



Dangerous Intentions

By

Anna Leigh Keaton

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Chapter One

"If you don't stop pushing so damn hard, you're going to reverse all the progress we've made over the last four months!"

Shelly Newman stood behind her stubborn patient, holding his wheelchair, wanting to ram it into the back of his knees so he'd sit his ass down. He gripped the parallel bars, forcing his feet to move one in front of the other, his face beet red and sweat soaking his gray T-shirt with *Marine* emblazoned across the front. The stubborn, mule-headed, pain-in-her-ass man drove her insane three times a week. And damn it if she didn't feel his pain right along with him.

"Can you even hear me? Have you gone deaf in the last ten minutes? You need to *stop*. You're pushing too hard, and you're in pain."

Through clenched teeth he ground out, "They can hear you in the next county, *Doctor Newman*. Now shut the hell up. I think I know my body."

Shelly kicked the brakes on the wheelchair, ducked under the bar, and rounded in front of him. "That's it, *Sergeant Dexler*. If you won't listen to me, you can find yourself a new physical therapist. Now, *sit down!*" She set her hands on his shoulders, wanting so badly to shove him back into the chair but knowing that would only cause more damage—the one thing she was trying to avoid.

He narrowed those sexy baby blues on her, and fury radiated off him so strong she could smell it. "*Master Sergeant Dexler, bitch,*" he muttered under his breath. But he changed the position of his hands on

the bars and slowly lowered himself into the chair.

"Now, did your momma teach you to talk like that?" she shot, not taking offense to the nasty insult. In her ten years working in physical therapy, she'd been called much worse than *bitch*. But Pete Dexler—Dex to his friends, of which she was only on very rare occasions—hadn't gone so far as to call her names until today.

He lifted the front of his shirt and swiped it over his dripping face. His stomach muscles rippled, but he could use a good meal. He was too thin. She admired his determination, but if he didn't take better care of himself, he'd never achieve his goal.

"Look, Dex," she said, squatting down in front of his chair and putting her hands on his sweatpants-covered knees. She took a breath and chose her words carefully. "I don't want to see you have another setback. When it hurts, you have to stop."

"It didn't hurt."

God, he was a bad liar. She'd lambaste him if it weren't for the flash of vulnerability she saw in his eyes a little too often. But that soft side didn't last more than a moment, and he set his mouth in a hard line.

She sighed and stood up. "You make me insane. If all my patients were like you, I'd find a tall building and end it all."

"Good luck with that. I'll be sure to put a rose on your casket."

"Oh, ow. You're being a real bastard today, aren't you?" She moved out from between the bars. "Get your ass over here and on the floor. Time for your stretches."

He rolled his chair to the exercise mat, and she watched as he carefully lowered himself out of it and onto the floor. He did his best not to show it, but he winced a few times as he lay on his back and raised his hands over his head. She went down on the floor next to him, leaned over him, and slid her hands under his lower back. His muscles twitched from overuse and strain.

"Damn it, Dex," she said on a sigh as she carefully massaged the muscles with her fingertips. "I don't want to see you again until Friday. You have to rest these muscles."

"I'm fine."

“Right.”

Without warning, he grabbed the back of her neck and pulled her down over him.

“What the—”

His mouth was against hers before she could think to shove away from him. The worst part though was that she didn’t shove away at all. When her mouth touched his, her brain went blank.

His lips were firm yet soft as they moved against hers. It was second nature to open slightly and meet him halfway. His tongue touched her bottom lip and pulled a soft moan from her as she felt that slight caress right down in her core.

That sound—her own sound of intense pleasure and need—made her finally push away from him. “Don’t you— What the hell—” She shoved to her feet and stepped away from him, her hands shaking and her tummy quivering. She clenched her teeth when he flashed a cocky grin she’d never seen before and wanted to swipe away with a slap.

“See, I’m fine,” he said. “I just proved it.”

“Finish your stretches on your own and get the hell out of here. One more stunt like that, and you *will* find yourself another therapist. Understand me, Mr. Dexler?”

That tiny flicker of vulnerability was there then gone. “Worse than any damn drill sergeant I ever had.” He rolled to his side and sat up, but he couldn’t hide the lines of pain around his mouth.

She turned on her heel and went into her office, refusing to give in to the childish act of slamming the door. So she shut it with a quiet click then leaned back against the metal, wishing it was colder since her body felt twenty degrees too warm. She’d fantasized about kissing him since he’d showed up in her office a few months ago, unable to walk and pissed off at the world. He was still angry, but at least he had a goal to work toward. If he’d just follow doctor’s orders—*her* orders—and not push so damn hard and hurt himself.

She moved to her chair behind her desk and sat down, closing her eyes and reliving that kiss. His big, callused hand behind her neck, the tangy saltiness of his lips from his workout. Placing her fingers over her

lips, she now wished it had been just a little longer, because it could never happen again.

Oh, she knew it meant nothing to him; he'd just been trying to make a point. But it had been too long since she'd been out on a date, let alone had carnal knowledge of a sexy male body. And his body, even injured and not fully under his control, was prime USMC stud muffin. He worked out like a madman to stay in shape, even if he claimed he didn't because he wasn't supposed to except with her. His entire upper body was luscious enough that she'd had a hell of a lot of very inappropriate fantasies. She had no doubt in a few more months the rest of him would be up to par. She just prayed that when he realized he'd never run another marathon—that he might never walk without a cane—it wouldn't kill him.

She sighed, sat up straight, and glanced through the window of her office into the physical therapy room. Dex was doing his stretches, so she turned to her In Box and lifted out the stack of paperwork to go through. She had an hour before her next patient—their little hospital in Cooper Valley, Wisconsin wasn't a hub of activity—so she might as well get her insurance forms filled out.

When she held the stack of papers up to straighten the edges, an envelope fell out. Her stomach clenched. "Damn it," she whispered. *Not another one.*

She opened the side desk drawer and pulled out a pair of latex surgical gloves. The envelope was the same as the nearly two-dozen others she'd received over the last couple of months. Ivory colored recycled paper. High quality with the brand name embossed on the flap. Only the contents changed. She pulled on the gloves and lifted her letter opener from the pencil caddy on the corner of her desk. She slit the top open and pulled out the folded stationery paper that matched the envelope.

Taking a deep breath, she unfolded it.

*My dearest Shelly,
It was so nice seeing you again. You always make me smile,*

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brighten my day, make me feel warm and safe inside. I loved the way you wore your hair today with it flowing over your shoulders, the sunlight catching the strands of gold intertwined with the auburn. I've always found your hair so sexy, even when you bind it up in a little knot.

I don't have much time to write today, I have to get back to work.

See you soon,

Love you! XOXO

Shelly folded the paper and slipped it back into the envelope, trying hard not to let the creepy-crawly feeling take over. She'd been getting these letters every few days. This, though, was the first one to show up *inside* her office. She must have forgotten to lock the door last night. Or it had been left open today sometime. Yesterday was the only day in the last two weeks she'd worn her hair down, because she'd been in first-of-the-month staff meetings all day and had no patients to see and get sweaty with. Which meant he'd seen her yesterday. Where? How?

The question was... *Who the hell is he?*

The handwriting was definitely masculine, and he always talked about her, and how seeing her made his day. Every letter commented about her clothing, hairstyle, even the odd time she wore jewelry.

The envelopes were left in places she'd find them. On the seat of the stationary bicycle she used during her lunchtime workouts in the therapy room. Taped to her locker in the doctor's lounge. Once, she'd gotten up from eating lunch in the cafeteria to refill her ice water, and when she'd returned, it was on her tray next to her fruit bowl. She'd looked around the cafeteria for the culprit, but no one stood out. She'd even asked the lady seated at the nearby table if she'd seen who left the envelope, but she hadn't.

There were never threats, and the first couple had made her feel really good, like she had a secret admirer. But months later these things kept showing up unexpectedly, anonymously, and they gave her the heebie-jeebies.

She got up, went to the medical cabinet against the wall, and retrieved a hazardous materials plastic bag to put the letter in, then took off the surgical gloves, dumped them in the garbage, grabbed her keys off the corner of her desk, and went out into the physical therapy room.

"Are you planning to leave me down here all fucking day?" Dex demanded, his face red, his teeth clenched together.

Shit. She rushed to his side as she shoved her keys into her pocket, dropped the letter onto the mat, and moved behind Dex to help him up into his chair. "I'm sorry. I got sidetracked."

He grunted as he used his already strained muscles to help her as she hoisted him up from under his arms. "You got kids, Doc?" he asked, his breathing a bit labored.

"Uh..." She frowned at him then picked up the hazmat bag. "No."

"Good, because you leave a kid in timeout too long it's called child abuse. Unfortunately, I can't have you charged with anything."

A sharp bark of laughter slipped out before she could stop it. She slapped her hand over her mouth. "Sorry," she muttered, trying not to grin. Sometimes his sense of humor was just...just what she needed.

His lips twitched with the slightest hint of a smile, and the angry glare in his eyes changed to that warm softness.

"I'm really sorry," she said again, still smiling. Then she remembered what had grabbed her attention and her humor fled. "Did you happen to see anyone come in and out of here today?"

His brow wrinkled as he looked up at her. "No. No one. What's that?" he tipped his chin toward the bag in her hand.

Shaking her head, she forced another smile and tucked the bag against her thigh. "Nothing. You okay from here? I need to run downstairs."

He shrugged. "I guess. You sure you're okay? You look a little shaken."

"My patient *kissed* me. Of course, I'm shaken." It was the best she could do. She didn't need to tell her patient her problems. It was none of his business.

He raised one eyebrow in an I-don't-believe-you expression that

she found just a little too attractive—and annoying.

“I’ll see you Friday. Not before. And take it easy on the home gym.”

“What home gym?” he asked with fake innocence so thin she could read a newspaper through it.

With a roll of her eyes, she went back to her office door and locked it. “Friday,” she said again as she headed for the hallway.

“Fine. Friday,” he said on a grumpy sigh.

She pushed the door open to the hallway. “And I’m serious, Dex. Don’t push it. You don’t want another setback.”

He waved one hand as he used the other to wheel toward the changing rooms where there were lockers and showers for the patients.

Shelly headed to the stairwell and skipped down the steps to the first floor and the emergency ward. Her friend—just about her only friend in this tight-knit little town—was working behind the ER reception desk.

“Hey, Celeste,” she said as she leaned against the chest-high counter and held the bag out to her. “Think you could make another delivery to that sexy husband of yours?” Celeste was married to one of the two local police detectives, and he also happened to be sexy as sin and a good decade younger than his wife. Celeste was one lucky woman.

Celeste made a face and took the bag containing the stalker letter. “Another? Didn’t you just get one two days ago?”

“Yep.” She shrugged. It was a real threat, or potentially could be. After her fifth letter when she’d started getting somewhat creeped out about them, she’d told Celeste. Her dear friend had immediately called her husband, who’d come right over to the hospital and looked at the letters. He’d arrived at the same conclusion: Shelly had a stalker.

So now she turned every letter over to him, and he went through the routine of looking for fingerprints. They’d found some consistent on every envelope but, much to her dismay, the prints weren’t in any searchable database Paul could access. Whoever owned those prints had no criminal record, and wasn’t a hospital, government, or even a state employee. But it was someone who could come and go from the hospital unnoticed because that was where all these envelopes kept showing up.

And now he'd gotten into her office.

Celeste put the hazmat bag in the top drawer of the nurses' desk. "Paul's picking me up after work. My car's in the shop. I'll give it to him then. You okay?"

Shelly shrugged again. "I guess so. Part of me believes that since the tone of the letters hasn't changed, and there's no threat—I mean he's not talking about killing a president for me or anything—that I shouldn't get so weird about it all. Right?"

Celeste wrinkled her brow.

"Come on, girlfriend! Say, 'You're right, Shell. You'll be fine and eventually he'll stop.'"

Celeste chuckled. "You need anything, you have my cell number. And Paul's. Don't you ever hesitate to call."

A little bit of sadness weighed on Shelly's shoulders. She'd been in Cooper Valley for three years, and Celeste and Paul were absolutely the only people she would even consider calling if she were in need. "Thanks, Celee. That means more than you could ever know. I've got another patient coming in soon, so I better get back upstairs."

"How bad was Mr. Marine today?"

Shelly curled her lip and growled, imitating a feral dog.

Celeste laughed. "Ah, but he's so nice to look at!"

Shelly really wanted to confide about that kiss, but Celeste was a supervising nurse. Had about fifteen years in the hospital over Shelly's mere three years there. And everyone everywhere, even in this little backwater town, knew that fraternization between doctor and patient was very much against the rules. Even if the doctor was only a physical therapist. So Shelly just smiled and tapped her finger on the countertop. "If only he had more than his looks to attract women."

Celeste laughed again and shooed her away. "Get to work. Let's do lunch this week. Friday?"

"Friday's good." Shelly headed back to the physical therapy room up one flight. Cooper Valley Memorial Hospital was only three floors with two wings. First floor was emergency, ICU, and ambulatory daycare. Second floor was the administrative offices and rehabilitation—physical,

cardio and respiratory—along with the x-ray department. The third floor had a two-chair dialysis clinic, a small pediatric ward, two-room maternity ward, and the rest of the patient rooms. Anything else a patient needed, they probably had to be moved to a bigger facility in a bigger town, which wasn't that far away, lucky for them.

She glanced at her watch as she reached the second floor door. She still had twenty minutes before her next patient, so she headed up to the third floor. The highlight of her day was to stop in at least once to the pediatric ward where they had three long-term patients. She grabbed three lollipops from the bowl on the counter, waved hello to Nurse Bethie Brighton who was on the phone, and went into the room the three children shared. "Hey, you guys," she said, pasting on a smile and holding out the lollipops. "How're my favorite kids doing?"

"Shelly!" Two of the three yelled.

She tossed the candies to Babs and Charlie as she passed the bed they sat on playing Candyland. Then she unwrapped the third one and approached the third bed. Her heart pinched, and she always had to fight tears when she saw little Neil. "Hey, sweetie," she whispered as she lowered the safety bar on the bed and sat down next to him. "Want a treat?"

"Teet," he said in a small voice.

She picked up the water cup from the bed table and dipped the lollipop in to moisten it, then held it to his lips so he could suck.

"Shelly?" Babs said. "You wanna play with us?"

"I can't right now, sweets," she answered. "But I'll come back when I get off work, and I'll play a game with you then. Or maybe read a book?"

"Yeah!" Babs and Charlie cheered.

The biological clock was ticking so loudly sometimes it deafened her. But then she came here, and saw these incredible little kids, and it helped. Maybe she didn't have any of her own—might not ever if she couldn't find a suitable mate before it was too late—but she had these three to visit with, play board games with, and hold when they got scared or lonely.

"Goo," Neil said.

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“Yeah, it’s good, isn’t it? Cherry. My favorite.” She swallowed the lump in her throat and smiled at him as she brushed his hair back from his forehead.

Chapter Two

Wednesday at noon, Shelly couldn't wait to escape the therapy room. Her morning had been filled with appointments, and everyone was in a pissy mood. Had to be the weather. The atmospheric pressure was super low while a blizzard brewed. She felt as if her skin was too tight, and it would seem everyone she came into contact with was the same way. She couldn't wait for it to actually start snowing and get over with.

One older man who'd had hip replacement had yelled at her, a middle-aged woman with a shoulder injury had called her a cunt for making her do her stretches before beginning the exercises, but this last patient had been the worst! A seventeen-year-old girl with a chip on her shoulder the size of Wisconsin who broke her foot during cheerleading practice six weeks ago and had just gotten her cast off. Wow. Shelly had forgotten just what little bitches teen girls could be.

As soon as the little witch teen had hobbled out of the therapy room in her walking cast, Shelly locked her office and headed for the doctor's lounge where lunch would be waiting, if delivery was on time.

She saw the half dozen white coats through the lounge's window before she entered. Pushing the door open, she said, "If anyone touched my ham and Swiss on rye, I'll have your head."

Doctor James Sidhu chuckled and stepped back from the table with his hands up. "I just want my tuna salad. Don't shoot."

"Looks like someone's had a bad morning," Nurse Jane Clarence said around a chuckle before she took a bite of a pickle spear.

"Is it just me," Shelly said as she grabbed a mug from the shelf and poured herself a cup of not-so-fresh coffee from the pot on the side table, "or is it a really bad day to be dealing with people?"

"I had one patient tell me he was going to sue my ass off because I made him wait a whole ten minutes past his appointment time," Doctor Nancy Pierce said as she held out a Styrofoam container to Shelly. "I think this is yours."

Shelly took the container with a smile. "It's been a hell of a morning. Thanks." She went to one of the round tables scattered around the room and slid into a seat, then took a sip of her coffee, closed her eyes, and sighed.

"Needs to start snowing, break the tension. Two days of this low is making everyone a little crazy."

"Full moon tomorrow, too. That doesn't help."

The conversation went on around her, but Shelly concentrated on her food.

"Hey, I forgot to leave the bag of condiments."

She glanced up to see Ricky Santana step into the room. She smiled at him. He'd been one of her first patients when she came to CVMH. "How's it going, Ricky?" she asked around a bite of salad.

"Good." He grinned and set a paper sack on the table. "I think the deliveries to the hospital will put me through college." He chuckled a little nervously as a couple of the doctors extracted bills from their wallets to tip him.

"Be a surgeon," one doctor said.

"No way, man. You wanna go into orthopedics," another piped up as he dug into the condiment bag.

Shelly laughed. "Yeah, you want to stick with a field where you can knock them out so you don't have to talk to them." She winked and lifted her sandwich. "Take care of yourself, Ricky."

"Thanks, Dr. Newman. You too." He gave a wave to the room in general and said, "Thanks," before he walked out.

"Cute kid," Jane said as she sat down across the table from Shelly. "I see him around here a lot."

Shelly nodded and swallowed her bite of food. "Good kid. Bad childhood, but good kid. And we do tend to order out a lot, and seeing he's the only delivery boy working at the only deli in town..."

Jane chuckled. "So true. We're little piggies."

"Speak for yourself," Dr. Sidhu said as he took the remaining empty chair at their table and opened his green salad with a blob of tuna salad in the middle.

Dr. Pierce, sitting at the next table said, "I'm on my feet ten hours a day." She lifted her not-so-healthy hoagie dripping with sauce. "I can afford a few calories for lunch."

"Unlike you lazy asses, I have to take my food to go," Doctor Brian Manning—the hospital's only orthopedist—said as he grabbed his mug of coffee and food container. "Later!"

Shelly waved, since her mouth was full, and the other doctors and nurses called out jibes and farewells. It was nice working in such a small hospital where everyone knew everyone else enough to be this friendly. They shared a nice camaraderie, but again, she considered none of them real friends. Celeste was her only real friend, and usually their lunches didn't coincide. Besides, poor Celeste, being an ER nurse, didn't always get her lunches on schedule unless she booked off the time.

Shelly looked forward to lunch with her friend on Friday. They didn't get together enough outside of work. And although it'd only be an hour-long lunch, at least they could run to the local pub instead of cold deli food or cafeteria food, which while not bad, was still hospital food.

When her lunchtime was over, she was the only one left in the lounge, and she didn't have to get back to the therapy room quite yet. She didn't have another patient until two. But she did have paperwork to fill out, file, fax, mail off, etcetera, etcetera. She got up from the comfortable chair, threw away her trash, refilled her coffee mug, and then, just because it had been such a rotten day so far, picked up the last glazed donut from the box by the coffee machine.

Okay, she wasn't the healthiest eater in the world. She readily admitted that. But four out of five lunch hours a week, she spent half of that hour using the exercise equipment in the therapy room. She had no

complaints about her curves, and besides, there wouldn't be any shorts and tank tops for another few months.

She put the donut between her teeth so she had a free hand to open the door to the therapy room. Because her mind was on the pile of paperwork ahead, a loud grunt made her jump and drop her donut. It was only due to years of coffee drinking that she maintained her hold on her mug, but she did yelp and turn toward the sound.

Across the room, standing between the parallel bars, stood Pete Dexler.

"What the hell are you doing here?" she demanded. "Our appointment for today was canceled. You're supposed to be resting your back." She scooped up the donut and frowned at the pieces of glaze left on the rug. *Damn it. Damn it. Damn it.* She tossed it into the garbage and headed toward him. "You could really hurt yourself being in here without supervision."

He turned those gorgeous eyes on her and glared. "I didn't hurt this morning, so here I am. I don't exactly have these things at home to work with."

"You wouldn't be honest about your pain level with me if your damn life depended on it."

"Got that right," he muttered and worked on his steps.

She didn't see any real signs of strain from him. Definitely better than the other day. But he still shouldn't be here. She'd told him not to come.

"And I don't need *supervision*. I'm not a child, and I've been living alone since I got back to Cooper Valley."

Oh, she hadn't known that. She just assumed he had someone around to help. Parents, a girlfriend...

Shelly stood back and sipped her coffee. What was the use arguing? She'd been fighting with this man for months now, and it never got her anywhere. He did what he wanted, when he wanted. Period. Probably came from his almost two decades in the Marine Corps.

His stubbornness didn't, however, sit well with this civilian.

"So tell me," she said conversationally, "were you this bad at

following directions in the military?"

He didn't answer. Didn't look at her. Just concentrated on his steps.

She noticed he was using his arms less and less to hold him up. And he was straining much less than he ever had up to this point. Either he'd taken it easy since their last session, or he was taking some major painkillers. She didn't believe he took drugs, though. From what she'd read in his V.A. file, except for the first couple of weeks after the surgery to remove the shrapnel from his back, he'd refused every painkiller other than over-the-counter stuff.

And then like flicking a switch, it all changed. He reached the end of the bars closest to her, adjusted his grip, and turned. Only he turned his body before his feet. The sound he gave was a soft gasp, but she saw the agony cross his face. She dropped her coffee mug and leaped forward, barely getting her arms around him before he lost his balance.

They tumbled onto the mat with her shielding him from the impact the best she could, trying to lower their combined weight instead of dropping, with him coming down on top of her.

"Fuckingsonofamotherfuckingwhore! Argggghh!"

His whole body tightened up, and all Shelly could do was hold onto him. She could only imagine the pain shooting through him right then, and bit her lip to keep from making a sound as his weight squished the breath out of her chest.

But then he rolled to the side and shoved her away, his hand planted on her shoulder. "What the fuck is wrong with you, woman? What are you trying to do to me?"

"I..."

He rolled onto his back, his face scrunched in pain and beet red once again, his breaths coming in pants. He slammed a fist against the blue exercise mat and let out a shout filled with more frustration than pain. "Fuck!"

Shelly got to her knees and sat back on her heels, waiting to see what he needed. She hoped he wouldn't leave the room on a stretcher instead of in his wheelchair.

Damn herself for acting like the bitch he accused her of being and

not paying attention to what he was doing.

His breathing slowed, the look of agony slowly lifted from his expression, and he opened his eyes. "Don't ever grab me like that again," he said. His voice was low, almost lethal sounding.

"Sorry," she whispered. If she hadn't caught him, he would have hit the floor at full impact.

"Help me up," he demanded.

"You need to rest a minute. I know that hurt."

"I said," he said through clenched teeth as he rolled onto his side and used his arms to lift his upper body, "help me the fuck up. I'm not lying here all day."

Shelly got to her feet, grabbed his wheelchair to push closer, and he shouted, "On my feet, goddamn it! Not in that fucking chair!"

"You can't stand up right now, Dex. You're in pain. You—"

"Fuck this shit." He pushed up onto his knees and growled.

"Stop it!" She rushed around behind him. "Stop pushing yourself so damn hard." The catch in her voice and the sting to her eyes pissed her off more than anything.

He got up on his knees and grabbed the parallel bars. Using his upper body only, he dragged himself to his feet, but he grunted and growled like a wounded animal. The sound tore at her heart, but it infuriated her too. She shoved the chair right up behind his knees.

"Sit your goddamn ass down before I get a tranquilizer and use it on you!"

"If you hadn't been standing there mouthing off—"

She pushed the chair against the backs of his knees.

"Fucking bitch, what's wrong with you?" he shouted, but he finally lowered himself into the armless chair by holding onto the parallel bars.

"You are what's wrong with me," she said as she shoved his chair out from between the bars and toward the door. "You and every other patient that comes in here and thinks they know more than I do. I'm a fucking M.D. with ten years of experience in this field. I know what the human body can take and what it can't!" She slapped the button on the wall so the door opened automatically and shoved him into the hallway

and toward the elevator.

"Where the hell are you taking me?"

Doctor Saunders was just exiting the elevator, so she rushed Dex in and hit the button for the third floor.

"Answer me," he demanded.

She narrowed her eyes and glared at the button panel. She'd had enough. If he didn't stop this shit, she'd drop him, and he could go the twenty miles to the nearest physical therapist.

The door opened on the third floor, and Shelly pushed his chair out, past the pediatric nurses' station, and into the room where her three kids were.

"What the hell?" he muttered.

"Shelly!" Charlie cried and jumped off his bed, grabbing his IV rack and pulling it along as he ran to her and threw his little arms around her waist in a big hug.

"Hey, sweet thing," she said, forcing her voice into one of calm happiness—the only emotion she showed these beautiful kids.

"You play now?"

"Not just now, hon. I want to introduce someone to you guys."

Charlie, holding onto the hem of her scrub top leaned around to look up at Dex. "Who is he?" Charlie asked in a stage whisper.

Babs came out of the bathroom shaking drops of water off of her hands. "Hi, Shelly," she called.

"Hey, sweets. Come over here a sec, would you?"

Babs came over and gave her a hug.

"Babs, Charlie, this is Master Sergeant Dexler. He's a Marine. You know what that is?"

Both Babs and Charlie nodded. Babs said, "Were you hurt in the war?"

Dex stared at the two little kids a long moment, glanced up at Shelly, then slowly nodded.

"Wow. Are you okay?" Babs asked.

"He's going to be fine. He just needs time to heal. Why don't you tell him why you're here?"

"I have leukemia," Babs said very matter-of-factly. Then she reached up and pulled the Sponge Bob bandana off her head. "See. My hair fell out cuz they put poison in my body. I probably won't live another year, but I stay here and take my medicine. Shelly says that there's hope until the end." Babs grinned and tugged her bandana back into place. "Shelly's really nice. She visits us every day."

The vulnerability that she saw every so often was slapped across Dex's face right then. Maybe she was making her point. "How about you, Charlie? You want to tell him why you're here?"

"I got hole in my heart," he said rather proudly, puffing out his chest. "Too big to fix, too."

Shelly heard Dex swallow hard.

"I have stomach stuff too." He lifted his shirt and showed Dex the feeding tube that was needed when he became too ill to eat. "And sometimes I have to sleep with a machine so's I don't stop breathing."

Shelly patted Charlie on the head. "Tell Sergeant Dexler what the rule in this room is."

"Always keep a positive thought in your pocket," Charlie and Babs said loudly, then they both giggled.

"That's right, and why do we do that?"

"Cuz sometimes life sucks," Babs said.

"Yeah, sucks," Charlie added.

"What's your positive thought, Babs?" Shelly asked.

"If I make it ten days without being really sick, Shelly takes me to the arcade at the bowling alley for an hour."

"And yours, Charlie?"

"Pizza!"

Shelly laughed, even as tears blurred her vision. "That's right. Charlie gets pizza if he can make it ten days without needing the feeding tube.

"We all get pizza when he gets it," Babs said. "Sometimes it's better than the arcade."

Shelly gave Babs a quick hug. "Thanks, you two. I'll be by after I get off work."

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Dexler," Babs said.

"Yeah, you too," Dex said softly, in a tone Shelly had never heard before. Could it possibly be humility? She didn't ask, she just pushed his chair across the room to Neil's bed.

"Hey there, sweetpea," she said, leaning over the railing and brushing the hair back from his face. "How you feelin'?"

The little boy grinned. "No feel."

Shelly turned to Dexler and didn't bother to hide the tears swimming in her eyes. She leaned down and whispered in his ear. "His stepfather beat him so hard he broke his neck while his mother watched. He's a ward of the state now, paralyzed from the neck down, and has the mental capacity of a two-year-old when he's actually five. Now, *Master Sergeant Dexler*, I'm fairly certain any of these three would gladly trade places with you. You're a fucking adult. Act like one."

She stood and, without looking back, left him there in the middle of the children's room and got out of there before she lost it. As it was, she barely made it into the women's restroom down the hall and shut herself in a stall before the tears came in earnest.

When she was with those three, she did her best not to think about their situations. Babs got a little sicker every month, not better. Charlie had no hope of survival without a heart transplant, but he was AB negative blood type, the rarest in the world, so it didn't look very promising. He was on constant blood thinners, which made it impossible for him to live a normal life out in the world. One small cut could cause him to bleed to death. But because his mother didn't have medical insurance, here he was, in this little nothing hospital without much hope, barely surviving on state aid.

Both kids' parents rarely came to visit any longer, maybe stopping in once or twice a week. Babs had a little brother who got the attention. Charlie's mom was a single mother who worked outrageous amounts of hours to try to pay a minimum of the long-term medical bills the state didn't cover. She, at least, came when she could. And then Neil. No one really knew what to do with him. The state footed the bill for him to stay in the hospital only because there wasn't enough room in the state-run,

long-term pediatric wards. He'd been there when Shelly had started.

She cried until the tears dried up, then washed her face and tried to get the redness out of her eyes with a cold paper towel.

"Hey," Nurse Bethie Brighton said, stepping into the small restroom. "You okay? Saw you come in here and not come out."

"Sometimes they get to me," Shelly admitted.

The nurse nodded. "Yeah, me too. Who's the GI?"

Shelly sniffled and wiped the moisture from her face. "A patient of mine who needed a wakeup call. I could probably lose my job for what I just did, but..." She shrugged.

Bethie laid a hand on her shoulder. "He's still in there talking with Babs and Charlie."

"Great. Hope he doesn't teach them any of his lovely language."

The nurse laughed. "When I headed in here, they were piling his lap with books they wanted him to read to them."

Shelly gave a shaky smile and sighed. "Well. He'll either shape up or really take it out on me later."

"You know you don't have to put up with abuse from patients. Hospital policy."

"Says the one who works with kids." Shelly laughed in earnest. "Come down to the therapy room any day to see what abuse is. And I can't even blame most of them. Dex is just a...special case."

"He's pretty cute, too," Bethie said with a wink.

Shelly raised an eyebrow. "Well, he's not *your* patient. Maybe he'd mellow out if he got laid."

The nurse's eyes widened, then she laughed loud. "If he sticks around till my shift's over, I just might see if he needs a little extra care."

Shelly ignored the pang of jealousy that streaked through her at the thought of the pretty, busty blonde getting it on with Dex. "Just watch out. He's got one hell of a bark."

"Ohhh, do you think he bites?" she asked as she shoved the door open with another laugh.

No, she thought, but he kisses like a god.

Chapter Three

By the time four-thirty rolled around, Shelly had never been so ready to get out of the hospital. The afternoon hadn't been as bad as the morning, but the emotional drain of the crying jag had taken its toll, and she just wanted to go home, take a long hot bath, and curl up with a trashy romance in her cozy bed.

The snow had started around two, and all three of her afternoon appointments had called to cancel, so she'd taken the time to catch up on the paperwork she'd been putting off for weeks. Then she spent the last half hour with Babs, Charlie, and Neil.

It was dark out already, and giant snowflakes tumbled from the sky glowing orange from the lights in the parking lot. Standing inside the main entrance of the hospital, she pulled on her stocking cap and gloves, and zipped up her down jacket. At least the wind hadn't started yet, though it was predicted before morning.

She stepped through the doors and into the nighttime wonderland. She loved the silence of heavy snowfall. The air was chilly, but not as cold as it had been that morning. And the tension bundled in the back of her neck and shoulders was gone. Maybe that crying jag was just what she'd needed. It'd been a while since she let it go. She stepped off the curb into a good two inches of fresh white fluff and tilted her head back to let the soft puffs of snow land on her cheeks.

"Doctor Newman?"

She yelped and swung around at the deep voice. Pete Dexler sat in

his wheelchair under the awning the staff called Smoker's Corner. Dex wasn't smoking though. He sat there bundled up under a heavy coat, hat, scarf and black leather gloves.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you...again."

"What are you still doing out here?" she asked, embarrassed she'd been caught at a vulnerable moment.

"Waiting for my cab."

She looked at the snow covering the parking lot and shook her head. "Bill's not going to be out driving in this. He never leaves his driveway if there's more than a half inch." The town had one taxi, privately owned by a retired school bus driver, who worked when he felt like working.

"I kind of figured that since I've been here for over a half hour."

She couldn't let him sit there all night. "I'll give you a lift. I've got a truck," she added when she saw what looked like an expression of doubt cross his face. "I grew up in the Midwest. I know how to drive in a couple inches of fluff. This ain't nothin'."

"Thanks. I'd appreciate it," he said, but didn't sound too happy about realizing she was probably his only hope of getting home unless he called someone else.

"Stay here. I'll bring it around." She headed across the parking lot in the heavily falling snow to her old, mud brown Bronco II. She'd been driving it since college, and she loved the little thing. After starting the engine to give it a moment to warm up, she grabbed her snowbrush off the passenger side floorboard and swept off the car.

It took a couple more minutes for the windshield to defrost before she could take it around to the loading zone by the front door and help Dex into the truck. She then folded his chair and stuck it in the back seat.

"Buckled in?" she asked when she got behind the wheel again.

"Yes."

She snapped her seatbelt into place and put the car in gear. "Where do you live?"

"521 Maple."

Hmm. Just a couple of blocks from her place. Although, that wasn't

too surprising, since the “downtown core” of Cooper Valley was about eight blocks square. Most of the ten thousand residents lived in the outlying areas on farms or by the lake. The hospital was the biggest thing in town, and that was because a few very wealthy retired people had settled in the area. Old rich people wanted nearby medical services, even if they had to pay to have them built.

“Mind if we stop off at The Ranch House?” Dex asked.

“Uh. Sure.” She slowed her truck as she approached one of three intersections in town with a traffic light. She really just wanted to go home. Dex lived alone, though, so maybe he stopped off for dinner often. She turned right onto Cooper Valley Way—the town was so original in its street names—and then turned into the almost empty parking lot of the town’s most popular restaurant, which was actually a pub by any other city’s standards. She loved the food there, some of the best she’d ever had, and she’d spent eight years in Chicago.

“You want me to run in and get you something?” she asked hopefully. That bath sounded better and better by the second. The heater in the truck wasn’t that great, and a chill was beginning to settle in on her.

“Actually...” Dex turned toward her. In the barely lit parking lot, she couldn’t really see his expression. He reached up and adjusted his stocking cap. “Would you let me buy you dinner?”

“Ahh... I don’t...”

“Please?”

Wow. The man said please.

“As a thank you for taking me home tonight, and...as an apology.” He glanced away, out the front window, then back. He blew out a quick breath. “I’m not too good at this. But I am sorry. For...fuck. Everything. You were right. I’ve been acting like a bastard.”

She raised an eyebrow, and he ducked his head, but not before she saw the smallest, sweetest little smile.

“Okay, I’ve been a total and complete jackass since the day I met you. I get that now.” He looked back up at her. “Let me buy you dinner so we can start over? Maybe...I don’t know.”

“You can stop fumbling now,” she said, cutting off his very painful

babbling. "Apology accepted *if* this really is a fresh start, and you're going to start listening to doctor's orders."

"Yes."

"Okay. But I'm ordering a steak. It's been a painful couple of months."

He chuckled, and the warmth of it sent a tingle down her spine. "Deal."

She stared at him for a moment. She'd never seen him so open and honest. A real smile, and that gentleness she'd seen itty-bitty hints of. Pulling herself away from his piercing gaze, she turned off the truck and got out so she could get his wheelchair out of the back.

The pub was almost empty. Only a couple hardy souls sat at the bar with their pints in hand. The same regulars she would swear were there every single time she came in after work.

"Hey, Dex," the lone waitress said, coming their way as they moved toward an empty table near the fireplace built into the far wall.

"Hey, Corinne. How's it going?" he asked.

His tone was light, almost flirtatious, which surprised Shelly. But she supposed she shouldn't be. Corinne was a pretty, young woman. A local girl. And Shelly was just his doctor.

"Good! Real good. You want your regular tonight?"

"Why don't you leave the menus?" he suggested as Corinne moved a chair away from one side of the table so he could roll right up to it.

"No problem. Hi," she added absently when she turned around and almost bumped into Shelly.

"Hi." Talk about feeling like the ugly duckling. Shelly peeled off her winter jacket and accessories and piled them on the seat next to her while Dex did the same. She tucked the flyaways that had escaped her bun behind her ears and wondered just how bad she looked. "Guess you're a regular here, huh?" she asked as she picked up her menu.

"Not much of a cook. If I want something that's not frozen or out of a can, this is about my only choice in town."

"Cooper Valley Sub Shop has good sandwiches. And the deli counter at the grocery store makes awesome rotisserie chicken and potato

salad." She glanced through the menu choices, but already knew what she wanted. Especially with someone else footing the bill.

"I guess you eat alone a lot, too?"

She lowered the menu and nodded. "Guilty. Totally single. Not even a dog."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why no dog?"

She frowned. "Good question. Guess I haven't met the puppy of my heart yet. I got a cat when I first moved here but found out I was allergic and had to give her away."

The perky Corinne returned with two glasses of ice water with lemon slices on the edge. "You guys ready to order, or do you want something to drink to start?"

Dex motioned for Shelly to go first.

"Chamomile tea, please. And I'll take the six ounce New York strip sandwich, medium rare, with fries and a green salad with ranch on the side."

"It's an apology dinner," Dex said with a half smile that curled up the left side of his lips and made him look much younger than his almost forty years. "I'd fork out the money if you wanted the rib eye."

Shelly chuckled and shook her head, wishing his smiles didn't have the affect on her they did. "New York's fine. Thanks."

"No wine? Beer? Mixed drink?" Dex prompted.

She shook her head. "Just the tea."

He turned his attention to Corinne. "I'll take the same as Dr. Newman, except I'd like the Caesar salad instead of green. And I'd like a domestic on tap." He looked back toward Shelly. "Is that okay?"

She wrinkled her brow at him. "Yeah. Why?" she asked, confused.

He nodded toward Corinne, and she left after picking up the menus. "I didn't know if you had anything against consuming alcohol. I am enough of a gentleman not to offend a lady I'm taking to supper."

"But it's okay to offend me in the therapy room." She grinned and held up her hand when he looked as if he might apologize again. "I just don't drink much. I like a beer now and then, and a hot toddy or spiced rum around the holidays, but I'm just not a drinker. Wine gives me

headaches.”

“And the chamomile tea? You’re not a health nut, since you ordered red meat and some of the greasiest fries I’ve ever had.”

“Not a health nut at all. It’s just been a long, rather trying day, and chamomile is good for mellowing me out...as much as an alcoholic drink would.”

He wrapped his hands around his water glass and looked at it. “This is not an excuse for my behavior, but it dawned on me that if my dad knew how I’d treated you—a woman and a professional—he’d tan my hide even at my age.” Looking up, his eyes held that vulnerability she found so endearing. “I’m not good at not having control.”

“I understand that,” she said softly. “You’re not the first person to come into my office with a chip on their shoulder.”

He shook his head, clenched his jaw. “I thought, since the doctors didn’t think the damage was permanent, that I’d go through a little rehab, get back to normal, and head back to my men where I belong. But I needed more than a little rehab, so I made the decision to take the medical discharge they offered.” He looked away, stared off into space for a moment, and Shelly could see how hard he fought his emotions. His jaw ticked, the lines near his eyes deepened a bit. “I thought I’d be in the Marines forever. It was my life since I was eighteen.”

Corinne returned with their drinks, and Shelly took a moment to put her tea bag in the hot water. When the waitress left, Shelly said, “I’m sorry. I know that doesn’t help, and it probably sounds very trite, but I am sorry. If I could wave a magic wand and heal you, heal every single one of my patients, I would. But I can’t. All I can do is help you help yourself get stronger so you’re not tied to a wheelchair the rest of your life.” She lifted her mug to her lips holding it with both hands.

Dex sipped his beer, set it down, rubbed his thumb over the condensation on the side of the glass, then looked at her. “I’m never going to be back to normal, though, am I?”

“You want the therapist line, or the bald truth?”

He sighed and closed his eyes for a moment. “Give it to me.”

“If we keep working, and you start following orders, in six months

you'll probably be walking with a cane. The muscle and tissue damage is just too deep. We can strengthen you, but you'll probably never be—"

"Whole," he finished.

"Listen, you have to fix your mentality, too, not just your muscles. Set that cane as your goal. Work toward it, aim for it, achieve it. Then we'll take a look at where we are and we'll reassess and maybe..."

"Don't start BS-ing me now, Doctor Newman." He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "How much pain is there going to be by the time I make it to managing without the chair?"

Shelly took another sip of her tea, then spooned the bag from the cup and set it on the plate. "I don't know. The goal is to eliminate it, but I've seen your back." And it had horrified her, brought tears to her eyes. She could only imagine the level of excruciating pain he must experience constantly. "I really can't say."

"That's encouraging," he muttered, his shoulders drooping.

"Do you mind me asking exactly what happened?"

He flinched slightly, but uncrossed his arms and leaned forward so his elbows were on the table. Lifting his beer, he took a long drink, downing almost half of it. When he set it down, Shelly couldn't draw her gaze from his face as his tongue came out and licked the drop from his top lip. It was all too clear in her mind how that tongue had felt when it had stroked *her* lip.

"Not sure you really want to hear this," he said softly. "It's not pretty."

"It's war. Your back was mangled. I never imagined it would be pretty."

He shook his head, his lip curling in what looked like disgust. "What they dug out of me was metal fragments, rocks, and chips of bone belonging to seven of my men."

Shelly's lips parted on a silent gasp.

"Some of them are still in me."

She covered her mouth with her hand and battled back the tears she was positive he wouldn't want to see from her.

"A little boy not much older than Babs came into our camp. He was

alone with this raggedy ass dog. They looked like they were both starving." He looked away, kept his face turned from her as he said, "The only reason I survived is because I'd already started walking away to go get some leftover food. We'd just had breakfast. He was carrying a bomb in a sack. Thought it was his worldly belongings, not a fucking—" He rested his forehead against the heel of his hand.

"Stop," Shelly whispered. "Oh, God."

He took a quick swipe at his right eye with the back of his hand. "It's not like I haven't talked about this before. I saw a shrink. And a chaplain. Plus my dad fought in Nam, and we talked."

Just then, chipper Corinne delivered their meal. "Can I get you anything else?" she asked in a much-too-loud voice.

Shelly and Dex stared at each other a moment, then Shelly said, "To Go boxes, please."

Dex nodded in agreement. It was obvious neither of them were going to eat right now.

"Wow, that was fast," Corinne joked. "Okay, be right back."

"I'm sorry I asked you to tell me. I don't mean to hurt you more than you've already—"

"It's okay. Really. It's something I've got to get past. Somehow. Maybe a lobotomy," he said, trying to joke.

Shelly smiled a little. "If you need to talk, I can listen. My brother was in Desert Storm, and my dad was in Vietnam, too. I grew up surrounded by military talk. And if you need more of a professional, I know a very good psychologist."

"Hanson Wills?" Dex asked.

She nodded. "Yes, he's great."

Dex gave that half grin. "I dated his older sister when we were in high school."

"Oh. Well." Shelly chuckled. "That might be a little awkward for you, then."

"It's a small town. Unless they moved here after I went off to boot camp, like you, I know 'em."

"Which means you know just about everyone except maybe half of

the hospital staff."

He nodded. "Yep. I'm grateful there's medical services here now. Cooper Valley High didn't produce a whole lot of doctors, though, and those it did moved to where the money was. Which makes me wonder how you ended up here."

Corinne came with two Styrofoam boxes and the bill. "You want me to package it for you?"

"No thanks," Shelly said, taking the boxes from her. "We'll be fine."

"Ooo-kayyy. So, Dex, when are you going to take me out to—"

"Corinne, I'm having dinner with Doctor Newman."

"Sorry," Corinne muttered, seeming to finally get the hint, and walked off.

"Sorry," Dex said.

Shelly shrugged as she transferred fries into her container. "No problem." But she was happy Dex hadn't set up a date while she sat across the table from him.

"No, it's not *no problem*," he said. "I went to school with her *dad*." He shook his head. "It's a little creepy."

Shelly chuckled and popped a fry in her mouth. "You're a local celeb. All the hot little things are going to want to get in your pants. The tragic, wounded hero who needs to be saved." She winked.

Dex laughed and shook his head. "That's just sick."

"When you're her age and live in a little town like this, believe me, fantasies are all you've got."

"Sounds like you speak from experience." He ate a couple fries off his plate then reached for the ketchup.

"Yep. Grew up in a town almost identical to this one—minus the hospital—in Iowa." She set the take-out container down and picked up her knife and fork to cut a piece of her steak sandwich. "Trust me when I say I had some major hero worship going on with a few of our hometown soldiers who came back from Desert Storm."

"But you were..."

"About Corinne's age, give or take a year or two." She made a face.

"Stop trying to guess my age; that's rude."

Dex grinned. "You're about my age, I'd guess. Pushing forty."

Shelly gasped in mock horror. "I will never be forty, thank you very much."

He chuckled and cut a piece of his steak. "Yeah, sure. And I didn't see a couple gray hairs at your temple last week before you colored and covered it up."

"Oh, my God, Pete Dexler! You *are* an ass."

He outright laughed then, and popped a bite of steak into his mouth. "Guilty. Never said I wasn't. I like your hair. It's very pretty."

She rolled her eyes but couldn't stop smiling. Even the backhanded compliment made her feel a little too warm inside. She forked a bite of her salad, dipped it in the dressing, and ate it while reminding herself he was her patient.

"So, are you going to tell me how you wound up in Cooper Valley?" he asked after he finished his beer.

"Not a real exciting story," she said when she'd swallowed her food. "I went to college in Chicago, did my residency in Milwaukee, and then went back to Chicago and worked at a sports medicine clinic." She speared the tender steak with her fork and cut another piece. "I hated the big city and searched the Internet constantly for a job in a smaller place. When I found the ad for a physical therapist here, it was perfect. And, best of all, I'm only about a six-hour drive from my parents in Cedar Falls." She put the meat in her mouth.

"And your reason for going into physical therapy?" he asked between bites.

"An almost zero percent mortality rate." Then she narrowed her eyes on him and grinned. "Unless I kill them on purpose."

Dex snickered.

"Seriously though. I did my rotations during my residency. Surgery, internal medicine, emergency medicine..." Shaking her head, she reached for her ice water. "Too much death. I just couldn't hack it. I went into medicine to help people, and some people can't be helped. So after I passed the medical boards, I changed course and went into PT. At least in

therapy they're more likely to get better, and I haven't yet lost a patient due to death from an injury I couldn't fix."

"Just death by strangulation when they piss you off too much, right?"

She grinned. "Not yet, but there's this one guy who's come close."

"I promise, from tomorrow forward, I'll let you help me."

She grinned at him. "'Bout time."

He laughed.

They finished their meal without too much talking other than laughing over the fact they'd actually been starving and had both cleaned their plates. Dex paid the bill, and Shelly helped him into her truck, stowed the wheelchair, then started the car to warm it up before she went out to brush off the two more inches of snow that had fallen while they were inside the pub. The snow fell heavier now, and she was glad she wouldn't be out in it much longer.

At his house, she helped push him up the snowy driveway in his chair.

"Thank you," he said as he dug in his jacket pocket and pulled out his keys. "I'll see you Friday."

"If you're not hurting, okay?" she said. Now that she was here, she was loath to end the evening. It was the first time she'd been out with anyone but Celeste and Celeste's husband since she'd moved to Cooper Valley three years ago. And Pete Dexler was actually a great guy when he wasn't fighting with his therapist.

"Yes, Doc," he said with a grin. "If I'm not hurting."

"Thank you for dinner. I had... I had a really good time, all considering."

He looked up at her. "I did too. Would you like to come in? I don't think I have any chamomile tea but I'm sure—"

She shook her head. She was a doctor, and he was her patient. Having dinner alone with him was probably pushing the boundaries. "Thanks. But I need to get home. I'll see you Friday—maybe."

He nodded and reached for the doorknob with the key. She wanted to touch his shoulder, kiss his cheek... Something. Instead, she turned and

walked back down the driveway, her boots crunching the snow. After she climbed into the truck, she looked back at the modest two-story house. He was still sitting on the porch in the falling snow. He raised his hand and waved. She started her car and pulled away. It was one thing to fantasize about her patient, and another to spend time alone with him outside of the hospital. She knew better. She should have refused his invitation, tried to explain that this town was too small to make any motions that could cost her the job she loved—most of the time.

But damn, it had felt so nice to sit across a table from a man and talk, laugh, tease. She sighed as she pulled into her driveway and hit the button to open the garage. At least now she had a hope of actually helping him get better.

Pulling in, she hit the button again and shut the door behind her. Time for that bath and book. And she knew the hero in whatever novel she picked up would have gorgeous blue eyes and a short, military haircut. A strong jaw with a tiny hint of a cleft. Broad shoulders, strong arms, rippling abs, and soft lips that made her tingle all over when they touched hers.

“Shit,” she muttered as she grabbed her purse off the passenger seat. She probably just needed to get laid. It had been forever since she’d been with a man.

Mr. Vibro was going to have a nice workout tonight after her bath.

Chapter Four

"I heard that you did some tough love on a patient the other day," Celeste said just before she took a bite of her hospital cafeteria burger. Since the snow hadn't stopped in two full days, Shelly and Celeste stayed in for lunch instead of fighting the weather.

Shelly shrugged and moved her spoon around her soup, wondering exactly what the mystery vegetables were. They didn't look like anything she'd ever eaten in her life. "Small town, even smaller hospital." She frowned and lifted a spoonful of broth to her lips.

Celeste chuckled. "We could film our own soap opera here. So what happened? The truth, not what the rumor mill produced."

She couldn't bring herself to try the soup, so she set her spoon back in the bowl and picked up her yogurt instead. With a shrug, she said, "The Marine, Pete Dexler. That chip on his shoulder just kept getting bigger and bigger, so I hauled him upstairs and introduced him to the kids."

Celeste pulled a face. "Ouch. You're mean."

Shelly flashed her teeth in a grin. "You are so not the first person to say that."

They laughed together, and Shelly ate a few bites of her yogurt. "Seriously though, I got through to him. He even took me to The Ranch House for dinner as an apology."

Celeste's eyebrows went up. "Really?"

She nodded. "He's actually a pretty nice, normal guy when he's not

cussing me out and calling me names.”

Her friend chuckled. “Men are the worst patients. I can’t stand to be in the same house as Paul when he’s got the sniffles.”

“Oh, paa-leeze! Don’t lie to me. You can’t get enough of that man no matter what’s wrong with him!”

Celeste’s cheeks turned pink. “Okay, you’re right. But he does turn into a big whiner when he doesn’t feel well. Worse than my kids ever were.”

Shelly didn’t bother to hide her jealousy of Celeste and Paul’s marriage. They doted on each other and spent every spare moment together. He usually came to the hospital to have lunch with Celeste, which meant she’d chosen to eat with Shelly instead of her hubby today.

“We need to find you a man,” Celeste said around a bite of lettuce.

Shelly almost choked on her yogurt. “What?”

Celeste laughed. “Don’t sound so horrified. You need a man of your own so you’ll stop lusting after mine.”

“I... That’s not—”

Celeste burst out laughing. “Calm down, Shell. I know, I know. I trust both you and Paul implicitly. But I also know how it feels to be on the outside looking in, wishing...” Her smile faded. “I know what it’s like to be lonely, and honey, you look lonely a lot.”

“That obvious, huh?” Shelly set her empty yogurt container on her tray. “It’s such a small town, and there’s so few...you know. Good men. There’re the regulars at The Ranch House, but I’m not going to pick someone up at the bar, because that’s where they spend most of their time. It’s not like Cooper Valley has any singles’ activities going on.”

“There’re a couple young, good looking cops Paul could introduce you to.”

Shelly scrunched her nose in distaste. “I’m not ready for the big blind date setup. Besides, how young is *young*? I’m pushing forty, as I was rather rudely reminded by my patient.”

A sly, Cheshire cat grin spread over Celeste’s lips. “Young can be really fun.”

Shelly rolled her eyes. “Yes, but young can also be very immature.

You got lucky."

"Yeah, I did." She grinned again. "Real lucky. What about one of the guys from the firehouse? They're not all young, and a lot of them are trained EMTs. At least you'd have something to talk about."

"Celee, stop. When the right guy happens, he'll happen. That's what I've always believed."

"He can't happen if you never leave the hospital."

Pete Dexler flashed through her mind, but she shoved the thought away. He was a patient. "I go out," she said defensively. To The Ranch House, where she refused to pick up men. God, the truth could be cruel. "Besides, you didn't have to leave the house to find Paul."

Celeste snickered. "You don't share a house with a guy."

"I share a backyard with a sixty-five-year-old biker. Maybe I should go older instead of younger."

"Zach Plummer? Ewww. He smokes like a chimney and is so hairy...." She shuddered, which made Shelly laugh. "He's in the ER twice a year with pneumonia because his lungs are so shot from his three-pack-a-day habit. He'll be lucky to reach seventy."

"Shame on you talking about your patients like that."

"I say it to his face every time he's in. He spends more time out in Smoker's Corner than he does in the hospital bed."

"I was just kidding, anyway." Shelly sighed and rested her chin on her hand. "Dating's a big pain in the ass. And finding someone to date is even worse. I didn't like it when I had a million men to choose from in Chicago, and I despise it here."

"Was there ever anyone serious in your life?"

"Oh, of course. A good half dozen over the years." She laughed at herself. "I was in love at least once every year from high school through med school. And then the doctors when I was an intern..." She sighed wistfully. "But, alas, I was young, naïve, and ready to jump in the sack with any handsome face and studly body I could find."

"And now you want something more than a face and body." Celeste nodded in agreement. "I know what you mean. Though, studly is still good."

Dex's soft voice and the tender look of sadness in his eyes as they'd talked the other night flashed in her mind. That was what she wanted. A man who she could talk to, listen to, share with.

Maybe once he wasn't her patient any longer.

No. Probably not. While she'd sat there during dinner with him taking too much pleasure in the fact that he teased her, she hadn't seen one iota of a hint of sexual attraction on his part.

"I gotta go," Celeste said, gathering up her wrappers and dishes onto her tray.

Shelly glanced at her watch. It was almost one, and Dex might be waiting for her up in the therapy room. He hadn't called to cancel his appointment, but she wasn't sure if the town's taxi would be running in this weather. "Okay. I'll see you later."

Celeste dumped her garbage and slid her tray onto the top of the trashcan. "What if Paul and I had a little get-together some night? A few of the married couples, and some of the single guys from the fire station and the police station?"

Shelly shook her head.

"I'll talk to Paul about it," Celeste said with a grin. "We'll figure out something." She gave a little wave as she headed for the door of the cafeteria.

Shelly gathered up her garbage and dumped it, filled her travel mug with coffee from the carafe on the counter, and headed for the therapy room on the second floor. Dex was just wheeling out of the men's changing room wearing his gray sweatpants and Marine Corp T-shirt.

"Hey," she said, a little upset with herself that her heart skipped a beat when she saw him.

"Hey yourself. You're late."

"Sorry," she said softly as she headed for her office to put her coffee on her desk.

"I was joking," Dex said, and she stopped to look at him. His face was serious, but that cold distance wasn't there. The shields weren't back up in place.

"You okay?" he asked.

All that talk about loneliness had gotten to her. She'd wanted to move to a small community so it felt more like home. What she'd never realized was that she wasn't sixteen anymore. She was a grown woman with needs, and there wasn't one damn man in the whole tiny town who could fulfill them.

She gave a little nod and unlocked her office door.

Dex was so totally out of reach, and also the only guy she'd been attracted to in ages, even when he'd been a total ass. The new, improved Pete Dexler was even worse. The guy had a heart, and kindness, and a deeper emotional pain than she could have imagined.

She took a breath and shored up her defenses against him before she turned and moved from her office to the therapy room. "So, how is your pain level today on a scale of one to ten?"

"Average. About a four."

She nodded and motioned for him to go down on the mat for pre-exercise stretching. When she reached under his back to feel how tight his muscles were, he sucked in a quick breath.

"Hurt?"

He shook his head and looked away.

"Dex. I thought we went through this the other night..."

"It didn't hurt," he said, meeting her eyes. "I swear."

And in his eyes she saw what she'd been hoping for, yet praying against. His bluer than blue eyes were filled with...

"I'm your doctor," she whispered, her chest feeling a little constricted, her skin too tight all of a sudden. She breathed in his crisp, clean scent, and damned if her mouth didn't water.

"I know. So you might not want to wrap your arms around me like this. After the other night, you're not just my doctor anymore."

She stared into those eyes, wondering if she could drown in them. "I'm not?"

"No. You're a pretty special woman, too. It was much easier when you were just the bitch who got off on torturing me."

She swallowed hard, slowly withdrew her hands from his back, and sat up on her knees. "I want you to get better."

He nodded. "And you're definitely not a bitch. I just haven't been around a woman I was attracted to in longer than I can remember."

"Don't be attracted to me. I'm your doctor. I can't—we can't—there're rules—my job..."

"I know." He clenched his jaw. "Let's just keep the touching to a minimum, okay? As you showed me the other day, there are some things I can't control, and the way my body wants to react around you today is one of them."

Shelly nodded. "Okay." She scooted back a few feet. "You go ahead and do your stretches. I'll stay over here unless you need me."

He turned his head and looked at her, then gave a half smile and shook his head. "Yeah, that'll help." He looked her up and down. "Damn."

"What?"

"Nothing. If I say anything else, I'll just get myself into trouble." He stretched his arms above his head and pointed his toes, beginning his stretches.

Shelly's heart fluttered erratically, and she clasped her hands together. This was *so* not good. One-sided attraction was way easier to ignore.

* * * * *

Shelly was locking her office door when Dex came out of the changing room in jeans and a sweatshirt, his hair damp from a shower. He didn't always shower after his sessions, so she guessed he had something to do before he went home, but he didn't have his jacket and winter gear on.

"You done for the day?" he asked.

"You're the only hearty soul who fought the snow to make it in, so yeah, kind of. It's pizza day upstairs, so I thought I'd surprise the kiddos by bringing it early."

"Would you mind if I tagged along? And then maybe you'd be up to giving me a lift home? Bill pretty much told me my trip here was his

last run until spring.” He chuckled but looked uncomfortable about having to ask.

“Sure. Just need to run down to the cafeteria first. You’re welcome to join us.” She smiled, but it was a little difficult. The last hour she’d worked with him had been torture, and the prospect of spending more time with him today might just kill her. And then there was next week, and the week after that, and the week... She headed for the door. “Come on. You can help me make the pizza.”

They took the elevator to the first floor, and she led the way to the cafeteria. “Hey, Pat,” she called to the lone worker at the front counter as she went through the swinging door to the kitchen and held it open for Dex.

“Hi, Shelly. I set all the stuff in the fridge for you. Even made the dough since it was slower than shit today. Oh, hi,” she said when she rounded the display and saw Dex.

“Pat, Pete Dexler. He’s joining us for pizza.”

Pat grinned. “I know Pete. Don’t suppose you remember me, do you?”

Dex grinned. “Moving up in the world, huh? Now it’s sick people not snot-nosed kids.”

Pat laughed and laid her hand on his shoulder. “I heard you were home. You’re lookin’ good, young man.” She turned to Shelly. “I was the lunch lady at Cooper Valley High for about a hundred years before the hospital opened.”

Shelly never would have guessed the sprightly, slightly overweight cafeteria worker was anywhere near old enough to have been a lunch lady at the school when Dex was there. She must have been just out of school herself.

“You don’t look so bad yourself, Ms. Clinton.” He winked at the woman, and Pat turned pink and giggled. Giggled! Like a teenager. It was becoming obvious Shelly wasn’t the only woman in town totally taken by him.

“It’s Mrs. Wrightman now.”

Dex’s eyes widened. “You *married* old man Wrightman?”

She laughed. "He was only old to you kids. He's just five years older than me." Again addressing Shelly, she said, "Old man Wrightman is CVH's history teacher."

Shelly nodded then shook her head and grinned. "Gotta love little towns. You two catch up. I'll go put the pizza in the oven."

"No, no." Pat patted Dex's shoulder. "You go help Shelly. I've got some cleaning to do." And then she did this big, exaggerated wink at Dex and tipped her head in Shelly's direction.

Dex laughed. "I'll stop by after one of my sessions next week, and we can visit."

"I'd like that. Welcome home, soldier."

"Thank you," he said, his voice softening. Then he moved his chair toward Shelly, and they went into the kitchen, the door swinging shut behind them.

"Please ignore the winks and...stuff. Everyone at this hospital who I consider a friend seems to want to set me up lately." She went to the industrial refrigerator against the far wall and pulled it open. "I swear I must be the only single woman in town."

"Pretty close to," Dex said. "At least in our age group."

She lifted out the pizza pan that Pat had stacked all the ingredients on and kicked the door shut with her foot. "The *pushing forty* crowd?" she asked wryly as she set the pan on the stainless steel counter in the middle of the kitchen.

He wheeled up across the counter from her. "Yes. The age at which women come into their own, know what they want, and are ripe for—" He cleared his throat. "Perhaps we should change the subject."

She couldn't think of a better idea than that. "Sounds like a plan. Wash your hands."

"Yes, ma'am." He wheeled over to the sink and washed up, then using just his feet, pushed his chair back to the counter.

After she washed her hands, she unwrapped the dough and started kneading it into the pizza pan. "Since Pat did all the prep work, you can put the stuff on when I'm done."

Dex picked up the tied-off baggies of toppings. "Why does this

look strange?"

"Well. Let's just say that I don't really enjoy eating the pizza I make for them," she admitted. "But they love it because it only comes along every couple of weeks."

"What is it?"

She pointed at the dough. "Gluten-free." Picking up the small container of red sauce, she said, "Low acid, no-salt, tomato puree."

"Sounds like low-flavor too."

With a nod she pointed to the cheese. "Lactose-free imitation mozzarella of some kind. I'm not sure what's in it, or even where the hospital buys it, but it's what Charlie can eat. And the pepperoni slices are vegetable based, very low-fat, and kind of turns the consistency of cardboard when baked."

Dex chuckled. "Yumm-my."

Shelly laughed and spread the sauce over the dough. "Okay, sprinkle the cheese and make the pepperoni into a smiley face."

Dex followed her directions. He even added a couple extra slices of pepperoni so it looked like Smiley stuck out his tongue.

"Cute."

He grinned up at her. "How'd you get involved with the kids?"

She picked up the pie, stuck it in the oven, and set the timer. While washing her hands again, she answered, "I'd worked here for a couple of months, and because I didn't know anyone, I pretty much stuck to myself and the rehab wing. I got restless one day during lunch and decided to look around. Neil was here then. He was so cute. Paralyzed from the neck down and on a breathing tube, but he looked up at me and grinned, and I fell madly in love. When I found out he was totally alone, I started visiting a few times a week, just to give him another face to look at." She shrugged and leaned against the sink. "Like any hospital, kids come and go, except Neil. Babs has been here about seven months, and Charlie's been here over a year now."

"Charlie and Babs have a pretty good outlook on life, considering where they are and why." Dex rubbed his forehead and looked away. "Thank you for giving me the kick in the ass I needed to stop feeling sorry

for myself.”

She smiled at him and gave a little nod. “My pleasure.”

He laughed. “I’m sure of that.”

Shelly wiped down the counter. “You are allowed to feel sorry for yourself now and then. It’s part of recovery. It’s just not good when it hampers that recovery.”

“I thought today went well.”

“It did.” She grinned. “You followed orders.”

With a nod, he conceded, “For a Marine, I’m not real good with that.”

“At least not from a civilian, right? Or is it that I’m a civy *woman*?”

“Whoa, hold on there. It’s got nothing to do with your sex. One of the most hard-ass COs I ever had was a woman. Maybe you reminded me of her,” he added with a chuckle. “Hated her with a passion.”

Passion. Shelly felt that all right. And the more they chatted away, the more it grew. When the timer dinged, it was with great relief she pulled the pizza from the oven and sliced it. She then pulled a lone pizza box from the top of a metal shelving unit and slid the pie inside.

“Didn’t realize the hospital did takeout,” Dex said with a raised eyebrow as he eyed the box.

“Shh. The kids don’t know I make it here. They think it’s from the pub.”

“The Ranch House doesn’t do pizza either.”

“And if you tell them that, I will kill you.”

Dex laughed. “Understood.”

When they reached the children’s ward, Bethie motioned them over to the desk instead of just waving them on.

“What is it?” Shelly asked, her chest tightening in fear. Bethie never called her over to chat.

“Babs isn’t doing well today,” the nurse said softly. “And Charlie’s not handling it well.”

“How bad?”

“Doctor thinks she might have to go back on dialysis as soon as tomorrow. She’s in some pain, too, so she’s on medication and kind of out

of it."

Shelly nodded. "Maybe the pizza will cheer Charlie up, and I'll sit with Babs for a while. She looked at Dex. "You hang out a bit?"

He nodded. "However long you need."

She turned and headed into the kids' room, plastering a smile on her face. "Hey, Charlie! It's pizza day!"

He jumped off his bed and ran to her, throwing his arms around her so hard she almost dropped the pizza box. "Babs is sick again," he said against her hip as he buried his face against her.

"I know, kiddo. Why don't we have some pizza, and then we'll watch a movie, okay?"

"K. She's going to die," he whispered.

"Not today, she's not," Shelly said with confidence. "Come on." She led him to the little table and chairs to one side of the room and set the pizza down. "You and Mr. Dexler have some pizza and show Mr. Dexler how to feed some bites to Neil, too, okay? I'll go see to Babs."

Dex made a comical face at her, but his eyes were serious as he nodded. "Charlie and Neil can entertain me for a while, I'm sure."

Shelly went to Babs' bed and lowered the guardrail on one side. "Hey, kiddo. Nurse Brighton says you feel yucky."

Babs slowly nodded. Her eyes were dull, yet glassy, an eerie sight Shelly never grew used to no matter how many ups and downs Babs went through. "Will you hold me?" Babs asked in a quivery, weak voice that broke Shelly's heart.

"Of course, I will. Should I put on a movie first?"

Babs nodded. "Cinderella."

Cinderella was Babs' favorite. Shelly couldn't count the number of times they'd watched the old VHS tape or read the book together. "Cindy it is." Shelly found the tape on the toy shelf, slipped it into the VCR, and pulled the rolling TV stand closer to Babs' bed. "You boys can join us when you're done eating," she called across the room.

Babs moved to the far side of the little bed as Shelly raised the back into a more upright position, and then Shelly stretched out next to her. The little girl curled up against her, resting her head on Shelly's shoulder.

She glanced over her shoulder to see Dex and Charlie slowly raising Neil's bed in order to feed the little boy.

"Remember. Small bites," she said.

Neil grinned when he was upright and could see more of the room. "Pitta day," he said in his baby talk.

"That's right, slugger," Dex said as he lifted a slice of the pizza from the table Charlie had dragged across the room. "You want some pizza?"

"Pitta."

The music started on the movie, and Babs tilted her head up to look at Shelly. "I have to go back to dialysis tomorrow."

"I know, hon."

"Could you put more music on my mp3 player, please? I'm tired of what's on it, and I hate sitting in dialysis."

"I'll take it home with me tonight."

Babs snuggled back down and laid her arm over Shelly's waist. "Charlie thinks I'm going to die. Do you?"

Shelly was glad Babs couldn't see her face because it took all she had to fight back the tears. "Not today, you're not."

"No. Not today."

Chapter Five

Hours later, the ride to Dex's house was silent. Shelly was right on the edge of losing it, and Dex seemed to understand she wasn't up to talking. She helped him to his door through the new snow, though it was obvious someone had shoveled his walkway at some point during the day.

"Thanks for the ride," he said once he was on the porch.

"No problem. Give me a call at the hospital on Monday if you need transportation. If I can't get away, I'll get someone to pick you up."

He nodded. "Appreciate it. Have a good weekend."

"Yeah. You too." She turned and walked away, needed to blink a few extra times to keep the tears from totally blurring her vision. Dex had been so good with the boys today. He and Charlie had fed Neil, and then Bethie had come in and moved Neil's bed so he could watch the movie with them. Charlie had climbed up on Dex's lap and fallen asleep sometime around when Prince Charming swept Cinderella off her feet at the ball.

Her heart hurt. Her head hurt a little. And she didn't want to be alone tonight. When she got to her car, she turned back to see Dex still sitting on his porch under the lone light. He raised his hand and waved.

She returned the gesture, climbed into her truck, and drove home feeling emptier inside than she had in ages. Babs was dying. Everyone knew it, including the little girl. It was only time. Maybe months, maybe not that long. What would Charlie do once she was gone? She was his

only playmate.

What would Shelly do once they were all gone? She knew that was selfish of her to think, but it was true. They'd become part of her heart.

She pulled into the garage, killed the engine, and shut the garage door. She was so tired. They'd stayed until the end of visiting hours, not that they had to leave, but they'd needed the excuse for the kids who hadn't wanted them to go.

Her purse felt as if it weighed a ton as she dragged it across the driver's seat, and she got out. She flipped on the kitchen light and dropped her purse and keys on the table as she went through. The scent of flowers hit her when she stepped into the living room. Frowning, she wondered why. The air freshener she used was Hawaiian breeze scent, not...roses? She moved across the darkened living room and turned on the lamp sitting on the end table.

Her blood ran cold.

She stared at the huge bouquet of blood-red roses sitting on her coffee table only long enough to realize one of those ivory stalker envelopes was stuck in the bouquet.

She turned on her heel and ran back through the living room and kitchen, grabbing her keys and purse off the table as she went. She dashed into the garage, jumped into her truck while at the same time hitting the button to raise the garage door. She slammed her car door, hit the automatic door locks, and floored the vehicle, squealing her tires as she tore out into the quiet street.

Her heart thudded so hard, she felt it would choke her. She threw the car into Drive and took off down the snowy street while digging into her purse for her cell phone. She fumbled it out of her bag, flipped it open, and hit the speed dial. Her hand shook so bad it took three tries to hold down number 3. Finally, she brought it to her ear as she glanced from mirror to mirror trying to see if someone followed her.

"The caller ID says this is Shelly, but she never uses her cell phone so—"

"Celeste! Celee, is Paul there?"

"What's wrong?" Celeste asked, her tone instantly changing from

teasing to serious.

"I need Paul. He was in my house."

"Paul was in your house?"

"No!" she cried. "The guy! He was in my house!"

She heard fumbling over the line. "This is Paul," he said in his calm, deep voice.

Shelly didn't calm to it though. "The stalker was *in my house*."

"When?"

"I don't know." She stopped at the red light and searched her mirrors. "Sometime today. He left roses and another letter."

"Where are you? Are you safe?"

"I'm in my car driving around town. I ran out when I saw them. What if he's still there?"

"I'm on my way, Shelly. And I'll call the patrolmen on duty. We'll check the house."

"Th-thank you," she said through a shiver.

"You did good getting out of there, Shell. Here, talk to Celeste. I'll call her when we get to your place, and you can meet us there."

"K."

"Are you okay?" Celeste asked.

"Yeah. I'm fine." No she wasn't... "Oh, God. He was in my house!"

"I know, Shell. Paul's right. You did good getting out. Where are you?"

"I'm on Cooper Valley Way. Going to circle back around to my house to meet Paul there. No one's following me. The streets are practically deserted tonight." Her heartbeat settled a little, and the icy fear subsided some. Now she felt a little nauseous. Her sanctuary had been invaded. Her cute little bungalow she'd loved since she first laid eyes on it a month after she'd moved to Cooper Valley.

"Paul will get him, you know," Celeste said. "Especially now. There has to be more evidence if he busted into your house."

Shelly didn't hold her breath. The guy's fingerprints weren't in any system. Unless they found him in her house, it was back to square one...again. "Yeah, I know," she said, letting Celeste think she believed it.

It had been bad enough when he'd invaded her office, but this was her *home*.

"I see flashing lights up ahead. The cops are already at my house."

"Okay, hon. Call me if you need anything."

"I will. Thanks for being there."

She closed the phone and dropped it in her purse as she pulled up and parked at the curb behind a black and white police cruiser with its lights flashing. Lights were on all over her house, so she sat and waited, praying the guy had been inside and would be caught so an end could be put to all this creepy stuff.

A few minutes later, the officers and Paul came out of the house, but they weren't towing anyone in handcuffs. *Damn*. One carried a big plastic bag, and she assumed it held the flowers.

She turned off the truck and got out as they came down the walkway.

"The place is empty," Paul said, shoving his hands in his pockets. He'd run out of his house in nothing warmer than a leather jacket, jeans, and sneakers. "He busted a lock on the window in your den and got in that way. There're depressions in the snow around the side of the house and below the window, but with it coming down this hard, it's probably been several hours since he was here, and there are no discernable tracks to photograph. They're dusting for prints now."

"The only thing we can see out of place is the flowers and this." He reached into his jacket and pulled out a clear plastic bag containing the ivory stationery and envelope.

Shelly's stomach turned over.

"You want to read it?"

She shook her head. Then nodded. Squeezed her eyes shut. "I don't know." But she held out her hand to take it.

Paul set the bag in her hand. He'd obviously already read it, since the envelope had been opened and the stationery was unfolded. It was easy to see in the light from the streetlamp overhead.

"Is it bad?"

"The fact we can't figure out this asshole's identity is bad," he said.

She finally glanced at the words and read them. Her stomach turned, and she swallowed the fear rolling through her. Handing the bag back to Paul, she said, "Would you come inside with me so I can get some clothes? I can't stay here tonight."

He nodded. "Of course."

Shelly made quick work of grabbing a couple changes of clothes and her toiletries to throw in her suitcase while ignoring the two officers working their way through her house with a little brush and a lot of black powder as they searched for fingerprints. She tucked her laptop in the carry case and put it in the suitcase too, since she needed to download some music for Babs. When she came down the hall from the bedroom, she glanced around her home and wanted to cry.

"I used to love red roses," she muttered, still able to smell them even though they'd been removed. She made a face and turned toward the door.

"I swear it, Shelly. I'll get the asshole," Paul promised.

She nodded. "I know you will." She just prayed it was sooner rather than later. Her nerves couldn't take much more of this. She shut off the lights as she went through the house to the front door.

"Call Spenser Security in the morning," Paul said as he took her suitcase from her and waited for her to lock the front door. "They're quick, they're good, and they're locally owned. They'll get this place shored up like Fort Knox for you real fast."

"Safe?" They walked toward her car.

"Very."

"I will." She waited until he'd put the suitcase in the back of her SUV. "Thanks for being so fast. I guess I kind of freaked out."

He touched her arm. "You did the right thing. Call me anytime. I mean it. Where will you be staying?"

She blinked at him. Where would she go? "The motel, I guess." Where else could she go? "Thanks again," she said, sliding behind the wheel.

"Why don't you come stay with me and Celeste? We've got the room."

"No, thank you. The motel's fine." She didn't want to be around the happy couple. She was feeling too vulnerable right now, and Celeste liked to mother a little too much. Shelly would suffocate in their house. Besides, how could she impose even more on them? He'd run out of the house to her aid once tonight already. She was a big girl and could take care of herself.

"You sure? You're always welcome."

She nodded. "Thank you, though. I appreciate the offer."

He shut her door, and she started the truck, then watched him get into his unmarked patrol car and drive away. She drove to the outskirts of town and pulled up in front of the SleepyTime Motel. The town's *only* motel. Snow was piled in the deserted parking lot, and one dim light glowed from inside the office. She couldn't stay there. She glanced around, into the darkness beyond the streetlights, and shook her head.

He could be anywhere. He could be *anyone*.

Putting the truck in gear, she reversed, then pulled back out onto the road. She could drive to Walzburg. It was only twenty minutes away, and there was a Hilton there. She stopped at the traffic light on the corner of Main and Maple. She turned her head to look down Maple.

No, she shouldn't go there.

She turned the steering wheel when the light turned green and drove a block along Maple.

The lights were on. The front drapes were open, but sheers were pulled across so all she could see was the light and the faint flicker of a television off to one side.

Putting the car into Park, she sat there and stared in the window. She shivered and glanced at the heater knobs. It was on full blast, but it barely took away the chill. The clock on the radio said it was after ten.

She had no business coming here, but she didn't want to be alone tonight.

What would he think of her if she knocked on his door at this time of night?

She supposed she could go to Celeste and Paul's, but... She made a face. She'd already said no to his offer, so she didn't want to go whining to

them. And she didn't want to be with *them*, she thought as she stared at the pretty house through the falling snow.

She shut off the car and got out. A wind had kicked up, and she pulled her collar up. She should go to Walzburg. It was wrong to knock on his door. Her feet carried her up the snowy walkway to the front door. The motion detector light popped on over the door, and she squinted against the sudden brightness.

With a cold, shaky hand, she reached for the doorbell. Just before she pushed it, the door opened.

"I thought that was your truck out there."

She stared down into Dex's deep blue eyes.

"Doctor Newman? What's wrong?"

Tears filled her eyes, blurring him. "I shouldn't be here." Her whole body shook as the day seemed to crash down on her. The kids. Babs being sick again. A man breaking into her house and leaving her creepy letters and flowers.

Dex backed up his chair and motioned for her to come in. She realized she was standing there, letting cold air into his house, so she stepped inside and out of the way of the door.

"What's wrong?" he asked again as he pushed the door closed.

She opened her mouth to speak, but her throat hurt from trying to hold back the tears.

"Shelly," he said in a sharp tone, the first time he'd ever used her first name. "Do you need some help?"

She nodded then shook her head. "I'm scared," she said in a rough voice, squeezing out the words she so desperately never wanted to say, because admitting her fear made it seem all so real.

"Scared of what? Do you need the police?" He moved forward and took her icy hand in his warm one. She couldn't remember what she did with her gloves.

"I already talked to them tonight." The tears broke free and streaked down her cheeks, but she swiped at them with her free hand. "I have a stalker, and he broke into my house today. I don't want to be alone right now..." The last word came out on a sob, and before she knew it, she

was on Dex's lap, wrapped in his arms, her face tucked against his neck.

"Shh. You're okay. You're safe here." Dex ran his hand over her hair, down her arm, held her tight against his chest.

She couldn't stop crying, so she turned into him, slid her arm around his neck, and let it all out. He was her patient, she shouldn't be in his arms, but she had no one. Her parents were six hours away, the roads were crap so she wouldn't drive there now anyway, and besides, she couldn't worry them with this. She was pushing forty and was so totally alone. How had she wound up this way?

"Shh, sweetheart," Dex whispered against her ear. "You're okay. You're safe here."

She nodded against his shoulder. "I know." She sucked in a shaky breath. "I didn't know where else to go. The motel was deserted. I'd be the only person there." She pulled back a little to wipe at her eyes. "I'm sorry. I swear I'm not a wimp or a crybaby. I'm not." More tears dripped from her eyes.

"I know. You're one tough bitch. But everyone gets scared." He pushed the loosened locks of hair from her cheek.

She nodded and sat back enough to meet his eyes. "I am a tough bitch." Her chin wobbled as she fought more tears.

"You can stay here tonight. I have plenty of room."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Why don't you get out of your coat, and I'll get you something to calm you down. You'll have a little drink of something alcoholic?"

She nodded. "I think I need it tonight."

"Okay. Up you go." He lifted her off his lap, and his strength startled her.

But then she almost laughed. "For a guy in a wheelchair, you're pretty buff."

He chuckled. "You're just in shock. Get warmed up."

"I need to get my suitcase. I'll be right back." She went out the door and practically ran down the walkway to her car and back with her suitcase. When she went inside, Dex was setting a bottle of brandy and a glass on the coffee table. "Do you have wi-fi by any chance?"

"Yes, I do." He frowned at her. "You need it?"

She nodded and set her suitcase down and unzipped it far enough to extract her laptop case. "I promised Babs I'd download new music to her mp3 player before her dialysis tomorrow." Peeling off her jacket, she toed her boots off, then dropped her coat on top of them by the door. She flipped the deadbolt on the door before she went to the couch.

"Wrap up in that blanket," he said, pointing to the crocheted afghan on the back of the sofa. "I'll light a fire."

As she tucked the blanket around her, she watched him wheel over to the fireplace, then she pulled her laptop from the case and opened it before she uncapped the brandy and poured herself a shot or so. Her hands still shook, and she felt frozen to the bones, but at least the tears had stopped. She was surprised she wasn't a little more mortified she'd just sat in the lap of her wheelchair-bound patient and cried all over him.

Maybe that would come in the morning.

Right now, she was relieved to not be sitting alone in a cold motel room.

"So," Dex said after a few minutes. "Are you going to tell me about the stalker? Or is that crossing too many lines between patient and doctor?"

She picked up the glass of brandy and downed half of it in one gulp. The liquid burned a path down her throat right to her stomach, reminding her she hadn't eaten anything but a piece of dried out, tasteless hospital pizza since lunch. "A few months ago an envelope was left for me at reception. It was a letter in a man's handwriting, and it was rather poetic in describing my hair and eyes and how I brightened this guy's day." She blew out a breath and then took another sip of the warming liquid. "I thought I had an admirer. Maybe one of the doctors or orderlies. I figured a dinner invitation would follow before long."

Tucking her feet up under her on the sofa, she shivered again. "After about four more letters, all pretty much saying the same thing and left in varying places around the hospital for me, I talked to my friend in the ER who's married to one of Cooper Valley's detectives."

"Which one?"

"Paul Jensen."

"Paul's a good cop."

Of course, Dex would know him. "Right. I guess he grew up here, too."

"Yeah. He was a couple grades behind me, but my dad says he's highly decorated and respected."

Shelly nodded. "Anyway. Paul's been on the case since then. I turn over all of the notes I get to him. But there's no evidence to go on. They got some fingerprints off a couple of the envelopes, but whoever it is isn't in the system."

"That's what you had in the hazmat bag the other day?"

She nodded. "Yeah. To preserve any evidence, Paul told me to wear gloves and seal it as soon as possible. Not that it helps any," she muttered.

"And you're sure whoever broke into your place is the same person?"

"He didn't break in to rob it. Didn't touch a thing from what I could tell. He just left a bouquet of red roses on my coffee table and another note. I ran out of there when I saw it and called Paul. He came and checked my house, but it was empty. This note though." She made a face and downed the rest of the drink.

"What did it say?"

"The fucking sick bastard says he loves me and I'm his forever."

Chapter Six

The two glasses of brandy should have knocked her on her ass, but Shelly couldn't sleep. She lay in a comfortable queen-size bed on the second floor of Dex's house, but every time she shut her eyes, she saw that damn bouquet of flowers sitting on her coffee table.

A table she'd searched rummage sale after rummage sale to find. An antique she'd refinished herself. She'd never be able to look at it the same way again.

Dex's house was old, and every little creak made her jump. Wind battered the window, making it rattle slightly. She sat up on the edge of the bed to peer outside. It still snowed. Three days straight now. It was going to be one long winter. At least she was warm. She wore her sweat suit, and Dex had given her a pair of big wool socks when she realized she'd forgotten in her haste to pack any socks at all. At least she had clean underwear for morning.

By the time she'd finished telling Dex the details of her stalker notes and had downloaded a couple megabytes of music for Babs, she thought she could sleep. Dex had given her clean sheets for the bed, since he informed her they hadn't been changed since his parents had left for their Florida home a couple of weeks after his return. This was their house, he'd told her, but they offered it to him since he was now on a limited military disability income.

Shelly got up and headed for the door. If she couldn't sleep, she could at least go downstairs, sit by the fire, and get on her computer.

Mindless games like solitaire often helped her when she had a rare bout of insomnia. She hadn't checked Facebook in ages. She should see what her old college buddies were up to.

The hardwood floors were slightly slippery under her socks, so she gripped the handrail as she descended to the main floor. The stairs popped and creaked with every step, and she made a face. No sneaking around old houses. Hers wasn't so bad since it was all one level and the floors were carpeted.

Which would make it easier for someone to sneak around and not wake her up.

A cold shiver went down her spine, and her stomach tensed. God. What if he'd been in there before? While she was home? Asleep, thinking she was safe and sound? She wrapped her arms around herself and stood at the base of the stairs, searching the living room in the darkness for any sign of movement.

"Doctor Newman?" Dex said from the direction of his bedroom at the end of the hall opposite the stairs.

"Yeah, it's me." Her heart thudded so hard she thought it might choke her.

"You okay?" A light flicked on in his room. He'd left his door ajar. In case she needed him?

She moved down the hallway, her stocking-covered feet soundless now on the carpeting. She rapped lightly on the doorjamb.

"Come on in," he said, his voice soft and deep.

She pushed the door open a bit more and leaned against the doorframe. "You wouldn't happen to have any chamomile tea, would you?"

On the far side of the room, he lay in the middle of a massive bed, on his side and under the covers, his head propped on his hand. A gooseneck lamp was attached to the headboard above him, casting a halo of light against his blond hair. His shoulders and upper chest, the only parts of him she could see, were bare. Was the rest of him?

"No. Sorry. Can't sleep?"

She shook her head. "You're comfortable lying on your side like

that?"

"Yep. Only way I can sleep through the night is on my side. If I'm on my back, the pressure hurts after a while, and on my stomach is even worse."

She raised her eyebrows. "Interesting."

He smiled. "What's keeping you up? I figured the brandy would knock you out since you said you're a lightweight."

She sighed and rubbed her forehead with her fingertips. "I keep thinking about him. The fact he was in my home, in my private space. Every time I shut my eyes, I see those damn roses." She lowered her hand and shook her head. "I wonder if I'll ever feel safe again."

Dex patted the vacant pillow next to him. "Come here." Then he lifted the maroon comforter in invitation for her to join him on the bed.

She crossed the room, passing in front of a picture window, and crawled onto the bed between the ultra soft, forest green sheets. She swallowed hard. She was in bed with a patient. How wrong was this?

He reached up and shut off the light over his head. "You're safe here. Go to sleep."

She turned her head and tried to see him in the dark. He'd laid his head down on the pillow and crossed his arms over his chest.

"What?" he asked softly.

"I shouldn't be here."

"I know. We've established that. Your secret is safe with me. Go to sleep."

Her heart squeezed a little. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, she could see that he was looking at her. The window was on her side of the bed, and a bit of streetlight glow filtered into the room through the semi-sheer drapes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"For what?"

She shrugged. "Everything. Showing up here in the middle of the night. Laying my problems on you. Crying all over you. I feel...stupid." Her voice hitched, and her eyes burned with tears once again. "I don't have any friends," she admitted through a tight throat.

"Yes, you do. Everyone has friends."

She rolled over on her side, away from him, because the tears were coming again, and it embarrassed her. She wasn't a crybaby, but the last couple of days she seemed to be losing it an awful lot. She felt so damn empty inside. Hollow.

Dex slipped an arm around her waist and tugged her body toward his until her back was against his chest. Damn, he was strong.

"You have friends. You're just upset tonight. Get some sleep and things will look better in the daylight."

She wiggled a little until she was comfortable in his hold. A tear dripped from her eye onto the pillow. "I only have two good friends. Celeste and Paul."

"See, you have friends. And you have me. I'm not going anywhere."

"You're not a friend. You're a patient. I could lose my job. I shouldn't be here, but I didn't want to call Celeste again."

"Hush with that. You couldn't be alone tonight."

She didn't want to be alone. And damn if he didn't make her feel safe and protected. "I should be able to deal with things on my own. I've been on my own since I went off to college at eighteen. I lived in Chicago and Milwaukee for years. Big cities. And not always in the best part of those cities, either, when I was poor. Nothing scared me. I can take care of myself."

"No one said you couldn't."

"I came here and cried on a patient. I'm in bed with a patient!"

"How many patients have you comforted over the years, Doctor Newman?"

She swiped the back of her hand over her wet eyes and cheeks. God, she was tired all of a sudden.

Dex squeezed her slightly. "Answer me. How many patients have you comforted?"

"I don't know. It's part of my job."

"Then consider this part of mine."

"That's stupid."

"Why is it stupid? You need comfort, and you came to me. I'm here, I'm available, and I'm willing."

"Fine then. Make me forget what I saw in my house tonight."

As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she bit her tongue. "Wait. I didn't mean..."

Dex slid his hand down from her waist, then up again, but this time under her sweatshirt. She sucked in her breath when his warm, slightly roughened palm touched her belly.

"That I can do, Shelly, if that's what you need. I understand what it is to feel alone and scared. I'm here for you tonight. Call it recourse for the way I treated you these last months."

She shook her head. "You made up for that already." Her muscles tightened when he rubbed just his thumb against the sensitive flesh below her breast. "You took me to dinner, and you apologized. You shouldn't... I can't... My job..."

"What do you need, Shelly?" he whispered in her ear. "I swear to God what happens here tonight will stay here forever. I'm not your patient right now, and you're not my doctor."

After a few moments, he started to move his hand away, but she grabbed it and held it in place. She wanted to be touched right now more than anything. To be held against his warm, solid chest. And it had been so long...

"Your call, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear.

She bit her lip while she tried to list all the reasons. Reasons that all led back to forgetting for a little while all of her responsibilities. All of her fears. All of her heartaches.

Closing her eyes, she laced her fingers with his over her belly and raised his hand so it covered her breast. Heat surged through her at that one simple touch, and her breath caught. She shivered and pressed his hand more firmly as her nipple hardened.

He moved slightly behind her, and then she felt his breath on her neck an instant before his lips, warm and soft, touched the tender, sensitive flesh just below her ear.

Tingles raced over her skin, down her side, between her thighs, and

she moaned. He licked her neck, teasing the tendon with his tongue and teeth when she tilted her head to give him better access. Her breathing sped a little, and heat infused her body. She kicked at the covers until her legs were free.

His teeth nipped at her earlobe as he lightly pinched and plucked at her nipple. She ground her ass against him and felt his erection long and hard. Another moan pulled from her throat. Thoughts scattered, and all she could think about was getting more, getting satisfaction, getting rid of the aching need building through her entire body just from his warm, sensual caresses.

“How much do you want, Shelly?” he whispered in her ear.

“More. All of it.” She took his hand and pushed it downward, into her sweatpants. “Please, Dex. Just this once. It’s been so long...”

“Shh.” He pulled his fingers from hers and softly petted her mound. “I’m right here.”

She whimpered and pushed at his hand while she spread her legs. She didn’t care if she acted like a wanton. She needed this more than she’d ever needed a man in her life. This was so different from using her vibrator. He was warm, gentle, and he made her tingle all over. Her battery-operated toy never made her tingle behind her knees or her nipples so hard they ached.

A soft chuckle rumbled up from his chest as he slowly inched his fingers downward to her labia. “Impatient, aren’t you?”

She nodded and held his hand down there, bucked her hips when just his fingertips teased between her pussy lips. With her free hand, she tugged at her nipples since he only had one hand to work with. His other arm was beneath her neck, and she liked being held too much to change positions just yet.

His middle finger dipped into her, and she let out a soft yelp at the shocking intrusion of pure pleasure. “Oh, my God...”

When his thumb flicked against her clit, and his finger delved deep into her core, she turned her face into the pillow and bit down to stifle a louder cry as flames of heat and need and lust licked through her.

He nipped the back of her neck. He pumped his fingers. His thumb

made tight, hard circles over her clit. She pinched her own nipples and thrust her hips against his hand, against the hard ridge of his cock behind her. He grunted once, hissed, then bit her shoulder.

She screamed as the orgasm tore through her. Bright lights fired off behind her eyelids, and she rode his hand like a hussy.

The room fell deathly silent except for her gasps for air. Dex's hand was trapped between her thighs, his fingers still embedded in her as her nerve endings fluttered and her muscles clenched in a softening rhythm.

A gentle kiss landed on her neck just behind her ear. "Better now?" he whispered.

She nodded and forced her breathing and heart rate to slow. "So much better," she muttered, still holding her own breasts in her palms. A soft laugh escaped when she realized what she was doing, and she pulled her hands from beneath her sweatshirt. Then she spread her thighs, and when he slowly slid his fingers from within her, letting them glide over her clit in silky warmth, she shuddered and moaned.

Reaching behind her, she laid her palm over his erection and closed her fingers. He wore only a pair of briefs.

But Dex grabbed her wrist and brought her arm around her front. "Go to sleep, Shelly," he murmured, tucking her in close to his body but keeping a firm hold on her wrist.

"Don't you want...?"

"Hush now. Go to sleep." He kissed her neck again. "It's late, and you have a lot to do tomorrow."

She was too tired to argue, and her body too languid. "G'night, Dex," she murmured.

"Night, sweetheart."

It was very easy to fall asleep in Dex's arms, his soft breathing in her ear, his arms forming a cushion of safety around her.

At nine in the morning, though, reality intruded when Shelly opened her eyes to see the furry wall of a man's chest, feel the warmth of a body along hers, and she realized she'd had sexual relations with her patient.

Chapter Seven

Shelly tilted her head back to look up into Dex's face, and almost sighed in relief that he seemed sound asleep. Her heart thudded so hard, she feared it would awaken him, but she was able to scoot backwards, away from his warmth, and ease off of the bed without jostling it enough to wake him up.

What had she done?

He lay there, his eyes closed, his face relaxed in sleep. He had to be the best looking man she'd ever slept with. And sleep she had. So very soundly. But in the light of day, her stomach turned and guilt and fear warred with the fact that she wanted to crawl back into bed with him and kiss those soft, sensual lips.

No!

She turned and fled the bedroom, her feet not making a sound on the thick rug. She made her way upstairs to the room she'd originally chosen and grabbed up her bag, stuffing yesterday's clothes into it. She'd shower at the hospital before she went to see Babs. Her hands shook as she zipped her suitcase. She'd slept with a patient. She'd begged him to do what he'd done. He'd opened his home to her, and she'd taken advantage.

She went back down the stairs, set her suitcase by the door, then unplugged her laptop and started packing it away in the case.

"Hey."

She froze. "Hey."

"You want some breakfast? Coffee? It'll just take a few minutes to

brew."

"Thank you, no." She finished stuffing her cords into the laptop case and zipped it closed. "I've got to get to the hospital. I promised Babs I'd be there." She shoved the laptop into her suitcase and reached for her boots.

When silence reigned until she had her jacket and hat on, she finally turned to see Dex wearing a pair of sweatpants. He sat shirtless in his chair near the sofa. "Thank you." What else could she say?

"You're welcome to stay here until you get a security system installed."

She shook her head. "I can't. Really." Not after what she'd done last night. "I appreciate the offer more than you know, but I just...can't."

He nodded in response, his hands set lightly on the wheels of his armless wheelchair. He had that very open, incredibly vulnerable look in his eyes.

She took the few steps separating them, leaned down and kissed his forehead, then turned away to grab her suitcase. "I'll see you Monday."

"Yeah. Of course."

She rushed out into the breath-stealing cold and blinding sun. At least the snow had stopped, she thought as the brightness made her head hurt. She rushed into the hospital, straight to the physical therapy room, and headed for the shower in the women's changing room. The hot water felt good against her skin, but it took all her will to block out the residual sensations of Dex's hands on her. It had been so good. Felt so right in that moment.

Never in her life had she made such a stupid ass mistake! She knew better. She lived by the rules. Sure, she'd had involvement with other doctors, a male nurse, and even a sexy orderly once, but never had she crossed the patient/doctor line. Not ever. And now she needed to figure out what the hell to do about it.

Should she keep working with Dex? He needed her. She could help him. But wouldn't it be way too uncomfortable for both of them? And if she stopped his care, he'd have to go twenty miles to the nearest physical

therapist. How would he get there?

"What have I done?" she whispered into the water. "What the hell have I done?"

Should she tell the chief of staff? Dorothy Bells was a tough administrator who hailed from one of the most prestigious hospitals on the eastern seaboard. If Shelly confessed to her, she'd lose her job.

She turned off the water and stood there dripping a few minutes. Maybe that was what she deserved. Maybe she should resign and search for another job in another town. Something closer to her parents. It would solve two problems, at any rate. Get her away from Dex, and from the stalker who was getting too bold and incredibly terrifying.

She grabbed her towel from the top of the door and stepped out into the chilly bathroom. Her long hair clung to her head and shoulders, but it was her eyes that caught her attention in the full-length mirror.

They sparkled. Shone with something she hadn't seen in way too long. Satisfaction? There were no dark circles under them, either, which was new. Lately her *nearly forty* was looking like *crawling up on fifty*.

Okay, maybe that was pushing it, but she looked good this morning. Hell, other than the turmoil about the stalker and crossing the line with Dex, she *felt* good.

She swiped the towel over her face and turned away from the mirror. She'd make a decision by the end of the day, she promised herself. Some decision about something.

Her clothes were wrinkled from being crammed into her suitcase, so she slipped her sweat suit back on to go to her office and grab her spare set of scrubs. She stepped out of the bathroom and froze, her foot poised over the ivory envelope sitting just outside the door. Right fucking *there*! He'd been in the therapy room while she was naked in the shower in an unlocked bathroom!

She stared at the envelope for a long moment, her stomach quivering and the little hairs on the back of her neck standing on end. It was the same handwriting on the front, same ivory recycled paper envelope. She slowly bent to pick it up then went to her office.

She locked the door behind her, dropped the envelope onto her

desk, then collapsed in her chair and stared at the damn thing. She refused to open it. She'd had enough. If Paul didn't still need it for evidence, she'd burn the damn thing.

She almost never came to the hospital on a Saturday, which meant the bastard was following her. Waiting for her, at the very least. He had known she was in that changing room and right where to leave the damn envelope for her to find it.

She needed to talk to Chief Bells on Monday. The therapy room needed to be locked up when she wasn't there, and she didn't have a key.

After she'd put on her shoes and socks, she went back to the changing room, gathered up her clothes and suitcase, locked them in her office, then headed off to see Babs with the mp3 player full of new music. Shelly called Paul from her cell and left him a voicemail about the envelope.

Fuck you, stalker asshole. You will not break me!

* * * * *

By six that night, her bravado had died. She'd spent the day with the kids. Four hours in the dialysis clinic while Babs went through her first treatment, and the rest of the time playing games and watching movies with the three of them. Babs was still tired but felt better after her first dialysis. Though she hated the treatment, the girl knew it worked and would eventually make her feel better.

When Shelly stepped out of the hospital carrying her suitcase, fear settled over her. She'd parked under a streetlight as usual, but she still checked the backseat and cargo area before getting into the Bronco and locking herself in.

Paul had come by the hospital and picked up the latest envelope that morning, again telling her if she needed anything to call him or Celeste. What she needed now was another bed to sleep in. She'd called the security company he'd suggested the night before, but they couldn't install the system until Monday morning.

So she had two more nights before she'd feel safe in her house. *If*

she felt safe in her house even with an alarm hooked up to the police station.

After a stop at the grocery store to pick up a rotisserie chicken and the trimmings, she headed toward Celeste's house. But when she pulled up outside, all the lights were out except the fluorescent one they always left on over the sink.

Of course. Date night. She could call Celeste's cell, but now she really didn't want to intrude on the couple's time together.

Shit.

She turned her truck in the direction of the SleepyTime Motel. Once again, the parking lot was empty. They hadn't even bothered to plow it after three days of snowfall. Obviously they weren't ready for guests. She'd stayed there three nights when she first moved to Cooper Valley. In retrospect, she wondered now just how sound the locks were. Would they stop someone intent on getting to her? The door hadn't even had a safety chain.

Fuck.

She drove all the way to her place and parked out front. Could she go in there and spend the night knowing that some creep knew how to bust into her house with no consequences?

No. She'd probably be dead—or worse—by morning. She could handle death. It was the *or worse* that terrified her.

The scent of chicken made her stomach growl. She'd eaten nothing all day but a gallon of coffee and a few bites of salt-free, fat-free, taste-free mystery meatloaf the kids had for lunch.

Then again, would the stalker really hurt her? So far he'd only sent love notes and flowers...

Don't be stupid! She'd watched enough made-for-TV movies to know better than to be so naïve.

She put the truck into gear and headed toward Dex's house. Then drove right past it out of town en route to the Hilton in the next town. About four miles later, she turned back. She didn't want to be alone. She was safe at Dex's. He had a security system. Hell, he probably had a gun, too.

She parked behind a beat-up pickup truck in front of Dex's house, grabbed the bag of dinner she'd planned to offer to Celeste and Paul in return for a place to sleep, and headed up the walkway.

The guy who opened the door when she rang the bell wasn't Dex, though. Nope, this guy was standing, about six-foot-four, and lean in a very athletic looking way from what she could see under his flannel shirt and faded blue jeans.

"Who are you?" she blurted.

The guy grinned, but it didn't extend to his dark, almost menacing eyes. "I could ask you the same thing, gorgeous."

She frowned and took a step back. She would have fallen right off the porch if he hadn't reached out and grabbed the front of her coat in his fist.

"*Don't*," she screamed and brought up the bag of food to clock him upside the head, but he grabbed her wrist and pulled her against his chest.

Terror ripped through her, and she dropped the chicken so she could grab at him with her hand, while she shouted at him to let her go.

"What the hell are you doing?" The angry question came from behind her attacker.

"Help me, Dex!" she cried as she kicked at her captor's shin, trying to get a shot at his groin with her knee.

The guy twisted, taking her with him, and practically threw her inside the house, where she stumbled and landed against Dex, who sat only a few feet away in his wheelchair. She jumped up fighting, ready to defend Dex, and ran at the guy.

"Shelly. Stop."

Dex's command stopped her just short of going for the asshole's face. She'd gouge his eyes out if he laid a finger on Dex.

"Shelly, this is my very good friend, Agent Kevin Strunk. DEA."

Her breaths sawed in and out of her lungs as she glared at the tall man who'd grabbed her.

Slowly, Dex's words sank in. And so did the humiliation. Her chin started trembling, and tears stung her eyes.

"Oh, God," she said on a soft breath as she turned to look at Dex.

"Oh."

He held out his hand to her. When she didn't move toward him, he wiggled his fingers in a come-hither motion. "It's okay."

She moved closer to him, and he wrapped his arm around her. "Kev, meet my friend, Doctor Shelly Newman. She's got a stalker and is a little jumpy. She's staying here a few nights until a security system is installed in her house. Right?" he added, looking up at her.

Slowly she nodded, trying desperately to get her emotions under control. Her whole body shook from the adrenaline rush. "I brought dinner," she said, her throat tight. "It's..." She pointed toward the door.

"Right here. Doesn't seem too much the worse for wear," Kevin said as he shut the front door and held the two plastic grocery bags. "Nice to meet you, Shelly."

"I'm sorry," she said, pulling away from the security of Dex's hold. "Very sorry. Dex is right, but I'm more than just a *little* jumpy." She pulled her glove off and held out her right hand to him.

"It's okay." This time his expression was softer, and the smile reached his eyes when he took her hand in his massive paw. "I'll go get some plates." He set the bags on the coffee table then walked through the swinging door into the kitchen.

As soon as Kevin was gone, Shelly's shoulders drooped. She was so pathetic. "Oh, God, Dex. I'm sorry. I can't believe—"

He held up his hand to stop her. "Get your coat and boots off. Then tell me what's got you worked up."

She peeled off her other glove, then her hat and jacket. The shock of finding the envelope crept back up on her. She focused on Dex's face, willing herself to relate the story without breaking down. "I took a shower in the changing room at work, and when I came out there was an envelope on the floor right outside the door. He'd been in there while I was in the shower."

Dex shook his head. "You need to start locking that room."

"I know. I'm going meet with the chief of staff on Monday and discuss just that." She hung her jacket on the hook by the door and slipped off her boots before turning back to him. "I'm sorry for intruding

on you again, but Celeste and Paul weren't home, and I can't bring myself to stay at the motel." She glanced toward the kitchen door to make sure Kevin couldn't hear her, then back at Dex and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Last night should not have happened, and I don't know what to do about it."

"You don't have to do anything," Dex said softly. "I told you. What happens here, stays here. We're both adults."

She sat down on the sofa, pulled the afghan from the back, and tucked it around her. It was warm, and it smelled like Dex. Like safety.

"Here we go," Kevin said, coming back into the room carrying a stack of three plates and three forks. "So, Shelly, you're a doctor?"

She nodded.

"Private practice?" He sat down on the chair opposite the couch and opened the bags of food.

"No. I work at the hospital."

"This smells great. Doctor of what?"

She clenched her teeth. *What happens here, stays here.* She glanced at Dex. Little town, big gossip. Would this stranger keep his mouth shut?

"She's my physical therapist," Dex answered. "She's fairly new to town and doesn't have anywhere else to stay. So I offered her one of the rooms upstairs."

Kevin nodded and pulled the lid from a container of potato salad. "Cool. We'll be neighbors tonight." He grinned at her.

"You don't live here? In Cooper Valley, I mean," she asked, relaxing a little at his laid-back attitude.

"Naw. Just stopping through on my way to a job on the left coast."

She glanced at Dex, unsure what Kevin just said.

Dex chuckled. "Dish me up, would you?" he asked. "Dark meat, please."

She nodded and reached for a plate.

"Kev, why don't you explain what you just said," Dex said.

Kevin, plate laden with potato salad, chicken breast, and two biscuits, sat back and lifted his fork. "I worked deep undercover for a while. We finally made the big bust about three years ago, and I've been

in hiding since then so I could testify without being picked off. The last of eight trials ended two weeks ago. My boss wanted me to take a sabbatical, but I've been sitting on my thumbs in an office for the last three years and wanted to get back to work. So, he's sending me to some hick town on the Oregon coast to nose around."

"Nose around for what?" she asked as she handed a plate and fork to Dex.

Kevin sighed. "We don't know." He made a face. "My boss is sending me on vacation, basically. He's buddies with the town sheriff there, who *thinks* there's some drug smuggling going on in his town. He's got no proof, so the state police and other law enforcement aren't really listening. So boss man said for me to go check it out, and enjoy myself while I'm there. Paid holiday."

"Where in Oregon?" Dex asked.

"Some little town called Moonlight Cove. Population negative eight, I think."

Shelly chuckled. "I adore the little Oregon coastal towns. An aunt on my dad's side lived there when I was a teenager, and we visited once. It's so pretty. But like all little towns, they seem very cliquish." She dished up her own plate of food while she talked. "It's hard to come in as an outsider and feel like you fit in. They're friendly enough, but you always feel like they're looking at you funny."

Kevin nodded. "Well, that's my specialty. And my cover...get this." He laughed. "Lighthouse keeper."

She looked up from the container of potato salad. Surely he was teasing. "Serious?"

He nodded. "The one there is a fishing buddy of the sheriff. He's getting a vacation somewhere warm and sunny on the town's dime, while I come in and cover for him for a few weeks and poke around."

"I thought all lighthouses were electronic now," Dex said around a bite of chicken. He licked his thumb. "And you are so technically inept you can't even send email."

Kevin laughed. "Apparently the sheriff knows what needs to be done. And you're an asshole."

"I've been telling him that for months," Shelly piped in, then laughed when Dex tossed a chunk of biscuit at her.

"She's the worst drill sergeant I ever had," Dex said with heat.

"You like taking a beating from a woman," she threw back.

Kevin and Dex laughed, and Shelly's face warmed at her un-thought-out comment. These two put her too much at ease. Made her too comfortable. She needed to watch her tongue.

"Sounds like you met your match, Dex," Kevin said.

"Not even," Dex said and narrowed his eyes at her, but a smile tilted his lips. "I know her soft spots."

"I have no soft spots," she said defiantly and turned back to Kevin. "You grew up in Cooper Valley?"

"Yep. We lived across the street." He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "Dex and I grew up together, beating each other up, fighting over girls, and taking CV High to state championship our senior year."

"Championship in what?"

"Everything," the two guys said together, then laughed.

"Basketball, football, and baseball," Kevin said.

She raised her eyebrows. "Impressive."

"When there's only forty kids per class year, the best gotta do what they can," Dex bragged.

She snickered and shook her head. "And so very modest, too. I suppose you dated the head cheerleader?"

Kevin raised his hand. "That'd be me. Dex liked the nerdy girls. His date to prom was the head of the debate team. Maybe that's why he's after a doctor now."

Shelly started shaking her head.

"Shelly's just a friend, Kev," Dex said.

"Oh. Sorry. Just the way you two look at each other..." He stood up. "Beer?"

"Please," Dex said.

"Yes, please," Shelly said softly. She nibbled on her biscuit, amazed at how easily she'd relaxed with Dex and his friend.

"Shelly," Dex said softly. "It's okay. He's a friend, and he's leaving town tomorrow. It'll be fine. I swear."

She nodded, but the fear still ate at her. She'd seriously considered resigning from the hospital, but then she'd spent the day with the kids and couldn't imagine leaving them. And then she looked at Dex sitting there, and she couldn't really imagine never seeing him again, either.

She bit her tongue. What the hell was she going to do? "I need to tell the chief of staff about—"

Kevin came back into the room carrying three open bottles of imported beer. He passed them out.

"You don't have to tell anyone anything you don't want to," Dex said firmly.

Kevin sat back down and took a swig from his bottle. "Whatever is going on here, I see nothing, and I hear nothing, okay? I dropped by uninvited. In fact, I'm not really here. I'm supposed to be hauling ass across the country since I refused to fly."

"Thanks," she muttered. The truth of the situation was that it was her guilt eating at her, not fear of being found out. She'd broken rules.

She never broke rules.

Ever.

But looking at Dex, she'd be very willing to break them again right here, tonight, if he'd hold her once more.

"So, Kev," Dex said, setting his empty plate on the coffee table. "Why don't you tell Shelly some of your war stories? How about the one where you busted that guy who was into BDSM and hid his drugs in the sex toys..."

Chapter Eight

For the next few hours, Kevin regaled them with the more humorous of his years in law enforcement, starting out as a traffic cop in Chicago, making detective by the time he was twenty-seven—practically unheard of—and then making the move to the DEA not long after that.

By eleven that night, Shelly's stomach hurt from laughing so hard, and for once in a very long time, she felt at peace for the moment. Relaxed.

She yawned yet again, her eyes watering. "I'm sorry to bag out on you guys, but I'm beat." She stood up and went for her boots.

"You're leaving?" Dex asked.

She smiled and shook her head. "My suitcase is in the truck."

"I'll get it," Kevin said, rising from his seat. "I want to grab a quick smoke anyway."

"Thank you." She dug into her coat pocket and pulled out her keys. "Please make sure it's locked."

"Of course," Kevin said, pulling on his jacket. "Be back in a few."

A cold draft flowed over her feet as he went out the door. Turning back toward Dex, she smiled. "Thank you for letting me be a part of tonight. I haven't had such an enjoyable time in..." She shrugged. "Well, probably forever."

Dex nodded. "I told you you're welcome here."

"I know. But you probably would have preferred more private time with your friend you haven't seen in years." She sat back down on the sofa a couple of feet from Dex in his wheelchair. It was safer to keep her

distance. She wanted so badly to sit in his lap again, wrap her arms around him, and rest her head on his shoulder.

"Nope. Tonight was good. I'm glad you were here. I'm happy you could let go and laugh."

She ducked her head and grinned. "You laughed pretty hard yourself, you know." Looking back up at him, she said, "I'm guessing his twenty years in law enforcement aren't all a barrel of laughs, though."

"No. He's seen some bad shit. He's just very good at compartmentalizing everything." He sighed. "Something I need to learn better."

She liked that he didn't try to hide his vulnerabilities from her any longer. Another reason to keep her distance. He was too easy to like, to care for. "Takes time, I'm sure."

He nodded. "Did you let Paul know about the latest envelope?"

"Yeah." And like a bucket of cold water, he splashed reality in her face. "He came by the hospital this afternoon and picked it up."

"What'd it say?"

She shrugged. "I didn't read it. I'm done reading them." Claspings her hands together, she said, "He's getting way too close. He could have easily walked through that door to the shower. Realizing that was scarier than having him in my home when I wasn't there. I'm not an idiot. I watch *20/20* and *Dateline*. I know what stalkers do. It escalates until it explodes—till *he* explodes. The notes are coming more often. He broke into my home. He was literally feet away from where I was naked in a shower..." She shook her head and pressed her lips together. "But he's a goddamn ghost."

"He seems to have pretty easy access to the hospital. Do you think it's someone who works there?"

She shook her head. "All health care workers, the janitorial and kitchen staff, *everyone* who work at the hospital are fingerprinted and given thorough background checks. He doesn't work there. But there's really no security in the hospital either, because it's so small. The entire town is so small. It's not like a downtown Chicago medical center where you have to worry about gangs and guns and stuff. The last gunshot

wound in Cooper Valley Memorial was Paul.”

“Paul was shot?” Dex asked, his eyes widening.

She nodded. “Yeah, a couple of years ago, before he and Celeste got married. I’d just moved here, in fact. Some guy killed a little old lady in town during a robbery gone bad. Paul and Liam, his partner, tracked the guy to some shack in the woods. He shot Paul through the door. Then Liam shot the bad guy. Biggest news story around here in fifty years, from what I could tell.”

“No shit. Wow. I’m surprised Mom and Dad didn’t tell me about it.”

The door opened, and Kevin came in holding her suitcase. The slight scent of tobacco followed him, and she was surprised she hadn’t noticed before. She had a very sensitive nose, and the smell of cigarettes was usually easy to spot.

“Here you go,” Kevin said, handing her back her keys. “Both doors are locked. Everything seems normal out there. Colder than all hell, but normal.”

She stood up to take the keys and put them back in her jacket. “Thanks. Again.” Lifting her suitcase, she said, “I’ll see you both in the morning.”

“G’night,” Kevin said.

“Night, Shelly,” Dex said.

She touched his shoulder as she passed him, and he smiled. Toting her suitcase, she went up to the room she’d picked out the night before, and realized she was wearing what she’d slept in last night. Good God. Scrounging through the myriad of clothes she’d haphazardly thrown in her bag, she found her pair of pajamas—flannel shorts and button-up top—and changed into them. The taste of beer was still strong in her mouth, and not something she cared for, so she headed for the bathroom and brushed her teeth. After, she decided to go downstairs and get a glass of ice water.

She’d just stepped onto the top stair, when she heard Kevin say, “So, are you gonna tell me what’s up with the gorgeous doc, or what?”

She stopped moving and waited for a response from Dex.

"She's alone and needed someplace safe to stay for a couple of nights."

"I don't buy it. If you two aren't doin' the nasty, you ought to be. You two can't keep your eyes off each other. Shit, she's gorgeous. I'd do her in a heartbeat."

"Enough." That one word was a hard command from Dex.

Shelly held her breath, waiting. After a long pause, Kevin said, "So, is it one-sided? You want her, but she just needs a roof to crash under?"

Again, another long stretch of silence. Shelly thought it might kill her if Dex didn't answer. "I don't know what's inside her, Kev. I wish to God I did. Up until a week ago, I couldn't stand her. She's my therapist and fucking tortures me three times a week, yells at me. Hell, she even calls me names..."

Shelly bit her lip to keep from laughing.

"...but this past week, she let me see a whole other side of her. She's fucking amazing. I fell, and I fell hard. Faster than I ever thought possible. But the fact is, I'm her patient, and if anything, she's dedicated to her profession, going way above and beyond what's asked of her at that hospital. Everyone knows the rules about doctors and patients. Besides..." He cleared his throat. "Besides, I'm stuck in a damn wheelchair and might never get out of it. It's not like I have anything to offer a woman, especially a career woman who's got more brains than anyone I've ever known. No job, living in my parents' home..."

Shelly shook her head, wanting to argue with him. He had everything she'd ever sought in a man. He was a hero in every sense of the word, even if he covered it with attitude and a potty mouth.

Kevin scoffed. "Oh fuck, man, get off the pity-me train. I know what your trust fund looks like. No, scratch that. I knew what it looked like twenty years ago, and if I know you, you haven't touched a damn dime, which means even though the economy tanked, you could happily retire, buy a fucking yacht, and waste away the rest of your days cruising around the world."

Her mouth dropped open. Dex was *rich*?

"Yeah, that sounds like me, doesn't it?" He chuckled. "No, I

haven't touched much of the money, though it's paying for my rehab. The one luxury I did afford myself was getting the hell out of the VA hospital. Not that there was anything wrong with it, but since I had the funds, I decided to leave what little there is for the government to use on vets who need the help.

"So sweep the pretty doctor off her feet, fly her to some tropical island, and show her you still have all your working...parts."

"How the fuck do you know my parts work when my legs don't?"

Kevin laughed. "Because, old friend, you got a boner at one point while you were gazing at her longingly during one of my stories. I'm a cop, remember? It's all about body language observation, and your body was doin' a *lot* of talking right then."

"Shut the fuck up and get out of my house," Dex said, but there was no heat in his words.

Shelly turned around to go back to her room. She didn't want Dex knowing she'd heard any of that conversation. She doubted he'd think highly of eavesdroppers, and she was sure he'd never want her to know that he'd fallen for her.

Kevin laughed raucously. "Don't sell yourself short, Dex. She's got the hots for you, too." He grew quiet for a moment, and Shelly stopped moving away from the stairs. "Don't let her go," he said softly. "If she's the one, grab hold of her and never fucking let go."

Dex's voice dropped, and she couldn't hear whatever he murmured in response, so she headed back to her room, shut off the light, and climbed between the sheets. Kevin's last comment sounded so very heartfelt, she was sure he spoke from experience.

She didn't give a flying fig about Dex's trust fund. In college, she'd dated two trust fund guys, and God, they'd been horrible. Immature, spoiled, obnoxious. Dex was none of those things. Well, he could be extremely obnoxious at times, but she couldn't blame him for it. Not with what he'd survived and endured daily.

She rolled over and hugged her pillow. Dex would walk again. She had no doubt about that. But he'd never walk normally, without a cane at least. She'd felt his hard-on last night in bed, so she agreed with Kevin

there. His parts definitely worked. If he was attracted to her, why had he told her no? Especially after she'd offered to satisfy him? Was he so altruistic he was trying to save her from herself? She'd told him a few times that what she was doing was wrong because of her job, because of who he was. Maybe he didn't want to add to her guilt.

She frowned into the darkness. Each moment she knew him, she learned something else about him that made him even better. Would she still think so if she gave up her job in order to be with him?

* * * * *

Something woke Shelly up. She turned her arm so she could read her watch in the faint light coming through the window from the streetlights outside. It was just after three in the morning.

Her mouth felt like cotton, and she definitely needed that glass of water now. Throwing back the covers, she sat up. She couldn't figure out what awakened her, but she was sure she'd heard a noise. Maybe the guys were still talking downstairs. They hadn't seen each other in years, so it was possible.

She went to the door and opened it but didn't see any light coming from the direction of the stairs, and she didn't hear anything either. Padding down the empty hallway, she reached the top of the steps and looked down. A low light glowed, but she remembered that from last night, too. There was a little, blue LED nightlight in the hallway at the bottom of the steps. She'd thought it cute since the housing on the light was a teddy bear.

With a sigh, she went down the stairs and into the kitchen, where the light over the stove glowed, nearly blinding her. Squinting, she went to the cupboards near the sink and started going through them in search of a glass.

A soft shout made her jump, and she nearly dropped the glass she'd found. Her heart hammered, and her skin prickled. There was no way her stalker could get into this house. No way. There was a security system, and she was sure Dex had set it before he went to bed. He had the

night before.

"No!" It was Dex, but his voice was muffled.

Of course, it was muffled. She was in the kitchen behind a closed door. She set the glass on the counter and moved toward the door to the living room. At the last second, she grabbed the longest knife out of the butcher block on the counter and then pushed the door to the living room open.

There was a lot of noise coming from Dex's room. Soft cries, shouts, sounds like wounded animals. Holding the knife up, she headed in that direction. No one was going to hurt him!

Standing in his doorway was a big figure, damn tall and wearing nothing but tighty-whities. She was about to take a swing with the knife when he turned, and the blue nightlight caught his features. She almost tripped over her own feet trying to stop herself from falling against Kevin.

He caught her by the arms and held her away from him. "What are you doing?" he whispered harshly.

"What's wrong with Dex?"

He looked over his shoulder, the shouts and cries louder now that Shelly was so close to his open bedroom door.

"I think he's having a nightmare. His shout woke me up."

She nodded. That must have been what awakened her. "Here. Let me go to him." She handed him the knife.

He grabbed her arm, stilling her. "He's been in the war."

She frowned up at him in confusion.

"Honey, he's a trained killer. That's why I was standing here. If he's reliving something..." He shook his head. "I know what I've done when I was asleep, and he's seen worse than I could ever imagine."

She ripped her arm from his light grasp. "I'm not going to let him suffer alone." She rushed to the side of the bed. The first thing she did was put her knee on the edge so she could lean over him and turn on the light over the bed.

Dex didn't move much, but it looked as if every muscle in his body was strained to the breaking point. His face was red, his head back into the pillow, the tendons in his neck standing out. His hands were fisted at

his sides, his biceps bulging.

"Dex," she said softly. "Dex, wake up."

He moaned, and the horrible sound cut through her as surely as if it were a knife.

"Pete," she said a little firmer. "Pete Dexler. You need to wake up."

"No!" He shouted and sat bolt upright at the same time swinging out with his right arm, hand still fisted.

She ducked and fell off the side of the bed, but scrambled to her feet when Dex gasped and his eyes finally opened.

"Dex."

His upper body was covered in perspiration, and he shook. He stared down at his clenched hands in his lap, gasping for breath.

"Pete."

He turned his head toward her, his eyes wide, filled with terror.

"Oh, Pete," she whispered as she sat down next to him and held out her arms.

He grabbed her hard and pulled her against his chest, nearly crushing her as he buried his face in her hair. His breaths sawed in and out, his whole body shaking.

"It's okay, Pete. I'm here. You're safe. You're safe now."

He clung to her, nearly squeezing the breath from her lungs, but she didn't care. She'd give him her life if it would take away the memories that made him like this in the middle of the night.

"Everything's okay now," she whispered. "You're safe."

His breathing eventually slowed, and he lay back on his pillows, pulling her with him.

"Your back," she protested.

"Hurts like a fucking bitch."

"Where are your pills?"

"I don't want any. Just stay with me."

"I'm here. I'm not going anywhere." When she looked toward the door, it was closed and Kevin was gone. "I'm right here." She reached up and shut off the light over their heads.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the darkness.

“Shh. It’s okay.”

His body slowly relaxed as she lay snuggled against his chest, her body half over his, her arms around him. She worried about his back, since he told her it hurt to lie on it.

When his grip on her loosened, she moved off of him and murmured for him to roll toward her. He did so, and she rolled over so he could put his arms around her. It amazed her that he could fall asleep so fast after what he’d just gone through. She was still thirsty, even more so now, but she stayed put. He needed her, and she wouldn’t leave him. Wasn’t that what he’d done for her last night?

She laced her fingers through his against her belly and snuggled back against him a little more comfortably.

Chapter Nine

It was still mostly dark when Shelly awoke again, and the clock beside the bed said it was just before eight. It was Sunday morning, and she had nowhere to be. She'd told Babs she wouldn't be in until afternoon to check on her. But she had to pee, and she was really thirsty now, so she eased out of Dex's arms and went into the bathroom attached to his bedroom. She used the toilet, washed her hands, then cupped water in her palm so she could drink. While she was there, she figured she might as well go all out, and used Dex's toothpaste and finger brushed her teeth before rinsing.

Ahh, that felt better. She drank a bit more water, then used the hand towel hanging over the counter on the wall to wipe her face and hands. The bathroom had obviously been modified a bit for Dex's convenience. It was a big bathroom with a shower stall and separate whirlpool tub, but in the shower was a plastic bench, and handrails had been installed. There was a set of removable handrails wrapped around the commode, too.

Shutting off the light, she went back into the bedroom and crawled into bed next to Dex. She snuggled up against his chest and sighed. He was so warm and solid. She liked the way his soft chest hair tickled her nose.

"Please tell me you didn't use my toothbrush."

She giggled.

"I'm serious. I'll share anything with you, but not that."

"No, I did not. I promise."

He sighed and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her flush against his chest. Then he ran his hand over her hair, pushing it away from her face. "I didn't hurt you last night, did I?"

She tilted her head back to look at him. "No. You didn't."

"I'm embarrassed by my actions. I've never broken down like that before. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You saw me at my worst the other night. I owed you one." She tried to laugh it off but could feel how upset he was about the whole situation. In her estimation, he hadn't really broken down. Not like she had with him. "I'm glad I was here for you."

He rubbed his big hand up and down her back. "Me too."

Inching upward a little, she pressed her lips against his. His hand stilled against her back, and she was fairly certain he held his breath, too. She eased her hand up his side, over his chest, and then touched the side of his face, his morning whiskers tickling the pads of her fingers.

"Don't," he whispered against her mouth.

"Why?"

"You don't want to do this."

"Yes, I do."

He moved his mouth, capturing her bottom lip in a sensual caress. "You'll regret it if you do."

"I'm a big girl. I know what I want." She reversed the path she'd taken with her hand and moved down over the soft hair on his chest and rippled stomach to the top of his briefs, dipping her fingertips behind the elastic band.

Dex sucked in his breath. "Shelly..."

"Dex."

"Call me Pete like you did last night," he murmured against her lips.

"I want you, Pete," she said. Of that, at least, she was sure. She'd never wanted anyone more than she wanted him. And she'd wanted him for a very long time, long before this week of getting to know each other. She'd been a little in love with him from the day they'd met.

"You'll hate yourself, and me, when it's over," he said, but pulled her closer, tighter against him.

"I'll never hate you. I swear it." She slid her hand into his underwear and wrapped her fingers around his rock-hard, velvety soft cock.

Dex groaned. "I should kick you out of my bed for your own good."

She squeezed him and ran her tongue over his bottom lip. "Don't be so noble. You want it as badly as I do. Even if it's just right here, right now. You're the one who said what happens here stays here."

"It does," he said on a groan when she nipped his lip.

"Then let's pretend here and now is all there is."

His hand dove down her back, into her shorts, and he cupped her ass cheek in his big, warm palm, making her moan and grow wet. He kissed her hard, his tongue skimming hers, dueling with hers.

Even if this was all they ever had, a mutual need for release and comfort, that would be fine. She needed it, too—needed to feel him inside of her. He'd been through hell last night, and she wondered how often he relived his nightmares. She wanted to make him forget it all, even though she logically knew that wasn't possible.

"I can't do much to help," he said. "Missionary won't work for me."

She gently nudged him onto his back and kicked the blankets off of them. "You just lay right there and let me take care of everything," she said as she pulled his underwear down and off his legs to toss it onto the floor. Wrapping her hand around his cock once again, she leaned down and took the tip into her mouth.

"Ohh... God..." He speared his fingers through her hair and gripped hard but didn't force her down.

Shelly closed her eyes and opened her mouth wide so she could take him deep. He was thick, hard, and long. Perfect. His musky scent and slightly tangy flavor made her mouth water for more.

"Shelly... Shelly, stop, please. It's been too long. I can't..." Now he tugged on her hair, pulling her mouth away from his cock. "Sweetheart, I

haven't been with a woman in way too long to last if you do that." He released his grip on her hair and brushed it away from her face when she stopped tormenting him.

As much as she wanted to make him come, she wanted him inside of her more. So she hurriedly shoved her shorts off and straddled his waist.

"Shit," he whispered as she rubbed her moist pussy against his shaft. "Are you sure? Really sure?"

"Oh yeah, I'm sure," she said as she leaned over and kissed his lips. "I want you, Pete. I want you inside of me." She moved back and forth, rubbing over his cock with her slick pussy, and he groaned and gripped her thighs.

"Protection," he muttered. "I don't have any."

"I'm on the pill, I get tested every year, and I haven't had sex in three years." She kept moving back and forth, the friction of his cock against her hardened clit sending sparks of pleasure through her. She could probably come just from this.

"I'm... Ahh... Clean. Tests. Lots of tests."

She grinned. He was literally losing his mind because of her.

She went up on her knees, reached between her legs, grabbed his cock, and came down onto him in one hard motion.

He cried out, but it was a strangled sound that didn't seem filled with pleasure, and his fingers gripped painfully tight on her thighs.

She froze, and her heart hit her stomach. "Pete. Oh, God, no. I'm sorry."

"Just...don't...move..."

She knew that tone of voice. She'd heard it from him numerous times during therapy. He was in agony. And she'd caused it. She'd hurt his back when she landed on him so hard.

In a moment, he let out a long, slow breath, and his grip eased. She started to move so she could get off of him, but he pressed down with his palms on her thighs.

"I'm okay," he said softly.

"No, you're not. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." She leaned forward and

ran her hands over his chest. "Let me up. I'll help you another way."

"No."

"No?" He was still hard. Pulsing inside of her in fact. Which surprised her because if she'd been the one in pain, all thoughts of sexual pleasure would be long gone. Especially the amount of pain he was in.

"You're there now. I need you to finish." His voice was still tight and strained, but it sounded like need now, rather than agony.

"But I'll hurt you again."

A soft chuckle came out of him that made her stomach tighten. God, it was a sweet sound. The quiet laughter ended on a hiss.

"Do that again."

"Do what again?" she asked, confused.

"Tighten your muscles around my dick, sweetheart."

She clenched her pussy muscles as hard as she could.

"Ahhh..."

Grinning, she did it again and could feel him grow even harder inside of her. She started a slow rhythm while she leaned over to kiss him.

He ate at her mouth, slid his hands up under her nightshirt, and cupped her breasts. The tender massage and slight abrasion he caused over her nipples made her even wetter. She pulsed her cunt around his stiff cock, growing faster and faster with her squeezes. Though she loved his mouth on hers, relished the way he explored her with his tongue, she pulled away to sit up. Carefully, she pressed her pelvis hard against his, reached behind her, and cupped his balls.

His breaths grew shallow.

She rolled his testicles in her palm, lightly tugging on them, all the while fucking him without moving anything but her inner muscles. The power and control she experienced made her feel like the sexiest damn woman on Earth. To have this big, strong Marine under her control without the benefit of anything but a gentle touch and some muscle contractions.

He flicked her nipples, and she jerked a bit, losing her rhythm for a moment, but she got it back quickly. It was when he lowered one hand from her breast to her clit that she grabbed his wrist and pulled it away.

She couldn't concentrate on the motionless fuck if he distracted her with too much pleasure.

"Let me—"

"No," she said and laced her fingers through his to occupy his hand so he couldn't touch her. "I want to feel you come inside of me."

He groaned and gripped her hand tight.

"Come on." She sped her muscle flutter and squeezed as tight as humanly possible each time. "Come for me, Pete. Let me feel all that hot sweetness inside of me."

He groaned, and his thigh muscles tightened. She slid her hand down farther between his legs. While cupping his balls, she pressed against that sweet spot under his testicles with her fingertips.

That grip he had on her hand grew painful, and he moaned. "Shelllll..."

"Let me feel your cum, Pete. I want it all."

With a shout, he jerked once, thrusting up inside of her, and pulsed his release while she clenched her inner muscles so tight it was almost painful for her to hold.

He gasped then seemed to sink into the bed before he gripped her arm in his free hand, pulled her down over him, and buried his face in her hair. Closing her eyes, she listened to his heart thud against his chest and his deep breaths. Pulling her hand from his, she wrapped her arms around his neck and held him. In that moment, she never wanted to move, never wanted to let him go.

"Who would have thought you knew how to talk dirty?"

She chuckled and turned her head to nuzzle her mouth and nose against his neck. "I've called you enough names it shouldn't have come as a surprise."

He laughed and held her tight. His cock slowly softened within her. "Why didn't you let me touch you? You didn't climax."

How was she to explain that she didn't care about that? All she'd wanted was to give him relief. "It's okay. I owed you one from the other night."

"I hope you don't really mean that. This wasn't—"

She stuck her hand over his mouth to stop his words. "No. It wasn't a pity fuck." She sighed and leaned up on her elbow. It was lighter outside now, so she could see him better. "I wanted you. Don't think otherwise."

He took her hand away from his mouth. "That was fucking amazing, what you did."

She smiled and gripped his soft cock with her muscles, then laughed when his eyes widened. "Women are supposed to exercise those muscles for medical reasons, but I think I like this reason much better."

He chuckled and kissed her. Against her lips, he murmured, "How about a shower?"

"Do I stink?"

He laughed and nuzzled his nose against hers in a playful way that made her heart squeeze. "You smell delicious. But I'm determined to make you come before I let you out of my room."

"Mmm. Promises, promises."

He poked her in the side, and she laughed and slid off of him, careful not to jostle him. "Help the cripple into the bathroom. Then I'll help you." He waggled his eyebrows, and that made her laugh even harder.

In the shower stall, Dex sat on the plastic bench. With her straddling his thigh, he proceeded to lather her all over with soap and make her cry and scream in ecstasy when he brought her to not just one climax but several, with his hands and wicked, wicked mouth. In the end, she wound up on the floor on her knees, his reawakened cock in her mouth. And finally, she got to taste his release as he shouted with his climax and held her head in his big hands, his fingers tangled in her wet hair.

Panting, she sat on her heels, her cheek resting on his thigh, as she gently stroked his softening penis.

"Do you have any idea how fucking beautiful you are?" he asked.

She grinned and tilted her head so she could look up at him.

"I'm serious, sweetheart." He smoothed her tangled hair out of her eyes.

"Thank you," was all she could say. Her brain was a little mushy from the incredible orgasms, and her body felt boneless.

A knock on the bathroom door had her yelping and jumping away from Dex, though. Then she slapped a hand over her mouth to stifle her embarrassed giggle.

"Breakfast will be ready in ten," Kevin called through the door, laughter obvious in his voice.

"You're a sick bastard," Dex called to him. "Get the fuck out of my bedroom."

Kevin laughed, but his voice faded as he moved away from the door.

"Oh, my God," Shelly muttered as she climbed to her feet.

Dex shook his head, grinning. "Sorry about that."

"Yeah, you sound sorry." She grabbed the soap from the dish, lathered her hands, and leaned over Dex's shoulder to soap his back.

"Hey, ohh...ahh...that feels good. I can finish up here alone though, if you want to get dressed."

She massaged the tight muscles of his lower back, where his injuries were, to help loosen them up after last night's and this morning's stress on them. "Oh, be quiet. You know you don't want me to go."

He groaned and leaned into her, resting his cheek against her breast, his morning whiskers tickling and sending tingles through her. "Not ever," he muttered.

She pretended not to hear, because it was irrelevant. It didn't matter. This was an impossible situation, and come tomorrow, when she had a new security system and alarm installed in her house...

How in the hell was she ever going to revert to a patient/doctor relationship with a man whose dick she'd had in her mouth? More importantly, how was she supposed to keep her hands to herself now that she knew how incredible sex with him was?

"We better get going," Dex said, putting his hands on her waist and urging her away from him, "or he could come back."

She stood up straight and frowned down at him. "How's the pain?"

"Three."

She pressed her lips together not believing him.

"Seriously. I feel damn good right now." He grinned and slid his hands from her waist to her hips, then tipped his thumbs toward her mound. "Don't you?"

She snickered and pulled away from his hands. It was almost embarrassing how just the thought of his fingers near her pussy again made her hot and bothered...and wet.

"Yeah, I feel pretty good, too." She opened the door and stepped out of the shower stall, while Dex turned off the water.

She dried herself and watched through the frosted glass of the shower stall how he pulled himself to his feet using the handrails, then carefully walked with tiny steps to the door and stepped out. She moved his wheelchair closer to him, but instead of sitting, he pulled a towel from the bar, leaned against the wall, and dried himself off.

"You been doing this on your own since you moved here?" she asked.

He gave her a sideways glance then shook his head. "First month, my parents were here. They moved into one of the rooms upstairs, and Dad had the handrails and stuff put in here for me. Pretty fucking embarrassing to be almost forty and have your daddy helping you in and out of the shower like a baby. This was their room when we were growing up."

"You have a sister, right?" She picked up Dex's comb from the counter and wondered how she'd get it through her tangles of wet hair.

He nodded. "Lives in Chicago. Married with three boys." He wrapped the towel around his waist and lowered himself onto the chair. Once she knew he was safe and sound, she turned toward the mirror and started working on the knots in her hair.

"Anyway. Mom and Dad hung around until they were sure I was capable of surviving on my own here. Mom wanted to hire a private duty nurse, but I refused. I had you three times a week, and that was enough torture. I sure as hell didn't want someone around here making me feel like even less of a man than you did."

Shelly gasped at the insult and turned from the mirror to look at

him.

He grinned then winked. "I'm kidding, sweetheart. Basically, I figured if I couldn't make it on my own, then I wouldn't make it. I'd been an invalid for months at the hospital in Germany, and then at Walter Reed. I felt more in control of my situation here on my own."

Shelly nodded. She could understand that. A lot of patients she'd seen over the years healed faster and more completely once they were home and out of the hospital. "You do seem to have it all under control here."

"Better hurry up," he said, wheeling toward the door. "Kevin will come back if we're not out there when he pulls the food off the stove."

Chapter Ten

Shelly juggled two bags of groceries and a gallon of milk while trying to open the door of Dex's house. Finally, she succeeded and almost cheered when she got it open. After a humongous breakfast consisting of bacon, ham, eggs, potatoes, cheese and who knows what else Kevin had cooked, they'd seen him off on his way to Oregon. After that, she'd headed to the hospital to check on Babs and then stopped off at the grocery store to get something she could make for dinner. Dex had next to no food in his house other than breakfast cereal. Kevin had made a run that morning to fetch the items he'd made.

"Hey, Shelly," Dex said from his spot on the sofa when she entered.

"Hey." She kicked the door shut and headed for the kitchen.

"What'cha got there?"

"I'm going to make us a pot roast for dinner. Is that okay?" She dropped the bags onto the small kitchen table and put the milk in the fridge.

"I dunno. Does it taste like my mom's?"

Shelly laughed. "I have no idea, but I hope it tastes like my mom's since she taught me how to cook."

It was only a little after one, and since she didn't have to get things in the oven yet, she piled the groceries, bags and all, into the nearly empty fridge and shut the door. She grabbed a cup of coffee from the carafe in the coffee maker and headed into the living room where she locked the front door, kicked off her boots, and then after setting her coffee on the

end table, peeled off her jacket and hat.

"Did you like your mother's pot roast?" Dex asked, giving her a dubious look.

She laughed and sat down next to him, turned, and set her legs over his thighs, her butt snuggled up against his leg. "Yes. Best pot roast in the Midwest." She reached for her coffee behind her. "You didn't like your mom's?"

"Not to offend my mother who is practically a saint, but..." He made a face and ran his hands up and down her legs, warming them. "Well, Dad and I spent a lot of time at the pub when I was growing up."

She sipped the acrid brew and made a face. "What was so bad about her food?"

"Nothing, if it came out of a can or box and she followed the directions. It was when she tried to make us a nice homemade meal that everything went to hell. Her pot roasts were the consistency of cardboard, and let's not even get started on the baked chicken incident of eighty-eight."

"Oh, I have to hear about that."

"The outside of the chicken was golden brown, and it smelled great. Dad and I actually thought she'd succeeded in making an edible dinner.

"We all got food poisoning and were sick as dogs. Undercooked inside. She'd had the oven too hot so the outside cooked, but not the inside."

Shelly burst out laughing.

"It wasn't funny! I've never before or since been that sick. God, we were praying for death that night."

She patted his arm. "It's okay, Pete. You survived and everything's okay now."

He chuckled. "You are such a little smartass."

She grinned, showing her teeth. "I know."

"How's Babs?"

She grew serious and shook her head. "Better than yesterday, but..." She sighed and looked into her coffee mug. "She's fought for a

really long time, but the bad days are beginning to outweigh the good ones." She wanted to change the subject. Babs was in pain, and there wasn't anything she could do to make it go away. "Would you mind telling me what your nightmare was last night?"

Dex squeezed her thigh and nodded. "Not a big secret. When I woke up in Germany, I was strapped to the bed on my stomach. Couldn't move. I've never been claustrophobic in my life, but that did something to me. Unable to move, to see anything but the floor through the donut opening in the bed. My night terrors, when they happen, are me reliving those first days when they had me strapped down, unable to move, and drugged out of my mind. I know now it was for my own good, but it was more traumatic than what had landed me in the hospital in the first place."

"Oh, my God. That's horrible. How often do you have them? Is there a trigger? What brings them on?"

He shook his head and rubbed her thigh, his thumb teasing very close to her crotch, which sent tingles through her body. She tried to ignore it, since she didn't think his actions were intentional.

"You sound more like a psychiatrist than a physical therapist right now."

"Humph." He obviously didn't want to talk about it. Turning her attention to the muted television she asked, "What're you watching, hockey?"

"Uh...yeah." He turned and frowned at her. "That's the game they play on skates carrying big sticks."

She stuck her tongue out at him. "Now who's the smartass?"

He laughed. "You don't watch, I'm guessing."

"Nope."

"What sports do you like?"

"None."

He raised his eyebrows. "Even in high school? You've got the body for...swimming, or maybe volleyball."

"I sink like a rock, and sprained my wrist the only time I attempted volleyball. But you would have liked me in high school. I was just your

type.”

He wrinkled his brow. “What type was that?”

She shrugged and grinned. “Kevin said you liked the brainy girls. That was me. Won the Iowa State Spelling Bee when I was in eighth grade. Captain of the debate team in high school—just like your girlfriend,” she added with a cheeky grin. “Graduated valedictorian, too.”

“And I bet you had scholarships for college.”

She nodded, grinning proudly. She’d worked damn hard to get where she was and not put any financial burden on her parents.

“I’m getting turned on.”

She laughed so hard, she sloshed her coffee on herself. Dex took the mug from her and leaned over her legs to set it on the coffee table. Then he literally lifted her up and moved her over him so she straddled his thighs.

“Damn,” she gasped.

“What?” He started unbuttoning the flannel shirt she wore over her T-shirt.

“You’re stronger than you look.”

His grin was big, crinkling his eyes in such a sexy way she leaned forward and kissed him.

“Mmm.”

“How’s your back?” she asked against his mouth between kisses.

“What back?”

She giggled and shrugged out of her shirt when he pushed it off her shoulders.

“Back’s fine.” His hands went up under her T-shirt to cup her bra-covered breasts, making her moan when he pinched her nipples.

She lifted the hem of her shirt, brought it over her head, and tossed it onto the floor with her flannel. “You sure we’re alone?”

Dex leaned forward and captured her nipple through the lace of her bra with his teeth. “Uh huh.”

Lust shot through her with the slight pain of his bite, and she bucked her hips. “I can’t believe I’m so horny again after this morning.”

He pulled back a bit and looked into her eyes. “You’re so fucking

honest. Do you know how much that's a turn on for me?"

She frowned. "What do you mean?"

"This morning, you told me where to touch you, how to do it, what it did to you, what you wanted from me. I've never met anyone like you."

Smiling, she reached behind her and unhooked her bra. "And you like that."

Watching her chest as she dropped the bra into their laps, he nodded. "Oh, yeah."

"Then you want me to tell you what I want right now?"

He nodded and raised his hands, spanning his palms over her ribs and moving upward, spreading goose bumps as he went. "Tell me."

"I want to fuck you hard. Do you think you can take it?"

He looked up at her face, one eyebrow raised, which made her laugh.

"I'm serious, Pete," she murmured, distracted by the soft graze of his thumbs over her nipples. "I don't want to hurt you."

"What about you, Shelly? Are you worried about getting hurt?"

She laid her hands on either side of his face, noticing that he'd shaved. "Yes, I am." And she wasn't talking physically now. This affair was stupid, and she knew it would lead to heartache somehow.

"This all ends tomorrow morning, doesn't it?" he asked.

She nodded.

"Okay."

The only thing that kept her from bursting out in tears was the fact that he looked so miserable over the decision.

"Fuck me then, Shelly. And fuck me all night long. We're going to make every damn moment count."

Standing up, she shucked her jeans, underwear, and socks, while Dex unbuttoned his jeans and shoved them down his thighs. She resumed her position on his lap and guided his hard cock deep within her. When she didn't see any signs of pain on his face or in his demeanor, she rose up and thrust back down hard.

"Yesss..." he hissed.

She fucked him fast, taking him deep, bouncing on him and crying

out when his cock stroked her sweet spot repeatedly. He gripped her waist in his big hands, helping raise and lower her. At one point he reached up and pulled the band from her hair so it flowed over her shoulders.

"So fucking beautiful," he said between gritted teeth as his body grew tight with his impending climax.

He reached between them and pinched her clit, which sent her over the edge into ecstasy, crying out his name.

With several sharp, short shouts, he came, filling her with his cum and holding her against his chest in a death grip.

She wound her arms around his neck and buried her face against his shoulder as she kept moving her hips against him, extending both of their pleasure just a little longer.

The tears came then, and Dex held her, running his hand up and down her back while she wept. An affair wasn't worth throwing away her career. She was sure of that fact. But throwing away what could be a budding love hurt so bad she felt as if she were back in high school with her first crush. It had been over a decade since she'd been serious about a man. Pete Dexler would be very easy to get serious about.

* * * * *

"I made you a roast beef sandwich for lunch, and I'm taking one for myself." Shelly sipped her coffee as she slipped a sandwich and a couple cans of diet cola into a plastic bag to take to work.

"Thank you. You didn't have to do that."

Yes, she did. Because once she got up this morning and had showered, she'd needed something to fill the time before she left for work. Something other than diving back into bed with Dex and never leaving his house.

She'd packed up her suitcase, made sandwiches out of the leftover pot roast from the night before, and drank half of a pot of coffee. Finally, her watch beeped on the hour, which meant it was eight and time to head to work.

She downed the last of her coffee, set the mug in the sink, then turned toward Dex who sat at the table in his wheelchair. "I've got to go."

He nodded. "I'll be there at one, as usual?"

He sounded unsure, which made her frown. "Unless you're uncomfortable with me as your physical therapist now."

With a shake of his head, he said, "No. I'm not. Are you?"

Yes, but not because they'd been intimate. Not because she thought she'd have a problem working with him. "I've never crossed this line before, Dex, and my problem doesn't stem from thinking we can't still work together. It's because I did something I have always found morally reprehensible."

"It's not as if you took advantage of me. I'm not someone you used your authority over to coerce into bed."

A small smile tugged at her lips, and she shook her head. "I know. I know that, and that's what I keep trying to tell myself. But the facts are the facts. I had an affair with a patient. And I'm not sure what to do about it."

Dex looked down at his hands splayed on his thighs, and then back up at her. "Don't do anything, sweetheart. Walk out of here, and we'll both forget this weekend happened. We needed each other for a while, and that's that. Your house will be safe and sound by tonight. Go home to it, and don't even consider doing anything stupid because of one weekend."

Hearing the words hurt worse than she thought they would, even though it was what she'd told herself she should do. She nodded. "Okay."

"Okay."

"See you at one, then." She moved around him and went into the living room. No more tears, she told herself as she put on her boots and coat.

"Shelly?"

She pulled her knit cap on and turned back toward him. He held out his hand to her, and she went to him, bent over, and kissed his lips softly.

"Thank you for the weekend," he muttered when she stood back up.

She nodded, unable to say anything through her tight throat. He gave her hand a squeeze, and then she turned away, picked up her suitcase, and headed out into the brisk morning air.

The temperature had raised some, and she breathed deep. She tossed her suitcase in the back seat then climbed behind the wheel, started the car, and flipped on the heater. As she was about to put the Bronco in gear, she looked out the window and saw the envelope.

On the windshield, held down by the wiper.

"Sonofafuckingbitch," she muttered, using a variation of Dex's word. She opened the door, leaned out, grabbed the damn envelope, and tossed it onto the passenger seat. But unable to withstand the lure of the unknown, she picked it up and ripped it open.

*How could you do this to me?
I thought I was your one and only.*

A cold chill went down her spine. Had this sick bastard been watching her with Dex? She turned and looked at the house. The front curtains were open, but the sheers were pulled, as they had been all weekend. But if someone was close enough they could see in. And the curtains in his bedroom had been the same.

Yesterday afternoon on the sofa, though...

She jumped out of the truck, ran up the path, and opened the front door of Dex's house.

"Hey! What...?"

"Lock your door," she said. "The bastard left me a note. Here, on my car. And he doesn't sound happy about the fact I was here."

"What are you—?"

"I have to get to work. I'll call Paul from there. Please. Lock your door."

"Okay. Be careful!" he called as she shut the door.

Chapter Eleven

By the time Shelly pulled into a parking spot in the hospital lot, she'd worked herself into a fine lather. She was tired of being afraid. That tingly all-over illness sensation every time she found a new note was becoming too stressful, and it had to end. All of this had to end!

Fighting tears of frustration, she locked her truck and headed into the hospital, gripping the latest note in her hand.

"Where have you been all weekend?" Celeste demanded when Shelly went through the sliding glass doors into the ER.

Shelly stopped and frowned at her friend.

"I tried calling you all weekend. You had me scared to death."

She swallowed hard. She'd never thought that anyone would worry about her or try to get a hold of her. "I'm sorry."

"Paul went and checked the SleepyTime Motel and when you weren't there, I really started worrying. Where's your cell phone? I called it and called it. But then I called here and found out you'd been in on both Saturday and Sunday, so at least I knew you weren't dead in a ditch somewhere."

Shelly held up her purse and dug inside of it for her cell. "I left it on Friday night, I guess, after I talked to you. It's dead." She held it up to show Celeste.

"Where were you?" Her friend looked much more concerned than angry, but still, Shelly pressed her lips together, not wanting to admit to the truth.

Celeste give her an odd look.

Shelly finally whispered, "I was at Pete Dexler's house."

Celeste's eyes widened a little in obvious surprise.

"It's nothing," Shelly insisted. "I just needed someplace safe to sleep. Okay?"

"He's your patient," Celeste whispered, dragging Shelly to the side of the lobby, away from the counter. "You stayed at your patient's house? Why didn't you come over to our place? You know we have the room."

"I did. Saturday night. You weren't home." Her throat got tight again, and damn it, she wanted to cry some more. She must be PMSing along with all the strain on her. "I have to go talk to Dorothy." She held up the note. "I got another one today. I got one here, Saturday. He's following me. He's *watching* me."

Celeste snatched the envelope out of her hand and turned away before Shelly could grab it back. Her friend read the note.

"He saw you with Dexler, didn't he?" Celeste asked, shoving the paper back into the envelope. "You slept with Dexler, and your stalker saw it."

Shelly neither admitted nor denied the accusation. "The point is, this fucker needs to be caught."

"I agree, but Shelly..."

Shelly grabbed the envelope back. "Just stop, please. If you're my friend, stop. I'm beating myself up enough, okay? I don't need you to do it, too."

"Hey..." Celeste put her hand on Shelly's arm. "I *am* your friend. I'm sorry. I just never thought you'd—"

Shelly closed her eyes against the onslaught of tears. "I never thought I would either. It really just happened. I feel like my whole world is falling apart." She swallowed hard. "I have to do something."

"You want me to come upstairs with you?"

Shelly shook her head. "No. Thanks. I've got to do this on my own. If you could call Paul and let him know? This note was on my windshield outside Dex's house this morning. I did come to the hospital yesterday, so I'm guessing he followed me back there. Or, hell, I don't know. This town

is tiny. He could have just driven around until he found my truck. Whatever the case, it feels like he's closing in on me. And I'm so damn scared."

"I'll call Paul and find out what he suggests. He's worried too. Maybe with this sounding more like a threat, there's something he can do now."

"Thanks."

Celeste gave her a quick hug. "You can talk to me. I swear. I'm not judging."

"Yes, you are." Shelly let out a little chuckle. "But I understand. I would, too. I'll see you at lunch. I've got appointments all morning, so I have to get up to Dorothy's office before nine."

"Go then." Celeste gave her arm another squeeze.

Shelly took the elevator instead of being alone in the stairwell, and got off on the second floor, but instead of heading toward her therapy room, she turned the other direction, went through the door that separated administration from the rest of the hospital, and asked the receptionist, "Is Dorothy in?"

"Yep. Just got here."

"Is it okay if I speak with her? It's really important."

The receptionist picked up the handset of her phone. "Hi, Dorothy. Doctor Newman is here and would like to speak to you." She set the phone back in the cradle at the same time Dorothy Bells opened her heavy, dark wood door.

"Doctor Newman?" Dorothy said.

Shelly stepped into her office. "Chief Bells, I have a situation I need to bring to your attention."

"Please," she said, extending her arm toward the chairs in front of her desk, "have a seat."

Shelly sat down and fiddled with the envelope in her hand. Then she unzipped her jacket.

Dorothy sat down behind her desk. "What can I do for you?"

She decided to just get it out there, since she didn't know how else to do this. "I have a stalker, and he's following me. I've gotten notes from

him here in the hospital, in the physical therapy room, even inside my office last week. Friday he broke into my home, and this morning I found his latest note on my vehicle in front of my friend's house where I spent the weekend."

Dorothy leaned her elbows on her desk and folded her hands together. "I'm sorry. Go on."

Shelly hadn't thought much past telling her the problem. "Well, I'm hoping you can send out a memo to the staff to have them keep an eye open for anyone who doesn't belong in the hospital."

"How do you know your stalker isn't an employee?"

"Detective Jensen, Celeste Jensen's husband, ran the fingerprints through every system he has access to, including the hospital employment records. Whoever it is doesn't work here and has never been in trouble with the law. It's like he's a ghost. I mean, he's moved in and out of the therapy room and even the doctor's lounge numerous times just to leave me these." She held up the offending envelope.

"I'll send out a memo right now," Dorothy said, pulling her keyboard drawer out.

"Thank you."

"Maybe we should get a security guard in the hospital for a while, at least until this person is caught."

Relief flooded through her. Part of her had thought her situation wouldn't sound scary enough to warrant any help from the chief of staff. "I'd appreciate that. One more thing..."

Dorothy looked toward her from her computer screen.

"Would it be all right if I began locking the therapy room when I don't have a patient? A lot of employees use it as a gym in their free time. I'll make sure I'm there during my work hours so they can still use it, but I'm just not feeling safe in there anymore. "

"By all means, lock the door. Do what you feel necessary. I won't have my employees living in terror," Dorothy said. "Do you have a key?"

Shelly shook her head. "Only for my office. The therapy room has just always been left open."

"I'm sure janitorial has one. I'll call down and make sure they turn

it over to you. You can pick it up after you leave here. Is there anything else you need, want, that will make you feel safer here in the hospital?"

A tight laugh came out of her. "About a dozen cameras in my areas."

Dorothy didn't laugh though. She looked thoughtful. "Your therapy room is rather out-of-the-way. It might not be a bad thing to put up some security cameras around the hospital."

"Really?"

She nodded. "I've worked at two of the biggest hospitals in the US in my thirty years. When I moved and took this job, I never considered security issues *here*. We're in Podunk, Nowhere."

"I know. I lived in Chicago and Milwaukee before I moved here, and I was never scared to walk down the street alone. Now..." She shook her head.

"How long has this been going on?"

"A few months."

Dorothy pressed her lips into a thin line before she said, "I wish you would have come to me sooner. What are the police doing? I should have been notified that something was going on in my hospital."

Shelly shrugged. "I'm sorry. It just escalated, and I didn't think about it until it got out of hand. And there's not much the police can do. There's no way at this point to identify him."

"I'll have a guard in here by tomorrow morning, okay? And this..." She clicked her mouse. "...is sent to all departments to keep an eye out for anyone who doesn't belong here, and to immediately report them to me."

"I appreciate this, Chief."

Dorothy smiled. "You are a huge part of this hospital, Shelly. The patients love you. The other doctors think you're great."

Shelly wrinkled her brow. "They do?"

Dorothy laughed. "Of course, they do. And those kids in Peds... They think the sun rises and sets on you. You had the highest marks out of anyone for your peer review last year."

Shelly's lips parted in surprise.

"Don't look so shocked. You're always there whenever you're

needed. And all the extra time you spend with those children..." She shook her head and smiled. "You go way beyond the call of duty. I wish all our doctors were as generous as you."

"Thank you," Shelly whispered. "I...uh...better go get that key. My first appointment is in a few minutes."

"Come see me if you need anything else."

Shelly opened her mouth, and it almost came out, an admission of what she'd done that weekend with a patient. But she heard Dex's voice in the back of her mind telling her not to do something stupid because of one weekend. "I will," she said as she stood up. "Thank you. Again. For everything." For letting her know that maybe she had more than she thought she did. Friends, or at least people who thought highly of her. Not that she'd ever needed that kind of validation, but knowing she had it made her feel much more secure. Maybe she wasn't quite as alone as she thought she was.

Never in her life had anyone, except her parents, worried over her. But because she didn't want them worrying, she kept her own problems to herself. Knowing that Celeste had spent all weekend worrying over her warmed her heart. She was rather surprised everyone seemed to reach out when asked for a little help.

* * * * *

Shelly met Celeste and Paul in the cafeteria at lunchtime. She handed the envelope over to Paul, and Celeste said, "I saw the memo from Dorothy, I take it your talk went well."

"Let me grab a coffee first." Spending all morning looking over her shoulder was definitely taking its toll. Her neck and the base of her skull throbbed, and she wanted to go somewhere and curl up in the dark. She poured herself a coffee from the urn by the cash register and dropped some coins in Pat's tip jar, since staff didn't pay for coffee. Pat smiled at her and helped the next person in line.

When she got back to the table, Paul was staring at the note.

"Looks like a threat to me," Celeste said.

Paul agreed with a nod. "You have to be extra careful, Shelly. I'd like to escort you home after work."

"They're installing the alarm system now. Max Spenser from Spenser Security came by and picked up my house key this morning." She stifled a yawn and covered her mouth with her hand. "He said it'll be done by two, and he'll return my key and talk me through the instructions on it."

"Still. I don't want you out and about alone right now. I'm going to have patrols drive past your house at least every half hour, maybe every fifteen minutes, until this sicko is caught."

"Okay," Shelly agreed. She wasn't about to argue about escorts and more security surrounding her. She wanted as much of a cushion around her as she could possibly get. Turning toward Celeste, she said, "Dorothy said she'll have a security guard in here by tomorrow morning, and she said she'll look into getting some cameras installed."

"Cameras are only as good as the person monitoring them," Paul said.

"That helps," Shelly muttered.

"I'm worried about you—about this asshole." He held up the note between two fingers. "You're right in thinking he's watching you, following you."

The thought of this faceless guy seeing her have sex with Dex on the couch made her want to throw up. "I told Pete to make sure he kept his door locked. What if this guy goes after him because of me? He's in a wheelchair. He's helpless. I—" Her throat closed up on her again, and she leaned over, dropping her forehead onto the table. "Would it do any good for me to take some leave and get out of town for a while?"

"It couldn't hurt," Paul said. "On the other hand, he could follow you. So it's your call. If you left, the only thing we could do is stake out your house and hope he tries to break in to find you."

She sat up. "I'll think about it."

"You look so tired," Celeste said softly.

"I am. Emotionally drained down to the bottom."

"You've got me on your speed dial, right?" Paul asked.

She nodded. "My cell is in my office, charging."

"As soon as that battery is full, you keep it on you at all times. I answer my phone day or night."

"I know. Thank you." She glanced at her watch. "I better get back upstairs."

"Shelly," Celeste said as she stood up. "Call me if you need an ear, a friend. I'm here, okay?"

Shelly tried to smile. "I will."

Once again she took the elevator up to her floor. The hallway was empty as she walked toward the therapy room, but she'd locked the door before she left. She held her hand in the pocket of her lab coat, her keys sticking out through her fingers as her dad had shown her when she was a teenager. There was no one around, though, so she unlocked the door, went inside, and locked the door behind her. She hated that she had to be so paranoid, but she had a really bad feeling. Her gut told her something was going to happen. Then again, maybe it was just paranoia. She couldn't decipher between the two any longer.

She unlocked her office and glanced around, looking for anything out of place, but of course, there wasn't anything moved. She went into the women's changing room, and then the men's. To think he'd been so close the other day....

A knock on the door had her peering out of the men's changing room. She didn't see anyone through the window. Then just a hand came into view, and the knuckles rapped on the window. She realized it was Dex and rushed to let him in.

"Hey. Sorry. You're a little early."

"Glad to see you're locking this door when you're alone." He wheeled inside, and she propped the door open, as was customary when she had a patient.

"Yeah. The chief of staff has been very helpful. She's going to get a security guard and some cameras."

"Good. Be right back." He headed for the changing room, and she went into her office to take a couple swigs of coffee. It was strange, but she didn't feel as awkward around Dex as she thought she would. It was

almost as if they had a closer camaraderie now. Knowing she could never touch him or be held by him again still hurt, but she didn't think that working with him would be too awfully uncomfortable. It would be worse to simply never see him again.

She headed back into the therapy room just as Bethie came in.

"Doctor Newman," the nurse said, looking upset.

"What's wrong? Is it one of the kids?"

The nurse nodded. "We got a call from child services this morning, and this is the first chance I've had to come see you. A bed opened up in a state facility. They're going to move Neil on Thursday."

Shelly staggered back into the wall, feeling as if she'd been slugged in the gut. She swallowed hard. "Where?"

"Green Bay."

She fought the tears, but it was a losing battle. Green Bay was a three-hour drive from Cooper Valley. It'd be nearly impossible to visit him but maybe once or twice a month.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Newman," she said. "I know how much those kids mean to you." She sniffled and swiped her own tear away. "We did know this day was coming sometime, though."

Shelly nodded, unable to speak.

"I have to get back up there."

Shelly nodded again, but as soon as the nurse left the room, she turned around to face the wall, unable to keep the sob inside. She was losing one of her babies. To a state-run hospital.

"Shell?"

"I'm okay," she said to Dex around her tight throat.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

She turned around and looked at Dex sitting in his chair wearing his Marine Corps T-shirt and gray sweatpants, his big blue eyes filled with worry and caring, and she totally lost it. It was all just too much. All he had to do was hold out his arms, and she was in them just like Friday night. Snuggled up on his lap, her face against his neck, his arms around her while she let it out.

"Neil's going to a state facility," she wailed. "They're taking him

away."

"Ahh, sweetie," he whispered, rubbing her back.

"I can't do this anymore. I have to get away from here. I'm so...I can't leave the kids. Not now. Not that they're losing Neil."

"Shh. Breathe, sweetheart. You've got to breathe."

She sucked in a few deep breaths, but the last broke on a sob. Never in her life had she experienced this much emotional turmoil. And never had she said, "Why me," but those were the two words that kept circling in her mind.

"Are you okay, Doctor Newman?"

She jerked her head up to see Ricky Santana standing just inside the door of the therapy room. She jumped off of Dex's lap and swiped her sleeve over her eyes. "Yeah, Ricky, I'm fine. Sorry." She sniffled, trying to figure out why the deli delivery boy was here. She hadn't ordered anything today. Food was the last thing on her mind. "Can I help you with something?"

"I...I wanted to give you this." He held out an ivory envelope with her name scrawled across the front in masculine handwriting. Recycled paper. And she'd bet her life that the brand name was embossed on the back.

"Who gave you that?" she demanded, stepping forward and snatching it from him. She turned the envelope over, ready to slide her finger under the flap and open it.

"No one gave it to me, Shelly."

She glanced up at him, and a sense of calm settled over her. Her tormentor, the *man* she'd been terrified of coming face-to-face with for weeks, was a sweet boy she'd known for three years. "Ricky, you're the one who's been leaving me notes all over the place?"

He nodded. "But you betrayed me." He looked toward Dex. "With him." He pulled his other hand out of his jacket pocket and raised it, pointing a small handgun right at her chest. "How could you do that to me when you know how much I love you?"

Chapter Twelve

It was a very small .22 or .25 caliber six-shot revolver. Shelly knew weapons because she grew up with a dad who hunted and who had taught her firearms at a very young age. The good thing was that it was such a small caliber. The bad thing was, even little bullets made holes in bodies that could be deadly.

"Ricky," she said, her voice firm, even as she took a couple steps backward. "What do you think you're doing?"

He stepped farther into the room toward her. "You know she'll do the same thing to you, don't you?" he asked, glancing quickly at Dex then back at her. "She told me she cared about me, but I was too young then. So I waited. I turned eighteen three months ago, and I started courting her. What does she do? She sleeps with you. And you're her patient! She told me nothing could happen because I was her patient, but I haven't been her patient for three years. Now she's doing you, even after all the love letters I wrote."

Oh, good Lord. She'd completely forgotten about the conversation she'd had with him so long ago.

"Ricky," she said softly. "You'll always be too young for me. I thought—"

Ricky had moved past Dex, so he was slightly behind the boy, and he fiercely shook his head at her when she started with a scolding tone.

"I thought you'd outgrown your...feelings for me." She'd almost said crush, but this went a bit farther than an innocent crush, now didn't

it? He was still a boy, though, and she was sure she could talk that gun out of his hand. "Why don't you give me the gun, and we can sit down and talk about this, okay?"

He shook his head. "You cheated on me. You haven't been with anyone for three years, and now that I'm finally old enough and have a job and have plans for college, you go and fuck someone else!" His voice rose. His hand holding the gun shook.

He'd been following her for three years? How else would he know she'd lived like a nun until this past weekend? "I didn't know it was you sending me the notes, Ricky. How could I know? You never signed them."

"I was trying to be romantic!" Spittle flew from his lips, and his face was red. "And you cheat on me with a cripple! He can't even walk!"

The sound of him pulling back the hammer on the revolver was loud and made her heart skip a beat.

"Ricky, please, don't. You love me, right? You don't want to hurt me, do you?" Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Dex moving, scooting to the edge of his chair, but what could he do? Ricky was out of his reach. And this wasn't just a threat. She could see the silver bullets from her side of the cylinder. The chambers were full. He was going to kill her. Or at least attempt to.

"I'm sorry," she said desperately. "I'm so sorry I hurt you. Please put the gun down so we can talk."

"You're a slut just like my mom. I thought you were different, but you're not. You didn't even try to hide it! Right there on the couch in the middle of the day for everyone to see. You make me sick!"

It was kind of like in the movies. She saw it all in slow motion and knew there was no way to move in time. His finger twitched, and it must have been a hair trigger. The shot was deafening. The muzzle flash was blinding. The pain that seared through her shoulder knocked her backward. She heard a shout and then a scream as she fell, but she didn't think either sound came from her because she couldn't breathe. The floor was hard as she hit it, knocking even more breath from her until she thought she'd pass out. Another gunshot echoed through the room. Her ears rang from the noise.

"Dex," she gasped, but when she tried to raise her head to see, pain zigzagged through her upper body, and she cringed.

Reaching across her chest with her right hand, she found the wound on her left shoulder. She had to get pressure on it. Pressure on the wound. *Holy shit!* Pressure on wound hurt.

"Help," she tried to yell, but it came out as a whisper. She needed help. She didn't know how badly she was wounded, but it hurt a lot! Like fire through her. And Dex. What if Ricky had shot Dex, too?

"Shelly. Shelly. Oh, God." She looked up to see him over her. Dex was there. He looked okay.

"He shot me," she said, still not quite believing he'd done it.

"I know, sweetie. I know." He moved her hand out of the way and pressed down.

She screamed.

"Shh, sweetheart. I know it hurts."

"Stop! Please, don't," she cried, squeezing her eyes shut. The pain became unbearable.

"I'm so sorry. So sorry."

She looked up at him again through a haze of pain that blurred her vision. "Why are you crying? You don't cry."

"I love you, Shelly. You'll be fine."

"Then stop crying. I'm not dying. I'm not..."

He turned his head up, away from her, and shouted for help.

"Stop crying," she begged as his tears dripped onto her. "I don't want to die." Her eyelids grew heavy, her breaths seemed so hard to drag in. "Don't let me die..."

* * * * *

They'd given her morphine.

Only morphine gave her this particular feeling of floating and flying and tingling fingers and toes. Hot and cold inside. Her shoulder hurt, and her mouth was dry, her lips chapped. What the hell had they done to her?

Her eyelids weighed a ton, but she finally got them open a crack. She was in a hospital room, which she'd figured. When she tried to lift her right hand to pull the oxygen tubing from her nose, it was weighted down. She tugged harder.

A head popped up into her view, but through her blurry eyes and the darkened room, she wasn't sure who she was seeing.

"Hey, sweetheart."

"Dex?" she muttered, but her throat hurt. Had they tubed her, too? "What the hell..."

"Shh... You're okay," Dex said softly.

"Need a drink, honey?" She turned her head slightly at the other voice. Even that slight movement hurt. But her mom was there at the other side of the bed. Then her dad appeared next to her mom.

"Yeah." She couldn't hold her eyes open. A straw touched her lips, and she drank. The cold water felt good coating her mouth and trickling down her throat. "My feet," she muttered.

"What about your feet?" her dad asked.

"Stuck. Move the blankets." She swallowed hard. Her throat still hurt. "Untuck..."

Just before she fell back into the blackness, she felt the covers being tugged and her feet freed, and a voice she thought sounded like Celeste's asking if she needed anything else.

Why was everyone standing around her? Was she really dying?

* * * * *

The next time she woke up, she was more alert, and in way more pain. She groaned as she opened her eyes. Dex was there again—or still—in his wheelchair right next to the bed. The room was dark, but there was plenty of light flowing in through the open door.

"Hey."

"The morphine wore off," she informed him in a croaky voice.

"You want me to call the nurse?"

"In a minute. Could I have some more water, please?"

He held the plastic cup with the bendy straw to her lips. She drank it all. Her throat burned a bit, but didn't ache as bad as before. When he pulled the cup away, she asked, "Did they tube me?"

"Yeah. You were in surgery for a couple of hours."

She frowned and tried to adjust herself since her butt felt numb, but the slight movement made her gasp in pain.

"The bullet lodged behind your shoulder blade. They had to go in and get it."

"Shit. How much damage?"

"Not much, really. I'm sure the surgeon will be able to explain better, but he didn't think your recovery time would be too long."

"What happened to Ricky?"

"He's been arrested."

She looked at Dex, remembering what he'd said as he'd cried over her. "What time is it?"

"About two in the morning."

"Why are you still here?"

He smiled at her and reached up to push her hair away from her face. "Because there was no way in hell I was letting you wake up in the hospital alone."

"Because you love me?"

He glanced away and cleared his throat. "Do you want me to call the nurse?"

So did he love her, or had he spoken in the heat of the moment while worried she was dying? "Yeah."

He pushed the call button then said, "Celeste, Paul, and your parents were here until about an hour ago. Your mom and dad are staying with them tonight. The doctor told the nurse to back off on the painkillers to get you to wake up, but it took longer than expected."

Her eyes were getting heavy again. Ricky was in jail. Dex was by her side. She could relax and go back to sleep. She was safe now. "I don't drink or take painkillers most of the time. I'm a lightweight. But I need something now."

"Hey, Shelly," the nurse said as she came into the room. "Finally

awake?"

Elaine, Shelly thought her name was. "Kind of. It really hurts."

"Got it right here," the nurse said, holding up a syringe. "Doc wanted you to wake up before you got another dose."

The nurse put the morphine into the IV bag then took Shelly's blood pressure. By the time the nurse took off the blood pressure cuff, the morphine was working its way into Shelly's veins.

"Go home, Dex. Get some sleep." She yawned.

"I'm not going anywhere. I won't leave you alone."

She closed her eyes, unable to hold them open a moment longer. "I'm a big girl... Been alone...long time."

* * * * *

The scent of food brought Shelly awake. Sunlight streamed in the window and warmed her body under the blankets. Her feet stuck out of the bottom of the covers, and she frowned before pulling them in to warm them.

"Hey there. You hungry?" An orderly was putting two food trays on her bed table.

"Starving. But I don't think I need two." She fumbled her right hand around until she got a hold of the remote to raise the back of her bed.

The orderly grinned. "One's for him." He pointed toward the other side of the room.

As the bed rose, she saw what he'd pointed at before leaving. One of the "daddy chairs" had been moved into the room, and Dex was asleep in it. They were very comfortable recliners in the two maternity rooms in the hospital. The doctors sometimes used them for taking naps when the maternity rooms were empty.

She smiled to herself and thought of the brief memories she had of last night. He'd been by her side when she awoke, and she wondered how long into the night he'd sat by her bed before going to the recliner. Then she wondered how he'd been allowed to stay since he wasn't staff or

family. Celeste and Paul must have had something to do with it.

Her brain seemed sharper than she thought it should be, but she wasn't going to complain about that. Most of the patients she'd worked with had little or sometimes no memory of serious traumatic injury. She was fairly sure she could remember everything that had happened up until the time she lost consciousness from the pain.

When she was upright enough, she reached over, tugged the bed table closer, and lifted the lid on one of the trays. The IV needle tape pulled at the back of her hand, and she made a face at it, then at the food. Scrambled eggs that looked rubbery, a slice of ham, and a small bowl of unflavored oatmeal. She reached for the cup of coffee and wrestled off the plastic lid with one hand.

Her left shoulder was bandaged with thick padding, and her arm was in a sling. She was not even going to attempt to move it until she talked to the surgeon.

"Hey there!"

She looked over the rim of the plastic mug after a sip of tepid coffee to see Celeste and Paul coming into the room. Celeste carried a huge bouquet of lilies and carnations. Paul held a big travel mug and a plastic bag.

"Please say that's coffee for me," she said.

Paul and Celeste laughed.

"Told you so," Celeste said as she set the flowers on the window ledge. It was then she noticed the five other vases of flowers. Who the heck had brought those, and when? "Give the poor lady her coffee. And Paul made his potato bake for breakfast."

Paul set the mug in front of her, and she snatched it up and took a long drink of scalding black coffee. "Ohh, I love you guys," she said with feeling. Paul moved one of the hospital trays off the table then pulled a container from the plastic bag and removed the lid before putting it in front of her.

"We love you, too," Celeste said with a grin. "How are you feeling?"

She used the fork from the hospital tray and took a bite of potatoes,

bacon and cheese. "Wonderful, now. Where are my parents?"

"They'll be coming later. We called and checked on you, and since you were out of the woods, they decided to get a couple more hours of sleep before they came in."

"Dad's got a blood pressure problem. Did he look okay?" She took another bite.

Celeste nodded. "He's okay. Much better after finding out you'd be fine."

Dex lowered the footrest on the recliner and reached for his wheelchair. "Hey, guys."

They shared greetings while Shelly ate.

"We brought some breakfast so you're not stuck with hospital food," Paul said, handing Dex another plasticware container once he was settled in his wheelchair.

"Thank you. Though I can't believe it'd be any worse than GI breakfast."

"It is," Celeste and Shelly said in unison, then they both laughed, but Shelly's ended on a groan.

"You look better this morning," Dex said as he wheeled over toward her. "How are you feeling?"

She swallowed a bite of potato and rolled her eyes. "I was shot. It hurts like hell. Please stop asking me that."

Dex smiled and winked. "Okay."

"Are you up for giving a statement?" Paul asked. "I didn't come just to feed you."

Shelly nodded then took another sip of coffee. "I'm ready."

"I have to get to the ER," Celeste said before touching Shelly's shin. "I'll come up and have lunch with you, bring you something from the cafeteria."

Shelly smiled at her friend who had been at the hospital, by her side, until early into the morning. "Hey," she called before Celeste cleared the door.

Celeste stopped and turned back.

"Thank you."

Celeste just smiled and gave her a little wave before turning the corner.

"This is good," Dex said as he dug into his breakfast.

"It's about the only thing I can cook," Paul said with a little chuckle as he pulled a micro cassette recorder out of his jacket pocket before shrugging out of the coat and tossing it onto the recliner. He hit a button and held the recorder up to his mouth. "Detective Paul Jensen interviewing Doctor Shelly Newman case number one-eight-five-three-four. Please state your name." He set the recorder on the bed tray in front of her and gave her a small nod.

"Shelly Jane Newman."

"Could you please tell me about your relationship with the accused, Richard Santana?"

Chapter Thirteen

Shelly licked her lips and reached for the travel mug of coffee. "He was a patient of mine when I first started working here at Cooper Valley Memorial a little over three years ago." She took a sip of the coffee.

"Did your relationship with him go beyond doctor and patient?"

She glanced at Dex. He watched her with those expressive blue eyes, not bothering to hide his curiosity.

"Yes. Somewhat. He was fifteen and came to me for rehab for a broken collarbone. He claimed he fell out of a tree house. I didn't think much of it until I started noticing bruises on him during our sessions. What looked like hand marks on his upper arms, a bad bruise on his lower back. When I questioned him about them, he had an excuse for every single one of them. But when he tried to tell me he got a black eye from walking into a door, I called the police.

"His stepfather was arrested and charged with child abuse. Apparently he wasn't the first man in Ricky's life who had abused him, but Ricky had always kept his mouth shut because he didn't want to upset his mother."

"And that was the extent of your contact with him?" Paul asked.

"The only contact I had with Ricky was during his therapy sessions, but..." She sighed. "I took it as hero worship." She took a sip of coffee. "One day he told me he loved me and wanted to marry me. He was fifteen, confused. Feeling safe for the first time in his life, I think, partly because of me. I explained to him that he was my patient, and I

couldn't be personally involved with a patient, and that even if I could, he was very much too young for me." She glanced at Dex, then back to Paul, then at the tape recorder. "When we were done with therapy, I didn't see him much until he got a job as delivery boy for the local deli. He's at the hospital a lot, because the deli is the only place in town that orders out, and doctors aren't known for packing lunches for themselves. I had no idea he still harbored feelings for me."

"What do you remember about what happened yesterday when you were shot?"

She turned her head and met Dex's eyes again, wondering how he'd take her admission of their relationship when he'd so clearly stated she shouldn't say anything.

He pressed his lips together into a flat line, then glanced away.

Shelly closed her eyes and said, "I'd just gotten some disturbing news from one of the nurses, and Pete Dexler was there for his session, and I was crying and sitting on his lap when Ricky came in. Ricky had one of those envelopes. At first, I thought someone had asked him to deliver it to me, but then he accused me of cheating on him—uh—betraying him, I think he said. And then he pulled a gun and pointed it at me. I tried to talk him into giving it to me or putting it down, but he kept saying how I'd cheated on him with Pete, and...and uhm..." She swallowed hard and looked up at Paul. "He'd seen me with Pete over the weekend. He said he'd turned eighteen and tried courting me; that was why he'd left the notes. He said he was trying to woo me with romance...." She rubbed her fingers against her forehead. "I had no idea it was him. I see him here a couple times a week when he does deliveries. He's always just been a sweet kid."

"Is there anything you can think of," Paul said slowly, "that would have led him to believe you had feelings for him?"

"No. Hell, no. I've never—" She looked at Dex then gritted her teeth. "I never, under any circumstances, made any motion toward him. He's a kid, and he was a patient of mine, and until Pete Dexler, I've never, *ever* been involved personally with any patient."

Dex reached out his hand and took hers. "It's okay," he mouthed

silently.

Paul shut off the recorder. "I'm sorry, Shelly. I had to ask the questions."

"I know. It's okay. What's going to happen to Ricky?"

"He's going in front of the county judge in..." He glanced at his watch. "...about two hours. The DA is charging him with attempted murder. I'm sure he'll be adding stalking and breaking and entering to the charges at a later date."

Shelly dropped her head forward. "God, the kid can't get a break."

"He tried to kill you," Dex said in a harsh tone. "What kind of break do you think he deserves? I tried to stop the first shot but wasn't fast enough. I tried —"

She squeezed his hand. "It's okay."

"No, it's not okay," he stressed. "If he hadn't been so focused on you, if I hadn't knocked him out when I did, he would've succeeded. He could've killed you."

She couldn't think about that right now. She surely couldn't think about the fact that Dex could have taken a bullet in defense of her. She shrugged, then hissed at the pain the attempt at motion caused in her left shoulder. "Damn, that hurt." So she sighed and looked at the men on either side of her bed. "Check with social services. They opened a case back when I reported the possibility of abuse. That kid had broken bones going back to when he was five, and you can't tell me he was so clumsy he kept doing it on his own. His mother had been married four or five times, and when she was between husbands, apparently she brought home every stray, drunkard, and druggie she could find in the county. He had a fucked up childhood. I almost can't blame him for clinging to someone who treated him right." She rolled her eyes. "Almost. Getting shot sucks."

Dex squeezed her hand. "Yeah, it does. Do you need me to get you your nurse?"

"Not yet. Anything else, Paul?"

"No." He picked up the recorder. "I'll let you know what happens in court."

She nodded. "Thanks."

Paul grabbed his jacket and headed for the door just as Dorothy Bells knocked on the open door.

"Hello, Detective," she said as she stepped aside when he passed.

"Ma'am." Paul nodded as he left.

Dorothy approached the bedside with a warm smile. "How are you doing this morning, Shelly?"

Shelly kept hold of Dex's hand when he tried to pull away from her. "I'm doing well, all things considered," she said, though the pain was starting to get to her. Burning, pinching pain in her shoulder and spreading down her arm. She hoped the surgeon would be in before she let the nurse drug her into unconsciousness again. "I'm glad you came by," she said to Dorothy, "I wanted to talk to you."

Dorothy came over to the bed and looked at the bandages. "You had us terrified for a while yesterday. You sure you're okay? Your eyes look a little glassy." She laid the back of her hand on Shelly's forehead. "Don't seem to have a fever."

"It hurts, but I'm...okay for right now. I need to give you my resignation."

"What?" Both Dorothy and Dex said at the same time.

"No. Oh, Shelly, don't resign over this. I'm sorry we didn't do more to protect you. I tried to get someone in here yesterday, but—"

"Chief Bells. No. Listen. This has nothing to do with me being hurt on hospital property, I assure you." She took a deep breath and held on to Dex's hand tightly. "I've broken rules, and I..." She closed her eyes and let out a breath.

"Shelly, don't," Dex whispered.

"I'm involved with a patient." She tipped her head toward Dex. "I crossed a line, and it can't be uncrossed, and my conscience won't let me stay on here as a doctor."

"She's been on morphine all night," Dex said. "Don't listen to her. She doesn't know what she's saying. There might have been some hanky panky, but it wasn't her fault; it was mine. I take responsibility for that, and it's over."

Dorothy looked down at their clasped hands, and Dex jerked away

from Shelly's hold. "I see," the chief said. "Some hanky panky?" She raised her eyebrows at Shelly.

"No, not hanky panky. I'm in love with him. We made love, at least in my mind we did, so...so I'm turning in my resignation, and you'll have one typed up once I can get out of this bed."

Dorothy turned her attention to Dex. "Mr. Dexler, would you give me a few minutes alone with Doctor Newman?"

"Of course. Shelly, you're being stupid. Don't throw away your career on me. I'm not worth it. I can't walk, I can't work, I—" His words cut off, and Shelly saw the slight brightening in his eyes that looked like tears. "Don't be stupid. I told you before not to be stupid."

Shelly scowled at him until he turned his wheelchair away from the bed and left the room. Dorothy followed him and shut the door. When she returned to the side of the bed, she pulled the molded plastic chair away from the wall and sat down.

"You know I worked at Virginia Mason in Seattle before I went to the Columbia teaching hospital, don't you?"

"Yes, I'd heard that," Shelly responded, wrinkling her brow in confusion. That, and her shoulder was becoming almost unbearable.

"Well, what no one in the world knows except for me, my husband, and the chief of staff at Virginia Mason is that I was asked to leave there, or I would have been fired. I, too, fell for a handsome, wounded, incredible man who stole my heart."

Shelly stared at her, unable to believe the woman who until yesterday had always seemed so tough just confessed something she probably should never have revealed to anyone.

"That's right. Bitch Bells fell for her patient."

Shelly's lips parted in surprise. She'd heard one of the surgeons call Dorothy that once. Dorothy was always so stern, but as far as Shelly knew, she'd never been the slightest bit bitchy.

Dorothy laughed. "Yes, I know what some of the staff think of me. You become a bitch when you say no to something someone wants. No, the surgeons don't get special treatment by getting their own parking spots close to the building. No, we're not going to bring in a gourmet chef

because a couple of our patients don't like hospital food. I have to answer to the board of directors, and there are some things that are just not that important."

"I see." But Shelly really didn't see where this was going.

"I left my position at Virginia Mason because of the man I'd fallen in love with. He was a cancer patient and might not have even survived, but to me, he was the one. And if he only had six months left, then I was bound to spend those six months doing everything in my ability to make him as comfortable as I could, not as his doctor, but as his companion. Luckily, his cancer went into remission, and we've been married fifteen years."

Shelly smiled.

"Now, tell me, is Mr. Dexler the man that you feel you will love forever and that you would gladly spend your days with him instead of being a doctor, if that was what it took to be with him?"

"Yes," Shelly answered without one second of hesitation. "He's the man I've spent my adult life hoping for. He's brave, and beautiful, and..." She sighed. "He has no idea what he has to offer, even if he never walks again."

Dorothy nodded and grinned. "Well, here's the deal then. I don't want to let you go, so I'm not accepting your resignation. You're much too big of an asset to CVMH. Besides, I can't see you leaving those kids, who, by the way, want to come see you as soon as you're ready for them."

"But..."

She held up her hand. "Just listen. There are only ten thousand people in the greater metropolitan area of Cooper Valley—"

Shelly laughed, and Dorothy chuckled.

"That being the case, I know it's damn near impossible to meet people here unless you have a reason to be thrust together for periods of time. It is perfectly natural that you'd grow close to one of your patients, since as far as I can tell you spend most of your waking hours right here in the hospital. And most of the men around here of your age are all married."

Shelly nodded.

"So. This isn't Virginia Mason," she said as she stood up. "And I don't *always* say no. As long as none of that hanky panky went on under this roof..." She pointed up at the ceiling, and Shelly shook her head in the negative. "...and you don't make a habit of moving from one man to the other, which I don't believe you will, I don't see why you can't have your beefcake and eat it, too. This once."

Shelly burst out laughing, then groaned and grabbed her shoulder, which didn't help the pain any.

Dorothy smiled and patted her good arm. "You need some painkiller."

"Yeah, I do," Shelly said as tears filled her eyes. "Thank you, Dorothy," she said, using the chief's first name, something she'd never done before.

"You're welcome. Get some rest. I'll send Mr. Dexler back in to you so you can give him the good news. You're on full medical leave until your doctor releases you, of course. I've got calls in to the nearby hospitals to see if we can get someone here to fill in for you for a few weeks."

Shelly nodded. "I appreciate everything. You have no idea how much."

"You're a good woman. And you've been through a hell of a lot. I promise by the time you come back to work, we'll have security beefed up around here so this doesn't happen to anyone again. I'll check on you before you go home." She headed for the door. "He really is a handsome devil."

"I know," Shelly said, grinning.

Dex wheeled into the room just moments after Dorothy left, and the door slowly shut behind him. "Please tell me you came to your senses."

She held up her index finger. "One question."

He moved next to the bed. "What?"

"Right after I was shot, and you were there, did I imagine it or did you cry over me and tell me you loved me?"

He looked down at his hands clamped together in his lap.

"Pete. Answer me."

"Yes."

"And did you mean it?"

"We've only been together for... Fuck, Shelly, we only spent the weekend together. You have a career. A life. I don't have either right now and don't know when or if I ever really will. So why the hell—"

"Did you mean it?" she shouted over his rambling.

"Yes, I meant it! I love you more than I ever thought possible to love anyone. You're the most amazing woman I've ever met, but there's no fucking way I'm letting you throw away your life for some goddamn cripple."

"Excuse me," the nurse said as she opened the door. "I have your morphine. Chief Bells said you were ready for it."

"Yes, I am." Shelly closed her eyes and waited for the hot/cold tingling to commence. The nurse took her blood pressure then quietly left the room.

"I'll leave town before I let you throw away your career."

She turned her head toward him and licked her lips. "I've been given permission to have my beefcake and eat it, too." She grinned, the drugs starting to kick in and dull her pain and her brain. "In other words, I still have my job, and I can have you, too." She giggled a little. "And besides, I'm going to need someone to take care of me for a while when I get out of here. I'm kind of fucked up."

"Shelly..."

"Shh," she said with a sloppy grin. "I love you, Pete Dexler. And you said you love me. Where I come from, we're now going steady."

Dex laughed and wrapped his big hand around hers. "I'm honored that you want to go steady with me, sweetheart. And I do love you. I always will."

"Good. Check on the kids for me." She couldn't hold her eyes open a moment longer. "And make sure Celeste doesn't stay around here too long. She's got a man to go home to."

"Why don't you worry about you for a little while? You deserve it."

"Love you..." she whispered as she slipped back to sleep gripping Dex's hand.

Dangerous Intentions by Anna Leigh Keaton

The End

Author Bio

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romance 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....

Anna loves to hear from her readers. You can email her at anna@annaleighkeaton.com or visit her website at www.annaleighkeaton.com for all her upcoming and previously published works, and meet her alter ego at www.leannekarella.com.