sip of her diet cola. "No kidding." Drake and Chuck had been together for over ten years and were possibly the happiest couple she knew.

The singer announced a ten-minute break, and Kate finally turned her attention toward the door. Sure enough, in walked her firefighters. They arrived like clockwork every eighth night after finishing their four-day rotation. Her pulse kicked up another notch as she held her breath. First came Steve and his gorgeous redheaded wife, Gracie who always hung out with the guys. Then came Bret and Keith, both single tonight, though they often brought their current squeezes. And then—her heart nearly stalled—*Toby Angel*.

The last through the front door, he stopped and exchanged a few words with Cal, the bouncer. Then, as always seemed to happen, his dark chocolate eyes scanned the room and zeroed in on her. That wonderful, scary shot of electricity zinged through her, making her tingle from head to toe and a few interesting spots in between.

Her breath whooshed out, and she turned away, grabbed her glass and scurried behind the bar in order to look busy. That...that powerful pull happened every time their eyes met—every *single* time—but she never got used to it. Had never been able to block it. Ignore it. Control it.

She'd known him for what felt like forever. She was only twelve when her father retired from coaching football at the high school, bought the run-down bar, and turned it into a quaint Irish pub. Toby had been his star athlete at Cooper Valley High, and he'd spent a year washing dishes and sweeping floors at the pub to help support his mother and sister after his father died.

But these past few years since returning home had been so different from when she'd been a kid with a crush on an older boy. Now she was a woman and knew exactly what he was offering. Only...she couldn't accept.

"Why do you do that?" Drake asked in little more than a whisper from beside her as he poured a shot of whiskey.

"Do what?" Kate dumped out the cola and tipped the glass upside down in the buss tray under the bar.

"Act like you don't see him." After collecting the customer's money, he waved it under her nose. "You two are like dogs in heat with a ten foot high chain link fence separating you. Panting over each other, but never making the leap that would bring you together. When he asks tonight, say *yes*."

Over the past three years, Toby had used one tacky pickup line after another on her almost every night he came in. Oh, God, wouldn't it be nice to accept? To be able to just let go and give in?

"You know I don't date the patrons."

"You don't date anyone."

True. But she didn't need that fact pointed out to her. "Mind your own business."

Drake clucked his tongue. "Sex would take care of that nasty little problem of yours."

She folded her arms over her chest and narrowed her eyes. "What problem?"

"Your attitude."

"Do you like your job?"

He laughed at the empty threat and walked to the end of the bar to help another customer.

"Hey, Kate."

The butterflies inside her belly fluttered like mad, and her skin heated at the deep voice. She turned, and there he stood—all six-foot-four inches of him lean and muscular in a navy blue Cooper Valley Fire Department T-shirt. Her gaze lowered, and she felt faint. Black jeans hugged thickly muscled thighs and cupped his sex in the most inviting way. How could someone be so flawless?

Half Native American, half African American, his looks bordered on exotic. With skin the color of lightly creamed coffee, a straight, aquiline nose, high cheekbones, square jaw—but not so square as to look harsh, just...right. She'd never been one to go for guys with shaved heads, but for some reason his turned her on. Hell, everything about him turned her on.

And damned if she didn't want to know what those lips would feel like on her skin. Full, but not too full, and always quick with a dangerous, daring smile. Like the one there now.

"Yoo-hoo, anybody home?" He waved his hand in front of her face. *Shit.* "Sorry."

"Two pitchers, four glasses, and my usual."

His usual was cola, not the Guinness his buddies always drank. In the three years she'd been back and working in the pub, he'd never once touched alcohol. That was just one more thing she liked about him. She may run a bar, but the scent of beer or whisky on a man's breath could still send her over the edge. Especially if they got too close.

She gave herself a good mental shake, grabbed up two beer pitchers, and began filling them.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Toby lower himself onto a stool and lean his elbows on the bar.

"So, when are you going to run away with me?"

There it was. She grinned. The last few weeks he hadn't asked, which meant he'd been seeing someone. The question tonight let her know he was single again.

"When you make Captain and can afford me." She added a flirtatious wink and set the pitchers on the bar.

He chuckled, as he always did. "You're a cold woman, Kate Darby."

If he only knew how deep those words cut into her heart. "Gotta look out for number one, ya know?" She set a tray with four empty glasses and one filled with Coke next to the pitchers.

Toby pulled out a few bills and dropped them on the bar. "Keep the change, sweetheart." He picked up the tray in one hand and the pitchers in the other as easily as any professional waiter. That sexy, teasing smile never left his lips, nor did the twinkle in his deep brown, almost black, eyes. "Someday you'll cave."

Doubtful, she thought as she watched him walk away, admiring the most perfect ass she'd ever seen. She wouldn't cave. Not to him. Not to any man. She wasn't a cold woman. She wasn't. She just couldn't...

Where There's Smoke

Gritting her teeth, she headed toward her office in the back, needing a moment or two to regroup. Toby always put her off kilter. Her reaction to him was simply irrational.

She reached her office door and was pulling the key from her pocket when the sound of trouble stopped her in her tracks. She spun around, looking for the source of the shout. Before she could spot the troublemaker, the sound of breaking glass crashed through the room.

The crowd went silent.

* * * * *

As Toby set the beer on the table, he turned his head toward the sound of shattering glass. The pub grew silent.

"I said, 'You owe me a hundred bucks!'" This from a guy near the pool tables brandishing a broken beer bottle at a much smaller man.

"Cal!" Kate shouted across the room, then rounded the bar, ducked past a few patrons standing nearby, and headed straight into the already overheated argument.

Shit, she was going to get herself hurt. She was way too little to take on a guy easily a hundred-fifty pounds heavier than her.

Cal, the bouncer, pushed his way from the door, but Toby was much closer. He rushed to Kate's aid with Steve, Bret and Keith close behind.

The guy with the bottle swiped it through the air at the little guy, who ducked out of the way.

Picking up a pool cue, the smaller man held it like a baseball bat at the ready. "I don't want no trouble, man."

"Too late."

"Knock it off!" Kate tried grabbing the arm of the man holding the beer bottle.

The guy turned, towering over her, his eyes glassy from too much alcohol, the broken bottle raised to do serious damage.

Toby leapt over a chair in his way, wrapped his arms around Kate from behind and turned her, shielding her body with his own. Fire ripped through his left shoulder blade as the glass cut deep.

He heard the crack of the pool cue breaking, and a rapid fire of furious curses burst from the bottle wielder.

Kate's pointy elbow thudded into Toby's gut, knocking the breath from his lungs. Shocked at her assault on him, he released her. She ducked to the side out of his reach. He turned to grab her and haul her to the floor if he had to, but she'd already jumped into the middle of the fracas.

She grabbed the bottle wielder's wrist in both her hands, brought it around behind him, and shoved it up between his shoulder blades. When he tried to get her with his free hand, she let go with one hand, reached between his legs, and grabbed the crotch of his baggy jeans.

The guy yowled and went down like a brick, his face smashed against the floor. Kate planted her knee in the small of his back, her whole weight on him, while she held his balls in a vice-like grip.

Steve pinned the smaller man against the wall and yanked the broken pool cue from his hand, while Cal pushed Kate out of the way and took over with the big guy.

Toby couldn't believe what he'd just seen Kate do. She'd taken down a guy nearly three times her size.

"Cops on the way," Drake called from behind the bar.

"Let's get these assholes outside," Cal growled. Keith grabbed the other arm of the big guy and helped Cal get him to his feet. The guy cursed and fought, but between the bouncer's bulk and Keith's wiry strength, he was no match for them. The little guy went without a fight, walking toward the front door with Keith and Bret.

Toby stumbled sideways, grabbing the edge of the pool table for support. His shoulder hurt like a bitch. A sticky flow of warmth oozed down his spine. Shit, how badly had he been cut? He swallowed. He didn't feel so good.

"What's wrong with you?" Kate asked.

Reaching over his shoulder, he felt the wound, the blood on his shirt. The cut couldn't be that bad. It couldn't.

"Toby?"

His stomach roiled and his mouth flooded with saliva when he glanced at the shiny wet blood on his fingertips. He swallowed hard. Oh, fuck, he was going to puke.

"He's bleeding," Gracie said from behind him.

"Just a little—" He blinked as the room seemed to grow dim. *Come on, Tobias! Don't be a baby!* His skin went clammy, and he gripped the edge of the pool table with his right hand, holding himself up.

"He looks like he's gonna pass out," Kate said as she moved up against him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

He tried to return the hug, but his arms had turned to lead. He couldn't raise them. And his knees seemed to be turning to rubber...

Kate tried to catch Toby's weight, but her knees buckled, and she hit the floor hard, her breath whooshing out as Toby's limp body sprawled on top of her.

Gracie was on her knees next to them in an instant. "Don't move him."

"Drake! Call for an ambulance! What do you mean don't move him? He's on *top* of me. Get him *off*." When Kate pulled her hands from Toby's back, she felt the sticky moisture and raised her hands to see them. They were covered in blood.

Her stomach rebelled. "No. Oh, God." She had to get him off her. *Now*. She glanced around the room and saw dozens of pairs of eyes staring down at her.

"I'll get Steve." Gracie lunged to her feet and disappeared into the crowd of onlookers who stood around like a bunch of morons.

"Toby. Come on, Toby. Wake up." She slapped his cheek. *Wake up and let me out of here.*

Drake appeared by her side with a bundle of bar towels in his hand. *Good*, she thought. At least someone was thinking. Drake pressed a wadded towel against Toby's back.

"He'll be all right, Kate," Drake said softly. "He's a big boy. Takes more than a little cut to..."

Kate swallowed. Big. *Very big*. And on top of her. "Wake up, damn you," she said between gasps, trying to catch her breath, knowing she was about to lose it right here in front of her customers.

Steve came in, shoving his way through the gawkers, and slid to his knees next to them.

"Ambulance is on its way," Drake said as Steve pulled the towel from Toby's back and then tore Toby's shirt open from the cut made by the broken bottle.

"Pull Kate out from under him," Steve said to Drake.

While Steve lifted Toby's upper body, Drake grabbed her hands and helped her wriggle out. She pulled away fast and took a quick glance at the crowd. Nothing she could do about them right now. One thing at a time.

Organize.

Toby first.

She knelt next to Toby's head and touched his clammy cheek. He hadn't bled that much. How could he be out cold? Was the wound so deep? Was his life in danger?

Not in her bar on her watch, damn it.

She slapped his cheek again, but still he didn't move.

Steve looked up from where he'd been compressing the wound, a small smile curving his lips. "Trust me, Kate, beating him up isn't going to help right now."

Gracie returned then, carrying something that looked like a tackle box. She flipped open the lid and pulled out gauze, bandages, and a brown bottle.

The sound of sirens came from outside, and Kate prayed it was the paramedics. Then she remembered Steve was a trained EMT; all the firefighters were. He'd know what to do. Toby would be fine. Drake was right. He was a big man. A cut couldn't kill him.

The strong antiseptic scent of rubbing alcohol stung her nose as Steve opened the bottle. When he poured the clear liquid over the eight-inch gash in Toby's skin, Toby came awake with a growled shout.

"Hold his arms," Steve ordered.

Gracie took one side, Kate the other, and they pinned Toby to the floor.

"Can't take you anywhere, can I?" Steve said, his voice light even as his face filled with concentration while he cleaned the wound.

"Son of a bitch. Why the fuck are you using alcohol?"

A wicked grin cut across Steve's face. "You passed out from a little laceration. Call it punishment for being a pussy."

As Steve cleaned the wound, he glanced up at Kate. "I've seen this guy perform a tracheotomy on a child and bandage bullet wounds, but he nicks himself shaving and he tosses his cookies."

Toby growled. "Fuck you."

Gracie smiled and sent a quick, conspiratorial wink toward Kate.

From what Kate knew, they'd all worked together for almost ten years. Steve was the lieutenant, and the others looked up to him as leader, but they were all like brothers.

"You're gonna need stitches," Steve stated as he laid gauze over the cleaned wound and applied pressure.

Toby groaned.

"Lost some blood, but I don't think there's any muscle damage. You can let go of him now," he added, looking up at her.

Kate reluctantly let go of Toby's arm. She wanted to touch him. It helped her believe he was okay. She'd never seen a man faint before. She'd seen men get knocked out in fistfights a couple of times or pass out from too much booze, but not one who'd been standing there lucidly talking one minute, then falling to the floor the next.

She fisted her shaking hands. Gracie reached over and patted her shoulder. Kate flinched and pushed to her feet. She didn't like being touched. By anyone. For any reason. When Toby had grabbed her, trying to protect her, fear so intense had spiked through her she'd nearly screamed. Yet, she hated *not* touching him now. She wanted to reassure him—no—herself.

Gracie stood and moved next to her. "He'll be fine."

Kate nodded. As she stared at her blood-covered hands, her stomach turned. She swallowed hard. She had to maintain. Just a little

while longer. She had to deal with the police, make sure Toby got to the hospital, and then she had to get the mess of broken glass and pool cues cleaned up. Make sure the rest of the patrons were all happy. One thing at a time.

Deep breath. Calm. Don't lose it yet.

"Go."

Kate jerked her head up to see Drake standing directly in front of her, his dark eyes trained on her.

"Go upstairs and chill out for a few."

She shook her head.

"Go now, or I'll have Cal carry you up there."

She knew he wasn't bluffing. But she had too much to do.

"Go. Cal and I can handle it down here," he said gently, as if he knew her very thoughts.

Kate took one last glance at Toby on the floor cussing up a storm at Steve who still held the gauze wads to his back. Then she slowly moved through the crowd, heading for the hallway that led to the stairs to her apartment.

She steadied her breathing, but as soon as her foot hit the bottom step, her stomach leapt to her throat. She barely made it up the long flight of stairs and into her bathroom before her stomach rebelled and she threw up. As tears of frustration coursed down her cheeks, she grabbed the edge of the toilet and heaved.

Chapter Two

Sunday night, Toby pulled the sling from around his neck and tossed it on the passenger seat of his F150 before stepping out of the truck into the icy October rain. His shoulder didn't hurt much, except when the two dozen or so stitches zigzagging across his shoulder and upper back pulled against his skin with the movement of his arm. Pulling his baseball cap down low to keep the sleet from his eyes, he slammed the truck door shut and made a run for the front of Darby's.

He burst through the door and nearly collided with Shelly, one of the two waitresses who worked for Kate, almost unbalancing her tray of empty glasses. "Hey, Shell," he said by way of apology and sidestepped the buxom blonde who always seemed a little too friendly.

"Toby!" she greeted with a huge grin. "How're you doing? I heard what happened Thursday night." She laid her hand on his arm and batted her eyes. "Sorry I wasn't here to make you feel better."

He smiled in an effort to keep from offending the girl. "No big deal. All better now." He glanced around the quiet pub and discreetly maneuvered away from the double Ds she liked to press against him. "Where's Kate?"

Shelly shrugged. "Probably in the office." She waved her hand toward the hallway leading to the restrooms. "Sundays are paperwork nights. Can I get you a drink?"

He shook his head and took another step back. "Just came in to see Kate."

The girl sighed and stuck out her bottom lip in a pout she could've perfected only by practice in front of the mirror.

Right, he thought and turned toward the bar. Drake had his cola poured before he sat down.

"How's the back?" Drake asked as he wiped the already shining bar.

After taking a drink of the soda, Toby shrugged off his jacket then decided that move was definitely out of the question in the near future. The stitches pulled and stung his skin, and his muscles rebelled. "Not too bad." He laid the damp jacket over the stool next to him, pulled off his hat, then set it on top of his jacket.

Drake smirked.

Toby couldn't keep the chuckle inside. "Okay, okay. Get it out. Big tough guy like me passing out. Not like I haven't heard it enough from the guys at the fire hall."

Drake raised his eyebrows. "I didn't stay anything, stud. But you know what they say..." Drake's gaze ran over his chest, making him feel like a piece of meat in a market. "The bigger they are, the harder they fall."

Toby rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'm going to go see your boss now."

Drake tipped his head toward the back hallway. "In the office. You should go drag her outta there. She's been bent over the desk since early afternoon."

Toby's mind immediately jumped to a picture of Kate curved over the desk, her lush, round ass bare and in his hands while he took her from behind with long, deep, hard strokes.

Drake laughed. "You're easier to read than *See Spot Run*."

Toby cleared his throat and stood, taking his glass of cola with him.

The door to Kate's office stood open. She sat at her desk, her chin propped in her hands, eyes closed, a hint of a smile on her full, pink lips. Was there a more gorgeous woman on earth? And was there one who tried so damn hard to hide her beauty with semi-baggy clothing and severe hairstyles?

She had porcelain white skin she didn't hide under makeup, and small, ultra feminine hands he'd long dreamt of feeling on his skin. She was petite, but voluptuous. Nice and round in all the right places—not some little stick figure. Every time he saw her, he got hard. Rock hard.

And in the three years since she'd been back in Cooper Valley, he'd done his best to get her to go out with him, but she constantly shot him down. Always polite, even flirtatious, but never, even when he'd been serious in his attempts, had she said yes. Tonight he planned to change that.

"Knock, knock," he said, lightly rapping his knuckles on the open door.

Her eyes shot open, and she let out a little yelp, nearly falling off the chair. "What are you doing here?"

Toby laughed, crossed his arms, and leaned against the doorframe. "Hoping you'd let me buy you dinner."

"Uh..." She glanced at the top of her desk, shuffled a few papers, picked up a pen and fiddled with it. "I'm busy."

"Looked to me like you were taking a little snooze. Come on, don't make me eat alone."

She shook her head, never raising her gaze from the desktop and whatever papers she had there. He pushed away from the door and sauntered around the desk until he stood next to her. Her head snapped up, and her eyes went wide. Her face flushed a beguiling pink.

He'd wanted to take her out, away from Darby's, but decided to change tactics when he saw she was going to keep refusing. "We'll sit right out there in your bar to eat. It's not like you have to be alone with me."

She practically jumped off of the chair and scurried to the opposite side of the desk. "I said no. Please leave my office."

Damn. Did this woman know how to play hard to get or what? She even added a stern finger aimed at the door to emphasize her point.

Hiking one hip on the desk, he pasted on his trademark grin. Usually women loved his smile. Told him so. Showed him how much they liked it. Kate couldn't be totally immune, could she? "You did send a card

saying I get free meals for life, along with the flowers. That was nice, by the way. I've never been sent flowers by a woman before."

"They were from Darby's, the whole staff, not me in particular."

Tilting his head, he studied her. Why was she acting so skittish, standing there as if she were ready to bolt if he made any quick moves? Why wasn't she flirting back like she normally did?

"Well, at any rate, you wouldn't make me eat alone, would you?" She didn't answer.

"Come talk to me. Let's get to know one another."

The pulse at the base of her throat was pounding so hard he could see it. From the rise and fall of her chest beneath the black Darby's polo shirt, he could see her breath rate had increased. Her cheeks had gone almost too pale. What the hell was wrong with her?

"Kate?" He stood, and she backed toward the door. "I think, after getting sliced up in your bar, the least you could do is have supper with me." She stopped moving, and her eyes narrowed on him. "You owe me," he added softly.

Her mouth fell open, her eyes widened, and her face went from pasty white to a flaming pink. Then she turned on her heel and disappeared down the hall. He followed her, wondering what she was going to do. She walked to the table nearest the bar, pulled out a chair, plopped down on it, and folded her arms over her chest.

Toby sent Drake a quick glance, but the bartender's raised-eyebrow expression of surprise didn't give him a clue.

Toby pulled out the chair across from her and sat, set his glass of cola down, then folded his hands on top of the table.

She glared at him.

"You want somethin' now?" Shelly asked, coming up to the table.

"Mushroom bacon cheeseburger. Extra cheese," he said, never taking his gaze from Kate. "You want anything?"

Kate gave her head one shake.

"Ohh-kay." Shelly paused a moment then headed toward the kitchen.

"Consider all debts paid," Kate said, her voice low and tense.

Toby licked his lips, trying to figure out what he'd done wrong. Elvis crooned *Love Me Tender* from the jukebox. The sound of billiard balls clacked from the other side of the room. Two older gentlemen sat a few tables away, laughing over something.

Kate looked ready to rip his head off and feed it to him.

"What did I say?" he blurted out.

She leaned forward, her eyes narrowing again. "I don't owe you a thing. I didn't ask you to step into that fight. I didn't ask you to play human shield. This is my place, and I deal with my own problems here. I pay Cal to be all big and tough, not you. I sent the flowers and the card as a thank you, anyway. How dare you try to guilt me into a date."

He leaned forward, too, until their faces were less than a foot apart, his hands fisted on the tabletop. "First, this isn't a date. If I were going to take you on a date, it wouldn't be in an establishment owned by you. Second, I can't get you to give me the time of day, let alone go out on a date, even though I've tried. Repeatedly."

"I don't date my patrons."

"Bullshit. You don't want to date *me*."

"No. I don't." She leaned back, her lips pressed into a firm line.

"Why?"

"Because."

"That's no answer. Tell me straight."

"It's none of your business."

"I think it's all my business. I'm the one who's been chasing you. At least tell me why, and be straight about it."

After a long, hard glare, her gaze slid away from his and landed on the table. The harshness left her features. "It's personal," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

Reaching for his soda, Toby let out a sigh and sat back. "Is it my job?" He knew a lot of women who wouldn't get involved with men who put their lives on the line for a living. And his job made it hard to devote enough time to a relationship.

She shook her head.

"Is it because I'm black?"

Wide-eyed, she looked back at him. "No! No, that has nothing to do with it," she said, her words rushed. "You're...you're beautiful."

Taken aback, all he could do was stare. Beautiful? Women had called him a lot of things, but that was a new one.

"I mean... Your heritage has nothing to do with it. If I dated, you would be on the top of the list. I think you're a very...um... Hell!" She swiped her hand over her face. "I do not date. Not you. Not anyone. I just don't."

Shelly came toward them, and Toby needed a moment to regroup, so he held his tongue until the waitress had set a plate in front of each of them.

"I said I didn't want anything," Kate said, eyeing the burger and fries that had been set in front of her.

Shelly shrugged. "Drake said to feed you."

Kate's lips pressed tight again. When she didn't say anything more, Shelly left.

Toby lifted a hot French fry and bit it in half. He chewed slowly, still pondering Kate's words. This was by far the longest conversation he'd ever had with her, and it confused the hell out of him.

He waited until she'd lifted a fry to her lips before asking, "How can someone as young and beautiful and successful as you not date? Don't you want a family? Kids? Some kind of meaningful relationship?" Wasn't that what all women wanted? Wasn't that what kept him on his toes to avoid getting involved too seriously? The hunt for the perfect mate seemed to be most women's only goal in life.

"No."

"No, what?"

"No, I don't want a family and kids. I don't want anything to do with men."

Like taking a punch to the gut, Toby dropped the fry. "You're a lesbian?" He would have never guessed. Not that he had anything against homosexuals, but Kate? No way!

Kate snorted, which turned into a laugh. She clamped her hand over her mouth, but she couldn't stifle the sound. Her eyes crinkled, and her cheeks went deep pink.

"Oh my god," she said around her giggles. "I am not!" Then another peal of laughter escaped, and she nearly fell off the chair.

Her laughter was infectious, and Toby found himself chuckling, more at the way she laughed so heartily than the fact she was laughing at him. Okay, so she wasn't gay. Good. But why the hell would she not want anything to do with a man if...

His stomach clenched.

The look in her eyes, the way the color had drained from her face as he approached her in the office. The way she'd skittered away from him, making tracks for the door, looking like she was trying to escape.

Dear Lord.

"What?" Kate asked, swiping the back of her hand over her eyes, still grinning. "Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not a lesbian. Trust me."

Toby forced a smile. "Yeah, I got that from the hysterics."

She grinned. God, she was beautiful. And she had been hurt. Was still hurting. Still scared.

"I'm sorry I said you owed me," he said quietly. "I'm sorry..." *for whatever happened to you.* He clenched his hands beneath the table while fury boiled inside him. "For being pushy. I'll leave you alone from now on."

Her smile slipped from her lips. "You will?"

He nodded and reached for his burger, even though eating was the farthest thing from his mind now. His stomach was queasy. His head filled with thoughts of retribution on the bastard who'd put fear in her.

"Thank you," Kate said softly, her deep blue eyes gentle now as she gazed at him.

He set the burger back on the plate. "Can we at least be friends?"

She nodded quickly, but he felt the agreement was only given to placate him.

"Kate." He reached across the table and laid his hand over hers. She immediately pulled away, sending another shaft of regret and anger through him. "If you need someone...to talk to...or...anything..."

She smiled, but it was as fake as Shelly's boobs. "I'm fine."

He pulled his hand back to his side of the table. "I'm here, though. Okay?"

She nodded again, and once again her gaze slid away in avoidance.

As much as it pained him to do so, he silently vowed to stay away from her after tonight.

Chapter Three

Toby's hands felt so warm and gentle as they caressed Kate's bare shoulders. His lips were tender as he sipped at her mouth, her jaw, her throat. She moaned and raised her hands to his bare back, running her fingers over his smooth, dark flesh.

Heat blossomed between her thighs as his body settled over hers, hot skin to hot skin. Her nipples puckered at the light exploration of his fingertips. Then his mouth claimed her right breast, and she arched against him, crying out as streamers of arousal shot through her veins, to her fingers and toes, and settled in a searing, throbbing ache deep inside.

"Please," she whispered.

His hand ran down her side as he suckled her nipple, each draw pulling sensations from deep within her, as if he tugged at her very soul.

His cock nestled between her legs, long and solid against the inside of her thigh. Then his fingers skimmed over her tight curls, slipped between her aching lips, and pressed ever so gently against her clit.

Her hips bucked against his hand, silently begging for more, while she clung to his shoulders, her skin heated and damp. She pictured his hand, her wet core, his fingers sinking deep within her.

Kate's eyes snapped open, her breathing ragged as she pressed her hand against the damp crotch of her panties, rubbing hard. She cried out as she rode out the tantalizing orgasm her dream had brought on.

She rolled to her stomach and clutched at her pillow. The lingering visions of Toby's eyes, his lips, his hands, pushed her over the edge even further as she pressed her hips into the mattress.

And then she lay limp and sweaty, tangled in the sheets, her entire body shaking as she hugged the fluffy pillow to her chest. She tried to laugh at herself, but the sting of tears fought its way through. She bit her lip and breathed deep, trying to quiet the turmoil within her.

Slow, calming breaths. Relax. Breathe...

She hiccupped on a sob and buried her face in the pillow, rocking from side to side in the only comfort she knew how to give herself. Wishing, pretending, that someone was there with her, holding her, comforting her.

But she was alone.

Completely and utterly alone.

By her own choice.

She clung to the sheet with aching fingers and cried her frustration into the pillow. Not by her own choice! It had never been her *choice*. She didn't *want* to be alone.

She wanted Toby with his gentle, laughing eyes. His deep, comforting voice. The warmth of his hand when he'd touched hers.

And now all hope of finally finding the courage to say yes to him was gone. He said he'd stop asking. That they could be friends. She'd blown it.

All because of fear.

God, that fear made her such a bitch sometimes. If she'd had even a tiny brain inside her head, she would have been happy to have supper with him the other night. Right there in Darby's with Drake and Shelly nearby. Safe. But she'd gotten angry because he'd crowded her. Gotten too close. Pushed her into having a meal with him when she'd said no. A meal that could have led to a real date someday. A real kiss. A real touch that maybe, just maybe, wouldn't have scared her.

Who am I trying to fool?

She hadn't experienced a touch in over three years that hadn't terrified her and made her ill. And all the post trauma and rape therapy she'd been through hadn't helped her deal with that. She was on her own.

All alone.

No man, not even sweet Toby, would ever want to help her through her paranoia, her fear of intimacy of any kind. The fear of letting anyone too close. The boyfriend she'd been with for two years, and had made wedding plans with, had dropped her like a hot coal after the rape. If someone who'd known her for so long didn't want her, who would?

Although he'd offered his friendship, his caring, she couldn't risk it. She couldn't survive another battering on her heart. Never again would she make the mistake of letting a man into her life.

* * * * *

"Toby, what the hell are you doing here?"

Toby's head snapped up at Steve's bark from the office. He grinned and lifted the paper he'd been holding. "Reading the newspaper?"

"Get in here."

Toby pushed up from the table, accompanied by a few "you're in trouble now" comments from the rest of the guys sitting around playing cards and watching the late movie on the fire hall television. He wasn't afraid he was in trouble. Steve just liked to grumble a lot. After nearly ten years working under him at Ladder Company 2, Toby knew he was all bark and very little bite.

"What's up, LT?"

Steve pointed to the chair in front of the small metal desk. "Have a seat. We need to talk."

Okay, that sounded a little serious. Toby lowered himself into the chair. Off the top of his head, he couldn't think of anything he'd done wrong, except show up for his shift when he was supposed to be at home recuperating from the bar brawl.

"I thought I told you to go home three hours ago."

"Yes, sir."

"And?"

"The stitches come out tomorrow. I'm healed up just fine. There's no reason to sit at home twiddling my thumbs when I can be here."

Steve shook his head, sighed with obvious exasperation, then slumped in his chair in a relaxed pose. "I can't let you out on a call until I get a release from your doctor, and we brought in Jameson to cover your shift. You know that."

Toby nodded. Truth was, he was trying to get Kate out of his head, and sitting at home didn't cut it. He'd promised not to ask her for a date again. The only way that was going to happen was if he could stop thinking of her as a hot, sexy woman—which meant not thinking about her at all. Which meant...trying to keep himself busy, his brain occupied.

The fire hall and firefighting was his life. All he had. Sitting in his apartment, staring at the television, thinking about Kate, worrying about Kate, wondering if there was anything he could do to help her, made him want to climb the walls. He didn't have a chance in hell with her. She couldn't have been clearer about that. So he needed to get over it and move on.

"Go home."

"Yes, sir."

He made to stand, but Steve stopped him. "One more thing."

He raised an eyebrow in question.

"Yearly reviews are due next week."

"Should I be worried?"

Steve's lips turned up in a half grin. "No. And you know it. But I thought I'd let you know I've put you in for a promotion."

"What?" There were men on the squad who'd been fighting fires longer than he had. In fact, he was the youngest member of the team, except for a new kid who'd just been hired on that summer.

"I'm putting in for Captain. With Gracie and the kids at home, it's time for me to get off these twenty-four hour shifts. Past time." He grinned. "I'm getting too old to keep this up much longer. At least, that's what my dear wife keeps telling me."

Toby smiled. Gracie hated Steve being a “hero” and worried over him constantly. As chief, he’d spend more time outside the fires, telling everyone where to go, rather than rushing headlong into them.

“So, someone needs to take over my position, and I feel you’re the most qualified. And you’re the best firefighter in this company. Besides me, of course,” he added with a chuckle.

“But Parker has been around longer than me, and he’s gotten several commendations.”

“True, but he’s a hot head. Always has been.” Steve pointed at him with a pencil. “You’ve got common sense on your side. You’re a take-charge guy. The peacemaker among the crew. The other firefighters respect you.”

Toby swallowed. He and Steve had been friends for what felt like forever. There was always backslapping and congratulations thrown around after every major fire, but never had he gone out of his way to say these things. Toby hadn’t known his boss truly respected him.

“Thank you, Steve,” was all he could think to say.

“Well, it’s not in the bag yet. Still has to pass through the bureaucracy, but I thought I’d let you know. Now get your ass outta here and don’t come back until you’ve got the doctor’s signed release.”

Light and excited, Toby headed out of the office. At the door, he stopped and turned back. “If you get the position you’re aiming for, I’m going to miss you out there. You *are* the best damn firefighter in Cooper Valley.”

Steve gave a nod of understanding, looking a little uncomfortable with the compliment.

Toby grabbed his jacket and cap from his locker, then headed out into the biting wind and slashing rain. He climbed into his truck and turned the heat to full blast as soon as the engine revved. Damn, he thought as he checked his watch. It was well after midnight, so calling his sister was out of the question. He wanted to share his news with someone.

The thought of calling Kate popped into his head. She’d still be up. The pub had just closed a few minutes ago....

He sighed and put the truck in gear. He'd have to wait until morning to call Stacy, and he needed to keep Kate out of his head altogether.

Maybe he'd stop by the sheriff's office where Stacy worked as a receptionist and drag her off to lunch tomorrow. He hadn't done that in a long time. Hadn't had any alone time with his baby sister in what felt like years. If he wasn't working, she was. If she wasn't at the sheriff's office, she was taking care of the kids and her husband and running her family like a well-oiled machine.

And he was jealous as hell of losing his little sister's time. Though he'd never admit it to anyone, especially Stacy, he was jealous of the fact that she was so happy. That she'd found someone who could turn her world around. She had someone to go home to every night, rain or shine, good times and bad. Someone to share her life—herself—with.

He could never admit those things because he'd spent so many years avoiding attachments. He'd been focused on his career, on being the best firefighter he could be, and women tended to get in the way. They didn't like the long hours, the smoky smelling clothes. And some had even been jealous of the close-knit friendships within the team.

Toby pulled the truck into the parking lot of Cooper Valley's one and only twenty-four hour mini mart as his stomach rumbled. He grabbed some hotdogs from the cooler, barbecue flavored chips, a loaf of bread, cereal and milk. He had zero food left in his apartment, but he only needed enough to get him through tomorrow. Then he could finish out the last twenty-four hours of his team's rotation at the fire hall once he got the all clear tomorrow afternoon from the doctor.

After paying for his food, he dashed back to the truck. Would the rain never end? *Grab the wood, Noah. Time to start building.* He turned the ignition key, and the truck roared to life, then sputtered and died.

He turned the key again. The engine turned over as smoothly as always, but didn't ignite. "Fuck." He smacked the steering wheel and glanced at the gas gauge. "Thanks for nothing, Pete." He'd loaned the truck to his buddy yesterday, and the jerk had returned it *empty*.

He pulled his cell phone from his jacket pocket and flipped it open. Guess his sis would get a call anyway. Her husband kept a spare can of gas in his truck. Hopefully one of them would come to his rescue. All the gas stations, like everything else around the little town, closed up tight by midnight.

He punched in Stacy's number and hit Send. Nothing.

"Don't even..." He looked at the display just as it went black. He'd forgotten to charge the damn thing. He rubbed his eyes and burst out laughing. What a night. Kicked out of work, no gas, no phone. What's next?

A payphone sat on the corner, highlighted by the streetlight. The rain beat down on the truck's roof like little ball peen hammers. Sleet. *Great.*

Zippering his leather jacket up to his chin, he pulled his cap down as low as it would go and made a run for the payphone. He jerked the door open and nearly shit himself at the sound of a puppy's terrified *yipe!*

He slipped while trying to avoid the rat-sized creature. His cheek slammed against the phone, knocking the receiver off the hook as he tumbled to the floor.

The dog scrunched into the corner as Toby sat in a cold, oozing mud puddle. His feet hung out the door, his cheek throbbed, and his ears rang from the dog's insistent, high-pitched barking.

He made a grab for it.

It curled into a tiny, shivering ball as if trying to hide. Thank God the yipping ceased. The only sound it gave out now was a constant whiny groan that sounded like a sick outboard motor.

After wiping his muddy hands on his jeans, Toby tried again, this time slower. "Hey little guy," he said softly, "I'm not gonna hurt'cha." He laid his hand on the dog's back, nearly engulfing the puny thing. The eerie sound that came out of it could only be called a scream. Was the poor little guy hurt? Hit by a car? Maybe it sought shelter in the phone booth to die.

"Shh. Don't be frightened. I'll help you." He reached with both hands this time, carefully lifting the puppy, which was nothing but skin

and bones. It couldn't weigh over five pounds. Every rib and vertebrae could be felt under its shaggy, matted, sopping wet fur.

Toby held the mutt against his body and gently poked and prodded his fingers over and through its fur, along its back, legs, head and stubby tail. He didn't feel any wounds, nor did the dog show any sign that his touch caused pain. It was just scared and cold and probably starving to death.

"You'll be okay, buddy," Toby said as he unzipped his jacket and tucked the mutt inside. He sucked in his breath when the cold wetness soaked through his T-shirt. "We'll get you warm and fed."

The dog whined and tried to scramble out of the jacket, but Toby quickly zipped it up again. The little guy didn't need to get any colder than he already was. He glanced around the phone booth and made a face at the wet ooze seeping through his pants. Neither did he.

He pushed up from the floor and lifted the receiver. Dead. He hung it up then lifted it again. Still nothing. "I don't fucking believe this." He tried tugging his wet slacks away from his cold ass.

The vibrations of the dog's tremors were strong, and Toby worried he was already too late to help him. He had no clue how long it took a dog to get hypothermia.

He ran back to the truck, wrapping his arms around the small lump of dog in his jacket to keep him from bouncing. The air wasn't much warmer inside the truck cab than outside, but at least it was dry. He ripped open the hotdog package with his teeth, extracted two wieners, then lifted the puppy from his jacket.

The whining stopped short, and its nose twitched. Toby grinned at the ugly little thing and held the food to its face. He watched in amazement as the dog scarfed them down in a couple of seconds flat, finishing with a short burp and an expectant look for more.

"Sorry. That's all for now, or you'll get sick."

He whined.

Toby reached into the extended cab's jump seat and pulled a couple of spare T-shirts from his duffle bag. He dried the dog with one then wrapped him in the other. When the little guy settled into the crook

of his arm like a baby, gave a big yawn, a soft chuffle, and immediately fell asleep, Toby went all soft inside. Too bad he couldn't keep him. His landlord didn't allow animals.

Toby laid the dog, wrapped up like a baby, on the seat next to him. He tried the key one more time, but the truck had decided not to move tonight. After checking the dog once again, he quietly opened the door, got out, shut it just as carefully, and headed back inside the mini mart to use the phone.

"Sorry. No public phones. There's a payphone on the corner."

"Yeah, I know. It's broken." Toby had seen the "no public restroom or phone" sign on the door.

The pimple-faced kid behind the counter shrugged his skinny shoulders. "Sorry, dude. Can't help you."

Toby unzipped his jacket to show the kid the CVFD insignia on his T-shirt. "I'm with the fire department. My truck is dead. I need to call a cab."

The kid wavered for a second then shook his head. "Sorry. Rules is rules. I can lose my job."

In an angry motion, Toby zipped his jacket and shoved out of the store. He strode back to the truck and jerked the door open. The dog yipped and struggled to free itself from the T-shirt, rolling off the seat to the floorboard with a furious, snarling howl.

Toby chuckled at the little guy's antics and scooped him up. Murmuring gently, he rewrapped the shirt around him then tucked him back into his jacket. Figuring he'd not make it back to his truck tonight, he picked up the plastic grocery bag and tied the handles, hoping to at least keep his bread and cereal semi-dry, then locked the door and headed down the sparsely lit sidewalk in the stinging sleet.

Three blocks later, soaking wet and getting more pissed off at the kid in the mini mart by the second, he passed by Darby's. Fluorescent lights illuminated the normally dim bar. And there was Kate, the woman he'd vowed to stay away from.

Fuck it. All he needed was a phone. Surely she couldn't hold that against him.

Chapter Four

Gliding the industrial electric polisher over the tile floor, Kate sang along with AC/DC's "Back in Black."

Thud, thud, thud.

She ceased her singing and listened.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

She hit the Stop button on her Discman and pulled off the headphones. Was the buffer making strange noises?

No, it seemed fine, its electrical motor as smooth as always. She hit the Off button on the polisher and glanced around the pub.

Thud, thud, thud. "Kate!"

A yelp tore from her throat when she saw the dark shape of a body silhouetted in the wall-sized plate glass window. Relief flowed through her when she realized it was only Toby.

He waved with one hand and pointed toward the front door. He wanted to come in? She glanced at the Budweiser clock over the bar. It was after two in the morning. She shook her head. No way was she letting anyone in this late while she was alone.

"Please," he mouthed.

She moved toward the window to see him better. He was dripping wet. Water ran off the bill of his CVFD baseball cap. His leather jacket hung heavily from his shoulders, obviously drenched.

Damn it. What was she supposed to do, let him freeze to death? Why was he out this late in the rain, anyway?

He paced along the street in front of the window as she moved to unlock the door. A blast of cold, wet air blew in when she pulled it open.

"Can I use your phone?"

He clutched one arm across his middle, a plastic grocery bag dangling from his fingers. He'd shoved his other hand into his pants pocket, but the navy uniform slacks were soaked and caked with mud. She couldn't just leave him out there.

She stepped to the side, holding the door open. "Get in here. You're freezing to death."

"I just need to call a cab. I'm out of gas, and this damn town shuts down at dusk."

She grabbed his jacket sleeve and tugged him inside. Water squished from the saturated leather. After quickly shutting and relocking the front door, she pointed toward the back hallway. "Come up to my apartment. You're going to catch your death."

He shook his head. "Your floor."

The guy was freezing, and he was worried about her freshly polished floor? "Screw the floor. You're an ice cube."

He nodded, but to her the movement seemed jerky and uncoordinated. His lips looked blue. "Maybe I should call an ambulance. You're not looking so good. Are you hurt? Were you in an accident or something?"

He shook his head. "I'm fine. Just...wet. *Fuck.*" His whole body seemed to tense, and he wrapped his other arm around his waist.

That did it. He needed to get warm, *now*. She reached for his jacket zipper and pulled it down, but it caught in a lump of material at his waist. He still clutched his arm, holding the lump in place.

"You *are* hurt," she said, thinking he'd wadded the material against a wound.

He shook his head again. "He's lost. And just scratched the hell out of my stomach," Toby said as she pulled a warm, damp bundle from inside his jacket.

Her heart melted on the spot when she saw the sad little face peeking from the navy material. He was out there freezing to death and

had picked up a stray dog? A really ratty, ugly little dog that smelled like old garbage.

"Come on," she said, tucking the dog against her side and flipping off the overhead lights. "Let's get you warmed up."

Toby moved up the narrow staircase, admiring the sway of Kate's gorgeous, rounded ass in front of him. He just needed to use the phone, and he shouldn't be watching her butt if he was going to keep his brain out of the gutter. On the other hand, maybe she'd take pity on him enough to keep the dog overnight, until he could take it to the shelter in the morning.

Kate pushed open a door at the top of the stairs and rushed into a small, dimly lit living room. "I've got some clothes of my dad's. They'll be big on you, but they're dry." She set the dog on the floor and disappeared into another room. Toby shut the door to the stairs and leaned against it.

The dog whined and followed after Kate, leaving muddy paw prints on the beige carpet.

Then he looked down and realized he was dripping muddy spots on the rug, too. Son of a bitch. He moved a few steps into the tile-floored kitchen, shrugged out of his jacket, and laid it across the worn Formica countertop.

Then he bent over to unlace his work boots, but the laces were swollen with moisture. He gave up. All he needed was to call a cab so he could get home. He glanced around and spotted a phone hanging on the wall by the fridge. He reached for it.

"Come on," Kate said as she walked into the kitchen carrying a bundle of clothing and towels. "Let's get you into a hot shower."

The dog barked at him.

"Shh," she said to the animal. Then she reached up and touched Toby's cheek with soft fingers that held the scent of lemon furniture polish. "You're so cold."

"I'm okay. I'll just call a cab and be out of your hair." He had to get away from her. The gentleness in her deep blue eyes, her concern, was doing strange things to his insides.

"Got to get you out of these wet clothes." She wrapped her warm fingers around his wrist and tugged him back into the living room.

"Your floor. I'm all muddy."

"Would you stop worrying about my floors? They're washable." She dragged him down a short hall and into a miniscule bathroom. After turning on the taps in the tub, she set the bundle of clothes on the sink then turned toward him.

"Turn around."

He frowned.

"Turn around. I'll help you get undressed."

"Kate, I don't think..."

"Your skin is cold and wet. You've probably got hypothermia. You don't want to catch pneumonia, do you?"

That explained her unreasonable need to get him warm. Her father had gotten caught in a storm while out fishing, which had brought on a case of pneumonia that eventually led to his death because he'd waited too long to get medical treatment.

Toby was a long way from hypothermia, and he'd never had a case of pneumonia in his life. He was a little chilly from the wet clothes, but hell, this was nothing compared to the cold water rescues he'd done last winter when some kids fell through the ice in Lake Mohegan.

She moved around him toward the door, and he thought maybe she'd leave the room. But then, from behind, she tugged his shirt out of his pants and pushed it up his sides. "Arms up," she said in a brisk, no-nonsense tone.

Damn. His best fantasy come to life. Kate Darby undressing him. Would she join him in the shower to make sure he didn't pass out again? With a little chuckle, he raised his arms.

Who was he to argue?

Kate's hands shook as she tugged Toby's shirt from his waistband. It'd been a whole lot of years since she'd undressed a man. Even though the situation called for her to remain calm and collected, how could she? In just a couple of minutes, this guy would be standing in her bathroom naked. And they were *alone*. But the man was being so stubborn, and she

couldn't let him walk back out in the cold, go home alone and probably freeze to death before he took care of himself.

"Arms up," she said and waited for him to lift his arms so she could pull his T-shirt off. His hat tumbled off his head. He stood so still not a muscle twitched. Hell, he probably felt weak from the cold. This fact should reassure her that he wasn't dangerous at the moment, but facts had little to do with her gut instincts about being anywhere alone with a man. Any man. Even Toby.

As he lowered his arms, she saw the jagged scar running over his left shoulder blade and upper back. A few of the stitches seeped blood, as if he'd done something to pull at them. Nothing serious, though, she hoped. She sure wasn't going to mention to him that he was bleeding. She didn't need him unconscious on her bathroom floor. How would she explain that if she had to call an ambulance?

"Turn," she said, doing her best to keep her tone even, to not let him know that her insides were shaking so bad she thought she might puke.

He slowly turned. She swiped her gaze over him quickly, telling herself she didn't notice the breadth of his shoulders, the thickness of his biceps, his washboard abs, the smoothness of his skin except where three thin welts ran diagonal across his stomach, obviously inflicted by the puppy.

Holy shit. He's like a Grecian god. Better than the statue of David. Staring at his body all night seemed like a very pleasant way to pass the time.

Toby crossed his arms over his chest, burying his hands under his armpits. The guy needed to get warm, she told herself again. But then she reached for his belt, and her fingers shook. She didn't want to do this. She wasn't sure she could. Her stomach twisted into a knot.

The dog barked, a high-pitched, ear piercing sound that made her jump.

Logic told her Toby wasn't going to hurt her—couldn't in the state he was in. But again, logic and facts didn't mean much to her nerves or her imagination.

Where There's Smoke

In her mind, she saw another man in another time. One standing over her, demanding she undress him while a gun pointed at her head.

Bringing her hand to her mouth, she swallowed back the bile rising in her throat. She stared at the black leather belt around Toby's waist, saw each individual tool mark, the stitching, the thin silver buckle so similar to another belt she'd had to unbuckle.

"Kate—"

She yelped and jumped back when his hand touched her shoulder. She grabbed the only thing handy for a weapon—a small aerosol can of air freshener.

"Don't touch me!"

No one is ever going to hurt me again. No one!

Chapter Five

Toby blinked and stared at Kate. She stood in the doorway holding a can of air freshener as if it were Mace. What the hell?

He raised his hands in surrender, to let her know he wasn't going to hurt her, and stepped forward. "I'm not going—"

"I warned you."

A puff of stinging spray hit his face, choking him, blinding him.

"Son of a bitch!" He shielded his face from further onslaught with one hand, squeezed his eyes shut, and grabbed for the towel rack to keep his footing. His hip thudded against the sink, and he groped for the taps. He bumped the pile of clothing, and they plopped to the floor. "Shit, shit, shit." His eyes were on fire.

The dog set up a steady, aggravated bark, the sound even louder in the tiny bathroom.

He splashed cold water on his face, trying to flush out his eyes. The smell of flowers stung his nostrils and made him gag. Goddamn, that was some potent stuff. Who needed pepper spray when they had Glade?

When he could open his eyes, he stood up and checked his reflection in the mirror. With eyes red and still watering, he reached behind him and grabbed a towel from the rack to blot his face.

He didn't need this. She dragged him up to her apartment, started undressing him, and then tried to disable him with air freshener. All he'd wanted was to use her phone. He should have kept on walking. He'd have been home by now, in his own shower, safe from psycho women. Hadn't

he told himself a million times over the past week to stay the hell away from Kate Darby?

He closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall, then took a couple deep breaths to calm himself. It wasn't her fault, he reminded himself. Someone had fucked with her head. He knew that, had realized it days ago. She'd just gotten scared. Just like that mutt who wouldn't shut the fuck up.

He turned off the shower taps. The dog went silent the instant the rushing water did. "Yeah, just shut up," he said in a low grumble. The dog gave a little whine and trotted down the hall.

For all he knew, Kate was in the other room calling the cops. If she hadn't run out of the apartment altogether.

He picked up his hat and wet shirt from the floor then strode out of the bathroom, wondering if he should just grab his jacket and leave. And the dog. Damn, he had to do something with it. It barked so much he didn't dare take it home. His apartment was next door to the landlord's.

As he rounded the corner, he saw Kate pacing the length of the living room, the phone in one hand, the killer Glade in the other. The mutt paced alongside her, letting out a tiny whine at each turn.

She'd called the cops. He just knew it.

He rubbed his scratchy right eye. Damn, he knew everyone in the sheriff's office. His dad had been a cop in Cooper Valley for almost twenty years, until he was killed in the line of duty. His sister worked there. He'd never live this down. Not in some fifteen years had he had a run-in with the local police. He didn't relish one now.

When she made another turn and saw him, she stopped pacing and ducked her head, avoiding his gaze. The dog ran into her calf, made a chuffing sound, sat on his haunches, and stared up at her.

Toby blinked a few times. The insides of his eyelids may as well have been coated in sand.

"How long until the police arrive?"

Kate's gaze snapped up to his, then away. She looked down at the phone in her hand, then slowly, deliberately walked to the kitchen counter

and set it down. Almost like an afterthought, she set the can of air freshener down, too.

"I didn't call the police," she said quietly, her back to him.

Thank God. "May I please use your phone to call a cab? I'll wait outside until it comes." As much as his instincts said to stay and work this out with her, try to figure out what had set her off, he didn't want to wind up permanently disabled because he refused to back off.

She picked up the phone and held it out to him, still not meeting his gaze. "You don't have to wait out in the rain."

As he dialed the number, Kate moved around the counter into the kitchen. He watched her warily as he gave the address of the pub to the dispatcher. She wandered in a circle, stopping in front of the fridge and then the stove.

"They'll be here in twenty minutes." He shook out his shirt and went to pull it on.

"Don't," Kate said. "I'll get you a dry shirt." And then she disappeared down the hallway, the dog following close on her heels.

Toby shook his head. He didn't know what to do or say. The biggest part of him wanted to make a run for it while she was out of the room. He was way out of his league with her.

* * * * *

Kate bit her lip and bent to retrieve the flannel shirt from the bathroom floor. Her face burned with mortification. How the hell was she supposed to apologize for this? For flipping out and acting like a madwoman?

God, please, she thought, wishing the floor would open up and swallow her whole so she didn't have to face him.

She scrounged through the medicine cabinet to find a bottle of Visine then took it and the shirt into the kitchen. Toby was still standing by the counter, bare-chested and so damn gorgeous.

She handed him the shirt, and he pulled it on. The sleeves were too short, and it was three sizes too big around the middle. It had belonged to her father who had been five-foot-six and built like a beer keg.

"Thanks."

She swallowed and finally found the courage to look up at him. "Oh, God, Toby." His eyes were completely bloodshot and tearing. "Please..." She pointed at the little table in the kitchen. "Sit down." She held up the eye drops. "I..." She bit her lip.

He took the Visine from her hand and sat at the table. He leaned his head back, and the first drop missed his eye.

She rushed to his side. "Let me."

He turned the bottle over to her and looked up. Why wasn't he angry? Why wasn't he yelling at her, calling her names? When her fiancé had walked out on her because she'd freaked out on him, he'd called her every name in the book. The one sticking most profoundly in her heart had been *psycho bitch from hell*. And damn it, she felt like one now.

"I'm so sorry."

"I know."

She shook her head in denial. There was no way he could know. No one knew the power of nightmare memories to royally screw with one's mind.

Toby leaned his head back and stared up at the ceiling. Carefully, touching him as little as possible, she put a couple of drops in each of his eyes.

He blinked, and the clear liquid ran down his cheeks. She grabbed a paper napkin from the table and blotted the moisture. How could he be so calm? Let her within ten feet of him after she'd attacked him?

"I do understand, Kate," he said, his voice low and gentle.

She moved across the kitchen to the fridge. "I don't have any Diet Coke. Would you like some orange juice? Milk? I could make a pot of coffee—" She thunked her forehead against the cold door. "Don't even try to understand me, Toby. I don't understand it myself most of the time."

"You're scared."

"Not of you."

"Of men."

"How the hell do you know?" She turned around and stared at him. Maybe he did know? Maybe he really did understand? Was there a chance?

"I know someone..." His lips thinned for a moment then he looked at her. "I don't know what happened to you, maybe I'm way off base, but my — someone I'm very close to was raped by her boyfriend in high school. It was a long time before anyone could go near her without her being afraid they were going to hurt her."

Kate swallowed the lump in her throat. "I'm sorry." Hearing about another woman going through what she went through was as bad as it happening to herself. And someone close to Toby. He really did understand.

"All I can say is that I'd never do anything to hurt you. Never. But I also know that it takes more than words to gain your trust, and that's okay."

"It's not a matter of trust," she said around a painfully tight throat, then shook her head. "Maybe it is. I don't know. I sure as hell never meant to hurt you."

His lips kicked up into a small smile. "I know that, too. You've got a damn good aim, though."

She moved to the table and lowered herself into the chair across from him. "How'd she get through it? Has she? Is she normal now?"

"It's not a matter of being normal or not. She still has bad days even though it happened ten years ago." He wiped his hand across his eyes and blinked several times. "She went through a lot of therapy. I know that. But..." He shrugged. "I really don't know what else she did."

"I've been through therapy." And she really didn't want to talk about it. Not with him. Not now. She couldn't.

He laid his hand, palm up, on the table. "I'm here for you if you need me."

Even after she'd attacked him? Was he nuts? She stared at his hand, the long, lean fingers, each dark little crease in his flesh, and all she wanted was to touch him. Could she?

She brought her hand up and laid it on the table next to his. Her heart thudded in her chest. Her tummy fluttered. Sometime she had to let someone in. Let someone closer than the arm's length she always held everyone. Besides her father who was now gone, and the therapists, Toby was the only person to know the truth. And he hadn't run screaming out the door. He'd offered his friendship. Could she take it? Could she give it in return?

She looked up at him.

He gave a slow, encouraging nod. "One tiny step at a time. And it's okay if you're not ready."

She took a deep breath and set her palm on top of his, never taking her gaze from his. Slowly his fingers closed over hers, and he smiled. Not the flirty smile she was so accustomed to, but a sweet smile to let her know she could believe in him.

But could she find it within her to believe in anyone but herself?

Toby wanted to scoop her into his arms and hug her, but knew that would probably end him up in the hospital. It was hard to believe that this competent businesswoman, who had accomplished so much with the pub since her father died, could have such a battered soul. Such a wounded heart.

By God, he'd do anything he could to help her through this. If she needed a friend, he'd be there. If she needed *anything*, he'd see that she got it.

Fifteen years ago when he'd been headed for real trouble, Colin Darby had come to his rescue, whipped him into shape, and set him on the right path. Kate's father had stepped in after his own dad died, at exactly the right time to keep him from becoming a delinquent. He'd never known how to repay Colin for helping him. Now he knew what he needed to do.

Help Kate.

He felt like a heel for how he'd treated her these past years. He'd only been hitting on the cute little barkeep for so long because she'd always been so spunky and flirty. He'd thought she'd be a fun lay. How hard had she worked to portray that particular persona?

The dog barked, as if reminding them he was still there.

He gave her hand a little squeeze before pulling away. He cleared his throat and glanced at the mutt sitting on its haunches, glancing between him to Kate. "I have a favor to ask."

Kate's hand jerked off the table to her lap, and her eyes widened, as if his words had spooked her.

"The dog." He tilted his head toward the mutt. "I hate to ask, but I can't take him home with me. There's a no pet rule in my building. Can he stay here until I pick him up tomorrow and take him to the shelter?"

"The shelter?" she squeaked. "You can't take him to the shelter."

"What am I supposed to do with him? Besides my landlord, what would I do with him while I worked?"

She leaned over and scooped the smelly little beast into her arms, snuggling him against her chest. "I'll take him." The dog licked her chin, and she giggled. "Yeah. I'll keep him," she said and scratched the dog's floppy, matted ears.

"Are you sure? He's kind of..." *...nasty.* At Kate's scowl, he didn't finish the sentence aloud.

"I never had a dog. Dad said the apartment was too small." She grinned at him, and he was relieved she looked more relaxed, more like the Kate he'd always known. "This little boy is just the right size for an apartment. He'll be fine once we get him cleaned up, won't'cha?" She ruffled his fur, and the dog gave a groan of contentment, settling against Kate's full breasts.

Oh yeah, the dog has it good.

A horn beeped from outside. Toby stood and gathered his jacket, shirt and hat from the counter. "That'll be the cab. I'll return the shirt in a couple days."

She stood up, too, and followed him to the front door. "Toby?" she said softly as he reached for the doorknob.

He turned to face her. "Yeah?"

She looked so small, so vulnerable, standing there cradling the mangy mutt against her. Her deep blue eyes gazed up at him, and there was no mistaking the sadness in them. Once again, he had the

overwhelming urge to gather her in his arms and keep her safe. Protect her from...everything.

She reached out, took his hand in hers, and gave it a squeeze.

"You'll never know what tonight has meant to me."

He swallowed hard around the lump of emotion welling in his throat.

"I hope your eyes are okay."

He grinned and gave her a wink, even though they did still feel scratchy. "I'll survive."

Still holding his hand, she looked like she wanted to say something more, but then let she go of him and took a step back. "Good night, Toby."

"G'night, Kate." He pulled open the door and jogged down the steps and around the building toward the front, where a Yellow Cab waited for him.

After he gave the driver his address, he peered up at the apartment over the pub to see Kate standing in a window, still holding the dog.

Now he just had to figure out what to do to help her through this. To help her heal.

Chapter Six

Kate blew out a breath, opened the door to her apartment, and was greeted by an over-exuberant Rusty—named so because after three washings, his fur had turned from a muddy, brackish brown to the color of rusted steel wool. He yapped and danced around her legs as she leaned down to pet his head.

It'd been a long day. She was exhausted and wanted nothing more than to crawl into bed and lick her wounds. Toby hadn't come by tonight, hadn't been with his crew when they'd come in for drinks at the end of their four-day rotation, even though she knew he'd finished out the shift after having his stitches removed yesterday afternoon.

He was avoiding her.

She refilled Rusty's water dish and picked up his new leash from the countertop. He barked and danced around the kitchen. He'd been out less than an hour before, so she doubted he had to go again. He just seemed genuinely happy to have her home.

The feeling of welcome, of being wanted, brought a tightness to her throat. "Come on, Rusty," she said, following the advice she'd gotten at the pet store to keep saying his name so he'd get used to it. "We've got some pumpkins to carve."

She rummaged through her utensil drawer until she found her carving knives. Next Friday was the big Halloween bash, and she had almost thirty pumpkins to carve before then. If she did a few each night, she might get them done in time.

Maybe the rest of her life was falling apart, her emotions out in left field, but she'd be damned if she let it stop her plans for the Halloween party she'd been working on for the last two months.

Her dad had opened the pub on Halloween night. The two of them had spent days carving pumpkins and decorating. Their costumes had been outlandish and fun. This was one tradition she refused to skimp on.

Rusty followed her down the stairs to the bar. She spread out thick layers of newspaper on the floor, which Rusty thought was just for him and did his best to mess up, running over them, grabbing them in his mouth and shaking them. Then she went back into the storeroom, grabbed two heavy pumpkins by their stems, and lugged them to the newspaper.

With a sigh, she sat down, straddled one of the pumpkins, and set to work cutting off the top.

Rusty growled and snarled at the other pumpkin sitting a few feet away, making Kate laugh. "He's not gonna hurt you, Rusty." Then she laughed again, imagining what Rusty might do when he saw one with a face cut into it.

She pulled off the top of the pumpkin, tipped it on its side, then scooped out the slimy seeds. Rusty immediately lost interest in the stationary gourd he'd been harassing and came to sniff at the growing pile of guts she shook off her fingers.

"No, Rusty. Stay away." She nudged him with her knee, but he just climbed over her leg and buried his nose in the slippery, goopy mess.

"Rusty. No."

He came up with a mouthful of seeds, stringy orange strands trailing from his jaw. She could have sworn she saw him grin.

Then he flopped over on his side and rolled in the goop.

"Eww. Bad dog. Bad Rusty." But he didn't seem to care that she was scolding him. Her laughter probably didn't help the situation any.

He snuffled around then stood up and shook. Pumpkin seeds and slime went everywhere. Kate held up her hand to keep it out of her face, but she laughed so hard she fell over on her side.

Rusty came to her, licked her cheek, then yapped and bounded away as if he'd just done something wonderful. Little Rusty, the great pumpkin killer.

Kate lay there for a few moments, staring up at the black and orange streamers she'd hung from the ceiling last night. The quick sting of tears caught her off guard, but she swallowed them back. Just overtired, she told herself as she sat up and went back to work on the pumpkin, while Rusty found interesting smells to sniff in the corner of the room.

Loneliness engulfed her as tears blurred her vision. She thought Rusty would take the lonesomeness away, but what she thought about now was sharing his cute antics with someone.

No, not someone. *Toby*.

"Damn it," she muttered as she scooped out the last of the seeds. So what if Toby was sweet and gentle with her and offered his friendship. It wasn't as if he really knew what he could have gotten himself into with that gesture. Besides, he hadn't come in with the crew tonight. He might have offered, but had he truly meant it?

He'd been hitting her up for a date on and off for three years. He'd never been rude, but some of his suggestions had been rather...colorful.

Exciting, she amended as she began carving out a triangular eye socket.

A shiver ran through her, as it had one night when he'd picked up a maraschino cherry, held it up by the stem and slowly sucked it into his mouth. Then he'd leaned over, so only she could hear, and whispered, "I want to cover you in cherry syrup and lick you from head to toe."

She'd lain in bed that night, and many others, imagining what his hot tongue would feel like against her skin. Her nipples. Her pussy. Licking sticky syrup from every inch of her.

Rusty woofed and trotted over to her, nudged her leg with his nose, then picked up his leash in his mouth.

Shaking off the tingling need inside her, knowing that the imaginings Toby's words brought to mind were impossible, Kate clipped the leash to Rusty's collar and stood. "You were just outside an hour ago. You can't have to go yet."

He whined and cocked his head, his big dark eyes almost pleading. She chuckled. "All right, Rusty." She grabbed her jacket from the office then walked with him down the hallway to the emergency exit where she slipped a key into the lock to disarm the alarm.

In the alleyway, Rusty wanted to sniff everything, stopping every three feet to lift his leg. Kate zipped up her jacket to ward off the chilly air as she waited for him to do his business. Thankfully, the rain had stopped, but the fall air was brisk with the scent of snow. Red and gold leaves floated on the wind under the lone street lamp at the corner.

Rusty turned and glanced at her, then let out a low rumbling growl. "Come on, Rusty. I'm cold. Could you just get done with it?"

His growl grew in volume, and he took off down the ally, nearly strangling himself when he reached the end of the leash.

"No. You're not chasing any squirrels or raccoons or, God forbid, skunks that might be out and about tonight."

His growl turned into a bark, and he pulled at the leash, desperately trying to run away.

"Rusty! Stop." She tugged at the leash, and he reluctantly stepped toward her, but he growled and barked, his focus trained on the end of the alley. She couldn't see anything amiss.

The crash of breaking glass startled a yelp from her.

Rusty set up his high-pitched, something's-very-wrong bark.

Kate ran down the alley, Rusty in the lead, and rounded the corner just as a big, dark pickup sped by on the street. She glanced at it, but it was too dark to see anything but the bright brake lights as it barely slowed at the intersection then turned left and disappeared out of sight.

Rusty's yapping sounded almost hysterical, and he tugged against her hold on the leash. She turned toward him.

Her stomach plummeted to her toes.

As she slowly walked past the front door of the pub, she saw a man-sized chunk of glass dislodging from the top of the window frame. She snatched Rusty into her arms and jumped back as the glass hit the sidewalk with a thunderous crash. She stared at the broken plate glass

window, the masonry brick lying where she'd been sitting on the floor inside, and the shattered head of her partially carved pumpkin.

* * * * *

An Affair To Remember. Click. When Harry Met Sally. Click. The Sound Of Music. Click. Titanic.

"For Christ sake," Toby mumbled as he hit the power button on the TV remote and tossed it on the coffee table. Where were the shoot-'em-up, kill-everything-in-sight movies when you needed them? Wasn't it bad enough he couldn't get Kate out of his head? Watching some sappy love story wasn't going to help any.

Wandering into the kitchen, he checked the charger holding his radio. Quiet night. Tones hadn't gone off once since he got home six hours ago. At least if there'd been a fire he'd have something worthwhile to do. So what if he wasn't on duty? That had never stopped him from showing up on a fire scene before.

He flipped on his dad's old police scanner then pulled open the fridge. He wasn't hungry, but he needed something to do. Something to take his mind off Kate. Kate's pale skin, pink lips, and long, shiny hair. The fear in those clear blue eyes.

He reached for a package of turkey and a jar of mayo. Damn it, he should have gone to Darby's tonight. He shouldn't have bagged out and slunk home like a weasel. But fear overrode his need to see her. Fear that he'd do something that would make the situation with her worse. How was he supposed to just be friends with her when all he wanted was to grab her, kiss her, sink into her body and find release?

"Domestic disturbance at the Conways' again, Hal," came the voice of Peggy, the nighttime police dispatch.

"What this time?" Hal's voice crackled over the scanner.

Toby plopped the bread on the counter and scrounged for a butter knife.

"Darrell came home drunk again, and Debby conked him with the fry pan."

Toby chuckled. So did Hal. "Which one called it in?"

"Debby. She's crying."

"Tell her I'm on my way."

Toby slapped together the sandwich, took a bite, then sat down on a bar stool by the counter.

He'd worked in Boston for a year, where every conversation over the police and fire radios had been in code and heavily monitored by superiors. He still found it funny that in Cooper Valley, except for extreme emergencies, the dialogue was as conversational as a phone call with a buddy.

He liked it. He'd hated Boston. Cooper Valley was his home, and he'd come back as soon as his contract with the Boston Fire Department ended.

"K.C.," Peggy called over the radio. "Could you head out to the Worthington farm? Charlene called in with a report of a peeping tom."

"K.C. here. Who the heck would be peeping on Charlene?"

Hal, who was the nighttime supervisor at the sheriff's office, came on. "Head on out there, K.C., and make the old lady happy."

"Yes, sir."

"Hal," Peggy said. "I've got Kate Darby on the line. She asks that you get to her place immediately."

Toby's heart stuttered, and he dropped the sandwich on the counter. Kate was in trouble. Calling for the cops. *Shit.*

Without a second thought, he grabbed his jacket and headed to his truck.

Arriving within minutes and before Hal, he parked on the street outside Darby's. The damage was more than obvious. The front window had been smashed, glass on the sidewalk and inside. He hopped from the truck and tried the front door, but found it locked.

"Kate?"

The dog barked from somewhere inside but, other than that, he heard no response.

Fear coiled through him, so he entered through the window and stepped over the broken glass, careful not to cut himself on any jagged pieces still sticking from the frame.

"Kate?"

Still no response except for the dog.

He headed through the bar toward the back hallway, hoping she'd locked herself in her office for safety's sake, but the barking came from the women's restroom.

He knocked on the door. "Kate? Honey, are you in there? It's Toby."

The dog's barking notched up to a fevered pitch, but Kate didn't respond. Fear punched him in the gut, and he pushed the door open.

He heard the sound of retching.

"Kate?"

"Go away."

Toby leaned down and patted the dog's head. He stopped barking, but did that little whimpery-whiny thing, clearly unhappy.

He found Kate in the second stall, hunched over the toilet.

"Are you hurt? What's wrong?"

She groaned and swiped her hand over her forehead. "God, get out of here."

What he wanted to do was scoop her into his arms and take care of her. Instead, he went to the sink and pulled some paper towels from the dispenser, dampened them under the faucet with cold water, then took them back to her.

"Here," he said softly as he stepped into the tiny stall. He saw her whole body stiffen, but she didn't move. Hunkering down behind her, he very slowly reached around to wipe her face with the towel. She flinched at his touch, but didn't pull away.

"That's it," he said softly. "Do you need a doctor?"

She grabbed the rag from him and pushed to her feet. "No. I'm fine." She flushed the toilet, stepped around him, and left the stall. "Why the hell are you here? Why now?"

Guilt flowed through him at her angry tone. Why now, indeed. She was halfway down the hall before he caught up with her. She marched back to the bar area and plopped down on a stool, clutching the dog and her jacket close.

"I heard the call come in over my police scanner. I was worried about you."

Her brow puckered into a frown, but she didn't turn her head to look at him. "I don't need you to worry about me."

Someone needed to, he thought with disgust. She was so alone. "Do you know who did this?"

"Could have been you for all I know," she snapped.

The dog gave one sharp bark before settling its head against her chest.

Toby sat down on the stool next to her. Close up, he could see she was shaking, her whole body vibrating beneath the puffy down jacket. Afraid of pushing her over the edge, he tucked his hands in his jeans pockets to keep from reaching for her. "Why do you say that?"

She took in a deep breath and slowly let it out. Did it again and again. "I'm sorry," she finally said, her tone lowered and normal, but still a bit too husky. She opened her mouth to say something else, but Hal arrived.

He stood on the other side of the shattered window. "Well now, isn't this a mess?"

For the first time, Toby looked down at the brick that was used to break the window. It had landed on a pumpkin and smashed the thing. Newspapers were spread all over the floor, pumpkin seeds everywhere. Had Kate been sitting there when the brick came through the window?

His heart pumped hard in his chest as fury overrode him. She could have been killed. The cinder block could have smashed her head the way it had smashed the pumpkin.

Hal stepped through the window as Toby approached the brick. There was a piece of paper rubber banded around it.

"Hello, Toby. Were you here when this happened?"

Toby shook his head. "Just heard it come over the scanner." He stepped around the brick and read the message.

His gut clenched. A cold sweat popped out on his forehead. Suddenly *he* felt like vomiting.

Chapter Seven

Toby sat next to Kate as she gave Hal her statement. Thank God she'd been outside when this happened. The thought of her being hurt, of what could have happened if she'd still been sitting on the floor with that goddamned pumpkin, made his skin crawl.

"Any idea who might have done this, Miss Darby?"

Kate shook her head. She held on to Rusty like a lifeline, but she sat tall and met Hal's eyes straight on. Toby wished it were him she clung to instead of the mutt. "Well, maybe. I don't know."

"Any leads you can give me would be helpful."

"William Matheson," she said, her voice so low Hal had to lean in to hear her. "But he's supposed to still be in jail."

Hal scribbled down the name in his notebook. "I'll check. What can you tell me about him?"

Kate swallowed and snuggled the dog under her chin. "He went to prison three years ago for a ten year sentence." Her gaze cut briefly to Toby. "For rape."

Toby's hands fisted at his sides. The name of the man who'd hurt her. Who'd raped her. God help him, the man better still be in prison, or he'd kill the bastard with his own two hands.

"Where's he serving his time?"

"Wallens Ridge State Prison in Virginia."

Kate had been in school at William and Mary College in Virginia. That must have been where it happened.

"I'll check him out. Anyone else holding a grudge against you?"

Kate's brows furrowed into a frown. She shrugged.

Who the hell could hold a grudge against her? She was so sweet. So... God, he couldn't take this. Pushing off the stool, he paced across the pub, bloodlust coursing through his veins. Whoever had done this would pay. He'd see to it. No one threatened his Kate.

His Kate?

Yeah, he thought with an overwhelming possessive urge to toss her over his shoulder and carry her away from this place. Away from danger and fear. She was his. His to protect. From the second she'd opened up to him in her kitchen and slipped her hand in his, she became his to care for.

Not since he'd been a teenager had he had such a powerful need to shelter and protect. Once he'd come out of his own despair over his father's death and realized his mother was alone and his little sister needed guidance, he'd stepped in and taken care of them. Until his mother's death five years ago, he'd single-handedly supported her. With Stacy married to a good man who provided a happy home for her, she didn't need him much anymore.

Kate was alone. She needed someone to look out for her.

"Anything else you can tell me, Miss Darby?"

"A pickup truck. When I heard the window break, I was in the alley with Rusty. When I came to the end of the alleyway, a dark-colored pickup sped down the road and turned left on Cedar Street."

"Dark-colored?"

After a short pause she said, "Blue, black, green. I don't know. Just...dark. A big truck, full-sized. Extended cab."

"That could be any of a thousand trucks in this area."

"I know."

"What about you, Toby? What are you doing here?"

He turned toward Hal. "I'm a friend of Kate's. I heard the call come over the scanner at home and headed over. I wanted to make sure she was okay." He glanced at the shattered pumpkin again. God, what could have happened....

Where There's Smoke

Hal gave a short nod. "Okay. I'll take the note with me back to the station. It's about the only evidence we've got."

Toby's muscles tightened. "Hal," he said. "Make sure you get whoever did this."

"I'm going to try, son. But we don't have much to go on. You gonna help Miss Darby get this place straightened up?"

"Yeah, I already called Steve. He's got some plywood we'll cover the window with for now."

"Good."

Kate sputtered, but before she could say anything, Hal held out his hand to her. "I'll call you as soon as I know anything, Miss Darby. Until then, we'll be patrolling the area on a regular basis."

Kate shook his hand then quickly pulled away. "Thank you, Deputy."

He tipped his hat and headed out through the window opening.

"You can leave," Kate said as soon as Hal was out of earshot.

"I'm not going anywhere. Why don't you go upstairs? Steve should be here in a few minutes with the plywood. Just show me where the broom is."

Kate hopped off the stool and walked up to him. Her cute little chin jutted out, her dark blue eyes blazing. "This is my bar. I'll take care of it."

This side of her was much better than the distraught woman he'd found in the bathroom less than an hour ago, but she could easily get on his nerves if she didn't back off and let him do what he needed to do.

"Kate," he said, holding his patience. "I'm here. I'm going to help. You can work with me or against me, but I'm not leaving."

* * * * *

Kate threw open the door to her apartment, and Rusty came running from the bedroom, greeting her with a wagging tail and a happy yip. She picked him up and moved into the living room, avoiding Toby's gaze.

Why wouldn't he just leave?

After Steve had shown up with several pieces of plywood, he and Toby went outside to nail it over the broken window while she worked on cleaning up the glass inside. She'd stashed Rusty in the apartment against his will so he wouldn't get his little paws hurt on the glass.

Now, an hour later, Steve had gone home, and Toby refused to leave.

She wanted to be alone. Her hands still shook every time she thought about that note. Who had done this? And why?

"Why don't you go get your pajamas on? I'll make some tea to help you relax."

She swung around, gaining a little whine from Rusty. "I don't have any tea. I don't like tea. And I don't own any pajamas."

God, she sounded snarly. She didn't know why she was taking this out on Toby. He sure didn't deserve it. He'd come to help, and he had, and she was grateful.

Toby's left eyebrow lifted along with the corner of his lips. Her face heated with embarrassment. As if he needed to know she didn't own pajamas. Damn, she was losing it.

"Thank you for everything you've done tonight," she said after taking a deep breath. "You're probably tired. Why don't you go home now?"

"You shouldn't be alone tonight."

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him. He wasn't serious. She'd been alone every night for the last year. Did he think a broken window would change that?

"What do you drink to relax?"

He was *not* getting it. "I don't need to relax." She shook her head. That wasn't right. "I don't need you here babysitting me. You need to leave now."

Totally ignoring her, he walked into the kitchen and started opening cupboards.

"Oh, for God's sake. Cocoa. But you can't just walk into someone's house and start going through their stuff."

After sending her a grin, he grabbed a ceramic mug from one shelf, and a box of hot chocolate from another. "Go change your clothes. You have pumpkin seeds on your jeans."

She glanced down. Sure enough, she did. "You're not leaving, are you?"

"Nope."

Flutters invaded her tummy. He was staying. In her house. All night? "Why?"

After pouring milk into the mug and putting it in the microwave, he turned toward her and laid his hands flat on the countertop. "Because, Kate, when I got here tonight, you were puking your guts up. You're as white as a ghost. And when you're not trying to keep them busy, your hands start shaking."

Which was all true, she thought. "I'm not a baby. I don't need to be looked after."

He slowly rounded the counter until he stood in front of her. Instinct told her to step away, run away, lock herself in her bedroom until he was gone, but she straightened her spine and met his gaze. She had to get over her unreasonable fear of him. Of people in general. He was a good place to start, since she honestly believed he'd never harm her. At least her head told her that; her insides didn't quite agree.

"Do you want me to leave, or do you expect me to leave?"

"What?"

"If you truly want to be alone, I'll go. But it has to be because you *want* me to leave, not because you *expect* me to."

She clenched her jaw. How could he know? He'd leave eventually. For good. Soon enough he'd realize she wasn't worth any of his time and be gone from her life. Yes, she expected him to leave. Permanently. She'd thought, when he hadn't shown up with the fire crew, that the time had come. But here he was, offering his damn friendship. His caring. Why couldn't she accept it?

Because once she'd gone off the deep end, everyone else had abandoned her. Fiancé, friends both male and female. They didn't understand her anymore. Everyone but Dad, and now he was gone, too.

"I thought so," he said softly. "Stay right here."

He disappeared down the hallway, and she wondered what he was going to rummage through this time. Her dresser drawers looking for pajamas that didn't exist?

He came back with a small smile on his lips. "Give me your hand."

She shifted Rusty to the crook of her arm and held out her right hand. He laid something in it. When she glanced down, she almost laughed aloud. The little can of Glade from the bathroom.

"There. Now, if you feel in danger from me in any way, you've got protection."

Biting her lip, she fought the smile trying to escape. He was so damn sweet. She was in danger only of letting her heart get involved. It was too easy to take his kindness as something more because she wished it *could* be more. But she had observed him for three years and knew him too well. He went through women like dirty socks. Not that he ever brought them to the pub, but she knew when he was dating someone and when he wasn't, and the on times were much shorter than the off times.

He wasn't the kind of person to hang her heart on. And right now, as wobbly as her emotions were, she hoped to God she could keep that in mind.

But would it hurt to take him up on what he was offering now? Wouldn't it be nice to know there was someone there with her, especially as scared as she was?

"I'll go change."

* * * * *

Toby set the steaming mug of hot chocolate on the coffee table and flopped down on the couch. God, he was tired. Drained. His adrenaline levels had gone through a big workout tonight. From the fear of hearing the call over the scanner to seeing the note some bastard had thrown through the window...

He swiped his hand down his face and let out a deep breath. He'd been taking a shot in the dark with his question to Kate, but he'd

obviously hit that nail on the head. She expected him to tuck tail and run. How many people had abandoned her in her life?

Well, he wasn't about to leave her. She would just have to get used to the idea that he was sticking around. At least until he knew she was okay.

The bedroom door opened, and Kate came out looking tiny and fragile in a pink tracksuit two sizes too big. Rusty trailed behind her. Toby was glad she'd kept the mutt. Even clean, it was still ugly, but the runt would at least be a companion for her.

She sat on the other end of the couch and picked up the hot chocolate. With a slight tremble, she grasped the mug with both hands then pulled her feet up under her. She barely took up any space at all, as if she tried to make herself invisible.

Rusty jumped onto the couch between them, sprawled out, and gave a little sigh of contentment.

Toby scratched the dog's ears. "You okay?"

Kate bobbed her head.

"Why were you throwing up when I got here?"

After a slow sip from the mug, she glanced over at him. "It's how my body deals with..."

"Fear?"

"Uh huh." She took another sip.

He knew about fear. About bone chilling, stomach curdling fear. He'd felt it the night his dad's police cruiser had been run off the road by a drunk driver. But he couldn't imagine what it would be like to have the memories Kate harbored.

"What scared you the most tonight?"

She was silent for so long he thought she wouldn't answer. Then, her voice so low he had to lean closer to hear, she said, "The note."

She stared at the wall across the room. "It's exactly what he said to me in court when he was sentenced. *You're going to pay, Bitch.* Like it was my fault he was there."

The calm deadness in her voice, as if she'd pulled her soul from her body before discussing this part of her past, sent a chill up Toby's spine.

"Kate."

It took a few seconds before she turned her head to look at him.

"Drink your cocoa."

She gave a little nod and took a long drink.

"I thought once he was in prison, I'd go back to being normal. He couldn't hurt me anymore. He didn't do this tonight. He's not up for parole for another three years. Now I'm expected to be afraid of someone else. Someone else wants to invade my life and take over the same way he did."

She tipped the mug and drained it. "But what they don't know is that there's nothing left." The mug thudded to the coffee table before she turned toward him, hugging her knees to her chest. "I've lived through hell. Three days of it."

Her voice rose with fury, and her eyes blazed as she stared at him. "Three long, never ending days at that monster's mercy. They think a brick through my front window will be my undoing?"

Her body was shaking, but this time Toby was sure it was from anger, not fear. Her fingers whitened where she gripped her arms around her knees. Her emotions were roller-coastering all over the place.

Toby carefully lifted Rusty and set him on the floor. The dog gave a small groan of displeasure, but then curled up under the coffee table.

He held out his hand to her. "Come here, honey."

Staring at his hand, she didn't move.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

Slowly, as if it took all her will, she reached out her hand and laid it in his. Her fingers shook within his loose grasp. Moving leisurely, trying not to frighten her, he reached out his other hand and stroked her cheek. She didn't flinch. Her eyelids slowly closed, and she leaned her face against his palm.

"Let me hold you."

Her eyes popped open, the spark of fear unmistakable.

"It's just me, babe. I'll never hurt you." His heart thudded in his chest, and he prayed he was doing the right thing. He couldn't stand her

sitting there, curled into herself. If he could give her just a bit of peace, he needed to.

Taking her other hand in his, he gave her the tiniest tug.

Unfolding her legs, she moved a little closer to him.

"That's it." He put his arm around her shoulders, felt her shaking, tensing. "Shh," he whispered.

After a few heartbeats, she moved into his embrace and laid her head on his shoulder. Running his hand down her arm, he wished he knew what to do, what to say to stop her shivers. He reached behind them, pulled the knitted quilt off the back of the couch, and spread it over her. She turned her face into his throat.

"That's it. I'm here for you."

His gut clenched at his own words. He felt fear now. Soul deep. He couldn't mess this up. She was too fragile.

"Just relax."

She let out a sigh, and her body seemed to melt against his. Her arms snaked around his waist.

He reached over and turned off the lamp on the end table. Kate's body tensed for a second, but he soothed her with soft words and a gentle hand on her back.

She needed him whether she realized it or not. Now he just had to figure exactly *what* she needed from him.

Chapter Eight

Warm.

Kate slowly slid into wakefulness with a sensation of warmth engulfing her entire body. She'd slept better than she had in years. No nightmares. No dreams at all. Just deep, undisturbed sleep.

She moved to roll to her back, but found herself trapped. Her arm was stuck. Her eyes shot open.

Holy crap.

She wasn't on her bed. She was on Toby.

Her heart set up a hard tattoo, and her stomach clenched. She glanced up at his face, but he was asleep. With one arm behind his head and the other hanging off the couch, he couldn't be very comfortable. But his eyes were closed, his face relaxed, and she could hear the soft, steady breaths from his slightly parted lips.

Looking down, she saw he had one foot flat on the floor while the other... She gulped in a breath. Her thighs straddled his leg.

Her stuck hand, she realized, was halfway under him, while one side of her body was wedged between his hip and the back of the couch. She'd been using his stomach for a pillow.

Eyes squeezed shut, she worked to steady her breathing. This was Toby, and he was asleep. He'd lain here all night with her. He'd stayed to make sure she was okay.

Deep breath. Deep breath.

God, he smelled good.

She tilted her head to see his face, irrationally afraid he'd heard her thoughts.

He was still fast asleep and hadn't moved one bit.

She looked down to where her head had been resting. His T-shirt had slipped from his waistband. A three-inch wide swath of bare skin lay exposed, a crescent-shaped belly button, and smooth, milk chocolate skin slowly rising and falling with each breath he took.

She looked at his face again. God, he was gorgeous. The slight brackets on each side of his mouth had smoothed out in sleep. Black whiskers stubbled his cleft chin.

Lowering her gaze, she took in the breadth of his shoulders. The muscled pecs beneath his T-shirt. Long torso. That strip of skin.

Slowly, she moved her free hand away from its tucked position against her chest. With just her fingertips, she touched the dark skin. Silky. Warm. She nudged the shirt up just a bit higher. Even relaxed, his well-defined abs were something to behold. Slightly concave beneath his ribs, his stomach was firm. Sleek.

She lowered her head, resting her cheek against him without the shirt separating them, and took a deep breath, closing her eyes as she did so. Spice, musk, heat.

Her lips parted, and she touched them to his flesh. Wanted to lick him. To learn his taste. But she stopped herself. He was asleep, for God's sake.

She looked at his face again, just to make sure. Not one muscle had moved. His lips looked so inviting. So soft. What would he do if she leaned up and pressed her mouth to his?

Kiss her back, she thought. A shiver of some combination of thrill and fear ran down her spine. She'd bet he was a good kisser. But would she be afraid if he did?

Yes. Terrified.

But it might be worth it just to know. Just once.

No. She couldn't.

Something under her elbow moved. She looked down to where her arm rested over his lower abdomen. Realizing she'd been stroking his stomach, she stopped and pulled her hand back to her chest.

And saw the long, solid ridge of his erection beneath the tight denim of his jeans.

Oh God, oh God, oh God.

She jerked her head up to see his eyes, but they were still closed. He hadn't moved.

Okay. Not so bad. He was still asleep. She knew about this. She'd read about it somewhere. Guys had something like seven erections every night. Or was it an erection every seven seconds? No, they thought about sex every seven seconds. How the hell did they ever get any work done?

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed deep, her brain turning to oatmeal. His scent burrowed into her, and she dropped her head back to his stomach, her lips touching the silky-smooth skin just above his navel.

His knee jerked the tiniest bit against the apex of her thighs. Her eyes flew open, and she gasped at the hard pulse of pleasure that zipped through her.

She tingled all over. Especially her nipples.

She pressed her forearm against her chest and prayed the feeling would pass. That it wouldn't.

He was still hard. Maybe even harder now. *My God, he's huge.* Now she could see the ridged crown of his cock outlined perfectly against his jeans. The long length. Its thickness.

Damp heat pooled between her thighs. Her pussy throbbed. If she reached down and rubbed herself, she'd come. But she couldn't. She was trapped here. And she... Without conscious thought, she pressed her hips down, pressing her heat against Toby's knee.

Warmth of arousal flooded her face. She could feel every pulse of her heart in her core. She stared at him and imagined what it'd feel like if he slid that long, hard shaft into her.

She moved her hand again, this time laying it over his cock. She felt it flex. God, he was hard. Rock solid. She wished he wasn't wearing pants, that she could feel his skin.

Again her hips flexed. She bit her lip to keep from moaning. Spirals of heat, of pure pleasure, coursed through her. She was so close.

She flicked out her tongue and licked his stomach. Slightly salty. Sweet. She did it again.

"You do know I'm about ready to explode, don't you?"

She screamed. With a hard yank, she jerked her arm from beneath him and rolled off the couch, whacking her thigh on the corner of the coffee table.

Rusty came running from the bedroom barking.

"Kate." Toby reached for her, but she scrambled to her feet. Backed away. Mortified. Terrified. She couldn't breathe.

Toby came to his feet and started toward her.

Panic seared through her embarrassment, and she ran for her bedroom. Slamming the door, she locked it. "Get out!"

The dog barked and barked. And then stopped.

What had he done to Rusty? God, don't hurt Rusty. Please don't hurt Rusty. No. Toby saved Rusty. He wouldn't hurt him. Tears stung her eyes. She couldn't breathe. Falling to her knees, she wrapped her arms around her stomach, preparing for the nausea.

It didn't come.

She didn't feel sick. *Why?*

Her hands shook. Hell, her whole body was shaking, but she didn't feel like vomiting. Turning her head, she listened. Footsteps along the hallway. They stopped in front of her door.

"I gave Rusty his chew bone. I'm going now."

He was leaving?

"Kate..." She heard a sigh and some low words she couldn't make out. "Damn, babe. I'm sorry."

The tears fell from her eyes. He was blaming himself for this? She'd been molesting him while he slept, and he was apologizing? She'd freaked out again, and he was apologizing for it? He hadn't *done* anything.

She stood up and grabbed the doorknob. He had nothing to apologize for. She did.

The living room was empty except for Rusty sitting on the couch chewing his rawhide bone. She ran to the front door and jerked it open. Toby was just rounding the side of the building. She called to him, but he didn't stop walking, so she ran across the apartment to the window overlooking the street. He was climbing into his truck. She knocked against the window, but he didn't hear. Didn't even look up. And then he drove away.

She slumped to the floor and folded her arms over her head. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. How could I be so stupid?*

Rusty licked her hand and whined. She scooped him up and snuggled him against her chest. He licked her chin. She blinked away the falling tears.

"What am I going to do, Rusty?"

He whined.

"Did I chase him away for good?"

Rusty settled his head on her still achy breast and sighed while he looked up at her with those sad little eyes.

"I can't let him walk away, can I?" She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears. "I don't want him to leave for good."

* * * * *

"Okay, what's up? Why'd you drag me away from work for lunch at ten forty-five in the morning? Why do you look like you haven't slept?"

Toby ran his hands over his face. His sister looked worried. He didn't want to worry her; he just needed to talk to someone who would understand and hopefully shed some light on what the hell was going on in Kate's head.

"You were at Darby's last night, weren't you? I heard about the window. Is there something you're not telling me?"

Toby dropped his hands to the table and glared at her. "Just what are you insinuating?"

She rolled her eyes. "For crying out loud, Toby, I'm not insinuating anything. I'm asking if you're hurt again. Did you get more stitches? Were you in the hospital and didn't tell me?"

"Stop." His eyelids were like lead weights. Exhaustion dragged at him, but he knew if he went home he wouldn't be able to sleep. "I'm fine. Nothing happened to me." At her frown, he forced a smile. "I swear."

She sat back and picked up her iced tea. "Then what's going on?"

He waited until the waitress had set his burger on the table in front of him and left them alone. "I have a friend with a problem."

"Oo-kay." She snatched a fry from his plate. "What kind of problem?"

"She was raped."

Stacy dropped the fry and choked on the bite in her mouth. Toby handed her the iced tea and waited until she'd wiped the tears from her eyes.

"It happened a couple years ago, but she's not dealing with it well. Not on a personal level. She's—" He didn't know how to describe Kate's paranoia. Her unreasonable reactions to...to *him*.

Christ, it killed him when he thought of her reaction this morning. She'd been turned on. Her breathing had been quick, erratic. She'd been riding his leg like a wanton. The touch of her tongue on his skin had seared him to the soul. And when she'd laid her hand over his dick, he'd almost come right then.

"She's what?" Stacy's eyes were wide, her brow furrowed. "Has she gotten help? Is she okay? Is there anything I can do?"

Propping his elbows on the table, he rested his forehead against his fisted hands. "Physically she's fine. She says she's seen a therapist, but hell, Stacy, she's..."

"Hey." Stacy's cool fingers touched his arm. "You care about her, don't you?"

He nodded and raised his head to look at his sister. "A hell of a lot."

She took his hand in hers and gave it a squeeze. "What happened? Tell me."

Toby told her about the night he found Rusty, about Kate's panic. And then skimmed over what had happened less than an hour ago.

When he was done, Stacy sent him a gentle smile. "Just because she's been hurt by a man and is frightened of them doesn't mean she's not a normally functioning woman. She has needs and desires just like the rest of us."

Not caring to hear about his sister's desires, he frowned.

Stacy laughed, sat back in the booth, and reached for another French fry on his plate. "This woman is obviously attracted to you."

"I think so."

"If she was getting all hot for you while you were asleep, there's no thinking needed. She wants you. She's just afraid to do anything about it." A teasing gleam in her eye, she added, "At least while you're conscious."

Toby growled. "So what the hell am I supposed to do? I mean, do I just pretend this morning didn't happen? Do I walk away? Should I call and apologize? I told her I was sorry before I left, but she was really upset. I don't even know if she heard me." He sat back and rubbed his eyes.

"The only reason you should walk away is if you're unwilling to see this through. And what, exactly, did you do that needs your apology? You were snuggling, things heated up. It's human nature." Stacy went still. "You didn't force her to do—"

"Don't even ask that question. You know I didn't." How could his own sister ask him that? "The only thing I did was pretend to be asleep when I wasn't. I thought if she thought I was asleep, she wouldn't get scared off." Wouldn't stop the sweet torture her touch inflicted. Damn, it'd felt good.

"Are you in this for the long haul?"

"What do you mean?"

"How serious are you about this woman?"

He scowled.

"Come on. It's not a difficult question."

"I don't know. I want to help her."

"And if she falls in love with you in the process?"

Staring at his sister, all he could see was Kate's face. The fear in her eyes. How her hands shook as she'd held them up as if to ward him off. And then she'd run and locked herself in her bedroom. Terrified of him. How could she fall in love with anyone if she only felt panic?

Stacy pulled his plate in front of her and picked up the burger. "I married the first man I let close to me." She took a delicate bite of the sandwich.

"I don't think Kate will ever let me that close."

Her eyes widened a fraction. "Kate? Kate Darby? This is who we're talking about?"

Fuck. He closed his eyes and slumped down in the seat. He hadn't wanted Stacy to know who the woman was.

"My God, she's so... You'd never know... You remember how I was after? I stayed to myself, barely left the house except to go to school. Kate's one of the leading businesswomen in Cooper Valley right now, involved in every charity out there and the chamber of commerce. She's turned that little pub into a thriving business. How does she do it?"

"I've been wondering the same thing."

"She interacts with all those men in the bar." Stacy shuddered. "It's been ten years since it happened to me, and you wouldn't catch me alone with a bunch of drunk men."

"Stacy, she'd kill me if she knew I was talking about her."

"And she'd have every right." Her smile was full of sympathy. "You have to make a decision. Are you her friend or her would-be lover? You can be both, but she needs to understand your intentions. Telling her you're there for her as a friend is not the same thing as telling her you're there for her no matter what. No matter what she needs."

"But if I tell her that, she'll totally freak out and never want to see me again. In fact, I think that might have happened this morning. She's probably banned me from setting foot in Darby's ever again." He grabbed his coffee and took a long swig of the tepid brew. "This is so fucked up."

"Yeah, it is."

"She needs someone to be there for her."

"Uh huh. Are you the one? Are you strong enough to do that?"

"But I work these damn rotation shifts. You know how many girlfriends I've lost because of it. What if she needs me when I'm at work and unavailable?"

"Toby," Stacy said, her voice admonishing. "Are you seriously blaming your mile long string of girlfriends on your job?" She batted her long eyelashes at him, her lips pressed in a thin line. Stacy's trademark 'get real' look.

He chuckled. Okay, so he'd used that as an excuse. But still... What if he wasn't there when she really needed him after he'd promised?

"Could she be the one?"

He turned to stare out the window, watching the cars as they crawled by on Main Street. "I just want to help her. She's all alone."

"That's not answering my question."

He sucked in a deep breath and held it for a moment.

"Don't answer. The only person who needs to know is you. Be honest with yourself, and be very, very honest with her. She's been betrayed. Hurt. A man has soiled the most important thing in her life. Inside she feels as if her very soul was cut open. No matter what front she puts on, or how strong she shows the world she is, you've seen inside her. You know."

He nodded then turned his head to look at her.

"And if you can't commit, you have to walk away. She doesn't need any more betrayal in her life. If she falls in love with you because she thinks you're the one man who can stand beside her no matter what..."

"I always wondered why you picked Jason." His brother-in-law was the nicest, gentlest man he'd ever met, but he looked like a rabid bulldog. They made a strange looking pair, but Stacy was happier than she'd ever been.

Her smile said it all. There was only one man in the world for her, and she'd married him.

"I won't hurt Kate." And he could very well see himself falling in love with her. Maybe he already had. He'd never cared about any woman so much before.

"Good. See that you don't. I'd hate to have to hurt you myself." She picked up his burger and took a big bite. Toby drained his coffee and held the mug up for a refill when the waitress walked by.

How did he go about being honest with Kate and not hurt her? Not scare her? Because, damn it, he wanted her. Bad. And after what happened that morning, he thought she wanted him too.

Honesty, he thought as he sipped the acrid brew the diner passed off as coffee. Okay. That's what he'd do. He'd just lay it out to her and hope to God she didn't tuck tail and run. She'd have to decide which direction their relationship went from there.

Chapter Nine

Kate closed the office door and flipped the lock for good measure. The evening crowd was beginning to file in, and she had one more thing on her To Do list to accomplish. She didn't need someone barging in on her while she made this phone call.

She picked up the note she'd made that morning and ran down the list. The window had been ordered. The guy from Hepner's Glass had already been by to take measurements. It wouldn't be in for a week, but that was okay—she already had plans for decorating the plywood for the Halloween party. She'd called Steve about purchasing the wood from him and told him she'd have a check ready for him the next time he came in.

The sheriff had called to let her know Matheson was still behind bars, so that was a load off her mind. Not that she'd thought he wasn't, but it was good to have the facts verified. He also said it had probably just been kids pulling a prank, and he'd keep a few extra patrols in the area for the next few days.

Now there was only one thing left to do.

Her tummy fluttered, and her face heated. Before she lost all her nerve, she picked up the phone and punched in the number she'd gotten from Steve earlier in the day.

"Please let it be a machine. Please don't let him be home," she chanted softly as the phone rang repeatedly.

On the seventh ring she heard a click. She drew in a deep breath to give the little speech she'd prepared in her head all afternoon.

"Hello?" came Toby's sleepy voice.

Shit.

"Hello?" he said again when she didn't speak up.

"Toby?" she said tentatively, then felt stupid. Of course it was Toby. She'd know his low, sexy voice anywhere. He sounded a little raspy, like he'd been sleeping.

"Yeah."

"It's Kate...Darby," she added for good measure. Who knew how many Kates he might have had in his past?

"Hey, how you doing?" He didn't sound upset with her. That was a good thing. But she still had to get this done with.

"I...umm...well..." She huffed out a breath. "I didn't expect you to answer the phone."

He chuckled. The sound shot an arrow of shivers down her spine. He was just as sexy over the phone as in person.

"You did call my house, you know."

"I know." She nibbled on her bottom lip for a second while she tried to remember the speech she'd rehearsed all afternoon. "This would have been a lot simpler if I could have just left a message."

"What's wrong? Did something else happen? Are you all right?"

"Everything's fine," she rushed to reassure him. He sounded as if he were about to come charging to her rescue again on his white steed. "I just called to say how sorry I am about this morning."

"Babe, it's okay. I understand. There's no reason to be sorry."

It's okay? she thought. No, it wasn't. Her actions this morning were...abhorrent. "I molested you while you were sleeping. You shouldn't understand."

He sighed heavily. "Kate, I wasn't asleep. And I'm not at all sorry that you touched me."

"You weren't asleep?" she whispered. "Oh, God." She covered her heated face with her hand. Could this get any worse?

"No, babe. I was awake all night, waiting for you to wake up. I was afraid you'd have nightmares or...something. And I wasn't sure how

you'd react if you woke up in my arms." He chuckled. "It wasn't at all what I'd expected."

She groaned. "I don't believe this."

"What? What don't you believe?"

"That you're not mad. First I feel you up, then I throw you out."

She'd freaked out again like a madwoman. She'd touched him—*tasted him*—and then told him to get out of her house.

"You got scared," he said softly. "I understand. But I couldn't keep my mouth shut any longer. I was too close to the edge."

"I thought you were asleep. Not that it makes it okay. I mean..."

She rubbed her forehead with her fingertips and stared at the worn ink blotter on her desktop.

"What do you mean? Talk to me, babe. You're safe with me. You can tell me anything."

She did feel safe with him...for the most part. She knew in her head he wouldn't hurt her, wouldn't force her to do anything against her will. He could have this morning, but he hadn't. He'd simply left when she told him to. And last night he'd stayed because he thought she needed him.

She had needed him, she admitted to herself now. She'd been so upset, so scared, and he'd been there to hold and comfort her. Had stayed awake all night to watch over her.

"Anything?" she asked, her voice quavering slightly.

"Yes. Anything."

She let out a shuddery breath and wondered how truthful she could be. Would she scare him off with her admissions? At least over the phone she wouldn't have to worry about his reactions. She didn't have to look at his face to see his disapproval. And maybe it'd be better to just clear the air with him, let him know how she really felt about him. If he walked away now, it would be so much better. Because, damn it, her feelings were getting way too strong for him. What did she have to lose?

"If I were the type of woman I wish I could be," she said, her words stilted and unsure, "I would have had sex with you a long time ago."

Kate squeezed her eyes shut. She couldn't believe she'd said it. *Damn, damn, damn.* What was wrong with her? How could she have told

him that? "I'm sorry," she said quickly when he didn't respond except for some strange noise she couldn't interpret. She couldn't lay this on him. She'd just said she wanted to have sex with him when she knew damn well she probably never *could*.

"Don't be sorry. Please stop telling me you're sorry." His voice was tight, strained. Had she upset him? Was he angry? Now she wished she could see his face. How stupid was she to do this over the phone?

"Christ, babe, you turn me on."

A shiver of uncontrolled excitement sparked through her. Was that what his voice sounded like when he was turned on? Was he turned on *now*?

Heat pooled between her thighs, and a thrum set up low in her belly as she remembered this morning. The slightly salty taste of his flesh. The warmth of his body against hers. His musky, spicy scent.

"Your breathing just sped up," he said. "Just like it did this morning when you kissed me. I wish you'd kiss my lips. I want to taste you."

His words brought back the vision of him licking cherry syrup from her body. Hot lips on her mouth. On her throat. Her breasts. Her belly. Between her legs where she grew damp and ached for his touch.

"Are you aroused, Kate?"

Oh God, was she. Just like that, his words, his deep voice, the memory of him, could bring her to the edge. She pressed her hand against her breast, wishing it were his hand. "Yes," she whispered.

"So am I."

She couldn't stifle the tiny moan that slipped between her slightly parted lips as she squeezed her nipple through her shirt and bra. Toby's groan of response let her know he'd been telling the truth.

"I want to hear you come, babe. God, I've wanted that for so long."

She jerked her hand away from her breast and glanced around the room, her face heating as if she was being watched. But she was alone. In her office. With the door locked.

Did she dare?

Could she?

Her pussy throbbed and, when she rolled her hips, the seam of her jeans pressed enticingly against her clit, sending more heat to her face. Made her nipples tighten into tiny, hard, tingling pebbles.

"Have I gone too far?" Toby asked, his voice low, concerned.

She swallowed hard, her breath coming in short gasps. Maybe this was as close to having him as she'd ever manage. She flicked her tongue over her bottom lip. "No."

She heard a low growl on the other end of the phone that sent heat flooding her body.

"I want you to touch yourself, babe. Can you do that for me?"

Glancing around the office once again, she realized she couldn't do this with bright fluorescent lights overhead. "Hold on a sec."

She set the phone on the desk, jumped up, and hit the light switch by the door. The room, now lit only by the glowing screensaver on her desktop PC, was much more conducive to erotic thoughts...and pleasures. She double-checked the doorknob to be sure it was locked, then rounded the desk and sat back down.

With a slightly shaking hand, she lifted the receiver from the desk. "Okay," she said breathily, her heart thundering in her chest.

He gave a soft chuckle. "Tell me what you were doing."

"I had to turn off the light. And make sure the door was locked." Her free hand fisted on the desktop. "I'm in my office," she admitted in a low whisper.

"Mmm. I'd love to take you in your office. Bent over the desk. Your beautiful ass in my hands while I pound into your hot little cunt."

She stopped breathing altogether. She could picture it. God, she could *feel* it. His hands. His cock. His heat.

"You'd grip the edge of the desk and call out my name as I sank into your silky, wet heat."

She ripped open the fly of her jeans and shoved her hand into her crotch. She was so wet, so slick already. "Toby," she groaned as she sank two fingers into herself and flicked her clit with her thumb.

"That's it," he said, his voice tight. "That's it. Let me hear you."

Scooting her office chair back, she raised the soles of her feet to the edge of the desk, spreading her legs wide for better access.

"I've wanted you for so long. Fantasized about you. Masturbated to thoughts of you. Just like I am now."

She whimpered as she felt the telltale tightening of a growing climax.

"I want to suck your pussy. Lick you until you scream with a mind-blowing orgasm. And then I want to spread your soft pink flesh and watch as my hard black cock sinks into your creamy center."

Kate threw her head back and squeezed her eyes shut as fireworks exploded in her brain. A long, low moan slid out of her as she rubbed her fingers over her clit, riding the climax as long as she could.

"Yes, baby. Yesss," Toby hissed in her ear, which turned into a low, growling groan as he obviously found his own release.

Feeling limp and drained, she tried to steady her breathing as the room spun around her. Sucking in deep breaths, she laid her head back and stared at the ceiling. She'd come so fast. When she was alone, unless she woke up from a wet dream, it took her forever to reach an orgasm. But with Toby's voice in her ear, it had been spontaneous combustion.

What had she just done?

Long distance mutual masturbation? Oh, God, now what? Was he going to expect— She swallowed hard as tears stung her eyes.

"You okay?" came Toby's sexy, deep timbre.

"Uh huh," she said quickly, blinking back her shame.

"I want to come see you."

"No!" Terror rippled through her, sending away the last lovely rays of release. She sat up and stared at the door through the dark room, half expecting him to come sauntering in.

"Shh. Sweetheart, it's okay."

"No. No, you don't understand. Oh, God, I didn't mean to. I just..." She could never see him again. No way. Not anymore. First this morning, and now this. He'd think she was some kind of slut. A horny little slut who couldn't keep her hands or her thoughts to herself.

"Kate. Calm down. What's wrong? Did I go too far?" She heard some rustling sounds and then...a squeaky bed? "Shit, babe. I didn't mean to freak you out." He sighed. "Don't pull away from me now."

She wanted to hang up the phone.

"Please, baby. I just wanted you to know how I feel about you. I didn't want there to be any secrets between us. I didn't know it would go this far."

A shiver raced up her spine. No secrets between them?

"Are you still there?"

She nodded then realized he couldn't see her. "I'm here," she said, her voice hoarse and shaky.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," she said, then pushed her damp bangs from her forehead. No secrets, he'd said. Could she really trust him? Did he mean it? "I scared myself."

"Aw, babe."

She heard that squeak again and realized he must be in bed. A much better place to get off than her desk chair, she thought in disgust at her own actions.

"Talk to me. Why did it scare you?"

She bit her lip and leaned her elbows on the desk.

"It's okay, Kate. It's just me. I'm not going to judge."

Okay, she thought. Let's lay it out there. What was the harm?

Lots of harm. He'd either run away and never want to see her again, which at this point might be best for them both... Or he'd expect more than she could ever give him. Namely, one-on-one, in-person sex. She used to like sex. A lot. Hell, she still did, she admitted. It was the thought of someone touching her...holding her...pinning her with a big, hard, male body that sent a chill through her veins to rival any winter blizzard.

"You're the only man I've been attracted to since...you know. And I think about you a lot. I dream about you. I wake up—" She bit her tongue. Too far. Too much info.

"Tell me," he whispered in her ear.

"I wake up in the middle of the night having an orgasm because of the dreams I have of you."

After a long pause, he asked, his voice so low it practically rumbled, "Is that a bad thing?"

It is now that you know about it, she thought and ran her hand through her hair. "It is when the dreams slip into reality like this morning and just now."

"Why?"

She huffed out a breath. "Because it is."

"You'll have to explain this to me, Kate. How can it be bad that we're both sexually satisfied, and we now both know the other one fantasizes about us? I feel relieved that you know. I'm glad you told me." She heard his long inhalation of breath. "And I know that there may never be anything more physical between us."

Damn it!

Tears fell from her eyes in a blinding rush at his words. He did understand. Oh, God. He really understood her.

"Shh," he whispered when she sniffled. "Don't cry, little love. Christ, don't do that."

"I'm not," she said then sniffled again. "This isn't fair to you, Toby. Why the hell did you have to pick me? Why not Shelly or any of the other dozens of women who constantly hit on you when you're here?"

"What's not fair is that you live in such a tightly enclosed world that you can't let anyone in. I want to help you change that. I'll do anything I can to help you. And as for picking you...?" He chuckled. "It's your intelligence. Your wit. Your smile. Those incredible blue eyes. I'm only human, Kate. And you simply take my breath away."

The air whooshed from her lungs at his sexy declaration. No one had ever, in all her twenty-eight years, said anything quite so sweet to her. He thought she was smart and witty, and he liked her smile and her eyes. *Wow.*

How could she not fall in love with him?

"Can I come see you?"

She shook her head. "Please, not tonight. I need some time to think." About how to keep her heart from claiming him as her own. About building up the courage to touch him in person, not only in her fantasies, while he was awake and could touch her in return.

"Okay."

She leaned back in her chair, relieved he wasn't going to argue.

"One question."

"Anything."

"Did you mean what you said about understanding if this was...it? If we never go any further? If I can't..."

"Sweetheart," he said softly. "I want more. Much more. But that having been said, I will never, ever *expect* more. The choice is yours completely. And if all you need is a friend, I'm here for that, too."

How could he? God, he couldn't be for real. No man would do what they just did and then say he didn't expect more. Correction, they might say it, but they didn't mean it. Weird thing was, she believed him. Again she wanted to ask why, but she held her tongue.

She could use a friend, she thought sadly. A real friend, not an employee or a business acquaintance. It might be nice to have someone to call late at night when the noises that go bump got too much to bear. Would he be there then? When she just needed a steady voice on the other end of the phone?

Ah, hell. She was dreaming.

"Thank you," she said briskly, needing to end the conversation.

"I've got to get back to work."

"Kate—"

"So I'll talk to you later, okay? Bye." She hung up the phone before he could respond. Okay, it might have been rude, but enough was enough. No guy, not even saintly Toby Angel, could have phone sex with a girl and remain just friends. He'd expect more eventually, wouldn't he?

Nice words he gave her, but they didn't mean much.

Then again, she wanted more than friendship, too. But building the courage to go after it was something else entirely.

Chapter Ten

Drake grinned at Toby like an idiot as he unlocked the front door of Darby's. "Hey there, fireman. We don't open for another hour."

Toby tried scowling, but wound up chuckling. Drake was as harmless as they came. "I know. I came to see Kate."

"In the office." Drake sighed. "She's been on the phone since I got here. Having some problems with the liquor distributor again." He shook his head and pursed his lips. "The man should be strung up by his balls. And I'd do just that if I weren't such a gentleman."

Shaking his head, Toby tried not to grin at Drake's words, but failed. "What kind of problems?"

They walked toward the bar, where Drake poured him a Coke. "The little bastard got wind of the vandalism and says he's not going to deliver on credit anymore. Says there's no guarantee he'll get paid." He picked up a white bar towel and began polishing beer mugs. "So now Kate's got to hand over cash up front for the booze for the Halloween party on Friday, and she's already paid out a couple thousand for the window, not to mention the food she serves at the party." He leaned over the bar toward Toby. "Between you and me, I don't know where she's going to get the money."

Frowning, Toby sipped his cola. "Doesn't she have insurance for the window?"

Drake sighed again. "Yeah, but it'll take a couple weeks to come through. They told her to go ahead and pay upfront, and she'd be getting a check in the mail."

"She doesn't have a line of credit?"

"Yes, she does, but she refuses to use it. Especially after the mess Colin left her in. The business credit cards were maxed to the hilt, and he had a ten thousand dollar signature loan, too."

"Christ." Toby had no idea Colin had been in financial trouble. He would have helped if he'd known. Well, he could help now.

He pushed off the barstool.

"I wouldn't say anything to her about this," Drake warned.

Toby raised an eyebrow.

"She's really touchy where money is concerned. She doesn't like anyone knowing her business."

"Then why'd you tell me?"

Drake grinned, but didn't answer.

Toby headed toward her office. Once again the door stood open, but this time she didn't look relaxed. No, she looked downright irate as she gripped the phone in one hand and a pen in the other. Staring at a notepad on the desk in front of her, her lips were pursed tight and her brow wrinkled into a formidable frown.

He edged into the room and slipped into the seat next to the desk. Her head jerked up, and she glared at him. He didn't take offense, though. She obviously had other things on her mind.

He hoped he could take her mind off those other things for a short while, though. He desperately wanted to talk to her. To make sure they were still on the same wavelength after she all but hung up on him yesterday.

Christ, having her soft whimpers and moans in his ear while he jacked off had been amazing. But as soon as it was over, she'd regretted it. Had nearly panicked. He needed to convince her he meant every word he'd said. No way in hell could he let her fear him after the intimacy they'd shared over the phone. He needed more. He needed her soft and

willing in his arms. He could wait until she was ready, but he couldn't let her run away now.

Kate's tummy fluttered annoyingly as Toby sprawled out in her visitor's chair. His long legs and wide shoulders seemed to take over her small office. The voice of her liquor distributor seemed to fade into the background as every sound, every word Toby had uttered yesterday over the phone, came zooming back to her mind in a flash.

Damn. Damn, damn, damn. Toby was a distraction she didn't need right now. She had much more important things to deal with than her runaway libido. She focused on her notes.

When Pete Jergens finally paused for a breath, she cut in. "I still do not see any correlation between a broken window in my bar, and you trying to put me out of business. You're not being reasonable, Pete, and I'm not going to stand for it."

"Well, you do what you need to, missy. You've no business running your daddy's bar anyway."

Her blood boiled like a pressure cooker. The man was in his sixties and didn't feel a woman's place was in the bar business. The fact that she ran the bar better than her dad ever had didn't seem to matter one whit.

"My name is Kate, not missy. And you should keep your patronizing opinions to yourself. I won't be using your services any longer." Her gut clenched. Shit, she was digging herself into a hole so deep she didn't see how the hell she'd get out. The nearest distributor besides Pete was seventy miles away. The prices she'd have to pay for delivery would eat any profits she might have been able to make. She'd have to raise her per glass prices, which would cost her patrons, which would be as bad as not raising prices and paying for the delivery charges. She wanted to scream.

"You'll be sorry about that, missy."

She gritted her teeth against anger and frustration. "Goodbye, Pete. You'll get your final check the first of next month." Without waiting for a reply, she hung up the phone. How dare that chauvinistic asshole treat her like she was nothing, knew nothing. She was a damn fine businesswoman. In one year, she'd dug Darby's out of debt. *One year.* If it

weren't for the goddamned broken window, she wouldn't have this problem with Pete. It was as if he'd just been waiting for the perfect excuse to cut her off.

She'd been so careful when dealing with him up until now. She'd always paid him on time, usually early, so he had nothing to hold over her.

"You okay?"

Kate startled and jerked her gaze from the phone to Toby's concerned eyes. She swallowed. "Fine."

His brows pulled down into a frown. "You don't look fine. What's going on?"

She let out a tightly held breath. "Nothing I can't deal with." And she would deal with it, damn it, one way or another.

"Maybe I could help. If you need a loan..." He leaned forward in the chair, resting his elbows on the opposite side of her desk.

She shook her head, but his gaze snared her. God, he was handsome. Today he wore his brown leather bomber jacket over a white button up shirt open at the collar. She was so used to seeing him in T-shirts, it stopped her for a moment. The top three buttons were open, revealing a beautiful V of creamed-coffee skin. Smooth. Hairless.

"Do you shave your chest?" she blurted out, then clamped her hand over her mouth and squeezed her eyes shut. Holy crap, she couldn't believe she'd said that. "Sorry," she said, her words muffled by her hand.

His deep chuckle had a frisson of heat spiraling down her spine. She dropped her forehead to the desktop, wishing the floor would just swallow her up.

"It's the Native American half of me," he said, humor lacing through his words. "No chest hair. Very little facial hair."

When he didn't say anything more, she slowly raised her head. He'd moved closer, his chin resting on his hands on the desk just inches from her nose. He grinned.

She rolled her eyes, but didn't pull away. Truth was she wanted to reach out and touch him. His cheek. His lips.

"Have lunch with me?"

She groaned. "I can't. I've got a ton of phone calls to make." Because if she didn't, she wouldn't have the stock she needed to throw her Halloween party, and it was only a few nights away. That was totally unacceptable, even though she really did want to spend more time with Toby.

No. Work first. Playtime later. Maybe. One good thing her dad had taught her. That, and don't mix business with pleasure, which was why she refused to talk to Toby about her business-related problems. Besides, why would he care?

"Please?" he said, giving her the biggest puppy-dog eyes.

She laughed and sat back, removing herself from the temptation of his too-near mouth. Those full, sexy lips that she'd spent all last night imagining on her flesh.

Her stomach tumbled, and she knew then what her decision would be concerning Toby. She wanted him. And somehow she'd have him. In her bed. How could she pass up the opportunity to be with someone so sexy, so absolutely beautiful in both body and spirit?

"I really can't today," she said, picking up her pen to still her trembling fingers. Now that the decision was made, she needed to figure out how to go about getting him in her bed without freaking out on him. If he just didn't have any hands and arms, it would be perfect. There would be no threat.

"When, then?" he asked, still looking up at her with puppy-dog eyes that could melt the most coldhearted woman.

"Monday. Night. Dinner." She sucked in a breath, realizing what she was doing. "I haven't been on a real date in years. Away from the pub."

A big grin spread over his face, and he sat up. "Really?"

"Yeah," she said even as worry gnawed at her. Fear that she was jumping in too fast. No. She could do this. He was perfectly...safe. "You're off shift that night, aren't you?"

He nodded, still smiling. His eyes were so dark, so intense, a shiver skittered down her arms. She was in over her head. She couldn't do this.

"How about dinner at Lowery's and then a movie?"

Lowery's. Cooper Valley's only five star restaurant. Could a firefighter afford it?

"We could take a walk down by the river afterward. It's really pretty down there at night with the leaf strewn paths."

Alone in the forest with him? In the dark? *Alone?*

"Kate?"

Silly, she chided herself. She'd been alone with him in her own apartment. If he'd wanted to do something to her, he would have done it then. But maybe he'd see the acceptance of a date as a green light for more.

"Hey, Kate," he said, reaching across the desk to take her hand.

She jerked away and came to her feet. Then plopped back down in the chair. She wanted more. Wanted to give him that green light.

"I'm scared," she admitted softly, hoping he understood.

"Maybe just dinner this first time, then."

She nodded slowly.

"You have to trust me, Kate. If you can't trust me, there's no way for us to..." His words trailed off, and he shrugged.

She did trust him. That was the bad part. If she didn't trust him, she could kick him out and never see him again. But she trusted him with her very life. She just couldn't get that horrible, dark part of her subconscious to shut up long enough.

"Um... It's not you," she said as she fiddled with her pen, drawing little circles on her notepad, avoiding Toby's penetrating gaze. "I know, logically, that you won't do anything to me. I mean...you wouldn't harm me in any way. But when I'm alone with you..." She bit her lip for a second, searching for the right words. Not even knowing how to explain it to herself, let alone someone else.

"Something inside you snaps, and it doesn't matter what your logical side is saying. Fear takes over. And you feel the overwhelming need to defend yourself."

She raised her gaze to his. How did he know?

His smile was gentle. "Babe, I've had some psychological training. I've also dealt with a lot of guys who have had problems after a bad

flame-up. I've seen what fear can do to a seasoned firefighter. Believe me, what you went through is worse than getting caught in a blow-over. What you've endured, survived, and struggle everyday to overcome..." He reached across the desk and tenderly laid his hand over hers. "You are the bravest person I've ever met."

She shook her head in denial. "You said you know another woman who has overcome it all. I'm not any different than her."

"Yeah, you are." His thumb traced over the back of her fingers, warm and affectionate. "She hid away from the world for a long time. You're right out there, working your butt off to keep this bar going. You're amazing."

Tears prickled the back of her eyes, and she blinked fast to keep them from falling. Only her father had ever told her how proud he was of her for facing each day like a challenge and making the most of it.

Never in her life, even long before she'd spent three days in hell with Matheson, had she wanted a man as much as she wanted Toby. He gave her courage. He understood her fears.

Still holding his hand, she rose and moved around the desk. He turned slightly to face her, but remained seated. She took a few steadying breaths, willing herself into calmness. "I want to kiss you."

His fingers flexed around hers briefly but, other than that, he didn't budge except to give her a smile.

"You can't move."

His eyebrows rose; the grin grew.

"I mean it. Don't touch me, and don't move."

He let go of her fingers and gripped the armrests of his chair with both hands.

Feeling stupid, she stood in front of him, wondering how the hell to do this. His knees were spread, and she supposed she could step between them, brace her hands on his shoulders and lean over. But that would throw her off balance, leaving her vulnerable. She didn't think he'd touch her since she told him not to, but she couldn't be sure until she put him to the test. And this was it. If he couldn't let her do this as slowly as she

needed to, with her in complete control, she couldn't do anything at all with him.

She stepped to the side of his chair. He followed her with his gaze, his head tipped back to watch her face. His smile had faded, but the gentleness in his dark eyes made her heart melt. With one hand, she touched his cheek. Sitting, his head came even with her breasts, and part of her wanted to cradle him against her. To hug him, pet him.

Her gaze roved over his cleanly shaved pate, and she followed the path her eyes took with her fingertips. Smooth, just like his abdomen had been. Her gaze dipped below his chin to the V of his collar. Her finger trailed down the side of his face, across his jaw. She stopped at the little cleft in his chin. Another trait from his ancestors.

His father had been a full-blooded Sioux. She remembered him from her childhood. Standing well over six feet tall, dark skinned, wearing the brown sheriff's uniform and gold star, he'd been a formidable man.

She let her fingers trail down the corded muscles of his neck, over his Adam's apple to dip into the opening of his shirt. Had there ever been another man whose skin felt so smooth? So warm to her touch, as if he had a furnace inside him made for the sole purpose of warming her?

As her gaze wandered over him, he sat perfectly still, but his knuckles turned pale from gripping the armrests. When her focus leveled on his crotch, there was no way for him to hide his straining hard-on.

A shimmer of heat flowed through her veins, making her lightheaded. Her nipples puckered and, instead of pillowing his head against her breasts, she wanted to lift her shirt and pull his lips to her aching flesh. To feel him suckle.

"You're so beautiful when you're aroused," he whispered. "Your cheeks turn pink. The little sounds of your breath speed up."

She squeezed her thighs together as heat pooled between them, and she began to throb. Just a kiss, she reminded herself. Just a kiss. A test. To see...

Before she lost her nerve, before her blossoming arousal was doused by her own stupid mind, she took Toby's face between her palms and pressed her lips against his.

Soft. Moist. Warm.

She tipped her head slightly and opened her mouth to capture his bottom lip between hers, tugging slightly.

Heat sizzled through her, but he sat so still she felt a moment of disappointment. Why wasn't he kissing her back? Was she doing something wrong?

She tilted his head back, leaned over him, and skimmed her tongue along his upper lip. A little groan came from deep in his throat, but still he didn't physically respond.

Pulling back, she dropped her hands from his face. Her breath came in and out in jagged gusts. Her nipples were pulled so tight she thought that the slightest touch would send her skyrocketing.

"You didn't like it," she said, dejected. "It's been a long time since I—"

"I'm about ready to come in my pants," he said, cutting her off, his voice gravelly. "Why the hell would you think I didn't like it?"

She frowned. "You just sat there and didn't kiss me back."

The left side of his lips kicked up, and his eyes were the color of night, filled with passion. "You told me not to move."

"Oh." She grinned, feeling like an idiot. He'd definitely passed the test. He hadn't moved a muscle. Her gaze flicked back to the long, hard ridge beneath his jeans. Well, any muscle he had control over.

"Wanna try again?"

She heard the teasing in his tone, and it drained away her anxiety. She could trust him. Any guy who would sit still and not even move his mouth when he was that thick and hard... *Well, shit.*

She wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned down toward his lips. "You can kiss me back this time, if you want."

"I want. Bad."

She was laughing when she touched her lips to his, but the sound soon turned into a long, drawn out moan of pure, undiluted pleasure as his tongue delved into her mouth and he took possession.

She clutched his shoulders as her knees went weak. Low in her belly, heat exploded like a fire lit with gasoline. Closing her eyes, it felt as

if the world spun around her. A vortex where the only sensations she could feel were Toby's lips, his demanding tongue, his insistent heat. His spicy scent invaded her mind, leaving her weak and ready to explode.

He tore his mouth away from hers and gasped in several long breaths. "Holy shit."

Yeah, she thought. If a kiss could do this to her, what would sex be like with him? Suddenly she wanted to know. Now. She checked his pants to see him still long and solid. The stupid chair had armrests. She couldn't straddle him. The desk. He said he'd imagined her on the desk.

She took his mouth again and thrust her tongue. He groaned, giving her more courage. He was as much at her mercy as she was his. Shoving her hand into his shirt, she found his tightly puckered male nipple and teased it with her fingertips.

He sucked in his breath, his hips jerking almost off the chair. "Babe," he groaned when she moved to nip at his jaw. "Babe, I can't take much more. Ahh," he moaned when she sucked at the skin of his throat. She felt as if she were starving. As if his taste alone could fill her.

She heard the crack of wood and jumped back, her butt hitting the edge of the desk. She couldn't seem to draw in a breath. Then her eyes went wide as she realized what the sound had been.

Toby sat there in the chair holding up one of the armrests. He'd snapped it right off the seat.

She bit her lip, realizing the restraint he'd shown her.

He stared at the piece of wood for a long moment then chuckled. When he looked up at her, the chuckle turned into a full-blown laugh. "I think I owe you a chair."

Kate giggled, a weird combination of admiration at his restraint and fear of his strength warring inside her. She swallowed and leaned her butt against the desk's edge. "Let's get one with no arms."

Toby's grin was wolfish. His eyes still shone with hot desire, but he seemed to sense the moment had passed for her.

She took in a few deep breaths, willing her body into submission, needing the throbbing tingle to subside so she could think clearly.

Oh, hell, who needed to think?

Where There's Smoke

Monday night she was going to get Toby into bed. She just prayed he could show this much self-control while naked.

Chapter Eleven

Damn, Toby thought, second time in three days he had to walk away from Kate with a raging hard-on and his emotions in turmoil. How the hell was he going to keep his hands to himself? Literally.

That kiss she'd laid on him had been the most mind-blowing, earth-shattering, physical experience of his life. He wanted to sink into her and claim her, make her his. Yet he knew he had to follow her guidelines, and that meant no touching unless she said so. And damn it all to hell, he wasn't sure he had that much restraint. Not if it came down to more than what should have been a simple kiss.

He pulled his truck into a slot in front of The Ranch House Bar and Grill. He hoped Sloan, the owner, was still a good enough friend to help him out.

He pulled open the heavy wooden door and waited for his eyes to adjust to the dimness within. Not much different than Darby's, a long wooden bar with a brass rail took up one wall. Where Darby's had tables, The Ranch had booths. A pool table in one corner, a jukebox in the other, the restaurant had been a favorite of his as a kid.

"That you, Tobias?" called a deep, Southern smoker's voice from behind the bar.

"Hey, Sloan." Toby headed across the room toward the bar. The place was empty, still too early for a lunch crowd. "I heard you got yourself hitched again."

Sloan chuckled. He was six feet of brawn with a neatly trimmed white beard and as bald as Toby. "Number five. And she's a looker." He turned sideways and shouted, "Celeste, come on out here, girl. I want'cha to meet the son of one of my best buddies."

Toby grinned. Sloan had worked in the sheriff's department under his father. Not long after his dad was killed, Sloan retired and bought The Ranch House about the same time Colin Darby opened the pub.

A tall, curvy, bleach blonde came around the corner from the kitchen. She had a big smile and cold, steel-gray eyes. Toby suppressed a shiver. Not a woman he'd screw around with. She looked close to twenty years younger than Sloan's sixty.

"Tobias, meet my wife, Celeste. Hon, this is Jake Angel's boy. You remember me telling you about Jake, don't'cha?"

She held out a long, lean hand with fingers tipped with inch-long claws the color of cherries. "Of course. Nice to meet you, Tobias."

He shook her hand, almost surprised her skin was warm to the touch. What was it about her...? "Nice to meet you, Mrs. Randolph."

Her laugh was throaty, whisky rough. "Please, call me Celeste."

Nodding, he withdrew his hand from hers. "Celeste."

"So, what brings you 'round here, boy? Been ages since you came in. You still with the fire department?"

Toby turned his attention back to Sloan. "Yes, sir. Truth is, I do most of my hanging out at Darby's. That's really why I'm here." Feeling awkward, unsure of himself, and ashamed that he'd let so long slip by without visiting his father's old friend, he sat down on a stool and tucked his hands in his jacket pockets. "Do you know Kate Darby?"

"Sure," Sloan said and then poured a cola for Toby. "We worked together last year for the Toys for Tots campaign, and again this spring to raise money for that orphanage going up in Blaine."

How had he not known Kate was involved in so much charity work? God, she amazed him.

"Well, she's having some problems, and I'm trying to figure out how to help her without getting my head chopped off for stepping on her toes."

Sloan's raspy laugh brought back memories of his childhood. Of sitting on the floor in his parents' living room listening to Sloan and his father tell their war stories of the mean streets of Cooper Valley.

"So what's the little lady's problem? I heard about the vandalism. Shame, really." Then Sloan narrowed his eyes at Toby. "I seem to remember a brat teenager who pulled those kinds of pranks, costing the God-fearing, tax-paying residents of this town quite a bit of money."

Shamefaced, Toby dropped his gaze to the bar. Damn. Fifteen years and his crimes still came back to haunt him. Would the people of the town ever forget? Ever forgive? Hadn't he given back enough in repayment?

He cleared his throat. "Yeah, well, Kate's having some problems with her liquor supplier. Do you happen to know if you share the same one?"

"Sure. Pete's the only distributor for miles." Sloan crossed his arms over his barrel chest. "Real asshole, too."

Toby nodded in agreement. "He won't let Kate buy on credit anymore, and she's got her annual Halloween party coming up. Word has it she's short on cash until the insurance money comes in for the window. She may not have enough alcohol for Friday night."

Celeste leaned her elbows on the bar, her hip rubbing against Sloan's thigh. When she leaned forward, her pale breasts nearly spilled from the tight red top she wore. Toby averted his gaze to Sloan, who seemed oblivious of his wife's wardrobe malfunctions.

"The son of a bitch. You know," Sloan said, laying a hand on his wife's butt as if they were alone. "When he comes in here to make his deliveries, he's always bitching about one person or another. I've heard him say that Kate Darby shouldn't have been allowed to take over the pub when her dad died. Said right to my face that a woman didn't belong tending bar." He gave Celeste's ass a proprietary squeeze. "I'd love to set him in his place. The only problem is, it would cost too much to truck in booze from J&S Distributors, which is the closest one."

Celeste moved a few inches in front of Sloan. If they weren't wearing clothes, Toby would be watching a porno, the way the woman

rubbed her ass against Sloan's groin, all the while watching him. Christ, he didn't like this woman. She gave him the creeps.

"So what do you think Sloan can do for her?" Celeste said then licked her full red lips. Slowly. As if she were trying to come on to him, not her husband whose groin she was grinding with her butt. "And why would my husband want to help out the competition? She's taken enough of his business as it is."

Sloan gave her a slap on the ass, which made her stand up straight and pout at him. "You behave, kitty. Put those claws away. If Kate needs some help, I'll do whatever I can."

Celeste's eyes narrowed at her husband, and she huffed out a breath.

Toby let out a breath he hadn't been aware of holding. "Thanks, Sloan. The only thing I can come up with is you ordering for her and letting her pay you back as she would normally pay this Pete guy. But whatever you do, don't let her know I was here to talk to you about it."

Sloan chuckled that raspy laugh. "Sounds like she's got you a little tied up in knots if you're worried about getting on her bad side."

With a grin, Toby pulled a couple of dollars from his pocket for the cola. Big huge steamer ship knots, he thought. "I appreciate the help."

"Don't be such a stranger," Sloan said as Toby headed toward the door.

In a whisky voice, Celeste repeated her husband's words.

Holy shit, Toby thought. No wonder the guy was on his fifth marriage if all the women he wound up with were like Celeste. It would take an army to keep that woman in line.

As he climbed into his truck and started the engine, Toby prayed he'd done the right thing. Kate needed help and wouldn't want to take any from him. But she just might take it from someone else who wasn't personally invested in her. And maybe he could see if the guys at the firehouse would toss in some cash to tide her over until her insurance came through. Surely she wouldn't turn down a donation from some of her most loyal customers.

* * * * *

Kate stood on the small stage and grinned at the crowd. This Halloween had turned out to be bigger, better, and more fun than any Darby's had ever thrown. The place had filled to capacity, the creepy hors d'oeuvres were a smash hit, and the all-you-can-drink for one cover-charge price was the best idea she'd come up with so far. She'd have to do the same on New Years Eve.

"All right, everyone," she said into the microphone. "Only a half hour left to sign up for the costume contest. We've got a three-hour beauty treatment from Kathleen's Day Spa for the ladies." The women in the crowd applauded. "And for the guys, we've got a hundred-dollar gift certificate for Big Roman's Sporting Goods." The men cheered. Kate laughed. "And for the best couple, a champagne suite at the Blaine Hilton for a night. Shelly has the sign up sheet. Just grab her as she delivers your drinks."

She set the microphone back in the stand and headed for the bar, stopping to encourage a few people to enter the contest along the way. She stepped behind the bar and poured herself a diet cola.

"Great crowd tonight," Drake said, looking as proud as she felt.

"Yeah. It did turn out well, didn't it?" she asked, looking up at the fake spider webs and tarantulas dangling from the ceiling, the green and red lights, and the giant Dracula teeth and dripping blood she'd painted on the plywood covering the window. She took a long swig from her glass then set it down. "Gotta check the buffet."

As she headed toward the side of the room where a long table had been set up with everything from "finger" sandwiches to "worm" salad and green "eyeball" punch, she heard her name being called. She turned around to see Toby standing a few feet away.

Her heartbeat accelerated. Her face went hot. She hadn't seen him since their scorching kiss the other day. Now she wanted to jump into his arms and kiss him silly, if for no other reason than to share her happiness of the night with him. Everything was going so well.

"Hey there, Li'l Red Riding Hood," he said, stepping nearer her. "Big Bad Wolf would like a bite." His grin was extra toothy, and it made her giggle. She couldn't kiss him here in front of everyone, but she wanted to. Wanted to feel those lips on hers again. Maybe even his teeth, she thought as a thrilling shiver arced down her spine.

She decided to change the subject. "Nice costume, but a bit unoriginal, don't you think?" She eyed his firefighter uniform of a navy dress shirt with his last name on the chest, the navy cargo pants with about a million pockets, and his black combat-looking boots.

"You've got a smart mouth on you, Red," he teased. He grabbed a "finger" sandwich from the buffet and eyed it warily, making her laugh again. "Cal said I didn't have to pay cover since I can't stay long, and now that I've seen the fare, I'm kinda glad I didn't fork over any money."

Kate playfully slugged him in the shoulder. "My customers have been complimenting the food all night. What are you doing here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be at work?"

He popped the sandwich in his mouth and chewed, raising his eyebrows. "Not bad," he said after he swallowed. "I have something for you. Can we go to your office?"

Ohh, he came by to kiss her, she thought and nearly skipped through the bar as her costume dictated she should. He couldn't stay away. She'd talked to him last night on the phone, but that sure wasn't the same as seeing him in person. And it had been only a short call because he'd been at the station and worried the guys would overhear him.

She unlocked her office and stepped in, holding the door open. He moved inside, and once again she felt like his presence made the room shrink. She shut the door and turned the lock, not wanting anything to disturb them.

When she turned toward him, he was leaning against the wall, his hands tucked behind his back. "Kiss me, Red," he said, his voice so low and sultry it made her insides quiver.

She took the two steps separating them then pushed back the hood of her bright red cape. Her hair fell free around her shoulders.

"Damn, you're beautiful," he whispered, leaning down so she could reach his lips with hers.

She placed her hands on his shoulders, went up on tiptoes, and pressed her mouth against his. He didn't move his lips. She teased him with her tongue, still nothing.

She growled and nipped his bottom lip. "Kiss me back, dammit."

With a muffled chuckle, he dove into her mouth with his tongue. He tasted of coffee and mint. Like Heaven. Her knees went wobbly, and she leaned her body against his for support. Her breasts pressed against the rock wall of his chest, her thighs straddling one of his, his solid erection against her belly.

Her arms tightened around his neck as his mouth ate at hers, his teeth grazing her lips and tongue, sending hot thrills down her spine, spiraling out to her fingertips and toes, flooding her core with damp heat.

"Ah, baby, you burn me alive," he murmured as his mouth left hers to trail nipping bites below her ear and down her throat. "You're so hot."

And then his arms closed around her.

Ice water shot through her veins. She yanked her hands away from his neck and pressed against his chest. A stifled scream escaped her throat, sounding more like a tortured whimper. "Don't touch me!"

He let go of her so fast she stumbled backwards, landing on the floor with a thud.

"Baby." He came toward her, but she held up her hand to keep him back. Her butt hurt like hell. Her ego totally shattered.

How the hell could she go from inferno heat to glacial cold so damn fast? All because he'd put his arms around her? This was not normal. She wasn't normal. Probably never would be.

"Kate, hon, I'm sorry. I forgot—"

"It's okay." Using the edge of the desk, she pulled herself to her feet.

"No, it's not. I promised not to touch you except when you said it was okay. I didn't mean—"

"Please shut up." She untied her cape and plopped it on the desk. So much for all her good feelings. Frustrated at herself, she didn't want to

take it out on Toby. She folded her arms over her still aching breasts. "It's not your fault. I'm asking too much of you."

He moved up close to her, raised his palm to her cheek. "Never. You'll never ask too much." He leaned down and skimmed his lips over hers in the lightest touch. Her breath lodged in her throat. "I'll do better next time." He kissed her again, nothing deep, no tongue, just a gentle movement of his warm, moist mouth on hers, but absolutely shattering to her heart. God, he was gentle when he wanted to be.

Next time, she thought. Next time. She blinked up at him. Next time would she get him naked? If so, how was she going to keep him from using his hands on her?

"I'm running out of time," he said, his voice still whisper soft. "Steve said I only had a half hour." He grinned and glanced at his watch as he moved his hand away from her cheek. "I've already used up twenty minutes."

"Oh." She leaned back against the desk. "I thought you came just for...that." Her face flamed, and she dipped her head so her hair would hide her glowing cheeks.

Toby chuckled. "It was wonderful, don't get me wrong, but..." He withdrew a legal sized envelope from his back pocket. "...that's not the only thing I came here for. The guys and I put this together for you."

She frowned and took the proffered envelope. She slid her finger under the un-sealed flap and looked inside. Cash? She scowled at him. "What do you mean, the guys and you?" She shoved it at his chest until he took it from her. "I'm not some charity case, Toby. I told you I didn't need a loan. I don't need your money."

"It's not mine. The guys at the fire hall all pitched in. Every one of them. We thought it would help you out until your insurance came through."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "How do you know about that?"

"Uh..." If a black man could blush, she was positive she was seeing it happen. His skin took on a distinctive glow, and his gaze skittered away from hers.

"Who did you get your information from?"

"Lucky guess," he said as he fiddled with the envelope.

"You're a liar. It was Drake, wasn't it? That louse." She reached for the doorknob, but Toby stepped in her way, blocking the door.

"It's not his fault. He's worried about you. I am too. Don't be stubborn about this. Take the money." He held the envelope out to her.

She crossed her arms again. She was no one's charity case. She'd dragged this bar out of debt all on her own. She wasn't about to start taking handouts now that she was so close to being home free.

"Babe."

"Don't 'babe' me. You had no right going behind my back like this. Just because we'll probably wind up screwing each other's brains out doesn't mean you have any right interfering in my business." Her eyes went wide as another thought occurred to her. "You're the one who talked to Sloan Foster, aren't you? You told him I'm having problems with Peter." She ground her teeth together and growled, "How dare you."

She'd been so relieved when Sloan came to talk to her, to offer to order her alcohol from Peter for her so she didn't have to pay the delivery charges of the other distributor. He'd come off like it'd been his idea out of the goodness of his heart. She'd been so touched that her biggest competition in town was offering to help her out.

But it hadn't been the goodness of his heart. It'd been because of Toby.

"That hurts," she said, her arms dropping to her sides. "I thought you told me no secrets. We could be honest. Going behind my back is not being honest."

"I wanted to help, and you wouldn't let me." He slumped against the door and rubbed his hand over his face. He looked ashamed, as well he should.

"Maybe in some things I don't need help. I'm not as fragile as you seem to think I am. Not where Darby's is concerned. This is my pub. My livelihood. I don't need you or anyone else trying to ride to my rescue. If I fail, I fail on my own."

"And I'm supposed to stand back and do nothing when I can help?" He shook his head. "I don't think I can do that." He tossed the envelope on the desk. "You need to get over your stubbornness."

She sneered. "You need to get off your white steed. You're not my knight in shining armor."

"Damn it, Kate! I want to take care of you. Why the fuck is that so wrong?"

She leaned away from his outburst. Not really afraid, she was more surprised. She'd never seen him really pissed off before. The fact that his anger was so far misplaced didn't help his cause as far as she was concerned. "I don't need to be taken care of."

He let out a harsh breath and reached for the doorknob. "Yes, you do. And I'm going to do it, dammit." He jerked the door open and nearly ran over Drake. Barely pausing, he mumbled, "Excuse me," before squeezing past a few women waiting outside the ladies' room and disappeared around the corner into the bar.

Stupid, arrogant, egotistical...man!

"Kate," Drake said, a panicked look in his eyes. "We got a problem."

"Shit," she said, thinking there was another brawl going on. When she headed toward the main room, Drake touched her arm to stop her.

"No, the cellar. Where we stored the extra alcohol for the party."

The old root cellar, from when the turn of the century building had been a boardinghouse, could only be reached by a short set of steps behind the stairs that led up to her apartment, or by the outside doors in the ally where she had deliveries made.

Kate unlocked the door to the interior cellar stairs, which was always kept secured. The strong smell of beer and whisky hit her nostrils. She reached for the light switch.

"Sonofabitch." She stopped at the top of the steps and stared. Her heart plummeted to her toes when she saw the inch-deep amber liquid on the concrete floor, the shattered glass bottles, and the kegs lying on their sides with beer still streaming from them. On the cinder block wall, in red spray paint, were the words, *I Warned You*.

Chapter Twelve

"Hey, Sheriff," Keith called from in front of the television in the rec room of the fire hall. Toby looked up from the *USA Today* he was scanning to see Sheriff Terrence Peabody stroll in.

"Good evening, gentlemen," he said in his clipped New York accent. "Tobias, may I have a few words with you?"

Sheriff Peabody had been a Cooper Valley deputy when Toby's father was the sheriff. He moved to New York and served on the NYPD for over ten years, returning to Cooper Valley after 9/11. He'd been elected sheriff by a landslide when he ran for the position.

Toby stood from where he sat on the couch and cast a quick glance at Steve who sat across the scarred coffee table from him. Steve shrugged and said, "You can use the office."

Toby led the sheriff into the chief's office. "What can I do for you, Sheriff?" He leaned against the desk, crossing his arms over his chest.

Peabody pulled out his little notepad from his inside jacket pocket. "Got a few questions about your whereabouts tonight."

Toby frowned. "I've been here most of the night, but I made a run to Darby's Pub to talk to the owner."

"Mmm hmm. What time would that have been?"

"What's this about?" Toby hadn't been interrogated by a cop in years, but he definitely remembered what it felt like. And he didn't like it one damn bit.

"What time were you at Darby's?" Peabody asked again, his voice calm but with an edge to it.

"Ten to ten-thirty or so." He glanced at his watch; it was just past midnight. "Did something happen over there? Is Kate okay?"

"Ms. Darby's fine. Now, what was your reason for being there when you're on duty?"

Toby rounded the desk and sank down into the squeaky office chair. "I took up a collection to help Kate with the costs of her window replacement. All the guys pitched in. Steve gave me a half hour to run it over, since it was from all of us."

"And did you have an argument with Ms. Darby while you were there?"

Gritting his teeth, he asked, "What's happened? Why are you questioning me like this?"

"Did you have an argument with Ms. Darby tonight?"

A cold sweat popped out on his brow. He fisted his hands beneath the desk. "Yeah."

"In regard to?"

"She didn't want the money I gave her."

Peabody looked up from his notepad and speared him with icy green eyes. "I have a witness that heard you yelling at her before you left the office. And another that said you practically ran them over on your way outta there. Awful big argument over a few dollars."

A stupid argument, Toby had been thinking since he got back. He'd been biding his time until he knew the pub was closed to call and talk it out with Kate. And now he was being questioned for...something.

"It was close to five hundred dollars, and she's...very independent."

"And you don't like that, do you?"

He opened his mouth to answer, but then snapped his jaw shut. "Am I under suspicion for something, Sheriff? If so, I would appreciate it if you'd tell me what you think I've done."

"Don't get an attitude with me, Tobias, or I'll haul your butt down to the station until this is all ironed out."

"Is there something I can help you with, Sheriff?" Steve asked from the doorway. Toby had never been so happy to see anyone in his life. Steve knew him better than anyone, knew that he hadn't done whatever the hell it was that Peabody thought he'd done.

"How long was Tobias away from the station tonight?" Peabody asked, not bothering to look at Steve at all.

"About thirty-five minutes, give or take. What's going on?"

"Some trouble down at Darby's tonight. His name came up a couple of times. I'm just checking things out."

Steve cut Toby a dark glare.

Toby came to his feet in a rush. "What trouble? I walked in and found Kate. We were in her office for a while, argued over the money, and then I left. That's it. I came straight back here."

"Someone busted the lock on her storage cellar, destroyed several full kegs of beer, and broke every liquor bottle in sight. Tore the place up some and sprayed graffiti on the wall." Those cold green eyes narrowed on him. "Obviously someone with a grudge against Ms. Darby. And since you were there and were heard raising your voice to her..." He gave a shrug and flipped his notepad closed. "Anyone can put two and two together."

"But...but I didn't... I wasn't anywhere near..." Toby's insides churned into a hot knot of anger. He'd done nothing wrong and sure as hell wouldn't hurt Kate in any way.

"Funny thing is, last time something happened at Darby's, you just happened to be there when the deputy showed up. Seems like you tend to show up at the most convenient of times."

Toby shoved his fisted hands in his pockets to keep Peabody from seeing how they shook.

"Sheriff," Steve said, stepping in front of the desk and into Peabody's line of view. "Are you arresting Toby for this?"

"Not yet. But as soon as we have enough evidence...."

"Then if you're done with your questions, I think it's time you leave." Steve's voice was hard. Cold.

Where There's Smoke

The sheriff came to his feet and headed for the door. "Don't leave town," he threw over his shoulder before leaving.

As soon as Peabody was gone, Steve turned on Toby. "You want to tell me what the fuck went on tonight?"

* * * * *

Kate poured the water from the mop bucket into the low sink. It'd taken two hours, but she'd finally gotten the cellar cleaned up and put to rights.

She'd offered her customers refunds of their cover charges since she'd run out of beer, but invited them to stay and enjoy the food if they wished. What the hell was she going to do with platters and platters of sandwiches, deviled eggs and salad? Then again, if she wound up back in debt or worse, leftovers might be the only food she could afford.

If? There wasn't any *if* about it. She was going back in debt. She'd have to pull cash off the business credit card to pay Sloan for the kegs he and his wife had delivered just that afternoon. Not just the price of the beer, but the huge deposits on the destroyed kegs. Then, if she planned on opening her doors tomorrow night, she'd have to bring in more beer. Her hard liquor... Though all spares had been destroyed, she had enough bottles on the shelves for a few more days.

She set the bucket on the floor and pushed a strand of hair off her forehead. Everything smelled like old whiskey and stale beer. Her hands, her clothes, even her hair.

She wiped her damp hands on her jeans and headed upstairs to the bar. Shelly, Drake and Cal were all cleaning up, the customers long gone. Rusty bound up to her, jumping to put his paws on her thigh. She leaned down and scratched his ears. Drake had offered to take him out for a walk a while ago.

"Hey, Cal, what's the damage?" she called across the room.

"In the pumpkin on the bar." He pointed with one hand while he tipped a chair up onto a table with his other. Then he grinned, which made Kate frown. He obviously didn't realize that if she'd lost too much

money tonight, the bouncer was the first one on her list of employees to go.

She walked to the bar and lifted the orange plastic pumpkin to take it to her office.

"Hold up," Shelly said as she sidled up next to her. "Here." She pulled a wad of cash from her apron pocket and dumped it in the pumpkin.

"And here's mine," Drake said as he reached into the pocket of his slacks and pulled out a neatly folded clump of bills. "Erin put hers in before she left."

"What are you doing? Those are your tips." Kate reached into the pumpkin to pull their money back out, but they both shook their heads at her.

"We can't let the customers be the only ones contributing," Drake said.

Kate made a face. "What are you talking about?"

Cal sauntered over, still grinning, his hands on his hips. "It was just a quick tally, not totally accurate of course, but the counter said we had around two hundred fifty customers in here tonight at twenty dollars a head. That should have been about five grand."

"But you returned most of that, didn't you?" She peered into the pumpkin, saw the stack of cash, but assumed it was small bills.

"Out of those two hundred fifty souls, only three asked for their money back. And then there were the others that dropped in donations on their way out."

"Donations?"

His grin got even bigger. "About another thousand or so."

"I made good tips tonight," Shelly said with a proud smile.

"Mine too," Drake said.

Cal reached into his back pocket and drew out his wallet. "I figure this is about a day's pay. I'd throw in more..."

Kate snatched the pumpkin out of his reach. "I'm not taking your money. You've got a new baby at home to take care of." Tears stung her

eyes. She was so overwhelmed by everyone's generosity, her throat tightened up.

"Looks like she's getting all misty," Drake said with a sympathetic smile. "Katie girl, don't you know by now how much we care about you? And look what your customers did. They didn't take back their money when we ran out of beer. They stayed and kept partying."

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye.

Cal laid a beefy hand on her shoulder. "You've made a great place for the locals to come and have fun, meet friends and have a beer, a burger, and a game of pool. No one wants to see you in trouble."

They all wanted to take care of her. Every one of them. Just like Toby. Her chin started wobbling, and she knew she was about to completely lose it. "Thank you," she whispered. "Could you lock up for me?"

They all grinned at her. She picked up Rusty and headed up to her apartment. Six thousand dollars. That'd be enough, she thought, feeling hopeful for the first time in hours. She'd be okay. Darby's would be okay. The tight band around her chest seemed to ease. Everything would be okay.

After she shut and locked the door to her apartment, she set Rusty down. He immediately jumped on the couch and went to work on his rawhide bone. She set the money-filled pumpkin on the coffee table and went to change out of her smelly clothes.

Financially she'd be okay, she amended her last thought. But she had some apologizing to do to Toby. She just hoped he wasn't too mad at her.

* * * * *

Kate approached the front of the fire hall with a wicker basket in her hands and a lump sitting squarely in her chest. November dawned bright and warm, and the red ladder truck gleamed in the late morning sun.

She walked past the truck sticking halfway out the open bay, heading toward the front door. She'd never been here before, had no idea what the rules were. Wasn't even sure if she was allowed inside.

She tried the doorknob, but it was locked. Then she spotted a call button and pressed it. A loud buzzer sounded, and she jumped back, half expecting a fleet of firefighters to come running.

"Hey, Kate."

She turned toward the truck bay to see Steve, his hands in his pockets. She let out a relieved breath and found a smile. "Hey, Steve."

"Come on in." He motioned for her to follow him and disappeared into the garage.

She followed him alongside the truck, taking in the sight of dozens of soot-smudged yellow turnout suits hanging from the walls. The scent of old smoke was pungent. Steve pushed through a door and stepped aside, holding it open for her. She came face-to-face with a half dozen big, burly firefighters. Every one of them looked up from their various positions around the room, making her feel small and very much under the microscope.

She shouldn't have come. She should have just slipped a thank you note in the post and not even thought about coming here.

"Howdy, Kate," Bret said, standing up from a long table in a kitchen-looking area. "Hey, guys, you all know Kate Darby?"

A round of greetings pummeled her from every direction. She knew most of the faces from the pub, but only Steve, Bret, Keith and Toby were her regulars. She didn't see Keith or Toby among the group. God, it was so much easier to face this many men when it was on her turf, not theirs.

She turned to Steve, feeling the most comfortable with him. "I brought a treat for you guys, as a thank you for...your...um...help and stuff." She shoved the basket toward Steve, who took it from her with a chuckle.

"Thank you." He peered into the basket where two deli boxes with clear lids showed off the fare. "Looks yummy."

Kate shrugged. "It's just from the market. There's two kinds of coffee cake. I'm not much of a cook, or I would have made something more. But I wanted to tell..." She turned to face the rest of the group. "I wanted you all to know how much I appreciate the...um...help." Oh, hell, she was bumbling this but good.

Bret took the basket from Steve and headed for the long table. Most of the guys got up from their various posts around the room and followed him.

Steve touched her arm briefly. "Heard what happened last night. Everything okay?"

She nodded vigorously. "Everything's fine. It wasn't as bad as I originally thought." Only because of the money her customers had not asked to be refunded. And the extra donations from them. And her staff.

Her eyes welled with tears even as she smiled. "Everyone's been so generous," she whispered.

Steve smiled at her. "Darby's is practically a landmark in this town. Nobody wants to see you in trouble."

Someone did. But one vandal didn't mean she was alone in the world. She'd come to realize that, and to understand that taking the help offered once in a while didn't mean she was a failure. Sometimes everyone needed a little help, whether it was financial or...personal. She just had to get over the huge mountain of pride she'd shoveled on top of herself these past few years.

"Is Toby around?"

"He's out back shooting hoops." Steve pointed to a set of double doors on the far end of the room. "Go ahead."

"Thanks." She headed past the table where the guys were devouring the treats. As she passed, they peppered her with more than a few appreciative comments about the food. A smile curved her lips as she pressed the release bar on the door and walked outside.

A nicely tended lawn, some chairs, and a barbeque pit sat off to one side, and a blacktop one-hoop basketball court on the other.

Toby and Keith were battling over the ball. Both were dressed in gray shorts showing off impressively muscled legs, and chest-hugging T-

shirts with the CVFD logo on them. They were an gorgeous pair. Both tall and built, Keith's blond hair and lightly tanned skin stood in stark contrast to Toby's darkness.

Keith snatched the ball from Toby's hands and made a running leap at the hoop. The ball missed the hoop and as Toby grabbed for it, he hip checked Keith, sending him sprawling. Toby made the basket while Keith rolled onto his back and stared up at the sky as he panted.

"Are you quitting?" Toby asked, his tone filled with irritation.

Keith didn't move, but his gaze shifted from the sky to Toby.

"You're being a prick."

A growling sound came from Toby, but he stood still, holding the ball against his side.

Keith sat up then rolled to his feet. He took the ball from Toby and tossed it into the grass. "If you want to duke it out, let's do it. You want a fight, quit taking pot shots and let's go."

Toby shoved Keith in the chest. Keith raised his right hand to take a swing.

"Hey!" Kate shouted and jogged across the court to stand between them. "What's going on?"

Keith dropped his hand and stepped back. "Hey, Kate."

Toby's dark eyes flicked in her direction. His jaw flexed. He wasn't the Toby she knew. This one was cold. Hard.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded.

She flinched at his nasty tone. "Keeping you from punching out your best friend. What's wrong with you?"

A mirthless laugh came from him. "Like you don't have a clue."

"Hey, Toby, take it easy," Keith said.

"Fuck that. She sics the sheriff on me, and I'm supposed to take it easy?"

Kate frowned. She glanced at Keith for an explanation, but he looked away.

"I didn't sic the sheriff on you."

"Like hell you didn't!"

Toby took a menacing step toward her, sending fear skittering down her spine. She stepped back and bumped into Keith.

"He comes here and interrogates me in front of my crew. Makes me feel like a goddamned misbehaving teenager again. Damn it, I didn't, *and never would*, do anything to hurt you!"

She scooted to the side, away from Toby, away from Keith. He said he wouldn't hurt her, but he was yelling at her, his hands fisted as if he was going to use them on her.

"Now I'm a goddamned suspect. And knowing Peabody, he's going to make sure I'm arrested for it because the bastard has never liked me and can't forget that I'm a grown man now instead of a snot-nosed, juvenile delinquent."

Kate turned and ran for the building, fumbling with the latch for a too-long second until she could pull open the heavy metal door. She ran through the kitchen area where the guys were sitting at the table, and then through the other door into the truck bay. Tears streamed down her face. Her stomach heaved. By the time she crossed the street to her car, she had to run around the opposite side and throw up.

"Kate?"

She swiped her hand over her mouth and glanced up to see Steve jogging across the street. Her stomach tightened and she gripped the roof of her car, preparing for another wave of sickness.

"Kate, what the hell...?"

She shook her head and begged God not to let her puke in front of him.

"Come on. Sit down."

She shook her head again. "I need to go." She rounded the car and dug her keys from her jacket pocket. "I've got to go." More tears poured from her eyes, and she fumbled with the lock. "I've got to go."

Steve's hand lightly gripped her shoulder, and he physically turned her to face him. "What's wrong?"

Jerking from his touch, she hit her elbow on the side view mirror and cried out. She opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out was a harsh sob.

Toby hated her. She'd lost him before she ever had him. He was gone from her life, as she'd always known he would be. She just never expected it to hurt this damn much.

Chapter Thirteen

Kate snuggled Rusty against her with one hand and swiped the tissue over her eyes with the other. In the last two hours, she'd gone from heartbroken to furious then back to feeling retched and alone. Now she just felt empty. Hollow. But the tears wouldn't quit, and that pissed her off.

Toby had no right to speak to her the way he had. No right at all. She hadn't done what he'd accused her of. Hadn't even mentioned his name to the sheriff last night. She knew he wasn't involved in the vandalism. In fact, part of her had wanted to call him at the station just to hear his voice, his caring, after the whole thing was over and she'd been alone in her apartment.

Thank God she'd kept that desire to herself and hadn't followed through. Wasn't it bad enough she had an unnamed vandal stalking her pub? She didn't need a...a what? He wasn't anything. They hadn't even gone out on one date. It wasn't like he was her boyfriend.

Another errant tear slipped from her eye. Rusty lifted his head and licked the moist, salty trail from her cheek, giving a tiny whine as if commiserating with her misery.

She buried her face against his fluffy head and squeezed her eyes shut. That's right, she thought. Toby was nothing to her. A customer. A guy she'd gotten too attached to. One that could make her body sizzle and her heart melt. One that had spoken sexy words in her ear as she...

"Goddammit!"

She sat up on the couch. Rusty's grumpy groan let her know she was acting erratically. Scratching his ears in apology, she regretted that she'd taken the day off. When she'd returned from the fire hall, she told Drake she wasn't feeling well and wouldn't be down until the evening crowd started to show. But now she regretted that action because she wasn't one to sit around bemoaning life, and that's all she'd done for the past couple of hours.

She got up and went into the kitchen. If she was going to spend the day being miserable, she needed chocolate to help her out. Just as she reached for the cupboard where she kept her stash, a knock sounded on the interior door that led down to the pub. Rusty woofed, but seemed unconcerned. He barely raised his head from his paws on the couch.

For God's sake, couldn't she take one day? She hadn't had a day off since her dad died. Was one day so much to ask? Maybe she didn't need to sit around feeling sorry for herself, but she did need a break once in a while.

She stomped over to the door and jerked it open, ready to lambaste Drake for bugging her.

"Hi."

She slammed the door and turned the lock, her heart jumping to a million beats a second. "You just get the hell out of here."

"Babe."

Toby's voice was low and, if she pretended hard enough, she could hear remorse in it. But she wasn't going to fool herself. No way was she going to fall for him again. No one yelled at her, glared at her, made accusations, and then got welcomed back into her heart. *Fuck you, Tobias*, she thought as she turned away from the door.

"Kate," he called. "I'm sorry."

I bet you are. She flopped down on the sofa and lifted Rusty in her arms.

"I screwed up big time this morning, honey, and I'm so sorry. Please let me in."

Not on your life.

The silence stretched to a full minute, and she thought he'd gone, but his voice came through the door, low and raspy. "I got scared and lashed out."

Her heart tumbled in her chest, and she felt the quick burn of tears in her eyes.

Toby laid the bouquet of pale pink roses on the small landing in front of her door and turned to leave. He didn't blame her. If their positions were reversed, he wouldn't let him in either. He'd been an ass. Worse, he'd frightened her.

When Steve told him she'd been vomiting by her car, he'd never felt like a lower piece of pond scum.

Halfway down the steps to the pub, he heard the lock turn. He stopped and looked up as the door opened. Just her head peeked through the opening, but Rusty came barreling out and ran down the stairs to greet him with a happy bark of welcome.

Never taking his gaze from Kate, though he could barely see her in the dimly lit stairwell, he reached down and lifted Rusty against his chest. The dog licked his chin and nuzzled his throat.

"What are you afraid of?" Kate asked, her voice hardly more than a whisper.

He slumped against the wall and squeezed his eyes shut. Never in all his life had he revealed his deepest fears to anyone. They sounded stupid, even to him. But it was what had straightened him out so many years ago, what had kept him on the right side of the law.

"Toby?" she asked, her voice so gentle, filled with caring.

He turned his head and looked at her. One word summed it all up. "Failure."

The door opened wider, and she bent to pick up the flowers. She buried her nose in the bouquet. As she stared at the soft pink petals, she said, "You had no right to talk to me that way."

He licked his dry lips. "I know. I'm sorry. You'll never know how sorry." He took a tentative step upward. When she didn't slam the door, he kept moving.

She looked up at him once he stood in front of her on the landing. "I didn't sic the sheriff on you."

Her eyes were red and puffy. She'd been crying. He'd caused her pain. He'd failed her. "I know." He scratched Rusty's head to keep from reaching for her, touching her. God, how could he have been such an ass?

"What happened to your face?" She was the one to reach out and touch his skin, the throbbing bruise on his cheekbone.

He dipped his head, wishing he'd worn his baseball cap so he could hide behind the bill. "Ran into something hard."

"Who hit you?" she demanded, her voice changing from soft to harsh in an instant. She pushed the door open and grabbed his coat sleeve, pulling him into the living room. "Who did it?"

He would have smiled at her reaction if the weight of his actions from that morning wasn't still weighing down his chest. She moved quickly into the kitchen, laid the flowers on the counter, then reached in the fridge to pull out a squishy cold pack.

"Sit down," she commanded. He lowered himself to the sofa. Rusty sprawled out on his lap as if he belonged there. But Toby didn't belong here, he realized. He couldn't be involved with someone like Kate. Someone so fragile. He couldn't take the chance of wounding her any more than he already had. He'd been so stupid to think he could be the one to take care of her.

As she sat on the arm of the sofa, she placed the cold pack against his cheek, then wrapped her arm around his shoulder and cradled his head against her breast. God, that felt good.

"Who hit you?" she asked again, her fingers lightly dancing over the back of his neck.

He closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of her for the last time, and sighed. "Steve."

"What? He can't hit you. He's your boss. He could be fired—"

"I deserved it." He pulled the gel pack from his cheek and turned to look into her eyes. "Why are you defending me when I'm the one who got you so upset you puked?"

Rusty jumped to the floor with an unhappy growl at Toby's raised voice, then curled up under the coffee table.

Toby pushed to his feet, needing to put space between them. He couldn't be so close and not want to hold her, kiss her. Damn it, he wanted to make love to her so bad he physically ached from the need.

"Because you didn't mean it."

"Oh, yes, I did. When you showed up there this morning, believe me, I meant every word I said. Don't fool yourself, Kate. I was madder than a pit bull, and I was mad at you."

"Because you thought I sent the sheriff after you."

"Because I thought you thought I could do something like vandalize your property."

"But I know you'd never do that."

"Wrong, sweetheart," he said, moving toward the door, ready to make his escape. He didn't want to hang around after she knew the truth. "Fifteen years ago I almost burned this place down because I was pissed off at your dad."

"*What?*" Kate came off the couch and caught his sleeve as he pulled open the door. "Don't you dare say something like that and expect to leave without an explanation."

He pulled free of her grasp and faced her. He'd faced Colin after the fire, and he'd been merciful. He doubted Kate would be so understanding. Talk about betrayal.

"He kicked me off the football team. I wanted to pay him back for ruining my shot at a college scholarship." He shrugged, trying to act nonchalant about the episode that had altered his entire life.

"While you were working here you did that?" Kate's face showed her shock, her horror, at the idea he'd been a juvenile arsonist.

"Before."

Her brow puckered into a frown. "Dad never knew?"

"He knew. He's the one who convinced the judge to let me off. He's the one who..." Shit, he was getting choked up. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "He made me see that I had responsibilities. And he started that by giving me a job so I could help support my mom and sister after

Dad died. He stepped in and became a father to me when I'd felt abandoned by my own."

Kate saw the moisture shining in Toby's eyes, and it was nearly her undoing. Big, bad, jump-into-the-thick-of-things-and-take-charge Toby was almost in tears. She reached up to touch his cheek, but he pulled away.

"I didn't know," she said softly, hurt at his withdrawal. She wondered if he got that little pain in his chest when she pulled away from him. When she didn't know what to do or say or got frightened of him. It hurt, she thought. It hurt bad.

"Not many people do. But Sheriff Peabody does, and he hated that I got off so easily as a kid. He's the one who arrested me, though he was just a deputy back then. So when he comes calling last night, accusing me of vandalizing Darby's..."

"You felt like a snot-nosed juvenile delinquent again," she said, recalling his word from that morning.

With a curt nod, he turned toward the door.

"Why are you running?" she asked, not wanting him to leave. She feared if he walked out now, she'd never see him again, not even as a customer.

"I'm not." His back to her, he pulled the door open. "I'm leaving you alone. Just like you asked me over and over to do and I wouldn't listen."

"I changed my mind."

He stopped moving. Went totally still. "Why?"

Her heart thudded too hard. Her hands grew damp. She couldn't let him walk away this time. She didn't want him to leave her.

"I'm afraid to miss out on something that could be really good." Her stomach quivered. "I fear failure, too, you know." She pursed her lips, wishing he'd turn toward her, let her see his eyes. "And I've lived these past couple of years struggling not to fail. I've just come to realize that it's impossible to fail if I never try."

Slowly he turned, and his beautiful dark-chocolate gaze settled on her with such gentleness. "What are you saying?"

"I want to try. With you. Because if it's not you..." She licked desert-dry lips. "...I might never have the courage. You're the only man I trust."

He shook his head. "How can you trust me after what I just told you? For all you know, I did do it."

A slow smile curved her lips, and she stepped up to him, so close she had to tip her head all the way back to see his eyes. "We both know you didn't. You wouldn't have been so angry this morning if you had." She reached up and placed her hands on each side of his face, rubbing her thumbs over his slightly whiskered chin, loving the tingly feel. "You're not a kid with a grudge any longer. Are you?" she asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

A gust of breath burst out of his mouth, and he wrapped his arms around her, burying his face against her neck. She fought back the initial panic the hard embrace caused her. Toby wouldn't hurt her, she told herself. No one out to hurt her would have bared his soul like he had. Let her see his heart.

"I'm so sorry," he said again, his words muffled against her shoulder. "God, Kate, I'm sorry. Everything just fell down around me last night."

"Shh. I know. I understand." She ran her hand over his smooth head, turned her face and kissed his ear. "Just don't ever do it again."

He pulled back a tiny bit to look into her eyes. "I promise."

Pushing up on tiptoes, she pressed her mouth against his. Now or never, she thought. No way could she let him walk out of her life.

Toby fisted his hands in her soft cotton shirt while her tongue thrust into his mouth. He groaned and ground his instantaneous erection against her soft belly. She still wanted him. Even after he'd told her about his past.

The sexiest sound came from the back of her throat as she rotated her hips against him. Her hands curled around the back of his neck. Her breasts pressed against his chest. Too many clothes, he thought as he lifted her shirt and found satiny soft skin beneath.

"I want you." His voice sounded raspy to his own ears. His breaths sawed in and out. Never had he wanted any woman this much. *Needed.*

"Yes." Clutching the lapels of his jacket, her mouth eating at his, she walked backwards toward the sofa.

He reached for the button on her jeans. She lifted his shirt and nipped at his chest. God, he wasn't sure he could take too much of this. It felt like an eternity since he'd been with a woman, and never in his life with one that turned him on this fast and hard.

She shoved his hands out of the way and pushed her jeans and underwear down her legs in one swoop, then pulled her shirt over her head.

She wasn't wearing a bra.

Toby went lightheaded. "Gorgeous," he said, his voice reverent. Her breasts were milky white, more than a handful he discovered as he cupped them in his palms, lifting and weighing them, molding and shaping. Dusky rose nipples hardened against his touch. Kate's breath hitched when he flicked his thumb over the pebbled tips.

He dipped his head and drew her right nipple into his mouth. She grabbed his shoulders, as if her knees had gone weak from his touch. She whimpered when he swirled his tongue and drew her deep into his mouth. The sound of her excitement shot his control.

He pulled away and shed his clothes in record time, then wrapped his arms around her and took her mouth, wanting to take her essence inside himself and keep her there. His beautiful, precious Kate.

She whimpered again, clung to him, her nails biting into his arms, her tongue dancing with his. "Please," she said on a moan when he trailed openmouthed kisses down the column of her long, sexy throat.

He backed her the rest of the way to the sofa and lowered her, never breaking contact with her mouth, then settled between her velvety thighs. He suckled her lush breasts, laved them, worshiped them. Her damp heat tantalized the tip of his cock as he teased her slick folds. He wanted to taste her, savor her, but not this time. He couldn't wait. He needed to feel her surround him. Needed to sink into her creamy pussy and find oblivion within her.

"Do it now."

Toby rose up over her, going for her mouth. When he took her, he wanted to be inside her in every way possible.

"Please. Just do it."

His heart lodged in his throat when he saw Kate's ravaged face. Her eyes squeezed tight, tears streaking into her hair. The painful grip her fingers held on his shoulders wasn't from pleasure and lust, it was fear. Her body wasn't tense with the need for completion.

A sob she tried to stifle slipped out, and she turned her head to the side even as she raised her hips, trying to take him inside.

"Kate."

She bit her bottom lip between her teeth. More tears poured from her tightly closed eyes.

He swallowed hard. "Babe. Look at me."

She shook her head. "Just get it over with. Please."

No way in hell. Anger shot through him, nearly blinding him. Christ, he'd almost done it. Almost taken her. Almost hurt her even more. And she would have let him.

He pushed away and rolled to his feet in one fluid motion, grabbed up his jeans, and hiked them up with furious motions. Kate rolled to her side and curled into a ball, wrapping her arms around her knees and ducking her head, her eyes still shut. Tears streamed down her cheeks.

With shaking hands, he found her shirt on the floor and knelt down next to the couch. "Come on. Sit up." He kept his voice low, controlled, even though he wanted to rage at her. What the hell had she been *thinking*? Did she think he was no better than the bastard who'd raped her? Did she think—

"Why'd you stop?" Her voice hitched. She sat up and took her shirt from him, pulled it over her head, but didn't look at him.

He swallowed back the vile curse clawing at his throat. "I don't get off on having sex with women who are terrified of me."

Finally she met his gaze, her eyes red and puffy. She was still gorgeous. Her pain nearly killed him. "I'm not afraid of *you*. I'm afraid

of... *I don't know*. I know you won't hurt me. That's why I didn't want you to stop. If we could just do it and get it over with the first time..."

Moving onto the couch next to her, he wrapped his arms around her and cradled her against his chest. "Shh. Babe. That's not how it works. If I take you when you're tense and scared, it's going to hurt. It won't help anything."

"I want to be with you."

Her warm breath brushed over his chest. He shivered, his arousal returning. He tamped it down and gritted his teeth. "I want you, too, Kate. But I'm not going to touch you again until you tell me exactly what that son of a bitch did to you."

Her head bumped against his chin as she shook with denial. "No. I can't."

"You have to. We need to work through your fears together, and I can't do anything if I don't know what's causing them."

After a long stretch of silence, she whispered, "Your hands."

"What about my hands?"

"That's what scares me."

Chapter Fourteen

Kate wanted to crawl into a very small hole and never, ever come out. Mortified by her actions, she buried her face against Toby's chest and did her best to hold in the tears of anger and frustration. She wanted to be with Toby more than anything. Yet, that unreasonable fear had clawed at her gut, making her ill, the moment he'd wrapped his arms around her, banding her to him.

"And your arms," she said softly.

She felt his physical withdrawal immediately. He lifted his hands from her back, and it was all she could do to stifle a cry of longing for his touch. She wanted to be held, snuggled, cuddled. *Loved*. God, that's what she wanted. *Needed*. Someone to love her as she was. But that wasn't ever going to happen. Not if she couldn't let anyone touch her intimately.

She pulled away from his warm, solid chest and grabbed a throw pillow, hugging it to her chest. She tried not to cry. With all her will, she tried forcing the tears away, but they wouldn't stop.

"Kate."

She shook her head, unable to form any words through her tight throat.

"I know you didn't like being touched, but I thought we were beyond that. You seemed to like me holding you the other night."

She nodded. "That was different." Just like now, when he'd held her gently against his chest. So different. But how could she explain that to

him? How could she ask him to have sex with her if he couldn't touch her? She buried her face in the pillow.

"Because it wasn't sexual." Toby's big, gentle hand settled on her shoulder.

She nodded and sniffled. Then sat up and wiped the back of her hand over her wet eyes and cheeks.

"Come here." He held his arms open to her and she all but fell against him, curling into him, seeking his gentle strength and warmth. And then she burst into noisy, gut wrenching sobs.

She just wanted to be normal.

She must have fallen asleep. Some time later, Toby's arms swept her up against his bare chest and carried her across the room. She tucked her head under his chin and sighed.

Toby would take care of her. Deep down she knew that. They might never have sex, and someday he'd get tired of being just friends and leave her, but for right now she'd relax and let him pamper her. She may never be treated so sweetly again.

He laid her down in the center of her bed then kissed her forehead. "I'll be back in a few minutes," he said in a soft whisper when she looked up into his beautiful eyes.

She nodded and her eyelids slipped shut. She hadn't felt so utterly drained since her father's funeral. She heard the front door open and close, and wondered where he was going. When he'd be back. If he'd ever be back.

She rolled to her side and snuggled one of her king-sized pillows to her chest. He'd be back. He said he would. And maybe he'd even snuggle with her some more. She slept so peacefully when he was near.

With a yawn, she arched her back and stretched, then quickly slid into sleep.

* * * * *

Toby slipped back into Kate's apartment after taking Rusty for a walk and stopping by his truck to grab something. The dog took up his post on the couch with his chew bone, and Toby headed for the bathroom.

Kate had lain there on top of him on the couch for almost an hour while he battled his driving lust. He was bound and determined to help her, to make her see that he was safe. But there was no way he could do what he planned without taking care of business first.

He unbuttoned his jeans and released his cock. Even the bitter cold wind outside hadn't fully diminished his hard-on. Within two strokes, he was fully engorged again. And when he pictured Kate in his mind, the way her body had looked after she whipped off her shirt and stood so proud in front of him, his balls drew up tight.

Placing one hand on the wall for support, he stroked himself hard and fast, imagining her mouth on him, her small, delicate hands teasing his sac as she licked and sucked. Her breasts were full, soft. Her pubic hair black as velvet against her milky skin. And he'd felt her heat, had been so close—

With a stifled groan he came, stroking himself until the last of his cum shot into the toilet. Panting, he stood there for a few moments, trying to collect himself.

Okay, he thought as he cleaned up and re-buttoned his jeans. Now that he'd taken care of himself, he could see to Kate without going insane. Or inadvertently doing something to hurt her. With a deep breath, he headed for Kate's bedroom.

She looked so peaceful, lying there all curled up with her pillow. With her black Darby's polo shirt on and nothing else, her bottom looked soft and inviting. Aching to touch it, caress it, he fisted his hands and gave himself a stern talking to. *No hands. Not sexually.* Christ, he didn't know if he could do this.

Stretching out next to her, he propped his head on his fist. With his other hand, he pushed her hair back over her shoulder. Her eyelashes fluttered then slowly lifted. Her eyes were still a little red, but the anguish that had been there earlier was gone.

"Hey." He let his thumb skim over her cheek.

She licked her lips and smiled at him. He would swear he felt that quick flick of her tongue on his own flesh.

"You okay now?"

She nodded, then reached out and ran her fingertips down his cheek, over his chin. He hadn't shaved today and wondered what she thought of his whiskers.

She smiled again. "They tickle," she said softly, as if she'd read his mind.

Toby shoved his free hand into his pocket. He slowly leaned in closer, waiting to see if she'd retreat. When she didn't, he lightly rubbed his whiskered chin against her cheek.

She giggled. Her fingers inched around his neck, pulling him a little closer. Taking that as a positive sign, he leaned in more, exchanging his whiskers for his lips, skimming them over her silky cheek as he inhaled her flowers and spice fragrance. She sighed, her breath warm and sweet against his face. When he took her earlobe between his teeth, she moaned and pulled the pillow from between them.

He had to fist his hand around the lining of his pocket to keep from jerking it out and wrapping his arm around her. Christ, this was difficult. He nuzzled his way from her ear to her neck, to the V opening of her collar. His cock lengthened and hardened, as if he hadn't just jacked off a few minutes before.

Kate moaned and tugged him even closer, her fingers fisting in his shirt. "Kiss me," she whispered. "Please."

"Wait." He leaned away from her and met her eyes. "Honey, I want you like I've never wanted any woman before. But I'll be damned if I'll go on if you're just doing it to get it over with."

She dropped her gaze to his chest. "I'm aroused, Toby. You turn me on." Her cheeks turned pink, and she dipped her head even further, hiding her face from his view. "I wasn't a virgin when I was raped. I know it can be good." She sucked in a shaky breath and slowly lifted her eyes. She swallowed so hard it was audible. "I've spent so many nights fantasizing about you in my bed. About your mouth on me. Your long, hard body pressed against mine."

She nudged his groin with her hip, causing him to suck in his breath. She nuzzled his throat with her lips. "Won't you show me, Toby? Just once. Just this afternoon. I'm not asking for anything more from you. I know you're not the staying kind of guy, and that's okay. But I'm afraid if you don't make love to me, I'll never have the opportunity, or the desire, again."

"Shh." Her words were breaking his heart. He wanted to be the staying kind of guy for her. He wanted to spend forever showing her how wonderful she was. In that instant, he realized his sister had been on the right track. Kate was the one. He loved her. Had loved her for years.

His heart thudding so hard he thought it would jump right out of his chest, he leaned in and captured her mouth in a hard, demanding kiss. He needed her. Like he needed air and water, Kate had become a necessity to him.

Arms around his neck, she held him tight, her fingers digging into his shoulders. Her tongue dueled with his, teased, tasted. She moaned into his mouth, and her body was so soft under his.

He slowly pulled his hand from his pocket and skimmed his fingers down her side.

She froze. Every muscle in her body tensed, and her sweet lips jerked from his. Hot puffs of air landed against his face with each quick exhalation from her.

Sonofabitch.

"I'm sorry." She squeezed her eyes shut. "I can do this. I can. Just...slower."

He rolled off of her onto his back and sucked in huge gulps of air. His cock throbbed within the confines of his jeans. But he'd have to ignore it for today. Today was for Kate. To build her trust in him, and herself. He could do this. Even if he couldn't walk for the next week, he'd give her what she needed most. And that wasn't him jumping her bones like a lusty adolescent.

He reached into his back pocket and pulled out the item he'd retrieved from his truck earlier.

Kate's eyes went wide and she sprang off the bed. "Just what the hell are you going to do with those?"

Ready to grab the phone and dial 9-1-1, Kate stood at the side of the bed and stared at the pair of dull silver handcuffs dangling from Toby's long, dark fingers. Bondage was one fantasy she'd never had. *No way.*

Toby rolled to his feet on the opposite side of the bed and faced her. "Handcuff me." He held the cuffs out to her across the bed. "My hands behind my back. That way I can't touch you, and you have the security of knowing that I can't."

She shook her head and folded her arms over her chest. His gaze fell to her crotch, which was still bare. She dropped her arms and tugged the tails of her shirt lower. "Where did you get those?" she asked, pulling him back to the conversation.

He lowered his hand to his side and slowly walked around the bed. Sitting down in front of her, he laid the cuffs on the bed then reached for her hands. Reluctantly she let him lace his fingers through hers. She didn't understand why his touch only frightened her in the throws of passion. She loved the feel of his slightly rough calluses, the heat that emanated from his fingers.

"They were my dad's. I keep them in my med kit."

She frowned. Could she do it? Could she make love with a man whose hands were bound? Could she physically bind him? Could she tell him no and let him walk out, maybe permanently? "Where's the key?"

Letting go of her right hand, he dug into his jeans pocket to pull out his key ring. He held up the small handcuff key.

"I want to make love to you, too, Kate. But I don't have the self-control not to touch you if I can. You're so damn sexy, and I want to run my hands over every inch of your beautiful body."

Her eyelids dropped and a shiver of warmth coursed through her veins at his words. It had been a long time since anyone had called her beautiful. She wanted him. Needed him and only him. Even though her heart was going to be in tatters when he decided to move on, perhaps...he'd heal her soul before he left.

She picked up the handcuffs. The metal was surprisingly heavy and cold to the touch. Toby set his key ring on the nightstand.

"Take off your shirt."

He pulled the T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the floor.

Her heart pounded in her throat. "Stand up."

He did.

"Turn around," she said, her voice dropping to a husky whisper as she felt, in a weird way, more powerful than she'd ever felt in her life. She would be in control. He wouldn't be able to do anything she didn't want.

Toby turned and put his hands behind his back, palms out. Such beautiful hands, she thought. She wanted to feel them on her body. Those long, lean fingers skimming over her hot, damp flesh.

Her breath caught as heat pooled between her thighs and her inner muscles involuntarily contracted. *After*. After this first time. She'd be okay once they got past this first time.

The cuffs on his wrists, she was left to stare at his smooth, dark back. Each well-toned muscle delineated. The wide shoulders, the narrow waist, the low-riding jeans that hugged his round ass. She raised her hands and touched his shoulders, ran her finger over the pink scar. He stood there with no shirt on, yet his skin felt like a furnace to her touch. So warm and smooth.

She heard his breath hitch at her touch, and she smiled to herself. As she skimmed her fingertips down the rigid muscles along his spine, she watched goose bumps pop out on his sides and arms.

"Kate," he said, his voice raspy. He turned to face her. "Let me taste you."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down, her lips eager for his. He possessed her mouth, his tongue so strong and invasive, yet gentle and persuasive. Shimmers of heat washed through her and her nipples puckered. She rubbed her chest against his, reveling in the feel of his hard body, his warmth.

He pulled back, his breathing unsteady and heavy. "Take off your shirt."

Hating to release him, she hurried to do his bidding then fell against him, skin on skin. Her breasts tingled. Her pussy throbbed and ached for him. His teeth and lips nibbled and tasted her mouth, his tongue swirling and licking. She couldn't stop the moan that grew and spilled from her lips.

"Baby," he panted as he worked his way across her jaw. Down her throat to that tender spot where neck and shoulder connect. She shivered and clung to his shoulders, the only thing still keeping her standing as her legs had turned to jelly.

"Sit down, love." He nudged her with his chest, and she fell back on the bed. She expected him to come down on top of her, but he knelt on the floor instead. "Let me taste those beautiful breasts, baby."

Another wave of pleasure spread through her at his words spoken through deep breaths with a voice so low, so seductive, she thought she could come just listening to him speak.

She sat up and cupped her breasts, lifting them like a sacrifice. Slowly, he leaned down and licked her right nipple. Her whole body jerked at the contact, and she arched into him, needing more.

His lips closed over her, and all she could do was stare. His dark skin against her pale breast. His strong, angular features against her softness. He was so beautiful he made her heart ache. She laid her palms against his head and guided him, holding him to her. Dear God, she never wanted this sweet torment to end. The suction of his mouth was so strong she felt the pull in her womb.

He released her right breast and suckled the left. Her hips jerked in reaction, needing more. So much more. Why had she bound his hands when the rest of her body longed for his touch?

He pulled away from her chest and plundered her mouth once again, but only for a moment before his hot mouth trailed down her neck, between her breasts, to her belly. His tongue teased her bellybutton until she moaned, then he moved lower until his lips met her pubic hair.

She tensed, her whole body shaking with need.

"I can smell you." Her hands stilled on his shoulders. "You're wet for me, aren't you, Katie?"

"Uh huh." She couldn't breathe. Couldn't think.

"Lie back."

She did without a second's hesitation.

He kissed her mound, inhaling deeply, as if relishing her scent. She could feel the moisture pooling, preparing for him. "Put your legs over my shoulders."

Slowly, a little unsure, she lifted her legs and rested the backs of her knees on his wide, hard shoulders.

"Ohh yeahh," he said on a sigh. "Goddamn, you're gorgeous."

Her hips lifted, and she fisted her hands in the bedspread. "Please, Toby." She couldn't take much more. She needed to come. She needed him to make her come.

"Use your fingers, baby. Open up that lovely pussy for me. Let me see you touch yourself right where you like it."

She whimpered and stared at the ceiling. His voice, so sensual it was making her crazy, and his words, daring her to do more than she'd ever done, even with her ex-fiancé.

"Come on, love," he urged. "Show me."

With both hands, she reached down and spread her pussy lips for him. He made a sound of pleasure and encouragement that spurred her on. She dipped her middle finger into her channel, feeling her own slick heat, and drew the creamy juices over her clit in a slow circle, which made her even wetter.

"Oh yeah. Again."

"Please, Toby."

"Again," he whispered.

She circled her clit again, her hips rocking in time to her movements. Knowing he was watching her, knowing he enjoyed the view, made her bolder. Delving two fingers inside herself, she then drew them out and rubbed herself harder. She watched his face as he watched her. Her hips bucked against her own hand as the climax grew closer.

And then his mouth was there. His tongue delved into her channel. He nudged her fingers to the side with his nose and then sucked her clit into his mouth.

She cried out and thrust her hips. "Please!"

He suckled her hard, and her excitement grew. When his teeth lightly scraped her most sensitive flesh, she came apart with a shout of his name. Lightning flared behind her eyelids in a myriad of colors. And still his mouth was relentless.

A second wave, harder than the first, crashed over her and she screamed. Every muscle in her body tensed with the force of her climax.

Tears spilled from her eyes from the release. Huge sobs tore from her soul. Confusion swamped her as her body exalted in his touch, and her heart swelled with love for him, yet she felt such deep sorrow welling up from inside. She grabbed a pillow and pulled it over her head to muffle her weeping.

Chapter Fifteen

Toby gulped in hard breaths, his cheek resting on her mound, his own orgasm so damn close he was afraid if he moved, he'd come in his pants.

"Baby. Honey. Can you let go of me?" Her legs fell from his shoulders, and she rolled fully on the bed then curled up in a ball, the pillow still over her head.

Sonofabitch. He needed to hold her. She needed to be held.

He crawled onto the bed behind her and curled his body around hers. "Shh. It's okay." He took the pillow between his teeth and pulled it away. She grabbed for it, but he kissed her before she could cover her face again.

She responded like a firecracker. She turned into him, grabbed his face in her hands and kissed him hard, her tongue seeking his. Knowing she could taste herself on his mouth, and that she liked it, made him even harder. He groaned in pleased agony. When she lifted her knee and nudged against his balls, he just about lost it.

"You're hard," she said against his lips, her voice jerky.

"I want you. Need you." He nibbled on her bottom lip.

She smoothed her palm down the length of his throbbing erection. Even through the denim, he could feel the warmth of her flesh. He thrust against her touch and moaned. "Please baby. I can't—"

She cut off his words by yanking on his fly, the buttons popping open in quick succession. Her soft little hand delved into his underwear

and freed him. He ground his teeth. Just two strokes of her hand, and he'd come. Just... "Ahhhhghh." He nearly swallowed his tongue when she leaned down and took him into her hot, wet mouth.

"You are so hard," she whispered, running her finger over the throbbing vein, down the length of the shaft. "So big."

He nodded. *Whatever*. "Please, baby." It was his turn to beg.

When she rolled away, he nearly cried, but she returned in seconds with a condom after digging through her nightstand. "Yes." He hadn't realized he'd voiced the word until she looked up at him. "I want you, baby. Need you."

A shy smile spread over her face. Her eyes were red from crying, tear tracks still marked her face, but her smile was as beautiful as the sunshine.

She tore open the packet and rolled the condom on. His breath hissed out at the touch, and he prayed he could last long enough to please her before he came.

He rolled onto his back, his arms aching from the awkward position behind him. He didn't care as long as...oh *yes!* She straddled his hips, her lovely, soft thighs hugging his sides. She rose up over him, then slowly—so damn slow it was the worst torture he'd ever experienced—she guided his cock into her slick, hot cunt.

His world narrowed to the place their body connected. He thrust up into her, and she sighed, her head falling back, her mouth open. With his next thrust, she moaned and ground her ass against his balls. He was so damn close he wasn't going to make it.

"Touch yourself." When she didn't respond, he thrust again. "Touch yourself!"

Her smile was like a sinning angel. Sweet, and so goddamned naughty. She licked her middle finger before following his command. And then she began to move over him.

Her little whimpers turned into moans. Still he held himself back, waiting for her, torturing himself. He met every one of her movements, each one harder than the last, until their bodies were slapping against each other. And then, just as he was beginning to think he'd never make

it, she fell forward, both hands braced on each side of his head, and came down over him in one hard plunge. Her inner muscles contracted around his cock like a vice. Their shouts of release mingled together as one.

Kate collapsed against his chest, and even as he struggled to regain his breath, he damned his cuffed hands. He wanted to hold her.

Rusty burst out barking on the other side of the bedroom door.

Kate giggled.

"Hush, Rusty!" she called, never raising her head from his shoulder.

Rusty whined, woofed once more, then went quiet.

Toby grinned. His woman, he thought. Only his. He loved her so much he wanted to shout it from the rooftops, but he didn't think she was ready. "Babe?"

"Hmm?" She snuggled her face against his throat, their bodies still connected.

"Could you take the handcuffs off before you fall asleep, please?"

Her lips found a sensitive spot below his ear. When he chuckled and tried to move away, she licked him there, then nipped. He felt himself growing hard again inside her.

She flexed her hips and rubbed against him. "Mmm. That feels real...nice."

"You want some more?"

She rose up over him and met his gaze. Her expression wasn't teasing. Once again tears gathered in her eyes.

"What is it, babe? Talk to me."

"Don't say that to me."

"What?"

She slid off him and reached for the keys. He rolled to his side, and she made quick work of removing the cuffs.

"Be right back." He went into the bathroom to dispose of the condom and cleaned up, washed his face, then buttoned his jeans. When he reentered the bedroom, she was lying on the bed and had slipped into his shirt. He smiled. She looked damn good in it.

"It smells like you," she said and buried her nose in the collar.

He wasn't sure what to say or do. Afternoon sex in the past had meant he was in a hurry, or the woman was, and so they fucked and went their separate ways.

"You're supposed to be at work, aren't you?" she asked, her gorgeous blue eyes sad, her lips turned down at the corners.

A part of him wanted to say yes and hightail it out of there, but that was the old Toby. The one who avoided commitment. Instead, he stretched out next to her on his back and slipped his arm around her shoulders. "Not really. Steve told me to fix things with you and not to come back until I'd done that. He knows where I am if he needs me."

She sighed and snuggled against him, resting her head in the hollow of his shoulder. This felt right, he thought as he lightly ran his fingers up and down her arm. It felt...like home.

The late afternoon sunlight played through the lacy curtains on the window, painting shadow patterns on the bed. Toby marveled at himself, that he could enjoy lying here, just holding. Not that he hadn't spent time holding Kate before—the other night he'd done it for hours—but it hadn't been right after sex. He'd become so accustomed to the obligatory few minutes of post-coital snuggling, and then he always pulled away. Either to get up and leave, or to simply distance himself physically and emotionally.

He didn't want to leave Kate. He wanted to spend the rest of the afternoon with her right here. Wanted to nuzzle her and kiss her and make love to her again. Images of marriage and children and a house with a white picket fence danced in his mind.

He wondered if she'd want a child of mixed descent. His life hadn't been easy being black and native. Black and white could be even rougher. But the thought of his babies growing in her belly...

"I was cramming for fall semester finals," Kate said, breaking into his thoughts. "It was about two in the morning. I'd been at the library for hours." Her voice was soft, detached, as if this had been said over and over, rehearsed. How many times had she repeated it? To police, to therapists.

His gut clenched. He needed to know what had happened to her, but he hated having her relive the pain. Rolling to his side, he wrapped his arms around her and held her snug against his chest. "It's okay, baby."

She took a deep breath before continuing. "I was walking back to the apartment across campus that I shared with three other girls. Everything was so beautiful. Big, fat snowflakes were falling, and all the buildings were lit up with Christmas decorations. I stopped beneath a streetlamp and was watching the flakes come down. It was so silent I swear I could hear each one as it touched down."

Toby kissed her forehead and rubbed his hand down her back. He wanted her to know he was there for her. He wouldn't judge.

"A car drove up and stopped next to the sidewalk. I recognized the driver. He was in my Strategic Management class. He offered me a ride." She shifted slightly, nudging her thigh between his and wrapping her arm over his side, her hand open on his back. Toby closed his eyes and held her tight, buried his nose in her hair and breathed her in.

"I told him no thank you. The air was cold, but I was dressed for it. And it was too peaceful of a night. I needed to clear my head, anyway. I'd been staring at statistics for the past six hours. He smiled and drove on.

"I walked slow, enjoying the crunch of snow under my feet. The puffs of my breath frosting in the air. I felt like a little kid as I made footprints in the fresh snow on the sidewalk." She stopped and sucked in a breath, then slowly released it, her body tensing, her hand fisting against his back. "I was less than a block from the apartment when I saw his car again pulled up next to the curb. I didn't think much of it. I had no idea where he lived, and the street I lived on had a dozen apartment buildings that housed students.

"He stepped from the car and called my name as I walked past. I stopped and looked at him. He said something about needing directions, which was odd because he was in the same masters program I was in. He'd lived there for years, just like me.

"He stepped up onto the sidewalk, and I let him get so close. Close enough to stand right next to me as he showed me a map. But the map wasn't of the campus, it was a state map. I was about to say something

when he wrapped his arm around my throat and choked me. I tried to scream, but I couldn't get any air in or out of my lungs." She sniffled and buried her face against his chest. "I fought as hard as I could, but I couldn't get away. And then everything went black."

"Shh. It's okay," Toby whispered when he felt the dampness of her tears against his skin. "Shh. You don't have to—"

"Yes, I do. I lost so much time because of that man. Until today I didn't even know what I'd missed. I haven't been touched sexually in any way in three years other than by my own hand." She pushed back and looked into his eyes. "Do you have any idea what it's like to live in a void? Do you have any idea how much I craved another human touch, but was too afraid to ask or even accept it when it was offered? Until you came along, I hated anyone to even accidentally touch me or stand too close. God forbid I could feel their breath on my neck."

Touching her lips to his, she whispered, "You've set me free."

Consciously loosening his hold around her so he didn't scare her, he accepted her kiss. When her tongue sought entrance, he parted his lips and let her taste him. All too soon, she stopped and tucked her head back against his chest. His body wasn't so quick to cool, though, and he had to force himself not to grind his groin against her thigh.

Her next words dowsed ice water on his libido.

"I awoke naked and cold on a lumpy cot in what looked like a one-room cabin. My head was throbbing. It was dark except for a gas lantern hanging above the door. A fire burned in the woodstove, but it didn't give off enough heat. William Matheson was leaning over me, his mouth on my breast."

Kate hunched her shoulders against the memory, and Toby tightened his arms around her. "I'm here, baby. Just me."

She nodded. Took a deep breath. "I tried to push him away, but he was big. Real big. Had been a football player at one time. It didn't seem to matter what I did, I couldn't budge him. His hands roamed all over my body. Hard, rough, painful."

"I panicked when I felt his penis against my stomach. He was naked, too. I fought with every bit of strength I had, but it wasn't enough."

He hit me in the head with his fist until I quit screaming. And then..." She took a shuddery breath. "Then he raped me. When he was done, he choked me again until I blacked out."

"Holy Christ, Katie." Toby had no idea her story would make him physically hurt. He wanted to find that bastard, in jail or not, and kill him. Make him suffer for what he'd done to his woman.

"It went on like that for a long time. Sometimes when I awoke, he'd be dressed and he'd make me take his clothes off. Other times I'd awaken with him already..." She swallowed hard and sucked in a deep breath. "The police said I'd been missing for three days, but time didn't have much meaning after a while. I just wanted to get away. I hurt so bad. Both my eyes were blackened. My cheekbones and jaw were bruised. My lip split. And I hurt deep inside, like I'd been torn apart over and over."

"Stop, baby," Toby pleaded. "Stop." He kissed her forehead, her cheek, cupping her face in his palm. "God, baby, I'm so sorry. So sorry you had to endure that."

"He'd ask me if I wanted some more."

He rocked her in his arms like a child. For her comfort as well as his own. Sweet Kate, so little, so fragile. And someone had hurt her so deeply. "I'll never say it again. I swear."

Tipping her head up, she looked at him, her eyes red from crying. "I..." She pursed her lips and glanced away.

"What? What babe? Tell me anything." Running his fingers through her silky black hair, he loved the way the ends curled around his hand.

"Thank you," she said finally.

He lifted her chin with his finger to meet her eyes. "For what?"

"For being here for me. Today and...before. I've gotten so used to taking care of myself I didn't realize how..." She swallowed and shook her head. "I've been lonely."

"Aw, babe." He pulled her into his arms and cradled her close. "I'm here. And if I'm not, I'm one phone call away."

She nodded her head.

"I mean it, baby. If you need me, day or night, call me."

"I will," she whispered on a sigh and settled against his body once again. "Just keep holding me."

"I will," he promised. *Forever.*

* * * * *

Kate drifted on a warm sea between asleep and awake. Cradled in Toby's strong arms, her body against his, their legs entwined, her head filled with the musky scent of him, she couldn't remember ever feeling more at ease.

He knew her secrets now. Knew why she was the way she was, and he hadn't run away. He'd simply held her and let her tell her story.

With his heartbeat in her ear and his hands roaming her back, sides and bare hip, she sighed in contentment. She could easily spend the rest of her life right here in this bed, with this man holding her.

She'd almost slipped up and told him she loved him. That wouldn't have been good. She'd seen the look in his eyes when he returned from the bathroom. He'd been ready to bolt out the door. She had to remind herself he wasn't the staying kind. Just because he had a heart of gold didn't mean he would give it to her.

Just because he felt sorry for her and had a misplaced need to protect her, didn't mean he'd be around for the long haul. She had to remember that. Had to build up enough protection around her heart so that when he did leave, she wouldn't shatter.

"What's your favorite color?"

Knocked out of her own thoughts by the strange question, Kate giggled. "What?"

He chuckled and ran his hand over her hip. She tingled, even as slight apprehension lingered. Determined to get over her fear of his intimate touch, she closed her eyes and focused on the texture of his fingers as they slid over her flesh. Goose bumps sprouted on her flank, sending a shiver through her whole body. "Blue," she whispered. "And yours?"

"Red."

She smiled. "Good color for a firefighter, I suppose."

"Favorite flower?"

"Stargazer lilies."

"Food?"

"Main course or dessert?"

"Both."

"Four cheese lasagna and heavenly hash ice cream."

"Mmm. Now that does sound good."

"Yours?"

"Turkey dinner with all the trimmings, and pumpkin pie loaded with whipped cream."

"Ohh," she said, then laughed and pushed up on her elbow to look at him. "That would come before lasagna. But it's only three times a year, so it's more like a treat than a regular dinner."

"Ever wonder why that is? Who made the rule that turkey was only for holidays?"

He focused on her lips, and her mouth went dry. His hand stilled on her hip, and he leaned into her and gently captured her lips with his. "Spend Thanksgiving with me?" he said, his warm, moist breath caressing her cheek.

Her own breath stuttered. "That's...weeks away." Was he going to be around that long?

"I'm not working." He nibbled on her earlobe, and she couldn't think. "Dinner at my sister's, with her family. You've met her."

Kate nodded. "She works at the sheriff's office."

"Uh huh." His mouth trailed tingles down her throat, his teeth nipping ever so lightly at her skin. "I want you to..." His hand cupped her cheek, and he found her lips again.

Her body came alive with renewed need for him. She wanted him again as if she'd never had him. Clutching his shoulder, she rolled to her back. He followed and settled over her. Her breath hitched as panic tried to take root, but she battled it with sheer will. She would not let her past rule the present. Not any longer. Not now that she knew what had been missing from her life for so long. The warm, loving touch of a man.

When he stopped kissing her and lifted his head, she knew he'd felt her tension.

"It's okay," she whispered. "Don't stop."

"You're scared."

"I'm getting better."

His smile was so filled with tenderness it made tears sting her eyes. "You're the bravest person I've ever met."

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she held him tight. "I'm not brave. I'm always scared," she whispered in his ear. "I haven't been brave in years."

"Ahh, sweetheart." He kissed her nose, then her chin. "Don't ever underestimate yourself. You went through hell, and yet you've come out on top. You're a successful businesswoman. You are sweet, and beautiful, and..." He ran his tongue along her bottom lip. "...taste like candy."

She laughed.

"I'm serious, though. You've faced your fears, fought the battle and won. That's amazing. You're amazing. And I'm the luckiest man in the world to have been the one who..." His words trailed off and his lips kicked up into an adorable smile.

"The one to reap the benefits?" she teased.

"Oh, yeah." He ground his erection against her mound and sighed. "You make me so hot."

"Ohh. I guess so." She pulled his head down for another kiss. "I want you to touch me this time. All over."

"Yes, ma'am." He claimed her mouth as he slipped his hand under the shirt and skimmed up her side.

Her heart hammered too hard, and not all from pleasure, but she breathed in, steadying her nerves. *Toby's hands won't hurt. Toby's gentle.*

When his hand slid between her legs and played through her damp curls, her brain went blank. Her hips flexed against his touch and all her fears disintegrated as his fingers skimmed over her clit.

"Yes," she said on a sigh, her fingers flexing against the bunched muscles of his shoulders.

His long fingers slid inside her. She moaned and spread her legs wider. Oblivion wasn't far now. The orgasm built from her core, moving out to her limbs, to her fingers and toes. Her head pressed into the pillow, her muscles tightening. Toby's mouth moved from her lips to her earlobe, which he sucked between his teeth before whispering, "Come for me. Let me feel you."

She whimpered and thrust her hips against his hand.

When his head dipped and his teeth closed ever so gently over her nipple still covered by his shirt, the climax rocked through her and she screamed, her fingernails clawing at his shoulders.

The dog started barking.

The phone rang.

Toby chuckled. "Party's over."

Kate groaned. The phone rang again. She reached for the cordless receiver on the nightstand. "I was supposed to be downstairs a half hour ago," she said when she glanced at the clock. "Hello?"

Toby rolled off of her and kissed her quickly as Drake started talking. "I'll take Rusty out before I go."

She wanted to reach for him, to pull him back into the bed, but he had to get back to work...and so did she.

"Hold on," she said to Drake. "Toby?" she called.

"Yeah, babe?"

"Are we still on for Monday night?"

He grinned and winked. "I'll be here at seven. Be ready."

Her heart fluttered. Damn, she was going to miss him when he decided he'd had enough. But until then, she was going to take every second she could get.

Turning her attention back to the phone, she said, "Okay, Drake, what's the emergency?"

Chapter Sixteen

Six forty-five Monday evening, Kate floated down the steps into the pub. The long, gauzy skirt she'd purchased earlier in the day swung around her ankles, and her three-inch heels clicked on the wooden stairs. She'd been floating for days it seemed. Her heart light, her soul singing.

A wolf whistle greeted her as she rounded into the pub from the hallway. Heat stung her cheeks, but she held her head high. The whistle was from Drake, and damn it, she did look good.

"I do believe this is the first time I've seen you in a skirt." Drake slid a Diet Coke to her when she took her seat at the end of the bar. "I could go straight for a woman looking as good as you."

She laughed and sipped her cola. "Thanks, Drake."

She'd slept with Toby, he'd given her multiple orgasms, and she'd spilled the story of her past to him. She shouldn't feel so blasted nervous. It shouldn't matter that it'd been over five years since she'd been on a first date. Or that she'd gone out and spent a rather large chunk of savings on new clothes, shoes and makeup. And had her hair styled by the best Cooper Valley had to offer.

Drake winked. "You look beautiful."

Her heart fluttered. And just because she could, because she finally had the courage, she reached across the bar and grabbed Drake's hand. His widening eyes showed his surprise—she'd never purposely touched him—then he smiled and squeezed her fingers.

"He's good for you."

Tears prickled her eyes and stung her nose as she nodded, the lump in her throat too large to speak around.

"Look at you!" Shelly slid onto the stool next to her and fingered the silk sleeve on Kate's royal blue blouse. "You're gorgeous."

Kate couldn't stop grinning like an idiot. She'd never considered herself *unattractive*, but it had been so long since she'd even swiped on lip-gloss. Her appearance must have been a shock to her employees who were used to seeing her in her typical uniform of Darby's Pub T-shirts and jeans.

"Thanks, Shell. You two are going to be all right tonight by yourselves?"

Both Shelly and Drake glanced at the nearly dead room. "I don't think it's going to be a problem," Shelly said with a disappointed sigh. "Sucks for tips."

"We'll handle anything that might crop up," Drake reassured. "I don't want you to even think of this place while you're out with that *F-I-N-E* man of yours." He fanned his face. "I know I wouldn't."

Kate giggled and hid her face. After being interrupted the other evening by Drake while in bed with Toby, she suspected everyone knew she'd finally gotten laid.

* * * * *

Seven-thirty.

Kate bit her lip and poured herself another cola. Settling back onto the stool, she tried to tell herself she was not getting stood up. Anything could have happened. Traffic. *In Cooper Valley?* He had to help his sister with something. *So important he wouldn't call?* Or...

Eight o'clock.

Still seated on the stool at the end of the bar, Kate saw the sympathy in Shelly's expression when the waitress glanced at her.

She'd been stood up.

After running upstairs to check her answering machine and finding no messages, she had to face the truth.

Toby had made his decision.

Why?

What had she done wrong? Had she been bad in bed? Had she not given him what he wanted? She'd felt bad that their time had ended so abruptly, and he hadn't been satisfied before he left, but she'd thought it had been mutually agreed on that they both had to get back to work.

"You stop that right now, Katherine Darby."

Kate raised her head from staring into her cola to see Drake scowling at her.

"This is not your fault. And when that bastard has the nerve to show up here, I'm going to kick his ass for you."

She tried to smile, but it wobbled. She would not cry. Would not. She knew going into this that it would end; she just hadn't thought it would be so damn soon.

"I'm okay." She slid off the stool. "I think I'm going to go upstairs. Call me if you need me."

"Kate," Drake called after her, but she kept moving, sending him a little wave over her shoulder.

Rusty met her at the door in his typical bouncy, happy puppy way. She picked him up and snuggled him to her chest, buried her nose in his ruff. "You'll never desert me, will you, Rust?"

He gave a tiny whine of commiseration and licked her cheek. The tears pressed against her eyes, but she refused—absolutely *refused*—to let them fall. She would not cry over Toby.

After depositing Rusty on the couch, she went to the small cabinet under the television and drew out *An Affair to Remember*. As she slipped it into the DVD player, she decided that if she was going to cry, she damn well needed a reason. Her favorite movie of all time always provided a good cause.

She stripped off her new clothes, changed into a comfy sweatshirt and shorts, washed the makeup off her face—that had been a total waste of money—and ran a brush through her hair. Grabbing the new pint of double chocolate chunk Häagen-Dazs from the freezer—which she'd hoped to share with Toby in bed, along with the jar of maraschino cherries

she'd brought up from the bar—she snuggled up with Rusty and, using the remote, turned on the TV.

* * * * *

The music soared, the end credits rolled, and so did the tears. Rusty licked her face and whined in sympathy. Kate felt like a fool as she blew her nose and mopped her soaked face. *Stupid movie. Stupid Toby. Stupid me.*

This was so not worth it. How could she have let herself love that man? She'd known! Knew he'd move on. That she wasn't what he needed. But damn it, she'd let herself believe in him, just a little.

She flipped off the television and laid back on the sofa in the dark, arm thrown over her eyes, Rusty on her stomach. *Stupid Toby. Stupid me.*

Rusty woofed.

"Shh. Go to sleep."

He woofed again, jumped to the floor, and trotted to the front door.

Then she heard the thud of feet moving up the exterior stairs. Her heart leapt. *Could it be?* From the way Rusty was bouncing around in circles and yapping, it had to be.

A smile started to spread before she stifled it. He was—she glanced at the clock on the DVR—almost four hours late. He'd promised her dinner in Cooper Valley's one and only exclusive restaurant. She'd spent over a hundred dollars of her precious savings on new clothes, makeup and haircut.

She wouldn't let him off so easy.

At the knock, Rusty went wild, running across the room then back to the door, yapping and whining and glancing back at her like he couldn't understand why she wasn't moving faster.

"Who is it?" she called when she got to the door.

"It's Toby."

Her heart fluttered, and her belly dove to her toes. Damn it. Just his voice made her tingle all over. She pasted on a frown and opened the door.

"You'll never know how sorry I am. I hope you can forgive me."
His eyes were red. His cheeks hollow.

Ignoring the pizza box in his hand, she stepped aside and let him in. "What happened?"

After setting the food on the coffee table, he literally collapsed onto the couch. "Five alarm fire in Walton. Started at about four this afternoon." He held out his hand to her, and she went to him, let him pull her down next to him. He wrapped his arms around her. "God, baby, I never wanted to miss tonight." He buried his face in her hair. "Please don't be mad. I'll make it up to you. I swear I will."

Her heart melted. Her whole body went to mush in his arms. "It's all right."

"I wanted to call, but we were so busy. And then by the time I was leaving the fire hall, I knew I couldn't apologize over the phone. I know the pizza isn't Lowery's, but..."

She leaned back and held his face in her palms. He looked awful. Exhausted. His shoulders slumped as if he carried the weight of the world on them. "Hey, it's okay. I understand. And you shouldn't be thinking about me while you're fighting fires."

He shook his head. His eyelids drooped.

"Do you need to eat?"

"No. I should go. I'm about to fall asleep." He kissed her forehead.

"Don't go," she whispered. "You can stay here...if you want."

He sighed against her forehead. "I'd like that."

All the tension, worry, anger and hurt drained out of her. "Come on. Let's get you to bed." She stood and held out her hand to him.

She helped him out of his boots, jeans and T-shirt, taking pleasure in touching the long, hard lines of his body, his firm muscles. He moved like an automaton, about to fall asleep standing up. When she pulled back the covers, he slid under them, then pulled her down and wrapped his arm tight around her waist. He sighed, as if completely content. She wanted to always be there for him when he came home late from work. Tired. The thought of him being alone at a time like this hurt her.

Shame swamped her for all the awful things she'd thought about him. Ashamed she hadn't thought about his job, that he was out there putting his life on the line to save other people, their families, and their precious belongings. What was a date with a woman he barely knew when compared to that?

"I'm getting promoted to lieutenant."

She gripped his hand and smiled, warm pride for him flowing through her. "Congratulations."

"Friday evening, two weeks from now at the courthouse..." He yawned and snuggled even tighter against her backside. He felt so warm. So vital. "...is a small ceremony. Steve's throwing a party at his house after. I'd like you to come."

"I'd like that, too."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be sorry. Your work comes first."

"You say that now..."

She turned her head to see his face. His eyes were closed and a small wrinkle between his brows showed his frown. "I mean it, Toby. You have a very important job."

Nuzzling her cheek, he said, "You won't be saying that when I miss your birthday, or the little league playoffs, or..." His words slurred slightly as he fell asleep. "...or a ballet recital."

Heart hammering in her chest, she wanted to shake him awake and see if he meant what he was saying. Did he mean what she wanted those words to mean? Was he talking about a future with her? A future that included little league and ballet? *Children?*

"Toby?" she whispered, her heart in her throat, her hands shaking.

A soft snore was the only response.

* * * * *

Had there ever been a more beautiful woman placed on this earth?

Toby gently brushed Kate's heavy locks of jet-black hair over her shoulder and watched her sleep. In the dim ambient light sneaking

through the lace curtains from the streetlamps outside, her skin looked as smooth as butter, as pale as fresh cream.

Stomach growling, he found himself chuckling at his wayward thoughts. Kate was definitely a pleasure to eat, but his stomach was asking for something with a bit more sustenance at the moment.

Her eyelids fluttered and slowly opened. She met his gaze through the darkness and smiled. He brushed his lips over hers. "Go back to sleep, babe. It's the middle of the night."

"Why're you awake?" Her voice was low, sleepy. She stretched like a kitten, and he could swear he heard her purr.

"Hungry."

Her smile turned teasing, and she bobbed her eyebrows.

He laughed and hugged her, buried his nose in her sweet scented hair, and breathed her in. "I love you."

The words were off his tongue before he thought them through. It felt so natural saying them to Kate. He'd never uttered those words to a lover before.

She stiffened in his arms, and he thought she held her breath. Loosening his hold around her, he leaned back to see her face. Her eyes were big and round, her bottom lip tucked between her teeth.

Sonofabitch.

He rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up. "I'm sorry, Kate. I know you're not ready for this. I didn't mean to upset—"

Her small warm hand against his shoulder stopped his words, and he turned to see her. Tears spilled down her cheeks, and she shook her head at him. "Don't be sorry," she said, her voice tight. "I just never expected..." Her gaze slipped from his, and she moved to the opposite side of the bed. "You needn't take pity on me. I don't want you saying anything you don't mean."

His heart just about tore in half at her soft declaration. She didn't believe him. That wasn't a possibility he'd been able to foresee. He rounded the bed and knelt in front of her. She tried to stand and move away, but he pressed his hands against her bare thighs, holding her in place.

"Listen to me. I would never say I love you to a woman and not mean it. Look at me." She raised her head a bit, her hair falling away from her face. Tears tracked down her cheeks in glistening streaks. "Why are you upset?"

Her swallow was audible in the silent room. Her hands shook as she raised them to tuck her hair behind her ears. She licked her lips.

"Baby, you gotta talk to me. If it's too soon, I'll wait. If you don't believe me, what can I do to prove—"

She laid icy cold fingers over his lips. "I believe you. I'm...I'm scared. I..."

Gathering her in his arms, he pulled her off the bed and onto his lap, tucking her head beneath his chin as he cuddled her close. "Whatever you need, baby. Anything. All you have to do is tell me. No pressures. No hurry."

Her heartbeat thudded against his chest. Too fast and too hard. She wasn't scared, she was terrified, and he didn't know why. They'd gotten through the sex. To do that, she had trusted him. He'd laid out his past for her, yet she took him to her bed, into her body. She'd opened her wounds to him, and he thought he was helping her heal.

His stomach growled again.

She leapt from his lap as if he'd shoved her. He reached for her, but she opened the door and disappeared.

Crap.

Wasn't there some sort of in between with him? He either ran from a woman, tail between his legs when they got too close, or now this. Pouncing on a woman before she was ready. Professing undying love when she was still mending from horrible monstrosities done to her.

He pushed to his feet and prayed she wasn't in the bathroom puking up her guts because of his stupidity.

* * * * *

Can you be any more skitzo?

Kate watched the plate of pizza spin 'round and 'round in the microwave. Toby said the words she'd longed to hear, and she'd run away like a scared little rabbit. She fell asleep last night dreaming of a house and children and Toby coming through the door after a hard day's work, and then wanted to hide when he said he loved her.

"Katie?"

She jumped and spun around, wishing the floor would swallow her whole.

What is the matter with you, girl?

"What are you doing?"

The microwave beeped, and she popped the door open. "Warming you some food. I heard your stomach growl."

The left side of his lips kicked up in a half smile when she set the plate on the counter in front of him. "Thanks."

"No problem." She slid a couple of napkins next to his plate. "Something to drink?"

He was staring at her. She could feel his gaze, even though she didn't have the guts to look directly at his face. "Ice water would be great."

She busied herself with the ice and filtered water from the fridge. But once she set the tall glass in front of him, there was no busywork left. She folded her arms over her middle.

He lifted a piece of pizza to his mouth. His straight white teeth bit into the steaming, gooey slice. The man even made eating look sensual.

He demolished a slice and a half before he picked up the water and drank it down in one long swallow. She watched his Adam's apple bob with each swallow, his long neck strong, his pulse beating steadily in his thick veins.

He set the glass down and snagged her gaze before she thought to look away. "Keep eyeing me like that, Kate," he said, his voice like tiny fingers of pleasure skipping down her spine, "and I will want something other than pizza to eat."

Her belly fluttered. Heat pooled between her thighs. His gaze was dark, intense. He wanted her. He found her beautiful, attractive. Seductive

even? But...did he really love her? Want a future? With her? Did she have it in her to give back enough?

"You look ready to bolt again," he said and lifted another bite to his mouth. He chewed, swallowed. "If you'd tell me what's got you so upset, I might be able to fix it."

"I love you, too," she blurted out, then clamped her hand over her mouth and turned away. *Idiot!* Her heart clattered in her chest, and she squeezed her eyes shut. She did love him. Had loved him probably from the first time she'd shot him down and he'd chuckled, winked, and said, "Maybe next time."

But she was still so broken inside. So scared of...of everything. Each day she faced, she worried about the pub, about her future. She thought about all the things she wanted to do, like finishing her master's degree and selling the pub someday. To open a different business, something small and homey. One that didn't have big, drunk men wandering about late at night. These weren't things you did when you had another person to think about. She never thought she'd have another person to think about.

Big, warm hands closed over her shoulders and gently turned her. Toby wrapped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head. "Even if it scares you spitless, babe, those were the sweetest words I've ever heard."

She breathed in his musky scent tinged with just a hint of smoke and wrapped her arms around his waist. "I'm afraid of disappointing you," she admitted in a whisper. "I don't know how to do relationships anymore."

His hand coasted over her hair and down her back. "Well, babe, I'm not exactly the poster child for commitment." His chuckle warmed her. "I think we'll have to just muddle through one day at a time, okay?"

She nodded. Turning her head, she kissed the smooth skin of his chest and felt his muscles twitch beneath her lips. He groaned, and his hands scooted down her sides, slipped into her loose shorts, and cupped her butt, kneading her flesh. She shivered.

"I want you, Kate." His words were as rough as gravel and made her skin tingle.

She tossed her head back and met his penetrating gaze. "Then take me, Toby."

His lips against hers, he whispered, "I don't want to scare you. But I need to touch you." His fingers flexed again and heat soared through her.

"I'm not afraid." She truly wasn't, she realized with surprise as he captured her mouth with his and speared his tongue between her lips. She felt nothing but electrifying tremors shaking her body, making her strain against him. His cock, just barely restrained in a pair of black briefs, rubbed against her belly.

When she moaned and rubbed against him, he shoved her shorts down her legs. His tongue danced and dueled with hers. His massive, callused hands sent heat waves through her body as he toyed with her butt, dipped into her soaked pussy, teased her clit.

"More," she murmured as she sucked the skin of his throat.

He lifted her, set her on the edge of the counter, and spread her legs wide. His raspy breaths matched her heated pants. She'd never had sex anywhere but a bed. Excitement bloomed inside her, along with a sense of naughtiness. She giggled.

She felt his grin against her lips as he suckled and licked her. My God, she thought, he could kiss. "Tell me to stop if you need, babe."

His fingers delved deep inside her, and she jerked in response. Moaned his name. "If you stop," she panted, "I'll be very—*ohhh!*—upset."

She reached for his cock and freed it from its confines. He was so long. Hard. Smooth. She wanted to taste him. Needed to. "Let me..." She scooted off the counter and went to her knees.

"No, babe. You don't have...ah, Christ!" He threw his head back and buried his hands in her hair when she took him in her mouth.

His hardened flesh was hot and musky. She pumped him in a tight fist as she sucked and licked, enjoying the power she wielded over him.

He pulled away from her mouth. She huffed in disappointment. He swooped her into his arms and kissed her hard. She moaned in delight. Yes. She loved this man with all her heart. She'd try to make him happy.

Lord, she'd try. "The counter," she said between heavy breaths when he started moving toward the bedroom.

"Condoms."

"Oh."

He chuckled. "Next time."

Where he found the ability to laugh at a time like this, she didn't know. But she loved the sound.

He dumped her on the bed without much finesse and came down over her, ravaging her mouth, his hands skimming her shirt over her head.

An instant of panic spiked through her at his demanding touch, at the strength so obvious in his easy movements, but she fought it back. Toby would never hurt her. Not physically. Hadn't he proved this to her by now?

Hot skin to hot skin, she clung to him. The tip of his cock teased her mound. His mouth, so hot and wet, devoured her thoughts, made her needy. And his hands. God, his hands! They touched, teased, tormented her breasts, her throbbing pussy, her ultra-sensitive clit.

When his teeth closed over her right nipple, she nearly came off the bed. "Please!" she begged.

"Please what," he said against her breast. "Tell me what you want. What you need."

"You. Inside me." She reached for the nightstand, fumbled for a packet in the drawer. "Here."

He laughed again and rose over her on hands and knees. "Put it on me, love. It feels good when you touch me."

Her hands shook with arousal, but she tore open the foil pack and quickly sheathed his length.

Leaning down, his face just inches from hers, he held her gaze. "Please, babe. Let me hear the words again."

Her heart tipped on its side at his heartfelt plea. Bracketing his face between her hands, she feathered a kiss against his lips. "I love you, Toby."

She spread her legs wide as he moved between her thighs. The tip of his cock nudged at her opening, and she rose up to meet him. Slowly—torturously—he slid into her. Her muscles tightened around him; he throbbed inside her. He groaned and lowered most of his weight down on top of her and laced their fingers together above her head. His gaze never released hers.

He began moving in a slow, steady rhythm she matched with the thrust of her hips. “I love you, Kate.”

She whimpered as warmth and love flowed through her, tightening her body around him. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

Chapter Seventeen

Kate ran for the phone as she pushed the dangly earring into her lobe. "Yeah," she said breathlessly as she tucked the phone between shoulder and ear and grabbed her blouse from the bed.

"Kate," a croaked voice said on the other end of the phone.

She frowned. "Shelly?"

"Kate, I can't make it in tonight. I'm sick. Really sick. I thought I could make it, but there's no way."

"Okay."

"I'm so sorry. I know you have that thing tonight."

Kate glanced at the clock. Toby would be here in fifteen minutes to pick her up. "It's all right. I'll call Karen to cover for you. You take it easy and get better."

"Thanks, Kate. You're the best boss. I'll try to make it in tomorrow."

"Take your time. I don't want my customers getting whatever you've got."

A chuckle that turned into coughing had Kate pulling the phone from her ear. "Thanks," Shelly croaked again.

Kate punched in Karen's phone number and slipped her arms into the blouse. The outfit she'd purchased for her and Toby's big date, which never took place, would be perfect for the ceremony at the courthouse where he'd get his official promotion to lieutenant.

On the eighth ring a voice said hello, sounding much the way Shelly's had.

Damn.

"Karen?"

"Yeah?" she croaked like a bullfrog.

"This is Kate. Doesn't sound like you're up to coming in tonight, are you?"

"Sorry. I'm down for the count."

"Okay, thanks. Shell's got the bug, too."

Friday night and the only employees working would be Drake, who'd been in since two that afternoon, and Cal. Cal could wait tables when absolutely necessary, but she needed him at the door.

Disappointment flooded through her, and she sank down on the edge of the bed. She couldn't go to Toby's ceremony. She couldn't leave the pub tonight.

In the past two weeks, this place began to feel like a huge albatross around her neck. Between Toby's schedule and being unavailable half the time, and her stuck at the bar the rest of the time, she felt as if she wasn't allowed to lead a real life.

Toby stayed over when he wasn't at the station, and they'd had a wonderful time together in the stolen moments she wasn't worrying about the pub, but what kind of life was it? What kind of life had she stuck herself with? How long would Toby stick around if she couldn't take one night off to be there for him during a very important event in his life?

The temptation to shut the pub down for the night was strong, but she knew that was impossible. It was already five and the Friday night crowd had started coming in for dinner.

A knock at the door and Rusty's happy yapping let her know of Toby's arrival. She pushed up from the bed and made her way to the door. What would she tell him? How could she tell him? Already she should be downstairs. Drake must be going nuts trying to tend bar and take dinner orders. How many times had he said he was a bartender, not a waiter, and hated double duty?

Kate pulled open the door and forced a smile. "What was the use of giving you a key if you don't use it?"

"Wow." Toby's dark eyes widened and his lips curled into a sexy grin as his gaze ran from the top of her head to the high heels on her feet. "You look...stunning."

He didn't look too shabby either. In his dress blues, he struck an impressive figure. "Thank you." She stepped aside to let him in. "I can't go tonight," she blurted out. "God, Toby, I'm more sorry than you can know, but Shelly and Karen have the flu and—"

He pulled her against his solid chest and kissed her hard. Her breath lodged in her throat, and she sank into his arms. His talented tongue teased her, dominated her, made her body tingle and strain against his in need of more contact than their clothing allowed.

When he lifted his head and gazed into her eyes, both of them were breathless. "I missed you." His voice was low, almost gravelly. She could feel the hard length of his arousal against her belly.

With a heartfelt groan, she rested her forehead against his shoulder. They talked every day on the phone, but he'd been on shift the past four days. His mouth, his arms, couldn't compare to a cold plastic phone, even if it did allow him to whisper heated words of love in her ear before she fell asleep to dream of him each night.

"You didn't miss me?" he asked softly, his lips brushing against her temple.

She shoved his shoulder then hugged him tight. "You know I did. But didn't you hear what I just said? I can't go with you tonight. I don't have a waitress. It's Friday night and I can't leave—"

He kissed her again, and her mind turned to mush.

"Work comes first," he whispered against her lips. "I understand."

Pulling back, she raised her hand to his smoothly shaved cheek, admiring the darkness of his skin against her pale fingers.

"I'm not saying I'm not disappointed, babe." His fingers glided over the sensitive skin on her throat, came to rest against her pulse point. "But I understand."

"But...but this is so important to you. This is a really big deal, and I wanted to be there for you."

"Shh. In both our lines of work, shit like this is going to happen. Missed dates. Missed..." He sighed and pulled away, turned toward the kitchen counter, then turned back, his hand on the back of his neck. "I can't say I've ever been on the receiving end, but I do understand."

Her heart filled to overflowing as she remembered his surprise when she hadn't been angry that work kept him from picking her up for their date. "I guess..." She shrugged, not knowing what to say. Theirs wasn't going to be an easy relationship. They'd both have to remember to keep their schedules open for opportunities.

"Yeah." He gently pulled her back into his arms and tucked her head beneath his chin. "Can I come over after Steve's party?" She nodded against his chest. "I'll get out of there as early as I can, but it'll probably be after the pub closes. There's something I wanted to talk to you about tonight."

She wanted to cling to him, throw it all away and go with him. Close down the pub. She gritted her teeth against the temptation and asked, "Good or bad?"

She felt his smile against the top of her head. He squeezed her tight, ran his hand down her back, over her butt, making her tingle and grow damp. In the past two weeks, his touch brought only pleasure. The fear she'd once felt was finally gone from her soul.

"I think it's good."

"Mmm. Talk or play?"

"Hopefully some of both." He gave her ass a pat and stepped back. "I've got to get going."

She nodded, wishing with all her heart she could go with him. "And I've got to change and get downstairs before Drake has a coronary."

He smiled and kissed her again. Softly. With infinite care that made her want to weep. Then he moved toward the door. "I'll be back as soon as I can escape Steve's."

She held the door for him and watched him go down the steps to the alley. "I love you," she called.

He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and grinned up at her. "I love you, too, Katie."

* * * * *

Toby tossed the beer bottle into the recycle bin outside Steve's back door and breathed in the crisp night air. His head felt a little fuzzy, his brain not keeping up with his eyes as he glanced up at the sparkling stars overhead. It was well after one in the morning, and the party was louder and wilder than ever.

He shoved his hands in the pockets of his slacks and fingered the small velvet box there. Damn, he missed Kate. He'd made such plans for tonight. First the ceremony, then a quick stop by Steve's, then a late supper at Lowery's. He'd decided to wait for dessert, when the restaurant would be nearly empty. Then he'd get down on one knee and, by the softly flickering candlelight, tell her how much he loved her and needed her. How she made him whole. And then he'd present her with the ring he'd spent all afternoon searching for. The perfect ring for the perfect woman. Delicate, yet strong.

He sighed and had to lean against the porch railing when dizziness washed through him. He shouldn't have had that last beer. He hadn't had a sip of alcohol in nearly three years, and now after only a couple of bottles, he had a major buzz on.

"You okay?"

He turned his head too quickly and had to blink back the blurriness. Gracie laid her hand on his arm and looked at him with concern.

"Little drunk, I think." Even feeling like an idiot for it, he grinned. "No. No thinkin'. I'm drunk."

Gracie chuckled. "Your party is inside; what are you doing out here?"

"Wishing Katie was here."

Crossing her arms over her middle and hunching against the cold night air, she grinned up at him. "I never thought I'd see the day that Tobias Angel fell in love."

His head fell back and he stared up at the stars. "Nothing has ever felt so right."

"Then what are you doing here when you should be with her?"

"Can't drive. Don't want to pull Steve away from his party. It's his night too, ya know. Making Captain is a big deal."

"A very big deal. It means he'll be home more. Let me get my coat, and I'll take you to Kate's."

A smile spread across his face. "Thanks, Gracie."

Five minutes later they were in Gracie's SUV heading toward Darby's Pub. As the haze of the booze lessened, his nerves kicked in, and he fumbled with his tie.

"What's up?" Gracie asked with a quick glance from behind the wheel.

"What if she says no?"

"Who?"

"Kate."

"Says no to what?"

He huffed out a breath and glared at his best friend's wife. She laughed and flipped on the turn signal for Main Street.

"You're going to ask her tonight?"

"I was. But now... I had it all planned. Real romantic." He rubbed his eyes with his fingertips. "I almost popped the question when she told me she couldn't go tonight. I wanted to tell her to screw the pub and come with me. But how can I possibly let her think her work is less important than mine? She's so understanding, but all I wanted to do was..." The car stopped on the side of the street and Toby looked at the darkened front window of Darby's. "All I wanted to do was beg her to come with me. To be with me. To let me go through with all the plans I'd made for the evening."

"But you didn't. And that's the important thing."

He slouched in the leather seat and sighed. "Yeah. But I feel like a selfish asshole. That night I missed our date, which we still haven't even gone on, she was so understanding. I don't want to be understanding. I wanted to throw a temper tantrum like a little kid and get my way."

Gracie chuckled. "But again, the important thing is that you didn't."

"Do you think I'd make a good husband? I mean, you've known me for a lot of years. Do I have what it takes to make Katie happy?"

Gracie reached across and turned his head so he looked at her. "Toby, you are one of the sweetest, most caring men I know. Kate is lucky to have you in her life. I think you'd make her a wonderful husband because it's obvious how much you love her."

A silly grin split his face. "I really love her."

With a pat to his cheek, Gracie smiled. "I know you do."

The inside of the truck spun slightly, and he blinked hard to clear his head. He really shouldn't drink. "Wanna see somethin'?"

"What?"

"Turn on the light." As Gracie reached for the dome light, he dug the black velvet box from his pocket and opened it.

"Oh, Toby." Gracie reached out and took the box from him, tipping it this way and that. His gaze riveted on the play of light over the sparkly diamonds and sapphires. "It's stunning."

"Think she'll say yes?" His heart began to pound at the thought of Kate turning him down. Maybe it was too soon. They'd been together less than a month. What if she didn't feel the same way about him?

But she'd told him she loved him just hours earlier. She kissed him and let him touch her anywhere he wanted now.

Gracie laughed again, snapped the box shut, and handed it back to him. "If she doesn't, she doesn't deserve you."

* * * * *

Kate got up from the sofa and went into her bedroom to stare at her reflection in the mirror for the hundredth time in the last half hour. Would

he like what he saw? It wasn't like she was Kate Moss, but maybe her body wasn't bad. Her hips were a bit wide, her thighs could lose a few inches, but her boobs were nice. And Toby always seemed to enjoy them.

She laughed at herself and turned to examine the slinky red baby doll negligee she'd picked up that afternoon. It barely covered her butt, and she cringed at the back of her thighs, but...but Toby told her all the time how beautiful he thought she was, how much he loved her body.

She'd never dressed like this—or undressed—for a man. Her nerves played havoc with her courage, and she had to force herself not to change back into her fluffy sweat suit. She'd missed Toby's big evening. The least she could do was make the rest of the night memorable.

Moving to the nightstand, she pulled open the drawer and visually examined the supply of colored condoms, the two new vibrators, and a few other toys she'd picked up at the sex shop in Blaine. She and Toby had discussed expanding their horizons, and she thought she should be the one to make the first move, since he seemed leery to ever push her limits too far.

Rusty woofed from the living room, and her heart set up a hard cadence in her throat. Toby was here. She slammed the drawer shut and nearly tripped over her own feet as she rushed through the doorway into the living room.

"Hey there li'l guy." Toby had let himself into the apartment. He picked up Rusty and snuggled the dog beneath his chin. "Miss me?"

Kate laughed.

He raised his head, and then his eyes went wide as he looked at her. "Holy...shhhit."

Her cheeks heated under his appraisal. "You like?" She twirled a little pirouette. The negligee flared about her hips, showing off the nearly nothing g-string she wore.

"Sorry, dog," he said as he set Rusty on the sofa and headed across the living room toward her. "Oh, man. I like lots. Come here." He swept her into his arms and his mouth settled over hers.

Bile rose in her throat as the taste and scent of beer imbued her senses. She shoved at his shoulders, but his arms held her too tight around.

Terror ripped through her and nausea assailed. Twisting her neck, she jerked her lips from his, gagging. "Get off me!"

He released her so fast she stumbled. Catching herself against the back of the sofa, she swallowed back the need to wretch.

"Katie?"

She saw it then. The slight glaze to his eyes. The lowered eyelids. How had she missed it? He was *drunk*.

"Get. Out." She backed toward her bedroom, ready to dive for cover if needed.

"Babe, what's..." He stepped forward, and fear rippled up her spine. Would he grab her? Beat her? *Rape* her?

Rusty ran between them and barked once. His little head moved back and forth between them, as if he couldn't decide which of them to side with.

Toby stopped moving and stared at her as she gripped the edge of the bedroom door, ready to slam it shut.

"Get out. Just go," she pleaded.

"Why?" His arms hung lax at his sides. Even through the haze of sickness and fear coursing through her, she could see his confusion.

She swallowed hard as her stomach clenched. "Please. Leave the key and get out. I can't see you anymore."

He raised his hand, but dropped it. "Tell me why."

Tears stung her eyes. She gritted her teeth against them. "You're drunk. You smell like a brewery." He opened his mouth, but she cut him off before he could say anything. "You don't drink! You never drink. Coke only. Every night you've been in here. Why did you have to *drink*? How could you lie to me this way?" Hysterics made her voice rise and the question ended in a shriek.

"Calm down, baby."

"Get *out!*" She slammed the bedroom door and turned the lock. How could she have been so fooled by him? For three years he'd never touched alcohol when he came into the pub.

The smell. The feel of lips on hers tainted with alcohol. "Oh, God." She wrapped her arms around her middle and prayed she wouldn't puke. She should have locked herself in the bathroom instead.

"Kate! Damn it, what the hell is this about?"

He was yelling now. She moved away from the door. Would he try to break it down? Would he... The tears coursed down her cheeks and harsh sobs wrenched her soul. Damn him. *Damn him!* She'd given him everything. Fallen in love with him. And he was a phony.

"You work in a bar for Christ's sake." His voice dropped off sharply as he continued. "Kate. You never said you didn't want me to drink. I'm not drunk, babe. I'm a little buzzed. That's all. Come out, and we'll talk about it."

She shook her head and edged toward the bed, around it, then knelt on the far side. No way was she going near a drunken man. He wasn't a pub patron. Those she could deal with. Not Toby. Toby could hurt her. She should have known better. She should have known no one was as good as he seemed.

A thump on the bedroom door had her ducking behind the bed. Her heart thundered in her chest as she crawled beneath it.

"Kate! Come on. Get out here and talk to me!"

"Go away," she whispered. "Just go." Her body shook, and she couldn't see through her tears. Squeezing her eyes shut, she curled into a tight ball and put her hands over her ears. "Please go. Please go."

* * * * *

Toby stepped out of the mini mart into the biting, winter wind. Slipping one hand into his jacket pocket, he sipped the bitter coffee in the other.

Between the walk in the cold air and the high-test caffeine, his head had cleared enough to think logically.

Walking out of Kate's had been like ripping his heart from his chest with his bare hands. He'd stood outside her bedroom door for a good ten minutes, pleading with her to talk to him, but there hadn't been a peep from her side.

Damn it, why hadn't she ever mentioned her problem with drinking? Would she really end their relationship because he'd had a couple of beers? How could someone that opposed to alcohol consumption run a pub?

His fingers closed around the velvet box holding the engagement ring he'd planned to give to her tonight. What a fucker of a night. No way was he going to let her off the hook so easily.

Angry beyond belief, he'd dropped her apartment key on the coffee table on his way out the door. He'd almost left the ring, too. He'd wanted to shove it in her face. Let her know what she was throwing away. But some common sense had settled in, and he hadn't gone that far.

Deep in his heart, he knew they'd work it out. Once she was calm and thinking straight, they'd talk. Hell, if the only problem she had with him was the fact that he'd had a couple of drinks, that was easy to solve. He hadn't had a drink in years. He wouldn't drink for the rest of his life if it meant being with the only woman he'd ever loved.

He glanced at his watch. Two fifty-five. Too late to tonight. But first thing in the morning, he'd be on her doorstep whether she wanted him there or not. They *would* work this out.

Raising his collar against the wind, he headed down Main Street for home. He supposed he could call a cab, but he'd be home in forty-five minutes. Not that he'd sleep tonight, anyway. Between worrying over Kate's reaction and the three cups of coffee he'd downed, he had one long night ahead. Should have just gone straight home in the first place. But he'd thought that once he had a couple of cups of coffee, he'd head back to her place.

She was probably still hiding in her room, though. And what good would that do? Besides, he'd left the key, as she'd demanded.

Three blocks later, as he neared Darby's and debated over knocking on Kate's door once again, he stopped dead in his tracks. He scented the

breeze, picking up the acrid scent of fire. He checked the skyline and the surrounding buildings looking for smoke or flames, but didn't see any.

Moving further down the street, his heart stalled when he came even with the front window of Darby's. Inside was pitch black with the unmistakable roil of gray-brown smoke pressing against the glass.

Dropping his coffee to the sidewalk, he sprinted down the street and rounded into the alley. Fire licked at the roof of the pub, had already eaten away the wooden cover over the door to her apartment, and worked its way to the roof of the apartment.

"Kate!" he shouted, praying she was out even as he jerked his cell phone from his belt and punched in 9-1-1.

"Tobias Angel," he said, identifying himself when dispatch answered. "Structure fire at 813 Main Street. Darby's Pub."

Not waiting for a response, he dropped his phone and ran up the steps to the apartment door. Scorching flames grabbed at him, but he didn't slow or stop to think about what he was doing. Kate's life was at stake.

He felt the door. It was warm but not hot. Breaking it down could cause an explosion, but...

"Kate!"

Faintly, beyond the sound of the crackling fire, he heard Rusty whine from the other side of the door. Kate wouldn't have left without the dog. The door was locked. Without a second thought, he threw his shoulder against the door and wood splintered under the assault.

"Kate!" he yelled as thick, black smoke rolled out the door and surrounded him. Blinding him.

Rusty barked.

"Get out!" Toby shoved the dog out the door with his foot, brought his jacket up over his nose and mouth, and moved blindly toward Kate's bedroom. "Kate! Kate!" he kept calling, praying she wasn't unconscious from the smoke.

Rusty barked. He hadn't stayed out.

The roof groaned and heat singed Toby's skin. He had to get the hell out of there before the whole thing came down.

The bedroom door was still closed and locked. He felt for heat, but couldn't tell. The whole apartment was like a furnace blast. Again he threw his shoulder against the wood and the doorframe splintered.

"Kate!"

Nothing.

His eyes stung and watered. His skin fairly sizzled from the heat. He stumbled to the bed, but it was empty. "Ka..." He choked on the smoke, his throat already parched and raw. Where was she?

Rusty pounced against his leg, and Toby looked down. The dog ran under the bed, then back out and barked.

Toby fell to his knees and peered into the utter blackness beneath the bed skirt. He reached out and felt...flesh. With a surge of adrenaline, he shoved the bed over, uncovering Kate's listless body. He scooped her into his arms, threw her over his shoulder and, holding his breath, headed for the front door.

Flames burst through the ceiling, and wood came crashing down. Turning, he shielded Kate's body with his own. Burning wood bit into his back, pulling a strangled cry from him. He ran the rest of the way through the fire and out the door, not stopping until he'd reached the bottom of the steps and crossed the narrow alleyway.

Coughing, gagging, he slumped to the ground and pulled Kate into the cradle of his arms. He listened for breath, but heard none. Felt no pulse.

Tearing off his jacket, he tossed it to the ground and laid her on it. She still wore the next-to-nothing negligee. She'd freeze. He leaned over her and put his mouth over hers to start CPR at the same moment he heard the welcome sound of sirens.

Tears tracked down his cheeks as he worked on her.

"Come...on...baby," he said with each chest compression.

"Don't...leave...me."

Chapter Eighteen

"How is she? Any change?"

Toby jerked upright at the sound of Steve's voice. He'd fallen asleep holding Kate's hand, his head resting against her thigh, as she lay utterly motionless in the hospital bed.

"Test results came back." Toby yawned and swiped his hand down his face. He hadn't left Kate's side since arriving at the hospital around four that morning. After answering Sheriff Peabody's endless questions. "EEG is normal. Lungs are clear." He glanced at his watch. Almost four in the afternoon. "They cut back her meds, so she should be waking any time now."

Steve's hand settled on his shoulder and gave a reassuring squeeze. "Why don't you go grab a shower in the doctor's lounge. I brought you a change of clothes."

"I want to wait until she wakes up."

Steve moved away then settled in the other chair below the window on the opposite side of the room. "Just got a call from Captain Darcy. The fire investigators have ruled it arson. Accelerant, gasoline from the smell, was found."

Toby shut his eyes and let out a slow breath. If he hadn't arrived when he had, the arsonist would be a murderer. "I've been thinking..." A yawn cut off his words. He propped his head in his hands while his elbows rested on the edge of the bed. "All this shit started after we broke up that fight. Has anyone checked the whereabouts of the big guy? Jed

Krogan, I think his name is. I'd heard he was a security guard and lost his job because he was arrested."

"I'll call Hal and ask him. How's your back?"

He shifted slightly, felt the pull of medical tape against his skin, the sting of the wound. "A little burn, some torn flesh. No big deal."

"Really stupid of you to go barging in there with no protective gear."

Toby lifted his head and stared at Steve.

Steve raised his hands in surrender. "I know. I would have done the same thing. But you're a brother to me, Toby. You scared the crap out of me."

With a nod of acknowledgement, Toby dropped his head back to his hands. "How bad is the damage to Darby's?"

"Total write off. Most of the concrete walls are still standing, but it's completely gutted. The apartment is gone."

"Fuck." His heart cried for the tiny woman he'd come to love with his entire being. In one night she'd lost everything. Her home, her business... "Where's Rusty?"

Steve chuckled. "Last I saw, it was a tug-of-war between Drake and Cal over who got to take the mutt home. I think he wound up with Drake."

"I would never have found her if it hadn't been for the dog. She was under her bed, of all places." Toby's throat closed when he thought about what her fate could have been. Dying in a fire, the entire building coming down on top of her. As hot and fast as the fire had been burning, the morgue would have been identifying her by her teeth, if even those were found. "Why the hell didn't she get out? I shouldn't have left her last night, no matter how mad she was at me."

"Hey." Steve came back to his side, laid a hand on his shoulder again. "You got her out. That's the only thing that matters. She's alive."

Toby nodded. He lifted Kate's hand to his lips and kissed her lax fingers. "If I ever find out who did this..."

The door swung open, and Sheriff Peabody strode in.

Toby pushed to his feet, but might have toppled over if Steve hadn't been there to support him. Exhaustion made his vision blur. "Did you find who did this?"

"Tobias Angel," Peabody said without preamble as he reached behind himself and withdrew a pair of handcuffs. "You're under arrest for arson and attempted murder."

"What?" Steve and Toby's question rang through the quiet room.

The sheriff turned Toby and clasped the right cuff on his wrist.

"You have the right to remain silent—"

"I wasn't even there when the fire started." Toby tried to pull away, but the sheriff's meaty fist grabbed the back of his shirt and forced him face down against the hospital bed, just inches from Kate's left foot.

"If you give up the right to remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law—"

"There's some kind of mistake," Steve jumped in. "What evidence do you have against him?"

"You have the right to an attorney. If you desire an attorney and cannot afford one—"

"Toby?"

He turned at Kate's raspy voice. Her beautiful blue eyes stared at him with confusion. Her forehead wrinkled in a frown.

When he tried to pull away from Peabody, the sheriff smashed his face into the bed. "Don't add resisting arrest to your charges, son."

"Katie..."

"Toby," she croaked again as she struggled to sit up.

Steve put a restraining hand to her shoulder to stop her from moving. "Stay still, Kate. He's okay."

"If you desire an attorney and cannot afford one, an attorney will be obtained for you before police questioning."

"Goddammit, Peabody!" Toby lurched toward Kate and kissed her cheek. "Baby, I'm—"

His collar nearly choked him when the sheriff pulled him to stand. Without another word, Peabody forced him from the room.

Steve's work boots thudded on the tile as he kept pace with them. "I'll call Kent Worth," he said. "He'll be down at the station shortly. He's a good lawyer."

Out the doors in front of the hospital, hands cuffed and the sheriff hauling him off like he had so many years ago, Toby's world splintered. "I didn't do this," he said, pleading with Steve even as Peabody shoved his head down and forced him into the back of the police cruiser. "You know I didn't."

"I know, brother. We'll get this straightened out."

"Take care of Kate."

Peabody slammed the car door. Just like he had fifteen years earlier.

* * * * *

Kate struggled into a sitting position, but the room spun around her. Her stomach churned, and she gagged. Her throat hurt. Her head hurt.

"Don't move, Kate," Steve said when he came back into the room. He shut his cell phone and slipped it in his pocket.

"What's happened? Why was Toby arrested?" Her voice sounded like she'd swallowed a whole pond of frogs, and speaking hurt like hell. She fumbled with the oxygen tube in her nose.

Steve placed a restraining hand over hers, but she jerked away. "Don't touch me. Tell me what's going on? Why am I here?" Panic set up in her, and her stomach roiled. She searched for something to puke in as she clasped her hand over her mouth.

"Relax."

Tears burned her eyes. She didn't understand anything. Glancing around the sterile hospital room, her breathing grew short and dizziness swamped her.

Steve reached for the call button and pressed it repeatedly. "You have to remain calm, Kate."

"Don't tell me to be calm," she cried. "What's going on? Why am I in the hospital?" Had Toby beaten her? Had he busted into the bedroom and hurt her? She couldn't remember anything beyond crawling under the bed to get away from him. Now he was arrested.

"Kate, honey, you were in a fire. You've suffered carbon monoxide poisoning."

Her stomach coiled, and she gagged again. Steve grabbed a small kidney shaped bowl and held it in front of her. She heaved, but nothing came out. Tears trailed down her cheeks.

"Her stomach's upset," Steve informed the nurse who rushed into the room.

"I'll get something."

"Please, Kate, lay back and relax."

"What fire? Where?" She swiped at the tears that blurred her vision. She realized she had an IV in the back of her left hand. "What the hell happened?" She looked up at Steve who watched her with concern. "What fire?"

"The pub. There was a fire last night. Toby pulled you out. You were unconscious under your bed."

When Steve's words sank through her panic, she laid back on the pillows. "The pub was on fire?"

He nodded.

"How?"

"The fire inspector says it was arson."

"Toby did it?" No. He couldn't have. Wouldn't.

Steve shook his head. "He was walking past the pub when he smelled smoke."

Walking past the pub? Why was he walking past the pub? She'd kicked him out. Or tried anyway. No. Toby wouldn't have done something like setting her pub on fire.

But he had before, hadn't he? When he was mad at Dad?

The nurse returned with a needle of something she slid into the IV tube. "This should take care of your upset stomach in a few minutes." The

nurse took her blood pressure, listened to her heart. "Blood pressure's a bit high. The doctor should be in shortly. Is there anything you need?"

Kate shook her head. The pain had receded in her brain, and her vision was clearing.

"You call if you need me." The nurse cast a glance at Steve before leaving the room.

"How bad was the fire?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer.

Steve lowered himself into a chair at the side of the bed before he answered. "Complete loss."

She swallowed hard as tears welled in her eyes again. "My apartment?"

Steve shook his head.

"Rusty? Did he...die?" Her voice broke on a sob.

"No. Rusty is with Drake. He's fine. He had a little smoke inhalation, but he'll be okay."

Rusty was okay. She still had Rusty. He was with Drake. Oh, God. Drake. And Cal and Shelly and Karen and her cook, Bill. Their jobs. They didn't have jobs anymore. She didn't have her pub.

Total loss.

* * * * *

"You'll be in here until Monday," Ken Worth, the forty-something lawyer told Toby. "You know this town. The judges don't come in on weekends. Your arraignment will be first thing Monday morning."

Toby rubbed his fingertips against his forehead. Two nights in jail. Great. Just what he needed.

"What the hell do they have for evidence against me?" he asked. "I wasn't even there." He turned away, glanced around the eight by eight jail cell. The same damn cell he'd been put into as a juvenile delinquent. At least then there was a real reason he'd been locked up. This time he was innocent. "I think Peabody has taken up a personal vendetta against me."

"Everything he has is circumstantial at best. He claims you were at Darby's for each of the vandalisms that occurred. And that you just

happened to be walking by and saw the fire is too coincidental. It doesn't look good, but I'll get a hold of the cashier at the mini mart. If you've got an alibi, you're in the clear."

Toby shook his head. "Admittedly I don't have an alibi for the first one. The broken window. I was at home listening to the police scanner and heard the call. But when the cellar was broken into, I was at the fire hall. I was gone only a half hour because I was on duty, and that time I was with Kate in her office."

Ken nodded and took notes on a yellow legal pad. "Ms. Darby will be your best alibi, of course. Chances are we can get this thrown out. There's no hard evidence, and the district attorney isn't going to pursue an arson case with no physical evidence."

"There's something you should know," Toby said, meeting the lawyer's eyes. He let out a slow breath. "Fifteen years ago I did try burning down Darby's. I was a kid, and it was an act of rebellion. But the fact is, *that* time I did strike the match."

"Were you convicted?"

Toby shook his head. "It was thrown out and the arrest record sealed by request of Colin Darby."

"You were underage?"

He nodded. "Sixteen."

"Then it shouldn't come into play, but I'm glad you told me." He opened his briefcase. "Anything else?"

"No. That's it."

After stashing his notepad, Ken stood and extended his hand. "See you in court Monday morning, then. Call if there's anything to add."

Toby shook his hand, and then watched as he called for the guard to let him out of the cell.

He clenched his teeth, stifling a curse.

* * * * *

Kate sat up and rolled her shoulders. The lethargy had finally passed since whatever medication they'd given her had worn off, but her

back was stiff from lying in bed for so long. The doctor had just come by to sign her discharge papers. She could finally go home.

Tears came unbidden, and she drew in deep breaths to stem their flow. *Home*. It was gone. Her new *house* would be a small rental cottage Drake and Chuck owned on the lake. Thank God it was winter and the place wasn't rented out, or she'd be homeless.

"Hey, Kate." She glanced up as Drake and Chuck came through the door. "How you doing?"

She brushed away the tears and forced a small smile. "I'll live." She shook away the self-pity that had been weighing on her for the past two days. "Were you able to stop and get me some clothes?" The only thing in the big white plastic hospital bag of her belongings was that damned negligee she'd planned to seduce Toby with.

Toby. No, she couldn't go there yet.

Drake grinned. "Yep. Got you some jeans and stuff." He set a canvas duffle bag on the end of the bed and unzipped it. "But I thought this might cheer you up more right now."

Rusty bounded out of the duffle with a small woof and leapt on her stomach, planted his paws on her shoulders, and happily licked her chin.

The tears came again. She couldn't stop them. She buried her face and fingers in the dog's soft fur and sobbed.

Rusty whined, his crooked tail wagging a mile a minute as he licked away her salty tears.

"Hey. Don't do that," Chuck said as he pulled a tissue from the box by the bed and handed it to her. "No more crying. You're going to be all right. We're here for you."

She sniffled and wiped at her eyes and nose. "Thank you." She tried to smile, but it wobbled. Chuck was almost twice the size of Drake, with wide shoulders and rippling muscles he got working construction for the past ten years. But he was as sweet as a teddy bear.

"Come on, Chuck," Drake said, grabbing Chuck's hand. "You get dressed," he said to Kate. "We'll be right outside." Almost out the door, he stopped and turned back. "Make sure you put Rusty back in the bag. I don't think Nurse Ratched would approve of your little beastie."

That made her smile in earnest. "Be out in a minute."

The nurse he referred to was a bossy little woman with her hair in the same exact style as the infamous Nurse Ratched from the movie. She'd kicked Drake out the evening before for disturbing other patients because he was laughing too loud while they watched a movie on his portable DVD player.

Kate hugged Rusty. "We're gonna be okay, aren't we?" she asked the dog. "Of course, we are." The pub and apartment had been fully insured. In fact, she'd have more money than she knew what to do with once it came through, but that didn't mean she had a clue what she should do. No matter what she'd thought about for her long-term future, she'd planned to keep the pub at least another five years.

"Finish my degree," she said as she set Rusty on the bed and dropped her legs over the side. "Finish college, and then what?" She'd always thought of a little shop of some kind. But what?

She rummaged through the duffle bag and found a pair of jeans two sizes too big, a gray sweatshirt, and underwear an eighty year old might wear. She grinned. So much for the stereotype of homosexuals having an innate fashion sense.

As she pulled on the clothing, her mind unerringly returned to Toby. Gritting her teeth, she bit back the tears the thought of him brought on. He was supposed to have been arraigned first thing this morning. Steve had stopped by yesterday and told her so. Also told her that his lawyer said the charges would most likely be dropped because of lack of evidence.

But...

But she hated herself for the seed of doubt sitting in her mind. He had been nearby during each of the vandalisms. And she'd all but thrown him out less than an hour before he supposedly saved her.

Sheriff Peabody had returned to the hospital after he'd hauled Toby to jail and spent almost an hour questioning her. What it came down to was, Toby had shown up less than twenty minutes after the window smashing. He'd been in the pub just moments before the mess in the cellar had been discovered. But the crowning doubt was that they'd had an

argument and the next thing she remembered was waking up in the hospital.

If he'd done it once, which the sheriff verified, was it something he'd do again? This time succeeding in burning the pub down?

Rusty whined. Kate lifted him and gently settled him in the duffle bag.

But he was a decorated firefighter. He'd spent his adult life giving back to the community. He *couldn't* have started the fire.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. He'd been arraigned hours ago, yet he hadn't come to see her. Was he avoiding her out of guilt?

She lifted the duffle and picked up her discharge papers from the bedside table.

Then again, she'd kicked him out of her apartment, telling him she never wanted to see him again. Was he taking that panic attack to heart? Had he finally had enough of her? Realized she was nothing but a totally screwed up woman?

Swallowing hard, she pulled open the door to find Drake and Chuck waiting for her. She smiled. "Okay. I'm ready."

Chuck took the bag from her and gently set the straps over his shoulder. Drake folded her hand in his. "Are you sure you don't just want to go to the cottage? Maybe wait a day or two to go to the pub?"

She swallowed again, knowing it was going to be hard seeing her home turned to rubble, but it was something she had to do. "No. I want to see it. I need to."

Drake squeezed her hand. "Okay. Let's go."

Her stomach twinged, and she hoped she didn't make a fool of herself and puke.

As they stepped out the sliding glass doors into the bright light of a sunny afternoon, someone called her name. She turned and shaded her eyes with her hand. Sloan and Celeste Foster were heading their way across the parking lot.

"Hi, Kate," Sloan said, taking her hand in a warm embrace. "We wanted to come by and see if you needed anything. I'm so damn sorry to hear about the pub."

She nodded, appreciating his concern. "Thank you, Sloan. That means a lot." She withdrew from his gentle clasp. "But I think everything's under control for now." She smiled at Drake. "Drake and Chuck are putting me up in their rental cottage until I get on my feet."

"You're being released?" Celeste asked. Her mink coat was open, revealing a skin tight, hot pink top. Her jeans looked as if they'd been airbrushed onto her body.

"Yes. I've just been discharged." She would have been out the day before if she hadn't had another bout of upset stomach, which she knew was more nerves than effects of the carbon monoxide poisoning. But the doctor hadn't listened to her.

"Damn, I'm sorry," Sloan said again. "Are you sure there's nothing we can do?" He took her hand again, his eyes filled with concern, his brow drawn into a fierce frown. "I mean it, Kate. Anything." He turned toward Drake and smiled. "If you're looking for a job, stop by my place. I can always use a good bartender."

Drake nodded. "I'll do that."

Kate squeezed Sloan's hand and smiled, comforted by his offers. Knowing she had so many friends trying to look out for her was more than she'd ever thought to hope for. The offer to Drake warmed her heart. "I'll call if something comes up. I do appreciate the offer. It means more than you can know."

He released her hand and reached for his wife's. "You take care of yourself, and don't be a stranger."

Kate nodded. Sloan and Celeste turned away. Celeste's four-inch heels clicked on the pavement.

"Ouch. Did that hurt?"

Kate gave Drake a frown as he opened the back door to his Accord for her. "What are you talking about?"

"The daggers that woman was sending you. Did they hurt?"

She scooted into the back seat then waited for both Drake and Chuck to get in the car, Drake in the driver's seat. "What *are* you talking about? Celeste?"

Chuck laughed. "I could almost see her face turning green with jealousy when Sloan reached for your hand the second time."

Chuck handed her the duffle back, and she unzipped it to release Rusty. "Give me a break."

Drake started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. "Come on. That woman sees what's in front of her. A beautiful young woman who her husband is attracted to, compared to a forty-something with fake boobs, Botox infused face and collagen lips."

Kate leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. "Sloan's old enough to be my father. No, almost old enough to be my grandfather. Don't be gross."

Drake chuckled. "Gross or not, I'd watch your back where that woman was concerned."

With a sigh, Kate snuggled Rusty to her chest. She had a lot of things to worry about right now. Her ex-competitor's wife was definitely not one of them.

Chapter Nineteen

"What the hell is taking so long?" Toby paced the length of the room. Steve stood against one wall. His sister sat at the small table. "The arraignment was supposed to be at nine. It's now..." He glanced at the wall clock. "...after one."

"Please stop pacing," Stacy said and patted the chair next to her. "Mr. Worth said he was meeting with the D.A. I'm sure he'll be back as soon as things are...settled."

Hearing the catch in his sister's voice, he settled next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. She shouldn't be here. It was too hard on her. He ran a hand down his tie, wanting to rip it off because it was choking him like a noose.

"Ken will get this straightened out," Steve said, his confidence bolstering Toby only slightly.

Toby nodded. He knew the lawyer had been tracking down alibis all day Sunday. When he'd met with Toby this morning, he said he'd set up a meeting with the district attorney, hoping to forgo the arraignment. But that had been hours ago. Now he sat in this enclosed room, awaiting his fate.

Would he be sent to prison for attempted murder of the woman he loved? The thought was too painful to bear. He'd never hurt Kate. Would do anything in his power to find the bastard who'd set the fire. But he couldn't do anything from behind bars. Nothing at all. And if he had to post bond, how much of his life savings would it take? All of it?

Kate, he thought. He had to see her. Needed to know she was all right. Steve had told him she was being released from the hospital today, and that Drake had given her a place to stay. But he needed to be with her. If she needed a place to live, it should be with him.

The door opened, and Ken Worth came into the room. Toby glanced at the two uniformed guards stationed outside the door before it shut.

"You're free to go," Ken announced with a wide grin. "All charges have been dropped without prejudice." He set his briefcase on the table and opened it to withdraw a thick sheaf of papers. "D.A. Carlisle finds that there's no physical evidence to hold you, and she's having a word with Sheriff Peabody about the way he went about obtaining the arrest warrant."

Toby shook his head, confused, relieved, but not believing it.

"Apparently Peabody bypassed the D.A.'s office completely and called in a favor with Judge Marigold to get the arrest warrant signed."

"The bastard." This from Steve who moved closer to the table, his arms crossed over his chest.

Ken nodded. "He also had your apartment and vehicle searched, coming up with only a can of gasoline from the truck as physical evidence."

"How can that be evidence if it was in my truck, parked at home, when I was on foot?" Toby ran his hand over his head. "And it should have been full. I've had it in there for a couple weeks, ever since running out of gas in the rain one night."

Again Ken smiled. "That's right, it was full. Therefore it can't be used as evidence that you set the fire. The arsonist had used at the very least three gallons of accelerant, according to the fire marshal who investigated."

Toby let out a sigh when he saw the tears shining in Stacy's eyes. "Dropped without prejudice," he said softly, not wanting her to get her hopes up that this debacle had been settled. "Which means the charges can be brought up again, right? If evidence is found against me?"

The lawyer nodded. "Yes, but since they've already searched your house and vehicle, there's not much chance of that. Is there?" he added with a raised eyebrow.

Toby shook his head. "Of course not." Because he hadn't set the fire.

"Good." Ken handed him the thick packet of papers. "Stop by my office in the next couple of days."

Toby nodded. "Thank you."

The lawyer took his leave.

Stacy threw her arms around his neck and squeezed him hard while she sobbed. "Thank God this is over."

Steve gave him a slap on the shoulder. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

He kissed Stacy's cheek. "Everything's okay." Though for some reason he didn't feel as if everything was over. Peabody wouldn't let this drop, he was sure. And someone out there wasn't getting caught because the damn sheriff had set his sights on him.

She nodded and sniffled. "I just can't stand you being in here. My big brother doesn't belong in jail."

Toby stood and pulled Stacy from the chair, then slipped his arm around her shoulder. "Come on. Let's go." He worried about her going back to work. She worked for Peabody, and if the ass made her life difficult because of him, Toby wouldn't be responsible for his actions.

After signing all the necessary paperwork and getting a manila envelope of his personal belongings, the three left the courthouse. Stacy said she'd drive him home, and Steve invited him over for supper.

His only concern now was seeing Kate.

He slid into the passenger seat of Stacy's Honda and opened the envelope. He pulled out his watch and fastened it on his wrist, slipped his keys into his pocket, then his wallet. And then the black velvet box. The engagement ring he'd planned to present to Kate Friday night.

Just three days had passed, but it felt like a lifetime.

"I need to find out where Drake's cottage is, so I can see Kate," he told his sister when she pulled the car onto the street.

She glanced over at him, then at his hands holding the ring box.
"Tell me what happened Friday?"

He shook his head. "You've heard it all. Gracie drove me to Kate's. We argued. I left. When I came back, the building was in flames."

She reached over and laid her right hand over his. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine. It's just been one hell of a long weekend."

He looked up as they drove down Main Street and saw the burned out building come into view. His stomach lurched when he saw the amount of devastation. The total destruction.

"Stop the car."

Stacy slammed on the breaks. "Why?"

"Kate," he said on a breath. He shoved open the door and jogged across the street toward her. She stood amidst the rubble wearing baggy jeans and an even baggier sweatshirt, her arms wrapped around her middle, her shoulders hunched.

"Kate."

Her head whipped around, and eyes filled with unshed tears and misery met his.

He ducked under the yellow Caution tape and walked toward her. She didn't move, just stared at him with those heart-wrenching eyes.

"Ah, baby," he whispered as he pulled her into his arms. Her body remained stiff against his. He leaned down and kissed her forehead, her chilled cheek, but when he would have taken her lips, she leaned back slightly and planted her hands against his chest to keep him from moving closer.

"I'm so sorry," he said, knowing that the loss of her childhood home, her very livelihood, had to be killing her.

"Sorry for what?" she asked, her voice a bit gravelly.

He brushed her hair behind her shoulders and cupped her cold cheeks in his warm hands. "Sorry for everything you've lost, baby." He leaned in to kiss her, but she pushed at his chest and pulled from his light grasp.

"Why would you be sorry?" Her eyes sparkled like blue diamonds from her unshed tears. "What do you have to apologize for?"

When the realization of the accusation in her voice slipped past his sorrow for her, he dropped his hands to his sides. "You don't think—"

"Tell me," she demanded. "Look me in the eye and tell me you had nothing to do with this."

Like a kick to the solar plexus, her words sucked every bit of breath from his lungs.

She came at him with fists raised. He stood still as she beat against his chest. "Tell me, damn you! Tell me you didn't do this to me!"

He took the beating, though her fists did little damage to him. He couldn't think. Could barely feel. Kate thought him capable of this atrocity. Thought he'd burned her pub down.

Her tears wet her cheeks, but he may as well have been looking into the face of a complete stranger. He felt nothing but empty desolation.

The fight went out of her, and she collapsed against his chest. He didn't raise his arms to hold her. Couldn't. With careful deliberation, he put his hands to her shoulders and held her away from him.

She stared up into his eyes and whispered, "Please tell me."

Words would never convince her of his innocence. She doubted him. But how could he blame her, really? She knew about his past. Why would she think he was a different person now?

He released her shoulders and turned away, trudged across the street to Stacy's car.

"Toby!"

He ignored Kate's cry as he slid into the passenger seat. "Take me home," he said, his throat tight, his voice strained.

"What the hell?" Stacy grabbed his chin and turned his face toward her.

He swallowed hard and closed his burning eyes. "Don't talk to me right now," he said softly. "Just take me home."

* * * * *

Kate pretty much shoved Drake and Chuck out the door at eight o'clock that evening. They didn't want her to be alone. She understood

why after her horrible breakdown at the pub, but she *needed* to be alone. Needed time to regroup and breathe.

God, she'd screwed up bad this time. She'd been standing there in the middle of the muck and mess, questions swirling in her mind, and then Toby had appeared. Like he always seems to when she was in trouble. In need of comfort.

But all she could think about were the accusations pointed at him by Sheriff Peabody. How had he always known when she needed him if he hadn't been the one causing problems? The window, the cellar. Pulling her out of a burning building when she'd supposedly kicked him out of the apartment less than an hour before.

If he'd just denied having a hand in the fire, she would have believed him. Maybe. But...

She sank down on a stool at the breakfast bar in the kitchen of the little cottage and buried her face in her hands.

The look in his eyes when he realized she'd been accusing him. So much pain. Even past her own heartbreak, her own questions and fears, she'd seen what her words had done to him.

Tears overflowed and dropped onto the tile countertop. God, she'd hurt him so badly. How could she have done that, said those things to him? She knew in her heart he hadn't hurt her, wouldn't hurt her. But now, she was sure, he was lost forever to her.

Rusty whined, and Kate sat up. His little furry body was curled on the couch, his big brown eyes watching her intently. "Hey," she whispered. He thumped his crooked tail on the cushion. At least she still had Rusty. The fire hadn't taken *everything*. He dropped his head to his paws and gave a little huff, as if relaxing after finding out she was okay.

More tears burned her eyes, but she swiped them away with the back of her hand. Enough tears. They wouldn't fix anything.

The scent of the sandwich Chuck had gone out to get for her rose up off the counter and, despite the fact she didn't feel like eating, her stomach growled. She pulled the plastic bag to her and unwrapped the six-inch sub. Her throat tried to close off when she took a bite, but she forced it down. The last thing she needed now was to become ill from not

eating. She had to take care of herself. Everything that had happened wasn't the end of the world. She would survive.

A tear trickled down her cheek as she took another bite. She had to survive, even if she didn't want to right at this very moment. She'd gotten through so much worse after the attack.

But then she had her dad championing her. And the pub that needed her business sense and education. Now she only had... A sob slipped out, and she dropped the sandwich to the counter. All she had left now was Rusty. She had to get through this because the little mutt needed her.

"Shit!" She slammed the side of her fist against the countertop. Gritting her teeth, she wiped away the tears. "Get over it." She took a few deep breaths and slowly blew them out. She hadn't done this much self-pitying when she'd been laid up in the hospital after Bill Matheson got done raping and beating her.

She rounded the counter and jerked open the fridge. Drake had said they stocked in food for her, but she hadn't expected a full refrigerator. Grabbing a Diet Coke from the bottom shelf, she noticed a bottle of wine in the door. Drake knew she didn't drink, so why would he put alcohol in here? Maybe Chuck had done it. She pulled out the bottle of blush, a really cheap brand she noted, and stuck it on the counter, then pulled open the freezer to get ice for the cola.

As she resumed her seat and poured her drink, she glanced at the wine bottle. She hadn't had a drink of alcohol since before the attack three years ago, and before that she had never in her life been drunk. Living over a pub, growing up practically *in* the pub, she'd seen the effects of alcohol on the human body.

The immediate buzz, the drunken idiocy, and then the slurring stupor that followed. Then there were the men and women who were regulars at the pub. They'd been coming for years. Some only drank a beer or two then went home, but there were the few that would come in at happy hour and stay until closing. Drink after drink, day after day, year after year.

Kate took a bite of her sandwich. She stared at the bottle of wine.

Some of the pub patrons were the same people when they were drunk as they were sober. If they were grumpy sober, they were even grumpier drunk. Happy people tended to be jolly drunks. The alcohol enhanced the personality. But there were those it changed. The shy, middle-aged woman who had a couple of Cosmopolitans suddenly became chatty and flirty. After a few beers, the melancholy man whose wife had just walked out on him would be hugging everyone within arm's reach.

Wondering why she'd never stopped to think on this before, Kate frowned as she chewed her food. Alcohol didn't exactly change a person. Not entirely. What's there before the drinks were consumed was still there, only enhanced. Exaggerated. Brought out to light because the inhibitions that kept that person in their sober state were stripped away.

Hence the woman who went home with a stranger after meeting him in a bar or nightclub, when the woman wasn't normally promiscuous.

So, all this would lead to the fact that William Matheson, her assailant, had always been an abusive creep. But once he had enough vodka in his system, his conscience, or whatever it was that had kept him from ever following through with kidnapping another woman, was drowned out so that there was nothing to stop him.

Kate felt like a giant light bulb flicked on over her head. It wasn't alcohol that made Matheson attack her, but something deep inside him. The alcohol was only the catalyst. Even without alcohol, he might have snapped one day and done what he did.

And Toby, no matter how much he might drink, would never hurt her. He wasn't a bad guy. He was one of the good guys. The *great* guys. He put his life on the line every day for other people. He'd come to her when she was alone and scared and wanted to care for her. He'd felt her deep need for connection and had helped heal her.

She grabbed the wine bottle and twisted off the cap. Whoever bought this needed to upgrade brands. She went to the cabinet and pulled down another glass, then poured a drop of wine into it. She thought, *what the hell*, and filled the water glass. She sniffed the blush. Didn't smell so bad. She sipped. Kind of sweet, kind of tart. Kind of tasty.

After cleaning up the food wrappers, surprised she had eaten the whole sandwich without realizing it, she grabbed the wine bottle and the glass and flopped down on the suede couch next to Rusty.

It was time to find out what deep emotions alcohol would bring out in her.

* * * * *

Toby's mind spun in a swirling cascade of what ifs. What if he hadn't told Kate about his history with her father? What if he hadn't had the beer Friday night? What if he had followed his first instinct and not left her apartment when she told him to leave?

He stripped down to his underwear and threw himself diagonally across his bed. What ifs didn't mean a whole lot right now. He couldn't go back and change anything he'd done or said.

He'd lost his Kate before he ever really had her. The past two weeks had been everything he'd ever dreamed of. Kate was every fantasy he'd ever let himself have. Warm, loving, sweet, funny, sexy. She had an inherent ability to make him feel like he was the only man in the world when she looked at him. And she was an absolute tiger in the bedroom once she got past all her anxieties and fears.

He rolled over onto his back and picked up the black velvet ring box from where he'd dumped it on the nightstand. The lid opened on springed hinges, and he stared at the ring he'd worried over for hours, searching jewelry store after jewelry store looking for just the right piece. The sapphire was the exact shade of Kate's startling eyes. The diamonds sparkled in the dim light spilling in from the other room.

She'd never see this ring now. He'd never get to have that moment he'd imagined of her eyes lighting up, maybe even filling with tears of joy, as he went down on one knee and asked her to marry him. To spend the rest of his life with him. To make him the happiest man in the world.

He slipped the ring onto his pinky finger and closed his hand. Tomorrow he'd return it to the jewelry store. He rolled over and hugged a

pillow to his chest. The next day he'd go back to work and do his best to forget Kate. Forget all the special moments they'd shared.

He buried his face in the softness of the pillow and clenched his jaw as his gut tightened painfully. After years of avoiding commitment, of keeping himself free of heartache by distancing himself from women in general, he'd finally let his soul open to one. And she'd reached into his chest, grabbed hold of his heart with both hands, and then stomped it into the ground.

The worst part of the entire situation... He couldn't even blame her.

After everything she'd been through in her life, how could he expect her to trust him after such a short time together?

The phone ringing roused him a couple of hours later. He rolled over and squinted at the digital clock on the nightstand. Just after nine. He didn't reach for the phone, but waited for the machine to pick up.

"Hey, Toby." Steve's voice was gentle and filled with concern when it came through the answering machine. "Thought you were coming for dinner tonight. You missed out on Gracie's chicken enchiladas and black beans and rice. Give me a call."

Toby rubbed his eyes and got up to use the bathroom. On his way back through the apartment, he flipped off lights. He wasn't going anywhere tonight. He hadn't felt up to facing Steve and Gracie and the kids. Didn't know if he'd ever feel like facing anyone ever again. He'd been arrested for arson and attempted murder. Didn't matter that he was innocent, he'd still been a suspect. More than likely still was, if Peabody had a say in it.

He sprawled back on the bed and stared at the ring on his pinky, turning it slightly side to side with his thumb, watching the dim light from the window catch the glitter and the color.

An hour later the phone disturbed a restless, vision-filled sleep. Again he waited for the answering machine.

"Toby, honey, are you home?" His sister sounded worried. "Please call me tomorrow. If you don't, I'm going to come track you down. I love you big brother."

He'd call her in the morning. He didn't want to talk to her, or anyone for that matter. It helped to know he had friends and family that cared, but right now he *needed* to be left alone to lick his wounds. At least for this one night.

He pulled the pillow over his head and squeezed his eyes shut. Sleep. If he could sleep, he wouldn't be able to think. To remember. To *feel*.

This time the phone pulled him from deeper, dreamless sleep. With a growl, he threw the pillow to the end of the bed and sat up, staring at the clock. Almost midnight. Who the hell would be calling?

The machine picked up and ran through his message while he rubbed his eyes and contemplated getting something to eat. He hadn't eaten since the less than savory breakfast that had been served to him in the jail.

After the beep, there was silence. He frowned at the phone. "Damned hang-ups." He pushed to his feet, scratching his chest. Then, just barely audible, he heard Kate's whispered words over the answering machine.

"I'm sorry."

He jumped toward the phone, but the click of her hanging up sounded before he could lift the handset.

Without pause, he dialed star-six-nine. "Damn." The call originated from an unlisted number. "Sonofabitch."

His heart hammered in his chest. Sweat popped out on his forehead. He had to talk to her. Was there still a chance for them? Could there be? Dare he hope?

Sinking to the edge of the bed, he snatched up the phone book to look up Drake's home number. Couldn't find it. He grabbed his jeans off the floor and started tugging them on. He'd drive down to the lake and find her. There weren't that many cottages out there, and most of them would be empty this time of year. She couldn't be too hard to find.

He was halfway out the door before his brain clicked in. It was after midnight. Maybe it would be better to wait until morning. Give her time.

She'd made the first move, and that was more than he'd hoped for. He couldn't rush her. God, he couldn't do that, she might freak out again.

He closed the door and walked back to the sofa. He could wait. Knowing she was ready to talk was like a million ton weight lifted from his shoulders.

Glancing down at his hand, he saw the engagement ring. He took it into the bedroom and slipped it back in the box. She was ready to talk. He wouldn't rush her into anything else. They needed to reestablish the trust between them before he would be ready to propose again.

And who knew how long that would be? Would it ever happen?

It had to. He couldn't imagine his life without her.

Chapter Twenty

Rusty's sharp barking dragged Kate out of a deep sleep. She sat up and grabbed her head. It felt as if a jackhammer was pounding her brain. Nausea rolled through her, but she breathed slowly and fought it back.

"Oh, God," she groaned and finally opened her eyes. Where the hell was she?

Then she spotted the mostly empty wine bottle on the coffee table. The empty water glass. The portable phone. The phone?

She was in Drake's cottage, she realized as she stared out the patio window onto the snow-covered deck through squinted eyes. In the living room. On the couch in the clothes she'd been wearing the day before.

"Crap." So this was what a hangover felt like. "Please be quiet," she said to Rusty who ran from the front door, back to her, then to the door, with a persistent yapping that thrummed in her skull.

Then she heard the knock. Someone was at the door.

Great. Just what she needed. If it was Drake showing up this early...

She pushed herself off the couch and swayed slightly. Holding her head in place with one hand, she groaned. No more drinking, she told herself firmly. Ever.

Her stomach lurched and, for a disturbing moment, she thought she'd puke, but she breathed through it.

The knocking and barking kept up. "Hold on," she called to the visitor. "I'm coming." She had a meeting at two that afternoon with the

insurance adjuster, but no one should be here... She glanced at the clock on the kitchen stove. It was almost ten. Not that early.

"Rusty, hush." But he didn't listen. He went on barking and barking.

Kate staggered toward the front door, praying with each step the pain in her head and the roiling in her stomach would cease. Neither listened to her silent plea.

She unlocked the deadbolt and the doorknob and pulled open the door. Bright winter sunlight, reflecting off the layer of new snow, speared into her eyes, and she blinked as the pain intensified.

"Celeste?" she said, confused, when she finally focused on the person in the doorway.

"Hi, Kate. Can I come in? I'd like to talk to you."

Why the hell would Celeste Foster be on her doorstep? The woman barely spoke to her.

With a shrug, which somehow spiked a nail-like pain into her head, Kate stepped aside so Celeste could come in.

"Rusty, enough!" The little dog kept barking, only now his barks were interspersed with a low, deep-throated growl. Stupid dog, Kate thought.

"If you could just give me a minute to freshen up," Kate said, waving Celeste toward the living room. She needed to pee something fierce.

"I don't think so," Celeste said conversationally. With her left hand, she shoved against Kate's chest. Kate stumbled backwards, bumping her side against the doorknob of the hall closet. "We need to talk *now*."

Confused and rubbed her aching side, she frowned at the woman who was now locking the front door. "What are you doing?"

When Celeste turned back, all Kate saw was the barrel of a handgun held just inches from her nose.

Kate froze.

Rusty's yapping reached a fevered pitch.

She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry. Her stomach leapt to her chest. The sour taste of bile invaded her mouth.

"Now, Kate, we're going to have a little chat."

Celeste's voice was deeper than she'd ever heard it before and filled with a nasty venom. Kate couldn't see beyond the barrel of the gun. Black. A revolver. From her vantage point, she could see that every chamber had a copper-colored bullet in it.

Oh, God. She was going to die.

Celeste was going to kill her.

Why?

"You always act so fucking innocent," Celeste said in a way that jerked Kate's gaze from the gun to her assailant's face. Celeste was always made up, and today was no different. The thick layer of foundation couldn't hide the fine lines next to her mouth and eyes. The heavy eye makeup made her look almost clownish. But the clothing was different than usual. Today she wore a man's denim shirt with a black suede jacket over it. Possibly belonging to her husband because they were a bit too large. And the jeans she wore were loose, baggy even. And running shoes, not her normal spiked heels.

She wasn't here on a social call, Kate thought almost hysterically.

"How long have you been screwing him?"

The pain behind Kate's right eyeball made her eye water.

"How long?" Celeste demanded, waving the gun in Kate's face.

"Um." She tried to think. How long had she been with Toby? God, her head hurt. Why wouldn't Rusty shut up? "About a month, maybe."

"You lying little slut!" The barrel of the gun clipped Kate's forehead when Celeste swung it.

Kate cried out and grabbed her head. She would have doubled over, but Celeste's fingers closed around her jaw, the one-inch, blood red nails digging into her cheek. She pressed the barrel of the gun against Kate's temple.

"Don't fucking lie to me, bitch. I want the truth. How long have you been screwing my husband? Since the toy drive last year? Or longer than that? Do you two sit back and laugh about it together? About making me look like a fool?"

The cold steel of the gun dug into her temple. Celeste's face was just inches from hers. Kate grabbed the woman's wrist, but she was bigger, much stronger. And the gun. She couldn't fight or the madwoman would pull the trigger.

Her husband? The words snuck through Kate's terror. Celeste thought she'd been having an affair with *Sloan*?

"I've never—"

A loud knock on the door drew both their attention. Kate drew in a deep breath, preparing to scream her head off, but Celeste clamped her hand over her mouth.

"Don't even think about it," the woman hissed in her ear.

The person knocked again. Rusty was going nuts. Kate's heart thudding in her throat, combined with the scent of Celeste's toxic perfume, nearly choked her.

Celeste's hand moved from her mouth to her throat. "Scream and you're dead." Her voice was low, little more than a whisper. She grabbed the front of Kate's sweatshirt in a fist and pulled her toward the door. The barrel of the pistol bit into her temple. Celeste looked through the peephole. "Your hero boyfriend is here," she muttered.

Oh, God. Toby.

"Stupid son of a fucking bitch had to rescue you when it took me days to plan that fire. To scope out the building. To know where to lay the gas so it'd burn like a funeral pyre. Only you weren't in it. All because of *him*."

He knocked again. "Kate! Open up."

Tears came hot and fast, burning her eyes. She couldn't let Toby be hurt by this crazy woman.

"Go away! I don't want to see you!"

The pistol thudded against her head. Kate saw stars.

"Stupid bitch," Celeste hissed.

"Come on, Kate. Babe, let me in. We have to talk."

"You better get rid of him now, or he's going with you." Celeste's mouth was so close to hers when she spoke, she could feel the psycho's breath on her lips. Kate almost gagged.

"You need to leave," she called through the door, praying for once he wouldn't be pigheaded. "You need to leave *now*."

"I'm not going anywhere until we talk, Katie. Let me in. Or you come out. God, babe. Don't chase me away again."

Her heart ripped at the sadness in his tone. She needed to tell him she loved him. Wanted to look into his beautiful eyes just one last time before she died.

She said the only thing she could think that might clue him in to her predicament...or scare him away for good. "If you don't leave, I'm going to call the sher—sheriff." Her voice broke.

* * * * *

Something wasn't right. Rusty was going insane with the barking. Kate's voice sounded odd. Off. Strained.

He tried looking through the window next to the door, but a lace curtain obscured his view. All he could see was Rusty's dark little body facing the door and hysterically barking.

"Fine. Call the sheriff, but it'd be much easier if you just talked to me. Tell me to my face to get lost, and I will. Open the damn door and say it to my face."

Silence. Except for the dog. Toby's heart rate kicked up. The hairs on his arms stood on end as dread and adrenaline rushed through him. What the hell was going on in there?

"Leave now, Tobias Angel! Get the hell off my property before the sheriff comes to haul you away."

She'd never called him Tobias the entire time he'd known her. Second mention of the sheriff. She wasn't alone in there, and she wanted to get a message to him. Her voice was too strained to be threatening. He could hear the fear in her.

He visually inspected the door. No way through it without an axe. Solid oak, deadbolt, most likely engaged. The window near the door was too small to do any good. No other windows on the front of the house.

"Okay. I'm leaving." *God, please let me be wrong*, he prayed as he headed toward the side of the house where his truck was parked behind her little red station wagon. He withdrew his cell phone and dialed 9-1-1.

He rounded the cottage. The ground sloped downward, and he couldn't reach the window above him. Besides, it was too small. The bathroom, he figured.

The emergency dispatch answered.

"I need police at 540 Wedgwood Way. *Now!*" He shut the phone and turned the corner. As silently as he could, he took the wooden stairs up to the deck. Wet snow crunched beneath his feet, making him wince. When he came to the patio window, he pressed himself against the log wall and peered around and into the cottage.

His breath froze in his chest.

Celeste Foster. *With a gun.*

Kate was out of his line of sight, but there was no mistaking that Celeste pointed the gun at her.

"Shut that damned dog up." Celeste's words were muffled through the glass, but she'd yelled the command.

Celeste moved a bit, and Kate came into view, reaching for Rusty. The dog skittered away, but kept up the barking and growling at Celeste.

Toby couldn't see Kate's face. He ducked behind the wall when Celeste turned.

Think. Think! He reached out and carefully pushed against the handle of the slider door. *Locked.*

His heart thundered in his ears. It would be at least ten minutes, probably longer, before the cops arrived. And then what? A hostage situation? He had to get in there. The cast iron deck chairs would break the window, but that might startle Celeste into firing the gun.

He heard Rusty yelp. He peeked around the edge of the window.

"Don't hurt him!" Kate yelled.

Celeste lifted her foot to kick the already down dog.

Kate lunged across the room, grabbing something off the coffee table.

Without another thought, Toby reached for the heavy chair, hefted it, and swung it with all his strength at the window. A gunshot echoed at the same time glass shattered.

Even as the power of the impact reverberated up his arms, he let go of the chair and charged into the room. In time to see Kate swing a bottle at Celeste's head.

The thud resounded. Celeste screamed. The gun flew from the woman's hand as she fell. Kate took another swing and struck Celeste again, knocking her unconscious. The bottle shattered.

With a warrior-like battle cry, Kate raised the broken neck of the bottle and was about to bring it down at Celeste's face, when he shouted at her to stop.

Kate lurched at him, broken glass still raised, eyes wild.

He caught her around the middle with one arm and closed his hand around the one wielding the broken bottle. "Katie. It's me."

Her body shook in a steady, violent spasm. She whimpered with each breath as her gaze searched his, as if she didn't know who he was. The look of terror ripped at him, but he held her firmly pinned against his chest and looked into her eyes. "Kate. It's Toby. You're safe."

With two deep breaths, her eyes focused. Then her face lost all color and she dropped the broken bottle. She jerked from his arms and ran to the kitchen sink where she retched.

Toby scooped up the pistol, glanced at Rusty lying on the floor whining, then went to Kate. The dog would have to wait.

She clutched the edge of the sink as her stomach heaved. Her legs buckled, but he caught her and held her steady. Reaching around her, he flipped on the cold-water tap. And that's when he saw the blood blooming on the sleeve of her gray sweatshirt.

His own stomach tightened. Fear spiked through him again. His hands shook as he pulled her hair away from her forehead.

She sagged back against his chest, deep, heart-wrenching sobs shaking her. Her own legs couldn't support her. He feared the depth of the wound on her shoulder. He had to get her shirt off so he could

examine it. He could see the hole where the bullet had gone through the shirt.

Sirens sounded in the distance.

He lifted Kate into his arms and cradled her against him as he carried her to the couch. Celeste hadn't moved. The dog hadn't either.

"She killed Rusty. She killed Rusty. She killed Rusty."

"Shh. Rusty's not dead." He set her on the couch and reached for the bottom of her sweatshirt.

"No!" She grabbed his hand with both of hers but cried out in obvious pain.

"You're hurt, babe. Let me see."

The sirens stopped outside the cottage. "You called the sheriff." Her eyes overflowed with tears. "I knew you'd save me."

Toby shook his head as he grabbed her shirtsleeve between his hands and ripped it open to reveal the oozing wound. "You saved yourself, baby." His throat closed as he realized how close he had come to losing her, and his presence wouldn't have stopped the bullet. "You are so brave."

She reached up with her good arm and touched his cheek. "I knew you'd save me," she said again, her words slurring slightly. Then her hand fell away and her eyelids fluttered as she passed out.

* * * * *

"You okay?"

Kate ground her teeth. "I'm fine." She slid off the high seat of Toby's truck before he could round the hood, and nearly yelped when the impact of her feet touching ground jostled her shoulder.

"You've been shot, Kate. Take it easy." The testiness in Toby's voice was unmistakable. Hell, she couldn't blame him. She'd been acting like a bitch all afternoon. God, she was sick of hospitals.

"I'm fine," she repeated and headed for the front of the cottage. The door swung open before she reached it. She jumped as panic flashed

through her, and would have fallen on her ass if Toby hadn't been right behind her to wrap a reassuring arm around her waist.

"Shh. It's just Drake and Chuck," he whispered in her ear. "You're safe."

Damn it! She *was* safe. Logically she knew that. Celeste was behind bars and had admitted to every incident of vandalism and the arson. But that didn't keep her heart from skipping a beat every time she heard a loud noise. One nurse at the hospital had dropped a tray laden with medical instruments, and Kate had nearly had a heart attack.

"How's Rusty?" she asked Drake when Toby slowly released her so she could move forward.

Drake's brows furrowed. "Two broken ribs, but the vet sent him home with us. He's here, but asleep from the medicine. How's the arm?"

"Hurts," she muttered as she went through the door into the warmth of the cottage. Where she'd been attacked less than eight hours ago.

She glanced around, looking for any sign of the struggle, but found none. Except for the broken out patio door, which was now covered in plastic sheeting and plywood. Drake had done a great job of cleaning up.

Chuck came down the short hallway from the bedroom and smiled at her. "Just checking on Rusty. He's still out. We made a little bed next to yours for him. The vet said he shouldn't be on furniture, or rather jumping off furniture, for at least six weeks." He stopped in front of her and kissed her cheek. "How are you doing?" He took in the sling holding her arm in place under the open front of the down jacket.

Her teeth ached from grinding them together. She forced herself to relax and smiled at her friends. "I'm okay. The bullet went through the fatty part of my arm, totally missing anything vital."

"Well, then," Drake said, giving Chuck a little signal with the tilt of his head. "We'll be going. Let you get some rest. There's a roast in the oven that should be done in about half an hour." He turned his attention to Toby. "Make sure she eats."

"Will do."

Drake kissed her cheek even as she fumed at him. She didn't need anyone making sure she ate. She was perfectly capable of handling something as simple as eating dinner!

"Chuck called his contractor buddy. They'll be by day after tomorrow to replace the patio door."

"Fine." She wanted them gone. All of them. She sent Toby a glare, but he just grinned at her.

Why couldn't they just let her be miserable alone? She hurt all over, not just her arm, which was killing her. Her stomach had been queasy on and off all day. And she was exhausted. She absolutely did not have the energy to talk to Toby right now.

But on the other hand, he'd been by her side the whole day, except when the doctor made him leave because he feared Toby was about to pass out. She almost smiled at that. Mr. Macho couldn't handle her blood much better than his own.

"Take care of her," Chuck said to Toby as he and Drake headed out the door.

"I will. Don't worry." Toby shut and locked the door behind the couple. Then he turned toward her, reaching to slip the jacket off her shoulders. "You need to go sit down and rest. I'll get supper together."

His warm breath fanned her cheek, and he stood much too close. Her eyelids drooped. He smelled so good. Even after hours in the hospital, he smelled like spice, musk and heat.

"Why were you here this morning?" The words were out before the thought fully formed.

He leaned in just enough to brush a sweet, tender kiss across her mouth. "To talk."

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth and searched his eyes. "Why? After the things I said to you yesterday, why would you want to talk to me?"

"Because I love you." His long, warm finger trailed down her cheek. "Because I need you in my life. And because you called last night and said you were sorry. I knew you didn't really believe I'd started the fire."

She frowned. "I didn't call you."

He slowly nodded. "You're on my answering machine."

She shook her head. "I didn't—" But there was a vague memory of fumbling with the phone late last night after she drank most of the wine. She'd wanted to call him, but she kept pressing the wrong numbers. Her brain had been so fuzzy by then, she didn't remember actually getting through to him. "What did I say?" Did she make a fool of herself?

Now Toby was frowning down at her. "You don't remember?"

Kate licked her lips. "I was, um, drunk."

His eyebrows shot up in surprise. "You were drunk?"

Heat infused her cheeks. She stepped away from him, pulled the jacket from her shoulders with her good right arm, and then let out a long breath. "Yeah. I had a bottle of wine."

"Okay. Well." He shrugged out of his own jacket, took hers from her hand, and went to the closet by the front door to hang them up.

The silence of those few moments nearly killed her. What had she said?

When he came back to her, he was smiling. He cupped her cheeks in his big, warm hands. "You simply said you were sorry. I was going to rush over here and find you, but decided I should wait until morning." His thumbs played along her throat, and she felt herself melting at his touch. She'd never thought he'd touch her again after the way she'd accused him.

"Look at me, babe." His words were a soft whisper, the same way he spoke to her when they were in bed together.

She lifted her heavy eyelids and met his warm, dark-chocolate gaze.

"You were upset yesterday," he said.

She nodded.

"Did you ever truly think I'd done it?"

Had she? Maybe in the instant when she'd stood in front of him and the smell of burned wood and plastic surrounded her. But... "You work too hard to help people," she said, her voice hoarse with emotion. "You wouldn't have hurt me like that."

He shook his head, his smile growing. "No. I'd never hurt you, Katie. Never. I love you."

She closed her eyes again and leaned into him. He surrounded her in a gentle embrace that stole the very last shred of her heart she hadn't opened to him before. His lips touched her forehead before he tucked her head beneath his chin.

She sighed. "I love you, Toby. And I am sorry. For everything I've ever said or done that wasn't...right." She snaked her right arm around his waist, reveling in the feel of his solid body beneath the soft flannel of his shirt.

"We'll work it out, baby. I'm never leaving you, no matter how crazy you get."

She chuckled, which hurt her shoulder, but felt good, too. "I'm going to hold you to that."

He leaned back slightly and tipped her chin with his finger. "And I'm going to hold you to that."

He kissed her then. The warm moistness of his mouth infused her with heat. His spicy, masculine scent engulfed her senses. She moaned and melted against him. Toby was the answer to every dream, every fantasy, she'd ever had. And he loved her.

Epilogue

Standing next to the bed, Toby silently stripped off his uniform as he watched Kate sleep. The past three months with her had been nothing short of amazing.

When they were together, his love for her grew with every glance she sent his way, each teasing smile. When they were apart, he felt like part of his soul was missing.

He slipped under the covers, careful not to jar the bed, but she awoke anyway. Her smile as she turned toward him melted his heart.

"Howdy, Lieutenant," she mumbled in a sleepy hoarseness that set his blood on fire.

"Hey, babe. How was your day at the shop?"

A soft smile tilted her lips. "Kate's Curios will be ready for grand opening next week." She arched against him and purred.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. What he'd meant as a soft goodnight kiss turned heated, and his body flared to life. Her tongue tangled with his and when she moaned, he rolled her onto her back and came down over her. His hardened cock nudged the inside of her velvet thigh, and he groaned. "You kill me," he said when he lifted his head to catch his breath.

She giggled as her hands roamed over his shoulders and biceps. "You don't feel dead." She adjusted her legs so that he settled against her downy nest of curls.

"You're beautiful." He tucked a strand of silky black hair behind her ear and let his gaze roam over her face. Her skin like porcelain. Her lips rosy from their kiss.

"So are you."

He grinned at that. But Kate was beautiful all the way to her soul. Sure, they'd had a few tense moments here and there. Sometimes she still got frightened and tried to hide, but they were getting past it all. Working through it.

He'd do anything for her. Absolutely anything. She made him complete. She healed his wounds. Made him a better man.

Her breasts rose and fell as her breaths shortened. "Honey?"

"Hmm?" He dragged his gaze from her puckered nipples to her eyes.

"Are you going to stare at me all night, or..." Her hips rose a bit, seating the tip of his penis just inside her heat. "I've been waiting for you for hours."

There was no objection or censure in the statement. Just fact. She never complained when he worked late or when work took him out of town. She was always there when he returned, arms open, body ready to give him the pleasures of late night fantasies. He smiled and slowly, torturously slid into her hot, wet pussy. Their sighs sounded erotic in the silent room. Kate was definitely reality. And his.

"I love you," he said, staring into her midnight blue eyes. He slowly withdrew from her body and reached over to the nightstand.

Kate made a sound of disappointment as she grabbed at his butt to keep him inside her.

He laughed. "Patience, babe."

"I'm on the pill. We don't need—*ahhh*."

Her words ended on a moan when he thrust into her again, seating himself as deep as he could. Her hips rose to meet him, and her legs encircled his hips.

"That's nice," she murmured, her eyelids lowered, her lips pouty and gorgeous.

"Mmm. Nice." He slowly rocked inside her as he nibbled her throat, her ear, and then captured her lips again.

Her hips bucked beneath him, trying to hurry, but he wouldn't hear of it. Not tonight. Not now.

"Kate," he whispered in her ear.

"Ahh. Toby." She swirled her pelvis against him, driving him insane. She nipped at his shoulder with sharp teeth.

"Marry me."

She went absolutely still. He thought she even stopped breathing. Levering himself up on his elbows, he looked down into her startled gaze.

"What's wrong?"

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. Her eyes were wide and so unsure. His heart sank. He'd been sure. For weeks he'd been waiting for just the right moment.

He was a goddamned fool, is what he was. You didn't propose to a woman during sex. You did it down on one knee, in a nice restaurant or some other romantic setting.

"I'm sorry," he blurted out. "I didn't mean it."

Kate's eyes went even wider and tears pooled. Oh, Christ, what was wrong with him?

"I did mean it. I want to marry you. I just shouldn't have asked *now*."

She stared at him as tears trickled into her hair. But when he tried pulling away, to disengage their bodies, she clamped her legs around his ass to hold him within her.

"Say it again." Her voice was tight with emotion. "Please?"

He reached under her pillow and withdrew the black velvet box he'd retrieved from the nightstand. He carefully opened the lid and withdrew the sapphire and diamond engagement ring he'd purchased so many months ago. Never had he doubted that he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Kate, but he'd never known when would be the right time for her.

"I love you, Kate Darby. And I would..." He had to swallow when his throat closed. "I would like you to be my wife."

"With white picket fences and kids? Little league and ballet classes?" Her tears dried, and a smile flitted on her lips.

He nodded. "And weekend camping trips and—"

She threw her arms around his neck and pulled him down. Her mouth found his and she kissed him deep, her tongue thrusting. Heat flared through him and he moved again, renewed. All thoughts of slow and lazy fled when she bucked, tipped him over, then climbed on top of him. He thrust up into her while her nails scored his chest, and her moans made him crazy with lust and love.

He reached between them and found her clit. She cried out and leaned over him. Her glorious black hair fell like a curtain around them. It

tickled his chest and face. Her gaze never left his. Her pants grew short and loud. Her inner muscles clamped down on his cock.

His shout mingled with her cry as they claimed ecstasy at the same exact moment.

Kate collapsed on his chest, their bodies covered in a sheen of sweat. Their hearts thudded in unison as they each tried to catch their breath.

Toby realized he still clutched the ring in his hand. He grinned. "So, um, Kate?"

She slid off him and shoved her hair out of her eyes. "Hmm?" She licked her lips.

He rolled to his side so they faced each other. "Was that a yes or no?"

Her lips curled into a sweet smile he'd never tire of seeing. "Let me see the ring." She held out her left hand, palm down.

His heart nearly exploded in his chest. He lifted the ring and slipped it on her finger, stopping at the middle knuckle.

She glanced at the ring but then returned to his face. "I love you, Toby," she whispered. "You surprised me, that's all. I wasn't expecting anything like this for a very long time. I want to marry you."

He pushed the ring the rest of the way onto her finger and closed his hand over hers. He smiled and kissed her fingers. "You scared the hell out of me with the tears."

She chuckled and snuggled against him, then kissed him softly on the mouth. "I'm not going anywhere. With you is where I belong."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight. "I couldn't agree more."

The End

Anna Leigh Keaton

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle and romance can be erotic—even in her own home. Now her writing has taken on a spicier flavor, and while hubby's off at work, she lets her imagination soar...