



“Heather!” A woman rushed from the sidewalk.
Heather dropped the bag and Keith caught it.

“Sorry, Whisper,” Heather replied. “I thought you’d be napping. I’m sorry.”

“Where were you?”

“I...went out. And I—”

“Go inside. Immediately!”

Heather started backing away after taking the bag from him. “Thanks. You’ll be paid, I promise. I’m sorry for any trouble.”

When he closed the back hatch on the SUV, he waited until Heather stepped inside before turning to regard her sister. Heather’s quick retreat made a really foul mood descend. Tired and feeling a little protective of the kid, he remembered he hadn’t gotten his damn beer.

“Look,” he said, “nothing happened to her, she’s home and safe. It’s late and she’s worn out. Let her explain and take it easy on her.”

“Anything else?” The woman’s voice didn’t carry far, but the menace came through loud and clear.

“Sure. Take better care of your sister.” He instantly regretted the words. It wasn’t his business.

“Who are you? Why was she with you?”

He sighed. “She got in some trouble and I walked into it. She told me you were having a hard time and we went to the grocery store. It’s no big deal, so don’t turn it into one.”

“What do you want?” She spat enough accusation in her question to make the Pope re-think recent actions.

His mood wouldn’t tolerate her tone of voice. He took a step toward her and she backed away. He’d only wanted to get close so their voices wouldn’t carry. Heather stood in the doorway and she’d already been through enough for one night. “Listen carefully. Take better care of your sister,” he said.

Whisper

by

Kathleen Lash

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

Whisper

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Dedication

To my friend and critique partner Jenny
for putting up with me
and patiently correcting my latest writing quirk.

For Sharon,
who is buying an e-reader just for my books.
Love you.

Miss you Dad and Mom —
I hope they have "highballs" in heaven.
Have one on me to toast another book.
Thanks to my husband, who gives encouragement
and still calls me "sexy."

I promise, sweetie, next royalty check,
we will get you better glasses.

To my family and children,
who are the absolute best!

And thanks to my editor, Cindy Davis
for bravely taking on another project from me.

Chapter One

Keith Manchester stopped for a six-pack of his favorite beer to enjoy over the Labor Day weekend. He wanted it, deserved it and damn it, he'd have it while busting his tail to get the large home repair project done. He didn't need more complications or another kid to worry about, but caught himself speculating about the teenage girl at the front of the store. With her arms crossed, shoulders rolled forward and head bowed, he took an extra few seconds to look the situation over. Her hands shook as she slowly pulled items from where they'd been concealed under her shirt, in the waist of her jeans.

With the police involved, she stood knee deep in one hell of a mess. God only knew why, he couldn't just leave her there. Her pitiful expression, rigid posture and those damned dripping eyes, made him forget the beer and stick his nose where it didn't belong. *Of all the stupid stunts! She got busted stealing two packages of hot dogs and a pound of bacon!*

He wandered close, placed a hand on her shoulder and said to the cop, "Maynard, what the hell's going on?"

Maynard Wilkins looked up and started laughing. After a firm handshake, Maynard replied, "When did you roll into town?"

Keith hadn't seen him in six months. A decade of patrolling for the Cleveland police gave Maynard some deep wrinkles and an abundance of gray hair.

"Touched down about an hour ago."

"Then you haven't even been home yet."

"No. Figured I owed myself a few cold ones. I'm only here for two days this trip, and you know what the short visits are like."

"Can you squeeze a night out with the guys?"

"Next time for sure." The visits could be more than a few days in duration and there still wouldn't be time to hang out with men he'd known since childhood. Maybe the situation would change in a few years when responsibilities lessened.

The girl squirmed beneath his hand and he tightened his hold. The kid trembled and hunched over slightly. Things would definitely take a turn in the wrong direction if she puked on Maynard's shoes. If she managed to hold it together, he'd see what he could do. "Looks like I might have my hands full the next few days. What'd she do?"

Maynard looked at the girl with disgust. "Theft." The stolen packages of meat lay on the counter in front of them.

Keith shook her slightly and she looked up. Wide, wounded, unusually shaded emerald green eyes brimmed with tears. He tried to sound stern and asked, "Jesus, Terry, what's gotten into you!"

Her mouth opened before snapping shut. Tears kept rolling as she bowed her head.

"She one of your kids?" Maynard asked.

One of his kids would consist of at least twenty juveniles, some of them delinquents who ran the streets of Cleveland. Claiming one more wouldn't make a difference. Everyone deserved a break, and by the look of her, she needed one.

"Yeah, she runs with my pack from time to time," he replied, not liking the lie, but figuring he'd pay for it in the long run.

Keith gestured toward the manager and Maynard followed him to the checkout counter. Out of earshot of the girl, he asked, "Miguel, any chance

you'd give her a break?"

The older, gray-haired man shook his head. Before Miguel verbally confirmed he wanted her arrested, Keith added, "If it was some kind of prank, I'd say bust her chops and teach her a lesson. Look at her." They all did. "Does she look like she came in here as a dare or she's pulling some sort of stupid stunt?"

"No," Miguel said, "she don't seem like the type."

He figured playing up her obvious fear and remorse would gain some sympathy. That along with the constant flow of tears might get her a second chance. An occasional soft sob added just the right effect.

"The kid doesn't eat regular. Mark's getting an earful when I get home. I told him to keep an eye on her."

"Come on, Keith," Maynard said, instantly coming to his younger brother's defense. "You know he does whatever you tell him to. She probably didn't say anything about being hungry. You know how kids can be."

"Yeah, they're stubborn and independent and most of 'em are street smart and tough at her age. Not her, though."

"No, she ain't. You can see she ain't," Miguel agreed.

It was why Keith stuck his neck out in the first place. "So what do you say, Miguel? Maynard? I'm home and I'll see she gets fed and I'll get Mark to keep better tabs on her."

"Where do you know her from?" Maynard asked.

"The shelter." Damn, he hated lying to Maynard. He did it to compel Miguel to have some compassion. Using the local homeless shelter and food bank as an alibi wouldn't condemn him to hell. He'd supported their efforts through good times and bad, and he'd bet his bottom dollar the preacher running the

establishment would look at the girl's situation and give him a blessing to do whatever it took to lend her a hand.

Miguel sighed loudly. "I suppose it'd be all right, but only because she belongs to you. In the future, if she's hungry, she tells me and I give her food. No more stealing."

"I'll explain it to her. You're a good man."

"Yeah, yeah, so you say." Miguel kept staring at her and his annoyed expression relaxed. A lot of people Keith knew had a soft spot. Sometimes it took a little nudge to get them to show it. "You think she's hungry?"

Keith laughed because Miguel wanted her arrested two minutes ago. "I'll take care of it and get her squared away."

Maynard shook both their hands as he got ready to leave. "The next time you're in town, Keith, give me a call. It's been a while since we played pool and had a few brews. Miguel, you've got me on speed dial. Call anytime."

"I'll see what I can do. And say hi to Nancy for me."

"I owe you for walking away from her."

Keith didn't do the *walking* in the breakup. In hindsight, Maynard winding up with her hadn't even strained their friendship. It all worked out. "She's a fine woman and you're a lucky guy. Good night."

When he walked close to the girl, he kept his voice low. "You have a choice. Get arrested or come with me."

Damn it, the kid actually started shaking. To her credit, she didn't freak out or jerk away when he placed a hand on her back and gently pushed. Once outside, he kept her walking to his older, black Ford Explorer. She froze when he opened the passenger door.

"It's still up to you," he said. "Maynard's across

the parking lot watching.”

“Where are you taking me?”

“Two blocks down. I said I’d feed you. I will. Sit with me in Steve’s diner, eat something, and I’ll take you home.”

When he got a look at her expression, he took a step back. God only knew why, but most kids trusted him on some level. She didn’t, not one bit and it surprised him. About to call Maynard over to take her home, she stepped into the SUV and reached for the seat belt. He walked to the driver’s side and got in. He caught glimpses of her eyeing him warily. Words wouldn’t take that kind of mistrust away, so he stayed quiet until he pulled into the restaurant and turned off the engine.

Only a few booths remained open at eleven at night. The number of people surrounding them should take her mistrust down a notch. Situated in a booth close to the window, the waitress walked up and offered menus.

“Evenin’, Keith.” She winked at him. “What’ll you have to drink?”

“Coffee would be great, Cheryl,” he replied before looking at the girl.

“Water, please,” she said.

Cheryl walked away and he casually read the menu. “Are you going to eat?”

“Not hungry, thank you.”

He wouldn’t mention the food she tried to steal. That’d probably be rude. “You like milk shakes?” When she didn’t answer, he asked, “Peanut butter?”

“What?”

He’d had similar one or two word conversations with other kids. “Do you like it?”

“Sure.”

“Chocolate?”

“Yes.” This answer was more spontaneous.

“Bananas?”

“Yes.”

Silence between them ended when Cheryl came with the drinks. He closed the menu and looked up at the haggard woman he'd gone to school with. “Is Steve cooking tonight?”

“He sure is.”

“Good. Double cheeseburger, salad with ranch dressing, and fries. And the young lady wants a Steve's special shake. Tell him I asked for it.”

“Will do. That it?”

“Yeah, thanks.”

She walked away and he got comfortable by turning sideways in the booth and leaning against the partial wall. Damn he wanted a beer and his bed, in that order. After five minutes, the girl asked, “Do you know everyone?”

He smiled because her voice didn't sound so shaky. Maybe she figured out he wasn't some predator who knew a cop, a convenience store owner, and made a deal so he could get her alone. God he hoped so. The kid looked like she needed the thousand-calorie shake.

“No, not everyone.”

Most kids didn't like silence, especially with an adult in authority hovering. A lot of them took advantage and talked or asked questions. He'd welcome either at the moment.

“I guess you live around here,” she said.

He stole a glance and she sat there toughing the situation out. She was a small boned, fragile-looking girl. He hoped her mistrust came from warnings given by a parent. He didn't want to think about the possibility of her learning hard lessons first-hand on the street. “Sure, grew up in Cleveland.”

“Why'd you help me?” she asked, getting right to the heart of it.

“Because I could.” Maybe if he opened up, she would too. “I have some half-wits for brothers and

they have some quarter-wits for friends. I've traveled the last few years and they had some run-ins with the cops getting used to their freedom. They figured it out though. They aren't bad kids and you didn't look like one either."

"I'm not."

"Glad to hear I didn't use all my political influence to get a hardened criminal off the hook."

When she laughed quietly, he relaxed. She might even drink part of the milk shake. Silence stretched before she eventually said, "It wasn't for me."

"What?"

"There was an accident," she began, before a tumble of words came out. "There's stuff to eat and I know she leaves it for me, and I tried talking her into it, even a sandwich, but she said she wasn't hungry and—"

Cheryl appeared at the side of table and the girl stopped short. She placed the coffee and milkshake down and left. He turned in the seat and slowly stirred sugar and cream into the steaming cup, waiting for the rest of her story. He gave her some time and when she didn't speak, he glanced up and found her silently crying. He gave his attention and waited.

"I'm sorry." She wiped her eyes and sighed heavily.

"For what? Worrying about someone you love? Don't be. Too many people don't give a shit."

Her gaze finally met his. "You care. I can tell."

"Yeah, well, I'm a chump," he said which made her laugh. When she smiled, a really cute kid emerged. It burned his ass that a girl her age was out so late at night alone, worrying about food.

After peeling the paper wrapper off the straw, she stuck it in the oversized shake. She took a small taste and her expression lit up. If only a chocolate,

peanut butter, banana shake with extra vanilla could fix more problems.

"I would've gone back and paid for it." The straw moved up and down in the thick goo. "As soon as we get paid again, I would've taken money to the store. I don't get into trouble." Her posture relayed embarrassment.

"So, some meat could fix your problems and you didn't have the money?"

She slumped against the seat. "Wow, that sounds lame."

"Not at all." He tasted the coffee. "Sometimes, all it takes is something really small to fix a bigger problem."

The next time she took a sip, she made it a long one, using the napkin to dab her lips. Once she relaxed, she yawned. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

"What's your name?"

"It's Keith Manchester." When her mouth dropped open, he ventured a guess at what caused her surprise. "Uh, oh, you know one of my kids?"

"We rent from someone named Manchester. The family across the street is yours?"

Wide eyes streaked with red gazed at him. Apparently she knew the boys in a good way. He couldn't imagine his brothers giving a kid like her any trouble. "Do you live on Bessimer?"

"Yeah."

"Well then, I bet you rented the little gray house with black trim."

"We did. All those kids belong to you?"

"No." He laughed. He wouldn't personally claim *all* the kids hanging out at home. "Mark, Corey and Billy are my brothers. The rest? When they need a safe place to crash, they show up."

"We haven't lived there very long."

"Welcome to the neighborhood. Glad to meet

you...” He held out his hand until she accepted it for a handshake.

“I’m Heather Neuman, but I guess I look like a Terry.”

It took him a second to remember the name he’d given her at the store. “So, Heather, since we’re neighbors, why don’t you tell me why you got busted for stealing fifteen dollars worth of meat?”

Chapter Two

Keith and Heather pulled into the driveway an hour and a half later. He put the SUV in park and turned off the motor. She climbed out, walked to the back and picked up a paper grocery bag before pulling a key from her jeans pocket. He grabbed three bags and followed her across the cement walkway. With just her and an older sister to feed, the food would probably last until her sister got back to work. He hadn't pushed to find out specifically what happened. Heather's reluctance to explain reminded him it wasn't his business.

The small house was as neat as a pin. The furniture had been stylish a decade ago and appeared gently used. After dropping the bags on the counter, he looked at the older stove and made a mental note to have a new one installed. The last he knew, the antique appliance worked, but probably wasn't conducive to making the chore of cooking any easier, and they'd bought food to prepare, not convenience items.

He never realized a trip through a grocery store could be so telling. The kid eyed a number of things, but didn't pick them up. He'd given her free rein to get whatever they'd need for three or four weeks. She priced items out, took store brands rather than name brands, and a lot of the purchases came from him putting something in the cart after she hesitantly replaced it on the shelf.

A few trips back and forth left one last bag to bring inside. They made their way to his SUV in the

moonless, dark night to retrieve it. The nearest streetlight glared four houses away. The city needed to be more vigilant replacing lights shot out by pellets from BB guns, or rocks thrown by bored children. With the last grocery bag in her arms, someone approached from behind.

"Heather!" A woman rushed from the sidewalk. Heather dropped the bag and Keith caught it.

"Sorry, Whisper," Heather replied. "I thought you'd be napping. I'm sorry."

"Where were you?"

"I...went out. And I—"

"Go inside. Immediately!"

Heather started backing away after taking the bag from him. "Thanks. You'll be paid, I promise. I'm sorry for any trouble."

When he closed the back hatch on the SUV, he waited until Heather stepped inside before turning to regard her sister. Heather's quick retreat made a really foul mood descend. Tired and feeling a little protective of the kid, he remembered he hadn't gotten his damn beer.

"Look," he said, "nothing happened to her, she's home and safe. It's late and she's worn out. Let her explain and take it easy on her."

"Anything else?" The woman's voice didn't carry far, but the menace came through loud and clear.

"Sure. Take better care of your sister." He instantly regretted the words. It wasn't his business.

"Who are you? Why was she with you?"

He sighed. "She got in some trouble and I walked into it. She told me you were having a hard time and we went to the grocery store. It's no big deal, so don't turn it into one."

"What do you want?" She spat enough accusation in her question to make the Pope re-think recent actions.

His mood wouldn't tolerate her tone of voice. He

took a step toward her and she backed away. He'd only wanted to get close so their voices wouldn't carry. Heather stood in the doorway and she'd already been through enough for one night. "Listen carefully. Take better care of your sister," he said.

He couldn't make out a single feature in the darkness, but saw her sway. Two females living alone in his neighborhood said a lot. The woman staggering around when Heather thought she'd be *napping*, said even more. The kid being secretive and avoiding direct explanations, just about spelled it out. He'd seen plenty in thirty-two years.

"Sober up, get your ass to work, and take care of that kid. If she ever steals food again, you'll be doing some explaining—to the cops. You take any of this out on her, and I'll come have another chat with you. Get me?"

He expected a retort. She turned, walked quickly into the house and closed the door before locks clicked. She'd retreat like that from guilt. Booze—drugs, it didn't matter, all users had an excuse and most of the people with the best excuses took up residence around his house. The last few years took a toll on the area.

Climbing into the driver's seat, he started the truck. Another eight months or so, and they'd be leaving. They wouldn't move far. They'd stay close enough so Mark, Corey, and their friends could commute. Too, most of the better paying jobs were in town. As for the rest of what the neighborhood offered—he'd had a belly full. The violence, crime and drugs kept moving closer. With two brothers still under eighteen, he couldn't ignore all the changes.

He barely fit the SUV into a spot at the end of the driveway. Of course the house would be crammed with kids on a Friday night. *Good, more hands to help tomorrow.* The front door stood wide

open and when he walked in, Mark jumped to his feet. His little brother looked good. Mark took his hand for a firm handshake before grabbing him in a rough hug.

"Jesus, Keith, where the hell have you been?" Mark asked.

Marks' girlfriend, Christy, lay sleeping on the couch with pizza boxes and pop cans on the coffee table.

"I got sidetracked." The resonant *thump, thump, thump* from below, made him smile. "Party in the crypt?"

Mark smirked. "Yeah, that sound room gets more use than even the bathroom. It's a great diversion for Corey."

"I bet the neighbors think so, too." No one ever complained outright, but the noise before the construction of the practice room could be ear shattering. "Where's my little guy?"

"Billy went to bed a few hours back. He's been a handful since he found out you were coming home."

Keith laughed. His youngest brother probably missed him the most. At ten, he was too little for trouble of a serious nature, and too old to think Keith worked out of state for the fun of it.

"You look like hell. Did you eat?"

"Yeah, found something on the way home."

"Are we hitting it hard in the morning?"

"I said we were. I keep promises." Despite Mark trying to hide it, his expression held dread. "We'll bust our asses tomorrow, get it done, and you can play all day Sunday and Monday with Christy."

"No problem. She'll be here to help too." Mark shifted and hit his palm against his leg like something occurred to him. "This has to suck for you. You get two days home and you have to fix shit around here. What time is your flight out on Sunday?"

“Five.”

“Damn it, you won’t have time to do anything! Couldn’t you get a later flight?”

“I’m working graveyard shift. If nothing bad happens at the airport, I’ll make it back just in time to work Sunday night.”

At twenty, Mark had grown a lot over the last year, and not just in height. The kid worried too much and Keith regretted saddling him with their two younger brothers.

“You know,” Mark said, “I can pick up a second job and Corey can get a job after school so you could be here.”

“No.” They’d had the conversation before, and he thought all the crazy ideas stopped when he’d been home on the Fourth of July. “I make a shit load of money and you help me by keeping the kids in line. Corey doesn’t work when he’s in school. His grades suck the way it is. You need to be here in the evenings. Hell, if Christy didn’t work an early shift and high tail it over here, Billy would be letting himself in after school.”

“He’s ten. He could do it.”

“No.”

“So you kill yourself and we all kick back and lap it up? You were working double shifts when you were my age. Hell, you worked full time when you were sixteen and Corey doesn’t do shit.”

“Are the kids too much? Is that what this is about?”

“No.” After a brief pause, he said, “Hell, no!”

“You sure? This subject seems to come up a lot lately. You need some freedom? If you do, that’d change the way we’ve handled things.”

“I’m sure. Sorry. This isn’t about me, or even the kids.”

He appreciated the concern but didn’t need it. “A few more years and I’m done. Maybe not even that

long. Then you'll all get sick of me working local and tightening the leash I'll sling around your necks."

"You've been traveling long enough. A few more years and there won't be anything left of you. You work eighty hours a week. The crazy shit they have you doing—"

"Pays the long dollar." *End of conversation.* "Now, has *Body of Suffering* gotten any better?" Corey and his friends started the band three years ago. What they lacked in talent, they made up for in determination and amplifiers. The hobby necessitated the construction of the sound proof room in the basement for rehearsals.

Mark laughed. "Actually, we don't suffer *as* bad these days when they play. Are you going down?"

"Not tonight. They sound like they're making progress so I'll leave them alone."

"The guys would like to see you."

"Yeah." Keith knew all of them and had little trouble connecting with the kids. His own sixteen-year old brother however, was a different story. The kid hated him, and he didn't know why. They'd been close once, really close. The longer Keith traveled, the more Corey seemed to chew on the mouth full of resentment. He'd never come right out and say what the problem was, either. "I'll catch them in the morning."

Keith walked toward the stairs and stopped when Mark asked, "What time?"

"We'll let the neighbors sleep for a while. How about ten?"

When Mark didn't respond, Keith turned on the bottom step. Mark asked, "You okay?"

"Sure. Why?"

"You don't want to start until ten?"

"Problem with that?"

Mark shook his head and Keith climbed the stairs. Maybe he rode them too hard when he

showed up. He'd cram it all into his few days home and then fly out. Maybe if they worked together with more sleep under their belts, Corey would look at him differently. Three years of rolling into town, fixing what broke not only on their house but on the rentals, grated on his nerves, too. Becoming a workaholic hadn't been a conscious decision. It'd been a necessity.

After closing his bedroom door, he stripped off his clothes in the darkened room. He flicked on the bathroom light before turning on the shower. God, it felt good to be home. The place wasn't organized or particularly clean, but it wasn't the type of mess some people lived in. Hell, with Mark and his friends, and Corey and his friends, the place could really be a wreck.

After finishing the long, hot shower, he toweled his hair and turned down the covers on the bed. Before crawling in, he stood by the window looking at the semi-lit street.

As his mind wandered, he gazed at the house where Heather lived. He hoped her sister took his warning seriously. She could do whatever she wanted, but because they lived in one of *his* houses, she'd damned well take care of Heather's basic needs.

He wouldn't tolerate anything less.

Fatigue bled into him and he walked to his bed. The squishy and broken-down mattress felt dependable, not like a hotel bed where you never knew what you'd be getting. He only slept well in his own bed, in their home, surrounded by the kids. If something bad happened, he could take care of it immediately and not worry about getting a few thousand miles in a hurry.

Trouble happened infrequently, but it did happen. Mark ruptured his appendix and needed surgery. Billy and a high fever required a few days

Whisper

in the hospital. Those things made up the nightmares in his life.

Traveling, working and busting his ass for phenomenal wages were a joke.

Chapter Three

"You sure you want to take this over?" Whisper Neuman asked Heather. Even with all the windows and doors open, nothing but humid air rolled into the overheated house. She'd been cooking all morning.

"They've been working straight through and it's way past time to eat. Keith bought the food and you cooked it. I'd be happy to walk it over."

Heather would probably be more than happy to meet new people. What Whisper didn't feel comfortable with was sending her across the street with a meal for a pack of males.

"If they even look at you cross-eyed, you high tail it back here. You hear me, Heather? You really don't know a thing about that man."

"I do. He was decent last night, didn't get funny with me, and was a really nice guy."

"Yeah," Whisper replied, "that's how most of them start out."

"He thinks I'm a child."

I hope so. "You mind me. If any one of them..."

"I know. I'll high tail it outta there." She smiled, exaggerating Whisper's slight drawl.

"You are one sassy little girl sometimes. And my accent is *not* that obvious."

Heather embraced her quickly and grabbed the oversized basket. "I love you so much."

"Because you're getting your way."

"Even if you said I couldn't go and had to stay in my room the whole day, I'd be mad at you, but I'd

still love you.”

Whisper brushed stray hairs away from Heather’s face. “I love you too, sweetheart. You be careful and mind your manners.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

From the window, Whisper watched Heather walk across the street and down a few houses. As she approached, every male stopped working. The little blond-haired boy ran to her. What a sweet looking child. Too bad most harmless little boys turned into men.

The temperatures soared beyond ninety that day with nearly one hundred percent humidity. Not one of them wore a shirt. She felt like she’d sent Heather unarmed into a pack of wolves. Actually, Heather would be more like bait with the food she carried. They’d probably be starved. It’d serve them well to treat her gently by word and deed. If anything happened, Whisper would do something drastic.

Her heart pounded when they circled Heather. Heather was a normal girl and probably didn’t mind the attention. Too, most of them looked pretty harmless, despite all the muscular builds. Keith appeared to be the biggest threat. Well over six feet tall, he was one solid man. He had to go more than two hundred pounds with most of it being muscle. Heather said something about him working construction. His build clearly spoke of hard physical labor or an abundance of time in a gym.

Keith accepted the basket and the wolves stalked closer. Some things never changed. A group of men who’d worked hard would certainly be hungry. She hoped the offering took the edge off Keith’s temper. *Take care of Heather!*

She probably wasn’t an ideal guardian for Heather, but there weren’t other options. Whisper swallowed, to ease the tension in her throat as

Heather took another step closer to the huge man. His weight casually shifted from one leg to the other while easily holding the twenty-pound basket of food. Arrogance and confidence oozed from him. Of course it would. What would intimidate a man his size? *Nothing*. Every man who grew to those proportions should spend time in a five foot seven, one hundred and thirty pound body. She'd bet after only a week, they'd remember how bad it hurt to be slapped or shoved by someone bigger and stronger.

In broad daylight, Heather stood within plain view of all the neighbors so Whisper left the window. Heather didn't have the same phobias Whisper did. She could laugh and enjoy being in the presence of men. Whisper could act similarly, but not with the men so close. She could act confident around a man if he stayed at least ten feet away.

She walked to the kitchen, put her hair in a ponytail to get it off her neck, and began washing dishes. The apple pies sat on the windowsill to cool. Two whole chickens had been cut, breaded and fried. She'd also fried five pounds of potato wedges to go with the coleslaw and homemade biscuits. The amount of food wouldn't satisfy men that large, but it'd take the edge off. After the pies, they'd probably be full. She made due with what'd been provided.

Heather's stealing made several things very real in her mind. They walked a thin line and an accident almost toppled them. She'd be more careful in the future. She couldn't afford a mistake.

The screen door opened and she expected to hear Heather's excited report of what all happened. What she heard instead was a familiar, deep voice. "Heather said to walk in."

She didn't turn to face him, left her hands in the soapy water, and rested her elbows on the edge of the sink. "It's fine. You need something?"

"You didn't have to go to all that trouble," he

replied. That thick, rumbling voice sounded a little different without accusation lacing his words.

"No problem. You bought the food."

"Look, about last night—"

She interrupted and blurted out, "I *do* take care of her."

"I'm sorry." He sounded controlled and sincere.

She didn't need a visual confirmation badly enough to turn an inch in his direction. She started scrubbing a pan. Maybe he'd leave. When he didn't, words formed. "Don't be. Heather said you were good to her. Isn't enough of that in the world these day's. Like she told you though, I'll repay you. I'll have cash next week."

"When you get money, buy what you need around here first." He sounded like he'd moved closer.

She heard him fine where he'd been, and knew he could hear her. There wasn't a good enough reason for him to come into the kitchen. "We'll manage. Thank you." Her voice grew softer. Damn, even her hands started shaking in the water. She needed to make her point but her throat closed a little more. "If you'll excuse me now, I'd like to get the kitchen in order."

Keith seldom tolerated being dismissed. She'd gone to a lot of trouble to make amends for the night before and show she'd be able to care for Heather. Keeping his tone reasonable, he asked, "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She seemed to understand he wanted a face-to-face conversation. Soapy hands came out of the dishwater. A full minute crept by as she slowly dried them. A hand rose to the back of her head to swipe the band holding her ponytail. Long, strawberry blonde hair fell almost to her waist. Her fingers ran through strands by her face before she hesitantly turned.

Reasonable length shorts and a loose fitting tee shirt greeted him as she hung her head and looked at his boots. Her feet were bare and her long legs were covered in bruises. She wouldn't look up. When he took a step, she backed against the stove and crossed her arms. The defensive move made him freeze. The entire situation changed. He'd been so used to defending kids; he'd forgotten sometimes parents or guardians weren't always a problem. They might even need a little safety themselves.

He leaned casually against the counter and relaxed. She'd probably sense any tension from him. "You okay?"

He waited as she stole a glance from behind long bangs. She nodded then sighed. "I'm a mess right now. Accident. That's why I haven't been at work."

"Heather mentioned something about it."

"We have enough to eat, but Heather gets crazy ideas." She laughed quietly before her shoulders trembled slightly. She rubbed her palms up and down her arms as if chilled in the sweltering kitchen. "She thought I needed protein to heal some bruises. We were low on meat, but had plenty of other stuff. We weren't about to starve."

She swiped the back of a hand across her forehead. Every male instinct kicked into high gear the second he glimpsed her face. The damage wasn't from a simple accident. "Just you and Heather live here?"

"Why?" Hesitation and mistrust surrounded the single word.

"Because I'd take care of the man who did that to you if he's still around." He'd meant the statement as an offer of protection.

Every taught line of her rigid stance relayed she hadn't taken it that way. "No. Just me and Heather."

"No boyfriend—husband?" When she shook her head, he asked, "What happened?"

Her hand rose and flipped as she bent her wrist. It happened twice before she actually made words softly come out with the gesture. "After work. Didn't see him. He jumped me."

"You were robbed?" It wouldn't surprise him with the increase in violent crimes. Heather said something about her working nights.

She shook her head and his chest tightened. She seemed embarrassed. "Johnny took care of it. Nothing happened."

By the look of her, a hell of a lot happened.

"Heather doesn't know. Not exactly. I told her it was a car accident."

She finally looked up and his right hand fisted before he made it open. He hoped *Johnny* took the problem seriously. Both of her eyes were swollen with greenish bruises circling them. *Damn it!* "You sure you're all right?"

"Yep." She looked down, purposely hiding her face. "I'm going back to work next week."

"Are you up to it?"

"Yes, I'm fine," she said quickly. "No problem." Her voice grew a little in volume as she crossed her arms. "We need to get our routine going again."

"Is money the problem?"

"No. I'll get back to work and we'll make ends meet just fine."

"Don't worry about rent."

She laughed and it sounded polite. "Oh, okay, I'll let the landlord know the guy across the street said not to worry about it."

Heather must not have mentioned who owned the house. He smiled when she looked up. "The guy across the street *is* the landlord."

"You?"

"Yep, you pay me."

"What about Nomad?"

"He helps, sometimes rents out a house if one of

us can't."

"But the money orders—"

"Are made out to Manchester, right?"

"Yes."

He extended his hand. For a minute he didn't think she'd take it. When she did, he said, "Keith Manchester, the guy across the street."

"Whisper Neuman. I really am sorry about last night. Heather's never done anything so rash."

"We got off on the wrong foot. I have this uncanny knack for jumping to conclusions."

Her hand was tiny and delicate with long fingers. He imagined under the discoloration on her face, at the very least, she'd be pretty. She appeared somewhat backward and shy which added to the impression of her being very fragile. She didn't have an out-and-out drawl, but part of the South still lingered in certain enunciations.

Heather walked in and when she saw their joined hands, a smile lit her face. "I told them they couldn't eat until you got back, Keith. I don't think they'll behave long. Whisper makes the best fried chicken."

Whisper drew her hand away and his felt empty. "I better get back, then. Thanks again for cooking. We spent the day wondering where all the good smells were coming from. Billy threatened to go door to door to find the right house and invite himself to dinner."

She turned toward the sink and pulled a pie off the windowsill. "You could take these with you. They're still warm. We wouldn't want *Billy* to miss dessert."

He accepted first one, and then the other fragrant apple pies. His eyebrows raised as his mouth watered. "They'll jump me before I get in the house."

Heather laughed and Whisper smiled. "I hope

Billy likes them.”

The pies smelled like butter, cinnamon, apples and summer. They could taste like putty, and he'd still be impressed she went to the trouble. With the overheated house, she should be resting and taking care of herself, not cooking and baking. He didn't mouth off too often, and it figured he'd spout off to a woman who needed a hand, not an attitude. “Would you come over and join us?”

She turned toward the sink. “No. Thank you, though. I really do have things to do.”

“Whisper?” Heather asked.

“They have work to finish, Heather. Certainly, they don't need you underfoot,” Whisper replied, apparently reading her sister's mind.

“I'd do dishes after they eat.”

He took a step toward Whisper and she glanced in his direction. One rough incident wouldn't be enough to make her keep tabs on exactly how close he'd gotten. Her reactions spoke of conditioning.

“She won't be in the way. Besides, there're three other girls in the house. They've been running drinks out and helping catch up on laundry. She wouldn't be alone with a bunch of boys.”

“Please?” Heather asked.

Whisper nodded and Heather grabbed a pie.

“Be home at dark,” Whisper said.

“I will. I promise.” She bolted out the door.

He touched Whisper's arm with the backs of his fingers. She flinched before straightening her spine and letting go of a long breath. The urge to gentle her and tame obvious misgivings about a man being close, grew stronger. With her reactions, it'd take time, of which his was limited. He wouldn't leave however, until she understood one basic concept. If bad things happened in the future, there'd be support right across the street. Even if he wasn't there, Mark, Nomad or even Corey would help in

any way they could.

"Whisper?" When she looked up, he said, "You're not alone here anymore. If you need something, even a light bulb changed, call the house. If you're ever worried, or feel threatened, give a yell across the street and someone will help. I promise." He touched her shoulder very gently and admired her bravery. She accepted the glide of his fingers without a jerk or cringe. "Are you sure you and Heather are all right?"

"We'll manage. I appreciate all the offers you made. With work next week, our troubles are over. Everything else is easy stuff."

"I'll see you later then." He picked up the pie and left.

He mulled things over on the way home. The stove would be replaced next week. She obviously knew how to cook and he'd make it easier for her. Maybe she'd bake something for the kids every once in a while. Mark or Nomad could get her to and from work. With one of them waiting on her, there wouldn't be a need for *Johnny* to show up. If the guy was a boyfriend or friend, he wasn't a dependable one.

With the porch mostly constructed, he stepped onto it and took a moment to take in the combination of smells. Warm apple pie and fresh cut lumber. What could be better? The porch stretched the entire length of the house with twice the width as the previous one to meet the overhanging roof. After dinner, they'd place the railings. The boys could stain it as weather permitted.

Inside, Heather, Christy and the others set the dining room table. The last time they'd eaten there as a family had been Christmas. The food, courtesy of Steve's Restaurant in the form of take out, had been the closest they'd come to a home cooked meal. The boys concocted stuff from the freezer every once

in a while, but they all lacked culinary skills.

"Will you stay the whole week?" Billy asked.

Keith took a napkin and wiped the corner of the boy's mouth. He didn't mind being idolized by the kid. He actually enjoyed Billy thinking he could fix any problem life threw their way. He hated the fall off the pedestal however, because the landing hurt like hell. It happened with Corey. "Nope. But I'll be here tomorrow."

"Oh."

"And tomorrow I don't have a thing to do other than catch a plane. That leaves all morning and some of the afternoon. It's not supposed to rain so I figured we'd play some football in the park."

That gained the attention of all the kids. Corey's best friend Jade asked, "Really?"

"Yeah, I need to blow off some steam. You guys would be doing me a favor."

Kids started yelling about who would be on which team. Billy, of course, would be with him. They pretty much understood the game would be played with the odds stacked in Billy's favor. They liked playing, regardless.

The chicken impressed him, never having tasted anything quite like it. Thick and crispy breading surrounded tender, flavorful meat. The rest of the meal was on par with the chicken, which was incredible. They ate fast, anticipating the pies.

After dinner, while dishes were cleared, Heather cut slices of still-warm pie. With a lot of mouths waiting for a taste, she divided them equally and didn't take a piece for herself.

"You not hungry?" he asked.

"Whisper made some apple dumplings for us. Besides, it's just the right number without me."

Corey couldn't get her attention back quick enough. For once, he didn't sound like a disgruntled sixteen-year old. He sounded like Mark. A pretty girl

could do that for a guy—make him mature. When she wasn't crying or being arrested, Heather was beyond pretty. Keith imagined Whisper would be too, without the extra color all over her skin.

He'd known a few men who'd beaten a woman. They'd also kick a puppy or shake a baby. When one of them would cross his path, Keith never hesitated giving a first hand demonstration on how it felt to take some punches. He'd never minded educating a man needing a hard lesson.

"Are you glad to be home, Keith?" Billy asked.

He took a second to focus on the question. He'd been mentally tearing some asshole's head off. "Sure. Why would you ask me something like that?"

Billy glanced at Mark who glared and shook his head.

Keith's stomach rolled. "Now what the hell was that about?"

Billy's eyes grew big and damp. Keith drew a breath, held it and let it out slowly. He planned on some trouble during the visit. It always surfaced. He'd just been surprised Billy had the problem. At ten years old, it couldn't be too severe. At least, that's what he hoped. He set his fork down and reached out. Billy flew into his arms. He'd outgrown hugs a few years ago. The kid needing one then didn't sit well. "What's going on, Billy?"

"I can't spell. Mark said not to tell you, but I failed every test. I just can't do it."

"I can fix that."

"Really? How?"

"You get the words on Monday, right?" He patted Billy's head when he nodded. "You tell me what they are and we nail them down, just like the porch. You'll know them forward and back. Simple."

"Every night?"

"Every single night." He talked to him almost every evening anyhow. Listening to him repeat the

spelling words would give them more to say. "Wait, I just thought of something. How would I know you weren't looking at the paper to see how they're spelled?"

Corey piped up, "I'll keep an eye on him. He won't cheat."

He didn't question Corey's sudden change in attitude or the interest in Billy. Corey resented Billy on some level; anything to bridge the gap would be a blessing.

"I'd really appreciate that," Keith said. "I know it'd take away from your practice time, but it'd give Mark a break."

Corey looked him in the eye and sort of smiled. "No problem. I don't mind."

Keith believed he didn't. Maybe Corey made the offer to impress Heather, and then again, maybe not. Whatever the reason, the long overdue behavior settled a few issues in his mind. He figured with Corey being so sullen, next on the agenda would be some sort of trouble with the police. It'd certainly happened with Mark.

"Better now?" Keith asked Billy.

The weight of the world had apparently been lifted from the kid and he took his seat. His little blond haired, blue-eyed brother seemed less tough than the other Manchesters. He wondered how much genetics influenced a kid's development. They shared a common mother, but Billy's father had always been odd. He wondered how he could love Billy so much while hating the man who'd fathered him.

Apple pie melted in his mouth and he forgot about a bastard stepfather. Most pies tasted too sweet. This one didn't. While consuming the slice, he tasted something complex and rich. What did she use? On the last bite, he figured it out. *Honey*. He savored every morsel because his diet consisted

mostly of take-out. Maybe he should consider mouthing off to women more often. If it ever happened again, he knew he'd get a kick in the pants, not a full blown, homemade meal with dessert. Sometimes things worked out.

With the pies finished, he stood and started gathering dirty dishes. If he didn't move fast, his work crew would be asleep from a food coma. "Let's move and get the porch done."

"Task master," Corey mumbled, reluctantly coming to his feet.

"Slave driver," Jade said. He stood, stretched and rubbed his stomach.

"Foreman," Mark added, before laughing.

"Supervisor," Dusty yelled from the living room.

Chief, manager, commander, general, ruler, supreme leader, captain, followed. He finally cut them off. "Just call me *Alpha Manchester*."

They laughed as they carried plates to the kitchen. Heather shooed them away and Christy joined her to do dishes. The kids grumbled as they headed out the door and picked up drills, wood and hammers. They took up where they'd left off. Through the years, they'd all gotten fairly talented with home repairs. Corey and his friends certainly did grown men's work for the day.

As the sun set, they cleaned up tools and debris from the yard. He stood back and looked at the finished project. The old porch lay in pieces in the rented dumpster, ready to be hauled away.

Corey came up to stand next to him. "Did we do all right?"

Keith ruffled his brothers long brown hair before patting his shoulder. "You did better than that. Once it's stained, it'll be the best in town. You guys did first rate work today."

"Thanks."

Before Corey left, Keith cleared his throat.

"Mark said you guys blew out one of the old amplifiers."

"Blew it up is more like it. We hacked it back together though. Why?"

"Then I don't suppose you could use that new seven-thousand series amp you've been drooling over."

His eyes rounded and he looked confused. "Do you know how much that costs?"

"Yeah, well, the labor today was free, so I figured we could choke something up."

"No way!" he said.

"Sure, but don't expect payment for every little thing. You live here too, so you help when I need it. Get me?"

"Oh, hell yeah! Holy shit!"

"Language, Corey," Keith scolded.

"Sorry, but, holy shit! Sorry."

Keith laughed and Corey immediately loudly told the guys what they'd earned. They'd done plenty and Keith knew they fixed what they could around the house in his absence. For kids, they weren't the worst in the world and should get rewarded every once in a while. Besides, they'd need the extravagance so the crypt wouldn't catch fire again. Thank God he'd installed extinguishers.

Heather emerged from the house. "Thanks for everything."

"Honey, you brought the food and did dishes."

"I really had fun." She twisted long strands of hair between her thumb and index finger.

He squeezed her shoulder before walking toward the house. "Then make sure you're not a stranger."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Corey race to catch her. He called out, "I'll walk her home."

You do that. Walk her all the way. He laughed, knowing he'd given Corey the excuse through years of lectures. *Never let a kid younger than you get*

home alone in the dark. Never let a girl do it either. If they were at our house, they get home safe. Maybe Corey did more listening than he imagined. Maybe his younger brother didn't hate him as much as he'd come to believe.

Chapter Four

Whisper couldn't ever remember being happier. For once, her efforts actually did some good and she could see the fruits of her labor. The five-bedroom, three bath, large older home sparkled. Chores were kept current. She loved cooking and the Manchesters appreciated it. As she washed dinner dishes, she smiled. She'd never been involved in such an organized catastrophe. With the house clean, laundry done and the kids doing homework, she felt as if she belonged to a family. After a few months of the pleasant routine, she almost never thought about her past.

A few hours from then, she could go to work, blank out what happened, and return to get Heather. Mark chaperoned Heather and Corey without complaint. He'd told her one more kid hanging around wasn't a burden at all. She believed him.

Billy wandered into the kitchen with a forlorn expression. Whisper wiped her hands on the dish towel and squatted in front of him. "Well, little man, what's that long face all about?"

"Keith didn't call last night," he replied.

"I bet I know what happened to him."

"You do?"

"Sure I do. He worked so hard the night before, he fell asleep after having a big meal and woke up late." She gave her most reassuring smile. In a strange way, she felt she knew Keith through the children.

Billy shook his head. "He doesn't sleep late, and he always calls me."

Mark stood in the doorway with a similar worried expression. She held Mark's gaze and took Billy into her arms as she knelt in front of him. Stroking his soft, long blond hair, she said, "Hush now, little one, your brother's just fine. Even a big man like him can get real bone tired."

Billy slumped against her and gave a too tight embrace. He was like a Great Dane puppy, all clumsiness and unknowing of his strength. "He could've got into an accident. It's snowing and he could've slipped off the road into a ditch. Could be trapped and starving."

"Oh, honey," she stroked his back, grateful he loosened his hold, "there's no snow where he's at."

"You sure?"

"Well sure, I'm sure. He's not too far off from where I grew up."

Mark's eyebrows rose. She'd been careful not to relay much of a personal nature, not even simple things. She'd cautioned Heather and believed she hadn't told Corey about their background. A lot rode on their past staying out of their futures.

"You grow up in Texas?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, I did. That's why I talk funny."

Billy pulled back and put his hands on her face. He kissed her forehead before wrapping his arms around her neck. He could be very affectionate. "I didn't mean what I said about you talking funny. I just never heard someone with a accent."

"You never heard someone with *an* accent, Billy. Remember the rule?"

"Sure. I forgot. But you don't talk funny. It sounds right now." He shifted the conversation. "It doesn't snow in Texas?" His little mind moved quickly and his topic changes were just as fast.

"No, sir, not around San Antonio. That's where

your brother is.”

“So, you think he was just sleeping?”

“We don’t know anything for certain, so let’s just believe that until we hear otherwise. Okay?”

“Can I have another piece of cake?”

She smiled and kissed the tip of his nose. “Not right now. You finish your homework, and do your chores. After I go to work, Mark will get you another slice.”

He beamed. He sure did love chocolate chip cake with chocolate fudge frosting. Corey’s best friend, Jade had a birthday. He’d never had a birthday cake or party growing up. They’d made it a royal celebration. No child should go without a party until they turned seventeen. She’d learned an awful lot lately about the world and what experiences a normal child should have.

“I’ll do the spelling so when Keith calls, I’ll have all the words nailed tight.”

She did love his verbal expressions. For that matter, all of them had some colorful ways of saying things. When Billy left, she stood and gave Mark her attention. He remained in the doorway, a hand resting on his hip. He looked a lot older than twenty. At around six feet, with long brown hair and deep brown eyes, he was a very attractive young man. He looked a lot like his eldest brother. Perhaps the worried expression made him appear older.

“He didn’t oversleep.” Mark’s voice remained low as he glanced around. “Something’s wrong. I’ve been calling his cell. No answer.”

He appeared pale and she hated seeing him upset. He was smart, strong and very brave. She stepped close and placed a hand on his shoulder. His expression softened.

“He’s never missed a call before?”

“Once. They worked him a double shift and he couldn’t get out of the tunnel to phone home.”

“Well, that’s what happened this time. You said he works like a fool.” She couldn’t give him any concrete answers. Short of flying to Texas, there wasn’t a thing they could do. “How about if I stay home tonight and keep you company? We’ll wait together.”

“I’ll pay you.” He quickly explained, “I can only guess what it’ll cost you to miss work. I don’t want you to lose income because—”

“I think that’s about enough, Mark.”

“You and Heather count on the money.”

“I have plenty.” Over the past few months, she’d managed to gather a nest egg in the event of another disaster. They wouldn’t be caught again without some cash.

“Then why don’t you find a different line of work?”

She took a step back, shocked and appalled at his audacity.

“I’m not sorry I finally spoke up. You shouldn’t be working in that shit hole.”

She’d let her guard down and he’d gotten too close. Before she could formulate a retort, he grasped her arms. “Please, Whisper, don’t be mad at me.”

She shook and her voice barely worked. “You and Nomad won’t be my taxi service any more. I told you when this started that I didn’t need or want your help.”

A quick move and a jerk gained her freedom before he caught her again. She could tell by his grip, she wouldn’t get lucky a second time. His expression forced her not to react. He looked physically ill. “Whisper, please. I meant every word, but let me explain.”

“You went inside!”

“No. Not when you were working, but I’ve been inside before.”

He knew exactly how she’d been making money.

She felt sick. She'd discounted the fact that, at twenty, Mark was grown.

"No one should look at you like that. You're not like the others."

Fury and embarrassment made her tremble. "Let me educate you, little man. One of the women is there to pay medical bills for her mother. Another has two kids and a drunk for a husband. One has to pay off rehab because a lousy boyfriend got her into a mess of trouble. Not like them? God, boy, grow up!"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"You're not supposed to know!" She calmed a little. "It's a game, like acting. I'm not real when I'm there."

"The men believe you are. That's why one tried to take what he thought you were offering."

She swallowed and looked away. She didn't want to think about it. She'd make sure it never happened again. She'd be smarter.

"Johnny told me how that guy stalked you. He's glad we're in the parking lot when you and the others get off, because he has his hands full with the drunks inside."

"My turn now. I'm sorry." His silence over the months allowed her to believe he didn't think too much about what she did for a living. He truly seemed to care for her and Heather. She didn't know her working at the club gave him cause for concern. "You shouldn't be involved in this. I should've—"

"No. Keith told me and Nomad to make sure you got home safe." He'd never once mentioned why they began insisting on taking and picking her up from work. Why would Keith ask them to do something like that?

"He didn't know what he was asking you to do."

"It wouldn't matter."

"Have you said anything to the others?"

His brows came together as he grasped her

hand. "I wouldn't. You know I wouldn't, and neither would Nomad. You never told Heather where you work, and you asked us not to say anything."

"None of them need to know."

"I agree."

She cleared her throat and pulled her hand away. "A little more and I'll quit. I'll figure something else out. It's just...we needed the cash. Fast."

"I can give you money if you'll stop. Let me say something to Keith."

"No!"

"Really. We can support you and Heather."

"No."

Christy walked in. "Mark?" He cleared his throat and faced her. "Is everything all right?"

She looked smaller than normal. Not liking conflict of any nature, it probably stemmed from two parents who battered each other on a regular basis. Medium length, curly brown hair accentuated her large, hazel eyes. They'd frightened her because tears formed. *Damn it!*

Mark stroked her cheek. "Sure, Christy, everything's fine. We were just talking about Keith not calling."

Christy appeared wary as she looked between them. Whisper turned and stuck her hands in the dishwater when Mark's cell phone rang. He pulled it from his pocket and answered. After a moment, he said, "Where in the hell have you been!"

Mark listened and his face lit up. *Yes* and *no* answers were relayed. "Get here as soon as you can. This is great! Wait until I tell Billy and Corey!" After a brief pause, he asked, "Why?"

The conversation ended shortly after and he snapped the phone shut. "They have him working like mad. They're finishing the job and he'll be home before Thanksgiving. He's getting vacation and

might be here until after the first of the year! But he doesn't want me to tell Billy yet. He said things can go wrong, so I should just wait until I see him. Oh, and to get the break, he might not be calling too often. I guess they're really going wild with the hours on the job site. Isn't that great?"

Christy beamed and Whisper managed a smile. She'd only been around a few months and knew absolutely nothing concrete about Keith, other than what the kids relayed. The story didn't sound quite right. She wondered why the sudden change in routine. Not letting any of her thoughts surface, she said, "It sounds wonderful. You guys can get back to normal for a while."

"Wait," Mark said, "what do you mean by that?"

"The *real* ruler of the roost will be home soon. You won't need me or Heather around all the time."

"No way. You won't run off because Keith comes home, will you?"

"Nope. I'll back out so the man can have his home and family. He's probably been waiting years to have some time with you all."

"But..."

"Mark, please. If you need anything, I'm right across the street. And don't forget I promised Thanksgiving dinner. I won't go back on my word."

She definitely wouldn't be over ordering the kids around when he came home. She'd never make the mistake of being in a man's way again. Mark didn't seem to mind, because in truth, he wasn't completely a man. He'd been thankful to turn control of the house and kids over to her. She believed Keith was different. She wouldn't hang around to find out anything to the contrary.

Keith closed the phone before the nurse took it from his hand. He wondered just how long a headache could last and how bad it could get.

"How's the pain?" the nurse asked.

"I can take it," he replied.

"Good, it shouldn't be long now. A half hour tops."

He'd been waiting a few hours to go into surgery and they'd stopped the pain medication so they could put him under. They said they'd fix the damage to his left leg. They seemed more concerned with the noxious gas he'd been breathing right after the cave in. He'd been the worst casualty of the disaster, and company men in suits stayed close to his room.

More answers would come after surgery and the latest battery of blood work. He refused to think beyond that. He imagined he'd be able to call home again tomorrow so the kids wouldn't get suspicious. They didn't need to worry. A few nurses talked to him about rehabilitation and the length of time needed to gain strength. *A few months, my ass.* Thanksgiving was a few weeks away. They'd better get the surgery right, *rehab* him in a hurry, because he'd be on his way home. He'd deal with the remainder of his medical condition once he'd gotten there.

"Jesus!" he exclaimed, the pain radiating into his hip and from there, to the center of his brain.

"Can you hold on?" the nurse asked.

"Sure. I'm fine." The worst was over. Nothing could be more painful than being dug out, dragged up the shaft and banged around in a helicopter the whole way to the trauma center. Nothing!

Company suits hovered in the hallway and asked questions. The tallest suit came into his room, took a spot beside his bed and asked, "You holding on, Manchester?"

"Yeah. Doing just great."

"We'll talk when you're out of surgery."

"Actually," Keith said, "there's some talking we'll do now. If anything happens to me, don't screw

around with my kids. You make sure that insurance money gets to them. I mean every stinking cent, the very next day. Get me?"

"You'll be fine. Don't talk about crazy stuff right now."

"Did you hear me? If you jack them around, my oldest will sue the damned company and he'll be calling the shots. You'll be the first one he fires."

The lanky, grey-haired man looked like an attorney. The cocky son of a bitch smiled. On a different day, Keith would've punched the smirk right off his face.

"I'll keep my job because you're in the very best hospital getting the very best care. Hell, Keith, if you want fillet mignon for breakfast, ask. They'll hook you right up."

Keith closed his eyes and swiped a hand over his wet forehead. "A beer. I never did get that beer."

"As soon as the anesthesia wears off and the doctor says it's okay," the nurse said, "you'll get it. What brand do you prefer?"

Keith opened his eyes and glared at her. She'd been dead serious. When he smiled, she smiled in return and rubbed his forearm.

"Your friend wasn't joking. I have orders to stick with you like a tick and get you whatever you want."

"Jesus," he muttered, closing his eyes, "I'm really screwed then. Shit!"

Both the nurse and man laughed. "No," the attorney said, "the company just takes care of its own. We've never had an accident near this magnitude. We'll make it right."

Probably wishful thinking, or perhaps being just plain naive, he believed it. He'd been lucky to get a job with the tunneling outfit. To date, they'd done right by him. His arms fell limp and a chill raced over him. Damned, he couldn't feel anything!

"Are you ready for him?" the nurse asked.

The question wasn't directed at him. He couldn't answer anyhow. Weird lights danced behind his eyelids and he felt queasy. He kept thinking about the insurance money and how it'd set Mark up for a long, long time. It'd educate Corey and Billy and take care of expenses for years. They had no debt other than monthly reoccurring items. The rentals paid for repairs and kept adding to the bank account. Actually, if they didn't get a cent from insurance, they'd be well off. Maybe he should've quit the job a few days earlier.

The bed moved and he no longer cared. They could hack off his mangled leg and that'd be all right. He wondered if Mark felt this much pain before he'd had surgery for the appendix. He hoped not. It made his gut clench thinking about any of the kids aching so bad.

Chapter Five

Whisper heard a sound before the bedroom door creaked. Not accustomed to the room or bed, she came half awake. When the light glared a moment later, she sat up and shielded her eyes. Keith Manchester filled the doorway. She threw the covers back and hurried to get out of the man's bed. Why she'd let Mark talk her into staying the night was beyond her at the moment.

A tangle of bedcovers trapped a leg and with some quick movements, she wound up on the floor with a thump. Additional soft thuds came toward her. "Slow down, you're still stuck," he said "You hurt?"

He finished untangling her leg before she let it join the rest of her body. Still partially asleep, she noticed things, first a black cast. She instinctively reached out and touched the hard surface.

"Oh, my God." Whisper struggled to stand. A hand grasped her upper arm and pulled her up. "Your leg! What happened?" Ashamed for sleeping in his bed, she added, "I'm sorry. Electricity is out across the street. This side has power. Mark said it'd be all right. We didn't know when you'd be—"

"Whoa, take it easy." He touched the side of her face and the scent of snow and cold drifted to her. He'd probably just hobbled in the door. "Better now?"

She nodded. He stood balanced on crutches tucked under his arms. How could she have forgotten how big he was? "Please sit down. I'll change the sheets if you want."

She tried to get around him, but the crutches sort of boxed her in. The only route of escape would be across the bed.

"I scared you again," he said. "None of the kids were awake or they would've warned me you were up here. Crawl back in bed. I'll see you in the morning."

"No, please." She placed her hand on his arm. He gazed down with an amused expression. "It's your bed. Billy doubled up with Corey and Heather took Corey's bed. I'll move in with her."

The grin left as Keith's eyes closed. The color drained from his face as his fists gripped the padded handles on the crutches. He attempted to bring a hand up and almost lost his balance.

"Here," she said, steadying him. Whisper moved beside him and took a crutch away. She fit perfectly in his armpit and wrapped her arm around him. "One step back and you can sit. Can you do it?"

He chuckled. "One step? Sure."

He took it and sat. Because of how she held him, she sat too. Sliding out from under his arm, she wound up on her knees beside his undamaged leg. He pulled a bottle from the breast pocket of his flannel shirt.

"Overdue," he said. "Flight delayed with the snow. Afraid to take it and drive home."

She took the pill bottle and read the label. She recognized the name of the pain medication. The instructions indicated one or two pills every four hours.

"How many do you take?"

"Two." Of course he did, he was twice a normal person's size.

"How long since your last dose?"

"Eight hours."

She noticed the set of his jaw and tightly closed eyes. The pain would have to be very bad to make

him look like that.

"I'll be right back." She walked to the bathroom, filled a glass with cold water and returned. Obtaining two pills, she said "Here, I have it for you."

Keith's hands trembled after taking the medication. It was hard to imagine a man that big and solid, shaking or getting broken. The children portrayed him as some larger than life, invincible hero.

"Thank you." He let out a heavy breath.

"The leg hurts that bad?"

"No. Head." He sounded strange, almost drunk.

Maybe she'd made a mistake giving him the medication. "Keith?"

"Yeah?" Swollen eyelids surrounded red stained eyes.

"Can you manage now?" He nodded and she stood. She'd been running around without her jeans and it was high time she slipped into them and got out of his room. He sat there taking and releasing deep breaths like moving would be too much of an effort. "Do you need help?"

He barely shook his head. For Pete's sake, the man was dead on his feet and in pain. She could, and should help. She didn't need to wake Mark or Corey. She stepped closer and reached out. He looked dazed.

"It's fine," he slurred. "I'll get there."

She grew more determined. He hadn't moved to even situate himself more comfortably on the bed. Her fingers trembled when she got close and began unbuttoning his shirt. "Do you wear pajamas to bed?"

He smiled. "No."

She kept unbuttoning. "What's the smile for?"

"Last set of PJ's I wore had fire trucks on 'em. I thought they were so cool." He kept staring, which

allowed her to believe a past memory made him smile, not the fact she'd started undressing him. A lot of misgivings slid away with the man thinking about kiddy PJ's while she removed his clothes.

Once the buttons were unfastened, she set the crutches beside the nightstand. She took the cuff of the shirt and gently pulled his arm free. He helped, but in the barest possible way. As she struggled getting the garment off, he said, "So damn good to be home."

"I can imagine."

"Worried about the kids finding out."

She folded the shirt and laid it on a chair in the room. "Do you sleep in a tee shirt?"

"No." He grasped the bottom of his before working it up. It fit like a second skin. She couldn't stand by and watch. Helping him pull the black shirt over his head, he handed it over and his hands dropped to his thighs. Dozens upon dozens of scrapes and bruises covered his chest. She leaned in and glanced over his shoulder. His back held more of the same with a large bandage covering something. Fresh blood seeped from beneath and formed a trail to his jeans.

"Something wrong back there?"

"You've sprung a leak."

"No problem. Happens when I move." Her hand was suddenly grasped and his breath touched her wrist. "Damn, you smell good. So does my bed."

Her heart skipped a beat as she eased away.

"Sorry, keep scaring you," he said, releasing her. "You smell like a mall woman."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Don't beg, honey. I'm an easy sort of guy."

His mental focus didn't seem too great, so she asked more bluntly. "What does a *mall woman* smell like?"

He smiled and his eyes dropped more.

“Christmas. Shopping for the kids. That woman who gets too close and smells so good, like she just came from a shower. You know, some lucky bastard’s present. How the hell will I shop with this piece of shit on my leg?”

“How did you drive home?”

“Slow. The roads suck. Got here and couldn’t get out.

She’d asked about his physical condition, not about how much snow had fallen. She kept up with his line of conversation however, and asked, “You couldn’t get out of your truck?”

“No.”

“Why? What happened?”

“Too tired. Better now.”

“How’d you get hurt?”

He rubbed his temple and then forehead. “Cave in. Gas seeped. Piece of the tunneling equipment landed on me.”

His shoulders bunched up as muscles stood out on his chest and arms. She regretted asking, hadn’t meant to upset him. She stroked the side of his face. The strain beneath his skin settled immediately.

“It’s damn good to be home. Have to show Mark again.”

“Show him what?” she asked.

“Insurance papers. God, I was so afraid he’d forget about them.”

“Medical insurance?”

“Life.”

She crouched down and turned his face. Tired, gentle brown eyes gazed at her. “You’re home now and you don’t need to worry about a thing. I’ll fix your back and get you tucked in.”

She walked to the bathroom and gathered medical supplies. When she approached, he leaned forward and rested his forearms on his thighs, making the task easier. Picking at the paper tape

surrounding the bandage, he said quietly, "Just rip it off like they did. Quicker that way."

She continued to carefully pick. "That's why your skin's so raw. We'll take the extra thirty seconds and save you some healing."

Once the bandage came off, she cleaned the stitched area with peroxide and re-dressed it. She wiped the trail of blood from his back, careful not to take scabs in the process. With him half naked and both of them perched on a bed, she should've been nervous. Whisper found Keith Manchester very easy to touch. He championed children, worked and supported his family; thought good smelling women were like presents, and smiled when remembering fire truck pajamas. She couldn't recall a man ever appearing so sweet and harmless.

She bent and placed a kiss on his shoulder before she'd even thought it through. Instantly regretting it, she got off the bed and scanned him for a reaction. Thankfully, he'd been too tired to notice. It'd been twenty minutes since he'd taken the medication. He probably couldn't feel much of anything. She could though. Her stomach tightened when she'd gotten close to his warm skin. He smelled good too, like outdoors and cologne mixed together. At the moment, *he* seemed like a present, albeit, a slightly damaged one.

After replacing everything in the bathroom, she found him still slumped over. Her fingers touched his arm and he straightened. "Let's get your jeans off and you can stretch out."

He fumbled with his belt, and sucked in his stomach.

She asked, "Pain?"

He shook his head but placed his hands on the bed. On braced arms, his neck stretched until his head fell back. His jaw clenched as his eyes shut tight. He looked mortally wounded and pale. Enough

was enough! *Either help him or get the hell out of the way.* She'd help.

The belt buckle came apart before undoing the button and zipper. She grasped the waist and said, "Use your good leg and lift up. I'll slip these down."

He struggled and removed his wallet from a back pocket before tossing it on the bedside table. When he lifted, she uncovered his boxers and didn't get much further. He groaned and eased himself onto the bed to lay back. She began tugging at the denim. It wadded around the upper portion of the cast, slightly above his left knee. She worked the other side down and her fingertips felt soft hair the whole way before slipping the sock off too. By the time she had one leg free, her own legs felt weak and her hands weren't steady.

Talk about smelling good! The fragrance of cologne and soap blended enticingly on him. It'd been a while since she'd been close enough to smell a man, let alone touch one. And the cuddly, drugged, mostly naked grizzly bear suddenly appealed. Instead of dwelling on it, she worked the cut off pant leg over the cast. When she lifted the cast, she took off the makeshift shoe. She stripped off the half-sock covering the toes his left foot.

He started shifting in the bed, trying to bring himself into a better position. He lacked coordination. He moaned, went limp and said, "Shit. I'll handle it. Leave."

"I'll help."

"Go now!"

Noticing the swelling at the front of his boxers, she took a step closer. It should've made her run. His arm bent and rested across his eyes. He didn't really appear embarrassed. He seemed more annoyed than anything.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Even his arousal seemed harmless, especially

with the apology. She'd never been very sensual and found her own desire surprising, not necessarily annoying. They'd suffer through the awkward moment together and get him into bed. He needed to sleep.

"Don't worry about it," she said. "Let's get you turned the right way. I'll hoist your leg."

"I'll manage. That cast weighs fifty pounds."

She laughed and he sort of smiled. "On the count of three, swing your good leg in and I'll bring this one. Use an arm to shove and you'll be comfy in no time. Ready?"

"No."

"Good. One—two—three."

They worked remarkably well together. However, she hadn't counted on him moving toward the middle of the bed. As she stretched to move his leg with him, she ran out of flex in her own legs. She toppled forward with her hands trapped beneath his cast. Her upper body landed awkwardly across his mid section. She'd been pinned with her face in a pile of covers.

Hands tugged her arm. She didn't budge because she was stuck.

"God, Whisper, are you all right?"

He sounded very concerned and she couldn't breathe. He yanked a little harder and her stomach started hurting from laughing so hard. She also couldn't help get free because every muscle jerked and weakened with the spasms. Eventually with him pulling and her scooting around, her hands got loose. She braced herself and turned to look at him. She realized exactly what position she'd wound up in and stilled. Draped across his boxers, her abdomen rested over a firm swelling. Too, her tee-shirt hiked up and bikini underwear had ridden between her cheeks. A large, warm, palm rested on those cheeks. When she moved to get up, he stilled.

All of her skin flushed as her heart rate increased. Her usually soft voice became a breathy whisper as she panted. "Your leg!"

She wasn't really on it and he hadn't complained. His hand slid over flesh. Her back arched, bringing her weight against him. Caught between his hand and erection, she couldn't formulate thoughts on how to move away. In truth, she ached to be closer, and that too, wasn't common.

His fingertips traced the bunched material and her thighs parted. It'd been so long since she'd felt desire. The throbbing between her legs became unbearable as he touched her lightly. *Good, Lord, what's wrong with me!*

Her mind conjured protests. Whenever she'd gotten pleasure from sex, there'd been a price. She couldn't afford another debt or the cost of payment. But, oh, she'd never been touched so gently. Why did something usually uncomfortable, suddenly feel wonderful?

"No, please. I'll go now," she said, panting every word.

His hand caressed her with less pressure. It soothed while exciting her. She stayed where she was. All the while her mind kept saying, *run*.

"You're so wet and feel so good lying across me. I'm with it now. I won't hurt you." His calm, deep voice made her feel anything but threatened.

"Oh—I'm sorry," she said, parting her legs more. She'd lost her mind because she wasn't capable of *needing* this sort of thing.

"It's okay. Don't be sorry. Not for this." He slid her panties to the side, exposing her.

Seconds ticked by and she waited for an insistent or rough touch. With every passing moment, she grew less wary and more wanton. His fingers gently parted her aching flesh and she moaned. A hand flattened out on her lower back and

rubbed its way to her panties. He kept stroking the cotton as the fingers between her legs gently touched. Wetness came from her, and he smoothed it over the sensitive lips guarding her sex. Her face fell to the mattress. Embarrassment stole her pleasure. When she'd gotten aroused previously, she'd been praised for being a *fine piece of ass*. She didn't want Keith to view things that way. "I'm sorry." Even though the words were muffled by linens, she knew he heard.

Hands slid up her body until he grasped her arms. He effortlessly turned and tucked her against his side. A drugged man, even his size, should've had some difficulty moving her. He didn't. Her head rested in the crook of his arm. He held her securely but not too tight. She could leave if she wanted.

"Better?" he asked.

Unsure, she looked at his expression to gauge how safe she was. She hesitantly nodded.

He appeared tired and patient. "Do you want me to stop?"

Her head shook slightly. His hand skimmed over her waist and stomach. He wasn't completely rolled on his side, but could reach where he wanted. His arms were long. When he stroked the front of her panties, her legs shifted to make room. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't help reacting to him. She turned her face toward him to take in his scent. Surrounded by warmth, she lightly caressed the coarseness of his jaw.

His mouth brushed hers softly, slowly and sweetly.

"Oh," she said against his lips.

It felt lovely, sexy and safe. No one ever kissed her like this, giving her time to get used to the situation. When he didn't deepen the kiss, she did. Her heart beat faster as a surge of heat burned between her legs. She twisted against him to feel

more. A hand moved to her hip and slowly eased the side of her panties down. All the wonderful heat and achy tingling immediately ceased. A gallon of cold water in her face couldn't have been more effective in cooling her desire. She didn't want the same things he probably did. She'd likely never want *real* sex again. It physically and emotionally hurt too much.

His touch changed as he settled his hand against her hip. "It's all right. I'm tired, not stupid. You didn't need to say a word for me to hear you."

"I'm sorry." Confused, she couldn't decide whether to laugh or cry, cuddle against him or get away.

"Shh," he said, kissing her forehead. "I won't hurt you."

"You didn't." No man had been more careful. No one bothered taking the time to see that maybe she'd grown uneasy or scared. "Please."

"What, baby? What do you want?"

In truth, she wanted his taste on her tongue, his lips pressed harder to hers, and his fingers between her legs. She couldn't fathom what else she wanted, but knew she'd be too vulnerable naked. She tentatively placed her lips against his. He slowly nibbled and tasted. The gentle kiss relayed patience. Nothing had ever turned her on more.

Panting when the kiss ended, hot and out of control, she asked, "Will you touch me?"

"You're okay now?"

She nodded.

"God, I'll touch you any way you want. So there's no misunderstanding, show me."

Soft kisses and tiny licks were placed on her forehead, cheeks and lips. The non-heated touching reassured her. Eventually, she parted her legs. She kept repeating to herself, *he won't hurt you. He doesn't get off on hurting women or children. Trust*

him. You've been around the kids. They'd fear him if he wasn't kind and gentle. Trust him.

"Show me what you need, Whisper. Teach me what you like."

She grasped his hand, caressed it and forced herself not to think about how big and muscled he was. She placed his palm on her belly. He didn't move other than to repeatedly kiss her. Her lips opened beneath his and his tongue touched inside. Her stomach dropped as she grasped his hand and slowly pushed it between her panties and body. The glide of his long fingers over her lips brought her hips off the bed. As he gently touched, rubbed and teased, she shifted to bring him closer. When he parted her lips, she couldn't help shifting so her wet sex slid against his long fingers.

"Your breasts," he said.

Working the tee-shirt up, she tried taking deeper breaths to calm down. When she'd raised the shirt enough, she placed her palms against his jaw and caressed him. Her hands shook, anticipating pain. Nothing more than his breath passed over a nipple. The heated stirring of air made some of the tension leave. His mouth opened, she felt it with her hands, and before she could prepare, a trail of moisture and softness slid over her breast.

"Again. Please again," she said.

Prepared this time, she felt the caress more vividly. Exquisite! The gentle slithering of his tongue accompanied by the light kisses, made her back arch as she strained to get closer. The dance of his fingers and the brush of his mouth soon became a subtle torment. Close to climax, her mind spun as she realized she wouldn't be crushed or bruised. Passion could burn strong and hot when the man retained a measure of control.

Her legs parted more and his touch deepened. His fingers discovered and rubbed. Her insides

bunched up. Attempting to make sound with a throat gone dry, she only managed to hoarsely whine. The noise gained attention. Her breast was kissed before the nipple slid painlessly into his mouth. Surrounded by heat, her hips lurched and he began a smooth and firm penetration deeply, between her legs.

Twisting, undulating beneath his skillful mouth and hand, she started rocking her hips. The motion helped him understand she needed more, because he slid from within and slowly stretched her with two fingers.

“Oh—oh, Keith!”

“Jesus, you’re so wet,” he said after pulling his mouth from a nipple.

“I’m sorry. Can’t stop.” He hushed her by gently caressing and teasing with his lips. “Mmm.” *Incredible, mindless, burning pleasure!*

“Shh, take your time, baby. That’s it. Ride it out.”

She couldn’t take her time because the climax swept over her like powerful waves of sound from blaring speakers. Like the thud from a bass drum, the deep, resonant, defined vibration touched everywhere, inside and out, and kicked so hard, her brain turned to mush. Completely connected to the pulsing of her body, she gave into the perfection and rode the surges cresting and receding.

“More? Can you take it? Do you want it?” he asked.

With every beat of her heart, she wanted to go higher and feel more. A breath and then another were gulped prior to words tumbling out. “More, harder!”

“Open your legs. Wider. Let me touch you, and God—see you and smell you and give you what you need.” She never imagined so much physical pleasure had somehow been trapped inside her.

“Now your mouth, baby. Open it too, so I can really have a taste.”

His fingers slipped in and out as his thumb rubbed high on her sex. A thick tongue took her mouth, filling it as she came totally undone. Her insides contracted and his fingers slid away as his lips vibrated against hers. “Mmm.”

His breath came fast; deep sounds rumbled from his throat. The moment the orgasm slightly abated, he'd push back in to stretch and fill and rub which made the climax throb and run wild all over again.

Broken cries didn't make it further than his mouth. How could anything feel so intense and peaceful at the same time? The fingers that'd carried her over the edge to ecstasy slowly brought her back to a safe bed, in a large house, on a snowy night. The tongue that'd incited wild sensations, slipped away as gentle pressure from soft lips slowly restored her senses. She'd never been more aroused or aptly rewarded.

In the aftermath, as her heart slowed, Whisper had been left with the uncontrollable urge to give as much pleasure as she'd received. Turning on her side, cuddling close, she ran her hands over the length of his erection. He groaned and rolled to his back.

“It's all right. Don't worry about it,” he said. He meant it. He'd given her the most beautiful sexual experience of her life and he didn't expect a thing in return.

Because he gave so freely without demanding repayment, she became determined to give him pleasure in return. It'd been a long time since she wanted to please a man sexually. For that matter, it'd been forever since she'd been allowed a choice.

“Would it be okay,” she asked while sliding his boxers down, “if I touched *you* now?”

“Jesus!” His breath hissed through clenched

teeth when she found him with her hands. He'd been surprised, but in a good way.

"I've never wanted this, but I do with you. Could I," she leaned over and licked the head of his erection, "kiss you?"

Is that how she looked? Like she'd die from wanting another touch? *Is this lust?*

His arm stretched out until his hand felt around on the top of the nightstand. He grabbed his wallet and flipped it open, pulling a small square packet from inside. "Shit," he said, his hands and fingers shaking too much to tear it open.

She took the packet from him and opened it. As she smoothed the thin rubber over his straining flesh, he mumbled and cursed, letting her know he found such a simple thing very exciting. She ran her tongue over him slowly while gauging his reaction. His head fell against the pillow and his fingers tangled in her hair as he rubbed her scalp. Another long taste gained a groan as his chest rose and fell faster. A very moist caress made him grit out softly spoken words. "Whisper, I'm on a hair trigger and if you..."

She took him into her mouth. His hand dropped away. Just as she'd trusted him, he gave his body over. In her care, he'd find pleasure. She wouldn't stop until he did.

He responded quickly to her touch, growing harder and thicker. It must've been a while since he'd been with a woman, though she found it hard to believe with his muscular build, peaceful brown eyes and gentle touch.

She'd learned how to satisfy a man with her mouth, but this was the first time she'd ever wanted to. His strength didn't frighten her because he'd been weakened from injuries. She could thoroughly enjoy his arousal at her own pace.

Very little time passed before he began straining

and twitching. Generally, she would've been relieved the deed could be finished quickly. Instead of ending the encounter, she toyed with him, forcing him to come close, but hold onto that instant before everything inside would burn and explode. She understood those feelings now, and found it to be the sweetest and most incredible pain. He should feel it too, enjoy the sensations, because he'd been so generous while touching her.

"Baby—oh shit." Then, more urgently, he said, "Can't hold off. Shit, Whisper, I can't..."

She couldn't let him go, wanted to finish the experience and took more into her mouth. His body grew tight as his hips pumped and strained. The noises he made sounded severe and painful. She imagined she'd sounded similar. No wonder he took his time and let her have all the satisfaction she could bear. Giving pleasure paralleled receiving it. In some respects, it might even be better.

As she released him, his fists unclenched while his breathing evened out. She finished taking care of him, using some tissues from the box on the nightstand. Pulling the boxers carefully into place, she stroked his muscled stomach, avoiding any bruises or cuts. Extra pillows from the bed were gathered and a few were crunched in half before she carefully lifted his cast and placed them beneath.

"You cleaned the house. Fresh fruit on the table," he said, mumbling. His eyes remained closed and he looked very serene. She smiled because he didn't really sound disgruntled or upset that she'd taken liberties in his absence. "The kids don't scare you. It's just me."

"Who'd be afraid of you?" She got out of the bed and walked to the other side.

"Had a dream." The words became harder to understand. More asleep than awake, he struggled to tell her something. "Dreamed a beautiful

woman—my bed—come home to her.”

She pulled the sheet and blankets up to his chin and stroked the side of his face, removing long strands of brown hair. “And all you found was me. Sleep now, you’re home. I’ll check on you and get your medication when it’s time.”

Chapter Six

Keith woke in a haze of pain and confusion. He kept reaching for the little plunger that'd bring relief and oblivion, and couldn't find it. Instead, he found the nurse. "Sorry." He removed his hand from her thigh.

"Are you finally awake this time?" A soft voice and familiar scent drifted in and made his brain start firing on more cylinders. *Whisper.*

He ventured prying his eyelids apart. The shades were drawn; the room remained fairly dark. He never closed the blinds, liking the first rays of light to get him going in the mornings. At least he used to.

"Thanks." He squinted in even the subtle light.

"It's pretty bright outside. Figured that headache of yours wouldn't appreciate the glare."

He suddenly remembered something and tried to sit up. "The kids." He got as far as propping himself on his elbows before giving up and slumping back down.

"They know."

"What did you tell them?" Damn, he hadn't meant for it to come out like that. He hated having to think about what he'd say before engaging his mouth. It'd become a regular habit to regret words with the pain medication in his blood.

"Not much," she said, her voice sounding faint. "I said you were home and that you'd had an accident. I fed them breakfast and told them you'd explain when you woke. I also told them you got

home in the middle of the night and that we'd let you sleep. Was that all right?"

Did he dream what happened between them? She sounded kind of scared, or hesitant. Shit, a drug induced hallucination got him off last night. It wouldn't be the first time he'd fallen asleep with her soft voice and body, and woke to find himself attached to a pain pump in a hospital gown covered in sweat. He'd been thinking about her prior to the accident, too. She left one hell of an impression during the five minutes he'd spent with her a few months back. The kids constantly talking about her hadn't helped.

"Yeah. I just didn't want to scare them, you know?" He remembered something else. She'd told Heather she'd been in a car accident rather than say she'd been jumped and beaten up. She knew *all* about protecting kids. He sighed. "You have a choice. Give me a few more pain pills and I'll shut my mouth and enjoy the buzz, or help me up so I can clear my head. It'd really piss me off, if every word I said to you today was an apology for something."

"How bad do you hurt?"

"Not too bad right now. My brain feels thick, though." He opened his eyes. She had a calm expression on her face.

"How's your leg?"

"No worse than yesterday. Better than the day before."

"I have breakfast ready when you are. I'd be happy to bring up a tray. The kids could come and see you here."

He tried again and this time managed to sit up the whole way. "Not a great idea." She stood and he threw back the covers. She helped him swing his leg over and onto the floor. "They'll think I'm dying."

He froze, realizing he sat there in his underwear. If he'd been dreaming about Whisper

and the night before, he'd be really embarrassed in ten seconds when he looked up to see her face. *Hell, why wait!* Glancing up, she tilted her head off center and gave him a questioning look. No embarrassment or discomfort on her part, made chagrin and desire instantly wash over him.

"Shit!" he said, feeling a semi-hard problem grow into something more. A step back let him know she wasn't uncomfortable around him half dressed, but an angry word definitely made her skittish. He slumped forward as he rubbed his eyes. "It'll be a long day."

"Why?"

"I'll spend it apologizing. I know it."

"Why?" Her voice became higher, more concerned.

He couldn't spend all day wondering about it, and decided to ask. If he was wrong, he could start apologizing right then and there, for flashing his lumpy boxers. "Last night. You and I."

Her eyebrows arched, anticipating something more. She didn't understand he wanted an answer. *Shit!* Uncomfortable himself, he blurted it out. "Did we—I think I remember—shit!"

Her arms crossed at her stomach and she took a step back.

"Damn it, did I kiss you!"

Her gaze dropped, she took another step back and nodded her head. "Yes, sir."

It *did* happen and he'd have to apologize anyway for the way he asked the question. If this was any indication of the day to come, he should stay in bed and take the pills. He held up his arms and opened his hands.

"Whisper," he said in a rational tone. She hesitantly came forward to place her palms against his. "I couldn't remember and didn't know how to ask."

“Oh.”

He rubbed the backs of her hands with his thumbs. She had some damned small hands. “The pills make me remember things like I was dreaming. Half of what I think I remember never happened. Last night—should’ve been a dream.” She tried pulling away. He hadn’t meant the statement to come out like what happened was a mistake! He tried to straighten it out. “I questioned what happened because I’ve never,” his voice trailed off. He’d try once more before he’d swallow the pills and lay back down.

“Baby?” Her pale blue eyes with the ring of gray gazed at him. “Did you let me touch you?” She nodded. *Good, some progress.* “And kiss you?”

“Yes.”

“Did you,” he said before swallowing, and then swallowing again. It was hard to think about because he was hard, period. “Never mind. I know what happened. My imagination isn’t that good.”

“Did I do something wrong?”

He brought her close, wrapped his arms around her waist, and rested the side of his face against her stomach. Her muscles were taught but at least she didn’t try to get away.

“I thought I dreamt your hands and mouth on me because I’ve never felt anything so good. I’ve never come that hard or quick, and God, you didn’t back off—nothing’s been that extreme.” Her fingers in his hair allowed him to relax.

“You’re not angry with me?”

“No. And you won’t have to ask me that question again. I’ll try my damndest to think before I speak.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ll just toughen up a little. You’ve had a bad time lately. You’re entitled to some anger.”

“I’ll keep it in check. I refuse to spend the whole damn day apologizing.” He released her. “Think you

can find my jeans from yesterday?"

She walked to the chair, picked up a pair of jeans and shook them open. "We brought in your duffle bag. I did the laundry and found a few pair of jeans that didn't look new, even had some holes. I hope they weren't favorites. I cut them to fit your cast so you'd have some changes of clothes. If I screwed up, I'll replace them."

The words tumbled so softly and fast he had a hard time following with some of her enunciations. Once his brain caught up with her, he laughed. "That's perfect. Thank you. Throw them here and I'll get dressed." She walked over, crouched down and began pushing denim up his legs. "You don't have to."

"You can do it yourself tomorrow."

She acted like it was no big deal helping him dress. She'd done the same the night before undressing him. It took some getting used to. Someone lending a hand. He couldn't decide if he liked it or not. The waist of the jeans sat at his thighs. Whisper brought him a tee-shirt.

"Hang on," she said before peering at his back. "Looks good. I'll change the dressing later."

"You don't have to." He pulled the shirt over his head.

"I don't? Good, then Billy can do it." He laughed knowing little Billy would probably puke.

She brought the crutches over and held them for him. "Have you done this before?"

"Yes, sir."

The *sir* slipped out once before and he wondered why it embarrassed her. It complimented the sexy drawl. "You a nurse?"

"No." She stood close. "Up you go."

He rose, allowing the crutches and right leg to bear his weight. She pulled his pants into place, positioning them on his hips. "Shirt tucked or un-

tucked?”

“You start tucking, and we’ll be here a while.” He kissed the top of her head and she looked up.

She smiled and pulled the waist of the jeans together and clearly understood what he’d been talking about when she tried zipping him. Balanced on one leg, he handed the crutches back, zipped and buttoned the jeans before she pushed him onto the bed. She grabbed socks off the nightstand and knelt. She pushed them into place, the left just over his toes.

“You cut your hair.” He ran his fingers through the silken strands. He liked long hair on a woman. Hers was still long, coming down past her shoulders and cut into layers. A cat they’d adopted years before felt that soft. He couldn’t keep his hands off the cat either, enjoying its squirming and purring. When stroked the right way, Whisper purred too.

“You didn’t cut yours.” She had an uncanny way of avoiding conversations.

“I rubber band it to keep it out of my way with a hard hat. Does the length bother you?” He only ever cut it once a year or so, and even then, he kept it ponytail length. If she liked shorter hair, he’d actually consider getting it cut.

“I like it.”

“Why’d you cut your hair?” When he asked, she stilled. He decided it wasn’t important.

She stood. “Ready?”

She tugged on his arm as he pulled himself up with the aid of crutches. Thumping across the carpet, he made it to the bathroom. “Go down. I’ll get there.”

“Ten minutes?”

“For what?”

“I’m sending Mark and Nomad after you. You’re not coming down those stairs by yourself.”

He stopped mid hobble and glared. “You are one

pushy little—”

“View the world from my vantage point for a moment, Keith. Your little brothers are all downstairs, waiting to see you. And then they will, rolling and crashing down twelve narrow and steep, uncarpeted stairs to land with a broken neck in a heap at the bottom with blood drooling from the corner of your mouth, neck all mangled sideways...”

“For the love of God!” he said, before laughing hard. She stood there smiling. “Send them up in five minutes. I can’t imagine how they’ll help, but hey, maybe the three of us can crash land together.”

The smile disappeared. “How about a pain pill? You look pale.”

“Excuse me?”

She repeated it and he loved her enunciation of the word *pale*. It came out more like *pay-yell*.

“Sure, after breakfast. Don’t want to miss the food or feel like I dreamed it. I kept waking up thinking all the smells were a hallucination.”

“Five minutes.” She turned and left him standing in the bathroom doorway.

His palm rose to wipe perspiration from his forehead. The least little effort made him sweat. It probably stemmed from the damn fifty-pound cast they wrapped him in. He’d feel better once he washed up, shaved, and brushed his teeth and hair.

The looks Keith got when he made it to the landing and rounded the corner for the last few steps into the living room! Neither Mark nor Nomad said a word. They’d just stood by as he managed the steps on his ass. His ass! The house was at capacity with his three brothers, Heather, Nomad, Christy and the rest of the band, which consisted of three of Corey’s friends. Yes, the house was full. And silent.

A few more days in the hospital might’ve been a sound idea. Maybe if he’d handled the crutches with

more finesse, they wouldn't all be silently staring at him. He made it to the dining room table, and sat. Corey took the armpit mashers and placed them in the corner. He'd come down for breakfast, not a funeral. The mourner's filed silently in and took places around the table to either stare or look down. He wondered what would happen if he had a beer with breakfast.

Having enough, he rolled his eyes and asked, "Who died?"

"Apparently you almost did." It surprised him Corey piped up.

"Not even close," he said.

"How bad is it? Your leg?"

"It's broken."

"You missed a call a week and a half ago. Billy mentioned strange people in the background when you called after that. How long were you in the hospital?"

He would've chewed a hunk of the kid's ass, but didn't because of the look on his face. They were scared. All of them. He wouldn't lie. "I got out yesterday and headed home."

"You were in the hospital the whole time?" It was Mark's turn to sound irritated and scared.

He wondered then what he'd expected. It sure as hell wasn't what came from the kids. "Look, if there was a *real* problem, I would've said so."

"You don't stay in the hospital that long for a broken leg."

Whisper walked from the kitchen to bring him a cup of coffee. "Cream? Sugar?"

"Both. Thank you," he replied.

As she brought the items over, she casually said, "Maybe if you start from the beginning and explain, they wouldn't be working so hard to fill in the rest with imagination." As she headed toward the kitchen, she said, "Breakfast in five minutes. Anyone

else still hungry?"

No one said a word and she left. They sat and stared and he didn't like it. He glanced at Billy who sat the furthest away, at the opposite end of the table. His wide blue eyes held tears. Billy kept swallowing like the tears were leaking down the back of his throat. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe they should've known.

He concentrated on the coffee and stirred in cream and sugar. He took a sip, placed the mug down and leaned against the chair. Immediately adjusting his posture, he took the pressure off his back. Hunched over the table with his forearms resting against it, he began slowly turning the coffee cup. He mulled over what they needed to know.

"How bad is your leg?" Corey asked, except quieter this time. When did the kid stop hating him?

Glancing around, nothing had changed. He started talking to end the silence. He couldn't stand it. "One of the machines hit unstable earth. It all caved in. I was up front, under a piece of jammed up equipment when the ceiling came down. It opened a pocket of gas in the process, something they didn't expect to hit for fifty feet. Some of us got chewed up."

He tasted the coffee. The tears started rolling down Billy's face and he wouldn't look in that direction again. He figured it was best the kid hear it now, rather than bits and pieces later. He'd get it out and deal with the loose ends head on.

"So they dug me out."

"Were you conscious?" Mark asked.

"Yeah." *Somewhat.*

"Scared?" Nomad asked. That surprised him. The homeless, black haired, blue-eyed, *chick magnet*, didn't get wrapped up in other people's bullshit. At least that was Nomad's self-proclaimed motto.

"Not really. I heard them working to get me out right after it happened." Or at least right after he

came to. He could leave out a detail or two.

"So they got you right out?" Mark asked.

"Sure, but they had to move the equipment that landed on top. It shifted and caught my leg."

"How bad?"

"A week and a half in the hospital—bad. Some plates, rods and screws. They set up doctors and rehab for me here. You're stuck with me, children."

"How long?" Mark's color didn't look right. He looked sick.

"You okay?" Keith asked.

Mark nodded. "How long?"

"A while. No one knows. It depends on how things heal."

Corey cleared his throat. "Will you be able to walk?"

"I can walk now. The leg's still attached and I got a look at it before they slapped the cast on. I won't look good in shorts, but who the hell wears shorts? Lighten up, guys."

"What about the gas? You said something about gas?" Mark asked.

"Yeah." He better explain now so they might understand some stuff down the road. "I got a face full. The blood tests look pretty good, but I have a side effect. My head sometimes feels like a hatchet is buried in there. I get kind of goofy."

"Will it go away?"

"My head—no. The pain, sure. I just have to wait it out. It's already better, but they said it'd take some time. So do your best not to piss me off, and everything should be great." The irritation surfacing without warning would be a problem if he didn't get it under control. "You've all had a headache, right?" Heads nodded. "Imagine a really bad one that won't back off. I have pills that make me drunk and then I sleep. The headache goes away but I feel like shit. I'm taking half the pills from just a week ago. It

shouldn't last long."

He took another sip of coffee and rotated his shoulders. "What I'm trying to say, rather badly, is bear with me. I really don't mean to get grouchy or be an ass. My mouth engages quickly though, and I immediately regret it. Can you do that for me? Forgive me if I get out of line?"

He shouldn't be asking the kids to put up with a thing. Selfishly, he came home when he should've stayed in Texas until he got over the headaches, dizziness and disorientation. Now that he was home, he didn't know how to make them feel less burdened. The holidays would definitely suck this year.

Whisper walked in and put a plate of food in front of him. As for an appetite, he didn't have one. Not one of the kids said a word. Why hadn't he thought things through?

He heard the rumble of paper before Whisper started talking. "So, here's what we need to do according to the hospital discharge papers I stole from his bag."

He glanced up and found all the kids giving their undivided attention. Apparently, she'd done more than his laundry. "Billy, get the small stool from the kitchen. Corey, get the stiff rolled pillow off the couch. Mark, go upstairs and get the bottle of pills off the nightstand next to Keith's bed. Also, go into the medicine cabinet and get gauze, peroxide, antibacterial salve and the roll of paper tape, not adhesive tape. Nomad, get some paper and a pen. I'll need you to make a run to the grocery store. Keith needs special foods to help the bones heal, which I'll go over with everyone. Christy and Jade, he needs the recliner pulled forward with a table beside it. He also needs a few rolled blankets to prop his leg on. Is everyone clear so far?"

Finally, some talking! They confirmed they understood. "Then let's get at it while he eats," she

said. "We'll go over all of this once you collect everything." They scattered. She could make herself heard when she wanted to. She turned to him and dropped her voice. "They're scared."

"They should be." He spoke quietly too so they couldn't hear. "I would be if the guy with the paycheck was messed up."

"It has nothing to do with money. They love you and they're scared because you're hurt. Let them help. Let them work through this with you."

"I don't need—"

"*They* need. Unfortunately, this isn't really about you." She smiled as he stared. "If they watch you struggle and can't help, they're powerless. They're children. They're burdens."

"They're *never* a burden."

"Show them."

Billy appeared with the stool. She stroked his head and he gave her a hug. With his arms around her waist, he eyed Keith warily. He even managed a smile and the tears were gone. Keith raised his arm and extended his hand. Billy looked more like a timid five-year old, hesitantly coming toward him. "Is only your leg bad?"

Whisper answered for Keith. "No, he's bruised and cut all over. Just touch him gently and it'll be fine."

She'd been warned with the rest of them about his temper, and he hoped she took it seriously because it flared. Billy didn't need to be careful. The kid gently patted his shoulder and stood close. On second thought, Billy didn't always realize his strength. He mumbled, rubbing his kid brother's arm, "I hate this."

"It'll be okay," Billy said. "Give it some time and you'll feel better. For once, we'll take care of you."

Billy gently rubbed Keith's head before going to the kitchen. Kids started arriving with assigned

items. He picked up a piece of bacon and took a bite. It actually tasted good and he turned toward the plate. His missing appetite came back with a vengeance.

Whisper and the kids got busy on the grocery list, diverting attention from him. He enjoyed every bite of the bacon, eggs, biscuits and gravy. Billy brought him more coffee and didn't spill a drop. When he finished, Christy took his plate and wiped the table. Things had changed since he'd last been home.

Whisper appeared. "They need to be able to change the dressing on your back if I'm not here."

"How bad is it?" he asked quietly. "It's not like I've seen it."

"Bad enough they should know how to fix you up."

"They'll puke if they see me without a shirt."

"Your arms aren't much better than the rest of you. They've already been staring."

"What next?" Corey asked, the kids gathering around.

"I need a few of you to learn how to change a dressing. If you think you'll get sick, go to the living room. No one *has* to do this."

When no one left, he intervened. "Beat it, Billy. You'll get nightmares."

"I'll stay," he replied, looking prepared for anything.

"If you puke on me..." The kids finally found something to laugh about and he relaxed.

"Shirt?" Whisper asked.

He sat forward and gingerly lifted. Whisper helped get it over his head. He closed his eyes when he heard some of the kids suck in breaths.

"That bad?" he asked. "It's not like I can see it."

All the kids stood silently behind him. Whisper joined them.

"Here we go," she said. "I washed my hands really good. After you wash, don't touch anything else. Don't touch the stitches."

Quickly and gently, she changed the dressing. As the kids asked questions, she explained the process. Before he put the shirt back on, most of them came around to have a look at his chest. The oddest expression came over Corey's face. He must've sensed Keith watching, and gazed at him. "We're really lucky you're sitting here, aren't we?"

"Maybe not. The headaches get bad," Keith replied.

"You'll get better. We'll help. Whatever it takes."

Heather touched Keith's shoulder as she walked past. Christy kissed the top of his head. Each of them touched him gently and he sat forward to lean against the table before picking up the mug. He never imagined the kids would be like this. In truth, he could've probably muddled through the mess alone in Texas with the help of the outpatient clinic they offered.

Did he speed through a bunch of years, never questioning how they felt about him? He thought he knew how Corey viewed him. He'd been wrong. The sentiment and concerned touched him.

As Billy and Whisper propped his leg, Christy slipped a feather pillow behind him so he could lean back comfortably. The damn headache surfaced and he quit thinking about the attention directed at him. He closed his eyes and tuned out everything. *By this time tomorrow, they'll forget all about this crap, and agonize about normal stuff.*

Chapter Seven

Whisper stared at the computer screen in abject horror as the video played. "Where did it come from?"

Heather glanced up. "The video web site. A lot more are popping up."

"But the footage is old. No one would recognize me."

"The guys constantly scan music videos on the computer. It's a matter of time."

Whisper sat on Heather's bed, bent at the waist, and placed her forehead in her hands. "I should've kept out of their business with the band."

Heather spun the chair to face her. "I asked you to help and you did. Have you heard them?"

Whisper closed her eyes. *Yeah, they were getting really good. But at what price?*

"Besides," Heather said, "if they find out, they wouldn't say a word. They'd be impressed and keep their mouths shut."

"Honey, you don't know that. Remember how close those men came to catching us in Georgia? As much as I like those kids, we can't take the chance. If Doug finds me, you know you'll have to go back."

Heather immediately burst into tears. She hadn't meant to scare her or bring back bad memories, but sometimes Heather didn't think about consequences. Heather wiped tears with her fingers and said, "Maybe if we went through the Ohio courts, it might be different."

"I've explained this before. I'd have to go back to

California to fight about your custody. Doug has money for the best attorneys. I don't. You know where things were heading the last time we tried."

"It's not fair! You have to work nights for that computer company because they pay under the table. Why does everything have to be so hard?"

She gathered Heather close. "I don't know, honey. We only have another year and a half before you're eighteen, and then we can get back on track and fight things the right way."

"You know he doesn't want me back."

Doug was the only family Heather had. Whisper couldn't verbally acknowledge that Doug wanted nothing to do with his only sister. She tried a different tactic to explain his actions. Heather could understand. She'd gotten old enough for some truthful reasons about Doug's bad behavior.

"Let's talk about something, woman to woman. You up for it?"

Heather turned. She nodded and wiped tears.

"Doug cares about you."

"I think you're wrong."

"He did when we married. He wasn't always like he is now."

"I don't remember him ever caring about me."

"When you were small, he'd cuddle you and sing to you. One day, when you feel safe, you'll remember a lot more than the last few years in California. Isn't that what the doctor said?"

Heather nodded. "Was I a bad kid? I mean, I was a little younger than Billy when mom died. What—like nine?"

"Yes, you were nine and you were an angel. Never gave me any trouble at all."

"Was I bad when I got older?"

"No. Doug had some evil habits that got worse with time. It wasn't you. Remember that."

"Drugs?"

"Sure. They were everywhere. He got a taste and couldn't get away from them. The more he used, the worse things got."

"I think I remember something."

Whisper hoped it was a better, earlier memory than the last few years with her brother. It wasn't all bad. "What is it?"

"Your dad. I sort of remember him. I think I remember when he died."

Whisper hoped not. "You sure it's not what you see on TV? There's still a lot about him out there. His name still comes up in the news."

"The infamous Robert Black, the rock star, the legend, the man..." Whisper laughed at Heather's announcer voice. She did a remarkable imitation of the commercial broadcaster telling about the collection of CD's currently offered. "Doug gets all the money from that?"

"It's all wrapped up very legal like."

"He was *your* dad. You should get that money."

"And Doug married me. He was older and smart and thought of things I didn't. Actually, I don't much care about the money."

"So what did you want to tell me? Your dad had the band, you got to travel with him when your mom died, you married Doug and got stuck with me. Doug hurt us and we ran away. Pretty much sums it up, right?" Heather no longer wanted to talk, recapping everything so Whisper wouldn't. She stood and began pacing.

"It's about the night we left," Whisper said.

"I've talked and talked about it. Nothing really happened. I don't have nightmares any more. I do okay in school. I don't cause trouble, at least not recently. I'm polite, well adjusted, behave, don't think about it..."

"Shh, Heather." Whisper stood and brought her close for a hug. "Sit down for a few minute longer."

She wasn't just a good young woman, she was exceptional and trusting when she had a bunch of reasons not to be. "I'll make it quick, and we'll have it done and over with. All right?"

The poor dear looked like the end of the world rested at her doorstep. She'd heard the facts before, during therapy, and maybe because of her infatuation with Corey, she might understand a little better and believe it this time. They sat and Whisper chewed on the side of a finger.

"I'm ready," Heather said on a long sigh.

"Good. When Doug came home that night, the house was dark. Remember?"

Heather nodded.

"You know he wasn't sober, don't you?"

"The drugs." It came out as an epiphany.

Whisper prayed the picture would finally change in Heather's mind. "Yes. He didn't know you were home. He thought he grabbed me."

"But when he turned on the lights and saw me, he blamed me!"

"He thought it was me in the dark. What he said after had nothing to do with you. He blamed you so he wouldn't have to take responsibility."

"He said it was how I dressed."

"Every girl in San Diego dresses in tee-shirts and shorts. Yours were more appropriate than most."

"He said I dressed like a slut."

"Heather, I know he scared you, but let's think it through. He said some awful things and chased you. When he caught you though, he figured out who you were, and nothing more happened except him yelling a bunch of things that weren't true."

"That's when *everything* happened," she sobbed. "That's when he blamed me. That's when you came in and the whole world exploded. The house shook and the chandeliers fell from the ceilings."

"No, honey." Whisper pulled her close. Heather always got stuck in the same spot of memory. "There was no earthquake. None of that happened. Think about it."

Huge eyes and wet eyelashes turned to meet her gaze. "You jumped him," Heather said. "He yelled and you two had a fight. A bad one. You said you'd leave the band. He said he'd send me away to a juvenile home. He said if you walked away, he'd make me pay."

"That's it. Keep going." *Finally!*

"It was all my fault we ran. I knew it, but it makes sense now."

"Because of you, we *both* got away and ended years of some pretty awful times." She needed to make Heather understand how important that night was. She didn't want her feeling guilty for saving them both. "I loved him once. But relationships can change. Our marriage was bad, and it never really dawned on me until that night."

"How bad?"

"Horrific."

"You're not angry I caused us to leave? Or because you wound up divorcing him?"

"You made me make a choice. I'm thankful every single day. I don't know what would've happened if we hadn't left."

"Why does he want you back so much?"

"My name. When I'm drumming for the Robert Black Band, the money comes in because a piece of Bob Black is up on stage."

Heather smiled a little. "You're a wicked drummer, Wendy. Whisper!" she immediately corrected herself. "Sorry."

She couldn't slip, not even when they were alone. It was bad enough she'd decided to use the last name *Neuman*. Most people knew her as Wendy Black. Her married name never really took hold to

replace the name she'd had with the media. Besides, using her married name after the divorce was absurd. Using his name to hide from him gave her some form of deep satisfaction.

"Was Doug ever a good drummer? I remember him practicing when I was really little. Then he went away. Mom wouldn't let me listen to the music. I never knew he was famous until after she died."

"He was the best once. One of the reasons I married him was because I was so impressed with his talent. That, and when I toured with Dad in the beginning, Doug kept me company. He amused himself with drugs back then. Nothing like since Dad died. That's when he stopped drumming and started playing manager. Eventually, his addiction was the only full time career he handle. Besides, when I took his spot, sales and money skyrocketed. He figured out real quick he didn't have to do much to profit. He sat back and counted the income."

Heather grew quiet and appeared thoughtful. "How'd you know I'd listen this time? I mean, I heard you before but there was a wall up or something. The words made it in, but they didn't make sense."

She stroked her hair. "Corey."

"What?" She looked up, startled.

"Has he kissed you yet?"

"No." Her brows came together.

"You've probably avoided it."

"How would you know something like that?"

"I watch. I see some things. With you feeling guilty about trying to *seduce* Doug, I doubted you'd ever let a boy get close."

More tears threatened to escape, this time from anger. It was about time! "I never tried to seduce him! Never!"

Whisper felt dizzy with relief. "I know that. Now you know it, too."

“Wendy?”

She didn’t correct her. Heather appeared younger again and vulnerable. “Yes, honey?”

“One more question.”

“Okay, shoot.”

“That night—what he said to me—he pulled my hair and pushed me down. The things he said...”

“It’s over now. Don’t think about it anymore.”

“He thought I was you? He did those things to you?”

She’d wanted to make certain issues clear in Heather’s mind. She’d never meant to create new nightmares for her to dwell on. It hadn’t occurred to her that Heather would put it together from the conversation.

“No,” Whisper said quickly, “he came home really messed up that night. It was worse than ever. He was angry about the concert.”

“Why—what happened?”

“I had a terrible night. I slammed my hand in the car door that day. Do you remember?”

“Yeah, I do. Your hand was really swollen.”

“Well, you don’t cancel a concert because the drummer has a problem. Twice I lost sticks and Doug was back stage getting really mad. The longer he thought about it, the angrier he got until he wanted to fight.”

“You couldn’t help it.”

Whisper smiled, partially because Heather remained ignorant about a lot of the trouble that took place between her and Doug. “I think he was embarrassed. I was his wife and he thought my actions directly reflected on him.”

“If he was angry over a few lost drumsticks, I wonder how he’s dealing with you divorcing him.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t think about that any more. He probably just wants more money.”

“Are you ready to start baking?” Heather asked,

holding out her hand. She'd forced poor Heather into dredging up history on the day before Thanksgiving. Holiday's and special occasions were generally a time they had fun. They both tried making up for a lot of lost years.

Whisper accepted her hand and stood. "We'll be at it all afternoon."

"Tomorrow's Thanksgiving. Can't you call off tonight?"

"I'd rather work tonight and get tomorrow off. I could switch however, but that'd leave you and the others with all the dishes."

They made it to the kitchen and began pulling bowls, spoons, and ingredients out of cupboards. "Do you like Keith?" Heather asked.

"Sure. Do you?"

"Yeah, but I mean, do you like him as more than a friend?"

"Oh, I don't think about that stuff anymore. Besides, I have this sassy girl I'm trying to make go down the right path in life." She opened the container of flour. "What about you—does Corey do it for you?"

"Whisper!"

"I see all that sizzling eye contact going on between you two when he sings. He's got an amazing voice for a boy. It changed early and he can really groan the lyrics out."

"Do you think they'll ever make it big?"

"Sure, if they have enough determination. Too bad for you, though. My mamma told me to stay the hell away from musicians. Dad certainly caused her a heap of trouble when they'd been younger. I didn't listen though. You will."

"Corey wouldn't hurt me like your dad did your mom. Or Doug did you."

"No? You have some secret plan guaranteeing it?"

"Yep. I'd tell Keith on him." They both started laughing. Heather could be one smart and sassy young lady.

Keith woke from the nap stretched out on the recliner with his leg propped, covered with a throw blanket. The last thing he remembered was sitting down with his head throbbing. He flicked the remote in his lap to silence the television. Surrounded by warmth and the smell of turkey, his stomach growled.

Whisper and the kids worked all afternoon preparing Thanksgiving dinner. Other families celebrated with a gathering of people and an abundance of food. Prior years involved the gathering at his house. The homemade meal however, had most definitely been lacking.

He listened as they talked in the kitchen. Their voices remained fairly quiet, considering how many of them spoke. Corey said, "No, really, Whisper. Tell me what I should do different."

"Honey," she replied, "I said not one word about you changing a thing."

"Fine, you didn't say it, but you got a look on your face."

"Help him," Heather said. "Tell him what you know. Please?"

A bunch of children started whining at the same time. *Please, please, pretty please.* He smiled. Whisper's hands were probably full cooking and they didn't care.

He could make out every word she uttered with that soft voice of hers. His hearing seemed more acute since she'd been around. "All right, but it's just my opinion." The kitchen grew very quiet except for the occasional bang or clang of a pot or pan. "The lyrics are good. There's depth of emotion, and you're making some pretty strong statements."

"But?" Corey asked.

"You're sixteen. You're making those statements to impact an audience of peers. They're fine."

"I think what Corey wants is to refine his four letter vocabulary," Mark said.

Everyone laughed. Whisper replied, "Well, seems to me those four letter words are in most post-grunge lyrics."

"That's the problem," Corey said. "You helped us lengthen and stagger the tempos. Now that we've changed, the words don't fit."

"We lack sophistication. Yeah, we need bigger words to say what we mean," Jade chimed in.

"All right," Whisper said, "let's talk about a *higher concept*."

"What?" Corey asked.

"Like your music, you want the band to have a unique quality. That's why you quit doing cover music and started writing your own. What you say should also be unique."

"Give me an example."

"You all love the word *death*."

"So?"

"There's nothing wrong with it. It describes what you want to say. But it's blunt, like I'm being. What if you were to make it more subtle, treat your listeners like they had a brain?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you understand the difference in meaning between assault and coercion?"

"Sure."

"I don't," Billy said and Keith smiled. The conversation fascinated him. He could hardly wait for what she'd say next. Some of the lyrics were more than a little blunt. Actually, they were downright scary.

"The word *dead* or *death* is an assault. The word *afterlife* gives the same general meaning in a less

blunt manner. It forces a person to get the message, without beating them over the head."

Jade piped up. "And what the hell rhymes with *afterlife*?"

"Knife," Whisper replied. The kitchen fell silent. Yeah, they could definitely use the word in the types of songs they wrote.

"I get it!" Corey said suddenly. "*He went for death, with crystal meth, and then he fell, straight into hell.* That's too blunt. But how would you *allude* to something like that?"

"Why is he killing himself?" she asked.

"Does it matter?"

Keith chuckled quietly. *Let's see her get out of this one.*

"Sure it does," she replied. "If he's some psycho meth-head that wants to die, that's fine. But why is he in love with the drug?"

"Again," Corey asked, "does it matter?"

"Yes. You're telling this poor guy's story, and we don't even know why he's so desperate. Give him history. I'll be shocked when he dies, but I'd cry if I knew why."

"Fine. He had his leg blown off in a war. How's that." Legs seemed to be an issue with Corey lately. Poor kid.

"What's the story? A missing leg isn't a reason to kill yourself."

"Sure it is. Probably happens a lot."

"Again, think about the higher concept. Why does it affect him? He doesn't feel like a man anymore? He can't support his family? His girlfriend left because she couldn't handle his disability?"

"I get it. Wife puked when she saw him. He couldn't take it. Now what?"

The kitchen fell silent and Keith reached over to get some water. He drank and placed the empty glass down silently, waiting for her answer.

"He came home from war, she hit the door." Dishes rattled before something scraped a pot. "Half a leg, half a life, alone in hell, with no damn wife. Light the pipe, up the dose, peace is coming, getting close. The pipes redemption, a clouded brain, six stories down, would end the pain."

The kids started clapping before she hushed them.

"I have to write that down," Corey said.

"Please don't. You get my drift thought about a higher concept? You don't necessarily need bigger words; you need a deeper meaning. And when you throw in the four letter words, make it for impact."

"How do you know this stuff, Whisper?"

"I have ears. I listen to music. I read. Sometimes it's what a person *doesn't* say straight out that really communicates what's going on."

The kids all started talking. Keith pondered her last statement. It described everything about her. Her compassion, ability with the kids and laughter surrounded them. It was blunt. The subtle flinch when he caught her unaware, the apologies when they got close the night he came home, were more subtle. She'd never said so, but she'd been hurt. Her and Heather both.

The way she handled the kids, the house, and jumped right in to take care of him, showed one thing. Her knowledge of drugs and post-grunge music didn't fit in with the rest. Smoking meth and linking it to *redemption*, also struck him. It applied to the story and rhymed, but she almost effortlessly blurted the words out. Had she been an addict? She seemed connected to the lifestyle.

He'd need to be watchful of her and not get too close. Then again, maybe their play from the other night wouldn't happen again. Damn, he hoped not. That mouth of hers and those warm little hands! God, she smelled so good. The pills could account for

his perfect slumber after they'd enjoyed each other. It more than likely came from the scent of her desire wrapping around him in the warmth of his bed, making him content and calm. He'd never had a woman in his bed. Not in their house.

He thought one day he'd get married and have his own private life, fulfilling needs while the kids surrounded him. That dream died at least five years ago. No woman would put up with his brothers and all their friends, let alone the occasional trouble. And his family came first. Always.

A warm hand rested on his arm. He turned his head and found her crouched beside the recliner. "Are you awake?" she asked.

"Yeah."

"You hungry?"

He gazed at her and those damned usual eyes. The urge to kiss her and pull her across his lap overwhelmed him. He wanted her. He would've wanted her if they'd met any other place under any other circumstance. "Yeah, I'm starving."

"You look comfortable. Would you like to eat in here?"

He shook his head and started the process of rising. She helped by taking the blanket and moving the pillows out from under his leg. He walked in the door a week ago, and there she was. He should probably be guarded about how natural it felt having her there. At his age however, when times seemed good, he tended not to question too much. He simply enjoyed the above average hours and days, facing the rest when it happened. And it always happened. No amount of preparation would make living through rough patches any more bearable, and he refused to dwell on potential problems. Life wasn't a dress rehearsal. You enjoyed what you could, full tilt.

Chapter Eight

Keith glanced around at those who'd gathered for Thanksgiving dinner. All the kids and a bunch of their friends filled the house. Laughter accompanied the scrape of forks against plates. He enjoyed seeing kids he hadn't seen in a while, catching up on their lives while listening to accomplishments and mistakes. Maybe the accident forced him to do what he should've done sooner. In the future, he wouldn't forget that spending time at home was more important than making money. He wouldn't ever give up more vacation time to earn double wages.

The meal surpassed anything in his memory. Turkey, dressing, potatoes, gravy, green bean casserole, salad, sweet potatoes—the list continued. Desserts sat on the buffet, reminding them not to eat too much. Pumpkin pies, apple pies, strawberry pies, cheesecake and chocolate frosted brownies covered the entire surface. The meal took hours as everyone leisurely ate, picked at morsels and enjoyed sweets. After eight in the evening, some of the kids left to go to the movies. Those closer to the family, stayed to help clean up.

With all the dishes done and Heather wanting to go down to the crypt with the guys for rehearsal, Whisper finally took a break and sat on the couch. Within minutes, she dropped off to sleep. She'd come over at dawn after working until two in the morning. No wonder she passed out.

The recliner didn't look nearly as comfortable as the couch so he hobbled over and sat next to her. He

placed a pillow in his lap and carefully eased her head and shoulders onto it. She sighed contentedly, squirmed around and settled down. Stroking hair away from her forehead and face, lassitude and peace washed over him. With a throbbing leg, he remedied the situation by placing his cast on the coffee table.

Mark came into the living room and stopped in his tracks. The kid probably questioned what the hell he was looking at. Keith wondered himself why it felt right having her in his lap, stroking her hair. Maybe it stemmed from the kids viewing him more like a father than a brother, and treating Whisper like a mother. Why shouldn't *mom* and *dad* get cozy once in a while?

Whisper started grouching and fidgeting. A nightmare of some nature caused the scared sounds coming from her throat. He placed his arm over her, laying his palm along her cheek and ear, letting his fingers gently rub her scalp. "Shh, you're so tired you can't relax. Go back to sleep, Whisper."

"Where am I?" she asked in a drowsy voice full of concern.

"You're with me."

"Heather?"

"Downstairs with the others."

Her eyes closed and she cuddled closer. "Protected." The single word confirmed more about her past than a week of talking.

Mark walked near, navigated around the coffee table and sat on the glass top. "Is she okay?"

Keith nodded. "Just tired."

Mark reached up, pulled the blanket off the back of the couch, shook it out, and spread it over her. She sighed contentedly. Mark touched her hair without disturbing her. "She looks like a kid." His voice was quiet.

"Most people do when they sleep," Keith replied.

"No calculation, no defense."

His brother smiled and replaced the hair. "Innocent looking."

Keith silently agreed. She looked like an angel, sleeping peacefully. Even the thumping from below seemed far away as he relaxed and let his head fall back. Each time she squirmed, he stroked her cheek and hair until she quieted.

Mark said, "I'm sorry about the accident but I'm glad you're home."

"Me too, Mark."

"Hey, and about Whisper..."

Keith raised his head.

"Well, when she heard you were coming home, she said she'd stay away. She said she'd *step out* and give you back your house." Mark shrugged his shoulders. "She's still here. I guess I'm trying to say thanks for—"

"Needing her?"

Mark smiled. "No, for accepting her. You know, letting her help."

"Mark," he said quietly, "we'd get along fine on our own, you know that. We'd muddle through whatever mess we found ourselves in. I'm not blind, and see having her and Heather around, make things a whole hell of a lot nicer. I'll make it up to her somehow."

Mark stood. "I wouldn't worry too much about it. Being needed and appreciated seems to go a long way with her."

Keith closed his eyes and thought about Mark's statement. For the first time since he limped in the door, he actually contemplated what motivated her and couldn't come up with an answer. Some people helped out while calculating repayment. Whisper sure as hell wasn't one of them. As Mark said, being needed and helping seemed to give her something she looked for or wanted. Did she desire approval?

Or could she simply be one of those people who had a heart of gold?

Sometime later, his eyes opened and the room slowly came into focus. He'd been covered with a blanket while slumped in the corner of the couch. A pillow remained in his lap and Whisper's head and shoulder rested there. They were alone.

He groaned because something felt really good. Jesus! Curled on her side facing him, Whisper held his wrist. She had his index finger in her mouth, lightly sucking it. She appeared to be asleep. God, the woman had a talented mouth and loved using it. Having just enough sense to refrain from acting on certain urges, he managed to pull his finger away.

With none of the kids around, he touched his fingertip to her lips and she opened before her tongue came forward to lick. If she kept it up, he'd come right where he sat. Using the moisture on his finger, he traced her soft lips. A simple gesture had never been more arousing.

The thumping in the crypt stopped, and he heard kids walking up the basement stairs. The kitchen door opened, and something crashed on the floor. Whisper sat bolt upright, shoving his hand away.

"Jesus, Jade, do you walk much?" Corey asked before kids started laughing.

Keith touched her arm to offer some reassurance. She flinched like he'd clobbered her; she tried to scream. The sound coming from her throat made him freeze. What the hell!

Heather rounded the corner. "Whisper!"

Whisper gazed at her. Breathing heavily, she said, "Go to your room, right now. Quickly. Hurry, Heather, go now!"

Heather stood there, mouth agape, before taking a few steps. Whisper blinked, like she tried making sense of the situation. She turned and placed her

feet on the floor. With her elbows on her knees, her face fell into her hands. "Oh, God. Sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep."

The other kids filed in and stood behind Heather. No one moved but Billy. Keith wouldn't move either until he knew for a fact she was completely awake. Billy walked right over to her and knelt down. Rubbing her arm, he asked, "Are you okay, Whisper? You have a bad dream?"

She raised her face and opened her arms. Billy went willingly for the hug. "Jade tripped and fell in the kitchen."

"Is that what woke me?"

"Yep. Just Jade. He has awfully big feet."

Everyone laughed except Heather. She kept staring at her sister, looking very scared. Whisper twisted and gazed at the pillow in Keith's lap. "I'm sorry. I can't imagine how I wound up here."

"We were watching the television and we both fell asleep," he replied. The statement was somewhat true. The TV still played across the room. "Someone covered us up and propped my leg."

"It was me," Billy said. "Whisper worked really hard and you needed a nap too."

The youngest in the house deciding when the adults needed to sleep, had all of them laughing. Whisper kissed Billy's cheek and stood. "What time is it?"

"Only ten," Corey answered.

"We need to get home."

"Can Heather stay for a while? No school tomorrow."

Whisper crossed her arms and looked at Keith.

"No problem by me. I'm up for a while," he replied.

"Cool. We're going to my room," Corey said. He must've thought about his comment because he immediately clarified it. "We're all going to my room

to surf the computer. You okay with that, Keith?"

What harm could there be in five of them hanging out in Corey's room? He glanced at Whisper to see if she had any objections. She shrugged her shoulders and said to Heather, "You be home by midnight."

"Yes, ma'am," Heather replied.

The troops amassed and made their way upstairs, while Whisper walked to the front door and started pulling on her coat. He managed to get off the couch and grab his crutches before limping to the door. Alone again, he wished like hell both legs worked. What he wanted to do wouldn't be easy with his armpits stuffed full of crutch pads.

"Kiss me," he said.

She glanced toward the staircase.

"We're alone. Kiss me."

"Why?"

After her sucking his finger and moaning, he figured her dreams probably coincided with something she might want. Regardless, there were things he suddenly wanted. Balanced on one leg, he leaned a crutch against the wall and wrapped an arm around her before bringing her close. "Because it's damn hard for me to kiss you. But I'll manage."

He leaned down and took a good taste of her incredible mouth. Heat swept over him and he worked to keep things simple. They could get complex really fast if he wasn't careful.

"Thank you." He stayed close, resisting the urge to feel more, take more. "For everything."

"No problem. I had a wonderful time." She didn't need to minimize the work and effort she put into a perfect meal. God knew, he'd never had anyone do half as much to make a holiday special for them.

"I bet."

"Really." The stroke of her fingers against his face felt like another kiss. He craved her touch as

much as her lips. The leather coat squeaked and crinkled when she crossed her arms. "It gets lonely. The holidays. We always celebrate but never..." Her tongue passed over her lips. "Today was special. With the kids. You've done a wonderful job raising them, you know. All of them. Even those not related."

"I'm never here."

"Someone taught Mark. Someone influenced the rest of them, too. The way they all look after each other isn't common."

"Necessity. They either stick together and we all make it, or they act up, cause trouble and nothing works out. They're smart." He had a question for her. It suddenly mattered a great deal. "How long, baby? How long have you been on your own?"

"Forever." Her eyes glistened with moisture. "At least long enough. I really am tired. A little sleep and I'll be as good as new, not all sentimental."

"I kind of like you sentimental. Makes me believe you might kiss me this time."

She pursed her lips and chewed on the inside of her cheek. "You'd like that?"

He openly stared at her mouth. He'd do a hell of a lot more than like it. He wanted her to do the kissing, and anticipated it as his heart picked up beats. A palm on the side of his face, a quick, nervous swipe from her tongue across her bottom lip before—heaven. For the sweet caress of her lips, she deserved a lot more than him growling into her perfect mouth. He couldn't help the sound though. A simple taste had his blood pumping and his body hard and hungry for more than an appetizer.

When she stepped back, she appeared shaken and surprised.

"Whisper?"

"What is it about you that makes me like this?"

He grinned, liking confirmation he wasn't the

only one affected. "The cast."

"You think so?" Her smile could be so sexy yet innocent.

"Sure. You have a soft spot a blind man could see. You love helping and fixing things." Every aspect of her changed—her expression, her stance. He'd hurt her somehow. "Whisper? What's wrong?"

"I'd just never heard that before. I'm surprised."

"You also think I just lied to you. Is that it?"

She took a small step back. He wouldn't let her go too far, not with the upset look on her face. He grasped her arm and his thumb rubbed. "Whisper?"

"I'm sorry." Her voice became impossibly soft. "I never meant to give the impression I could fix anything." She gently pulled away and backed toward the door. Her accent became more distinct. "Nothing's broken, except your leg, and that's way beyond me to fix. Thanks for having us over. Please send Heather on home if she gets underfoot."

The door opened, she slipped through before it quietly closed. Keith stood there dumbfounded as he watched her walk down the snow-covered drive to the sidewalk.

What hadn't she said in all those words? That she'd broken something and couldn't put it back together? That she didn't have the ability to fix something that went wrong? She'd thanked him for the company on a holiday, when she'd rallied everyone together and done all the cooking and cleaning afterward. Maybe she'd simply been tired, having worked like a dog without a reprieve.

When she woke, she'd been terrified. She ordered Heather away while she didn't move. Wouldn't a natural instinct be for her to get away from the danger too? Why hadn't she?

It couldn't be more obvious she'd suffered in some manner. He'd initially thought perhaps a man did the damage because of how she'd acted in bed.

He wondered then, if a parent hadn't inflicted some hard lessons on both her and Heather.

He needed to seriously consider how close he got to Whisper. She should have someone permanent in her life. He couldn't have anyone permanent in his. His brothers came first. He wouldn't take chances on risky ventures, regardless of how pretty, soft spoken or caring they appeared.

No one questioned the kids being with him. Not once, even when the police got involved when Mark acted up a few years before. They'd been damned lucky, and Keith sweated out the court appearances one at a time, fearing the kids would be taken away. Their father was dead and buried. Billy's father sat in prison for a hair brained robbery scheme involving a gun. Their mother—she was still Corey and Billy's legal guardian—God only knew what she'd found to occupy herself.

She'd left ten years ago. He wasn't too bright at twenty-two. She'd asked him to come home and watch the kids. His girlfriend at the time had gone with him, figuring a few hours out of her life wouldn't be too bad. Mark had been ten, Corey six and Billy was five months old. A few hours turned into days and then weeks. Nancy left the first night and never came back. She married Maynard four months later.

Even the cops couldn't find their mother. Keith gave up after the first year. Testing the courts and their view on guardianship had never been a priority. If things went wrong, the kids would never make it through another upheaval.

Whisper tempted him, made strong sexual urges and protective feelings surface. They'd been dormant for a while. It'd be best for everyone if he put those types of feelings back to bed. With a few painkillers so they'd stay asleep. In a locked room with no windows. Out of town.

Chapter Nine

That Monday the weather turned bitterly cold. Whisper offered to drive Corey and Billy to school. Mark scrambled because he'd gotten up late and Nomad had already left. The boys went to school not far from Heather. The private education cost a bit, but the admissions woman had been less concerned with the detail of a social security number than other places. For a few thousand dollars, she could have the transcripts converted when Heather turned eighteen.

Back at the house, Whisper wrapped tin foil tightly around the seasoned beef, placed it in the roaster, and slid it into the oven to slowly cook during the day. A still warm pan of sausage gravy sat on the stovetop along with some biscuits for Keith when he woke. She really wanted to be gone when he came down.

She'd done very well to take up space in the same room with him while maintaining a distance. She couldn't afford a mistake, and if she continued straying too close to the very handsome, somewhat battered construction worker, she'd make one. It'd been years since she wanted skin-on-skin contact with a man.

Damn the cold Cleveland weather! Her back itched from constantly remaining indoors in the warm, dry environment. Heather rubbed lotion into her back in the evenings to alleviate the torment, but the relief never lasted. As she rubbed up against the doorframe, she sighed.

"I could help, if you'd let me," Keith said.

She spun around and there he stood. Even with a fifty pound cast and some crutches, she hadn't heard him come down the stairs or through the living room.

"I just got done," she said. "Dinner's in the oven. I'll be back when the kids get home, you know, to finish. B-breakfast. Stove. Warm."

Alone. The two of them were alone and he looked freshly washed, clean shaven and smelled like baby powder, spicy cologne and warm man. His very presence threatened her. Not in a usual manner though. She didn't really fear him. She feared her own actions when he got close. His strength drew her as did his non-threatening manner. His hands, fingers and mouth were particularly incredible.

"Do you have a minute?" he asked. "To talk?"

She nodded. He'd been cutting back on pain medication, which showed in his eyes. They were bright and intelligent that morning. It kind of scared her. She'd need to be careful.

"I didn't mean to upset you the other night. If I was out of line, I'm sorry."

"You weren't. No problem." There was most definitely a problem, and it wasn't necessarily him. Guilt made her speak when she should've remained silent. "I don't get too close..."

"With too many people. Yeah, it's slightly obvious."

She waited while he stood there patiently. She wouldn't say anything else. No explanation would be forthcoming because she didn't owe him one. She couldn't afford to give him one. Having that settled in her mind, she looked down and her mouth opened. God only knew why, but she blurted out, "I'm not comfortable."

"With me?" His voice was low and rumbling, compassionate and calm.

Shut up, Whisper! She couldn't decide between a hasty retreat and a seat at the table to talk. She wanted to be closer to him because he didn't seem dangerous. That very fact also made her apprehensive.

"It's all right. I won't push you."

The worry faded and she leaned against the counter. Of course he wouldn't push. They were neighbors; their kids hung out together. She got companionship from the kids, he got a few meals and some cleaning. For once, she'd found herself on equal footing with a reasonable man. Impending dread or fear shouldn't be a factor between them.

"Before you leave, would you trust me a little? It'd mean a lot."

"All right," she replied, not liking the words *trust*, and *it'd mean a lot*.

He turned her so she faced the cupboards and leaned his crutches against the counter. He stood at her back. That'd probably be where the trust came in.

"Can I lift your shirt?"

"Why?" she asked, trying to twist around. Stopped by his hands, they remained gently on her shoulders.

"Do you know how often you rub against a doorway? I'd like to scratch your back. That's all."

"My back?"

"Yeah, your back. Harmless enough. The interesting stuff's in front."

She burst out laughing.

"I could do it over your shirt, but I find it generally makes the itching worse."

"You don't know what you're getting yourself into. I might not let you stop."

"You ready? I don't want to startle you."

She nodded and felt her shirt rise before he rolled it at the top of her shoulders. Her breasts

remained covered but she still felt strange. Fingertips and short nails stroked her shoulder blades exactly where it itched the worst. Her eyes closed in unadulterated pleasure. She stretched her neck forward and he worked down her spine. Nothing compared to the delicious scrape of his nails.

“Feel good?” he asked.

“Incredible. Do all Ohioans know this secret?”

“How to scratch a back?”

“Mmm.”

“No one’s ever scratched your back?” He sounded different, intense somehow.

“No. I could get used to it, though.”

“Am I hurting you?”

“No. It’s like a continuous pre-sneeze.”

He laughed and she grinned, imagining the smile on his face.

“Is that a good thing?” he asked.

“Sure. Right before you sneeze, you feel it coming on. You know what I’m talking about. That deep twitch that makes your body get all tight as you breathe in. Your eyes close, your body gets tense and it keeps coming, teasing, teasing until whammo. Instant, intense release.”

“I never thought about sneezing. I’ll have to enjoy it more the next time it happens.”

“Maybe it’s just me.” She could be peculiar at times. She knew she wasn’t like other people.

“No, you described it perfectly. I never paid attention before.” She’d wear his arms out, the satisfying gliding of his nails felt too wonderful. “Are you ticklish?”

He’d worked to the middle of her back.

“I don’t know. Why?”

He kept scratching. “I don’t want to go too far against your sides and tickle you. You’re getting nice and relaxed and that’d spoil it.” He worked his way

off center of her mid back. "You okay?"

"Yes."

"Still all right?" He strayed a little further.

"Yes. No!" She gasped before crowding the counter to get away.

His palms smoothed the skin until it no longer tickled. "Better?"

"Much."

She'd never been tickled. The feeling was alarming but made her laugh. What a contrary thing! Once he'd worked his way down to the waist of her jeans, he started all over again. Slow and thorough, he'd melt her into a puddle of goo by the time he finished.

"Whisper?" He'd moved closer because his voice was lower, softer but she heard him very clearly.

"Mmm." *Don't stop. Not yet.*

"The rest of it."

"Hmm?" Her eyes remained closed as she slowly rolled her shoulders so he'd hit every single inch.

"Your bra. Can I unfasten it, move it to scratch your soft skin?"

"Yes." The word came out breathy. She didn't worry about anyone walking in on them. Without a phone call, the kids wouldn't be leaving school. Even if Mark or Nomad unexpectedly came home, it took some fiddling to get a key to open the front door. They could hear it clearly in the kitchen. For now, the older home had only two people inside.

He took his time, one clasp, then another, and finally the last. His palms smoothed the material aside and swept the straps away. Without the bra, his fingertips and nails touching everywhere felt erotic.

She kept slowly squirming, loving being touched just hard enough to ease the itch. With the patience of a saint, he made sure every single spot was soothed.

"I'm going to rub you now. It'll make your nerve endings settle down. Is that all right?"

"Yes."

Large hands spread on her shoulders before he brought his fingers together to rub the muscle beneath. She groaned and curved her spine, arching into his touch. *It felt too wonderful.* Palms and fingers slid lower and rubbed, then lower and rubbed. As skillful fingertips kneaded her lower back, she pushed her rear end against him.

She'd been accustomed to the contact from smooth, clean, lazy hands. In all their perfection, they'd often wrought pain. The hands touching her now were bigger, stronger and coarsely textured. They'd been occupied with hard physical labor to provide for a family. She doubted they'd grown addicted to giving agonizing lessons on obedience or forcefully silencing crying women.

He caressed her denim covering hips, and squeezed with exactly the right amount of pressure. Gooseflesh rose when he stroked her stomach. Long arms came against her sides, not to trap or detain, but to hold and give reassurance. She loved being in his arms, held securely. Each and every stroke and touch relayed he wanted her, but for pleasurable outcomes that could happen between a man and woman. He no longer wanted to gentle dry skin. His intent was to arouse.

Moisture from her tongue spread over her lips when she leaned against him. Her buttocks pressed back and she felt the swelling of his erection. To know he enjoyed rubbing and holding her, made warmth and wetness saturate the panties and denim between her legs.

"You okay with this?" he asked.

"Standing in your kitchen," she replied, licking more dryness from her lips, "with your hands on my skin?"

“Yes, there’s that. But what about the rest?” He kissed her ear and nuzzled her neck. “Are you comfortable with how hard I am and how much I like having your ass rub the front of my jeans?”

“Yeah, I’d say so. Do you mind?”

“You rubbing against me, getting me hard? No, it doesn’t bother me too much.” She grinned because of his joking. He had an extremely unusual approach to intimacy. “In fact, it makes me think about your breasts and how they’re free beneath the front of your shirt. It reminds me how good they felt in my hands.”

The moan from her sounded expectant. Even his words didn’t pummel her. They sounded sensual rather than crude. Grasping his wrists, she pulled his hands under her shirt, and placed his roughened palms against her breasts. Cupped and plumped, he held and gently massaged the sensitive flesh.

“Oh,” she said, whining the word, “how did you learn to touch like this?”

“From you. Everything about you is delicate. I’m anything but. The last thing I want is to put a mark on your skin or cause you any discomfort. You see,” he said, catching both nipples between thumbs and fingers before gently pinching, “if I’m careful and remember how small and sensitive you are, you’ll let me keep touching you, arousing you and maybe you’ll let me go further.”

“Further?” To fantasize about sex was safe. She wouldn’t allow it outside of her mind. She couldn’t. *Further* wouldn’t be happening, not if it meant lying beneath him.

“Relax, Whisper. I’d never take anything you didn’t offer.”

In her heart, she knew he told the truth. His words concreted the knowledge, and she leaned back against him to enjoy.

“That’s better. Touching you is a pleasure.

Having you enjoy it and respond, goes through me like lightning. If you wanted nothing more than my hands on your body, I'd feel lucky."

"Why?" She arched her back to press into his hands and against his groin in one motion. She'd never been seduced. His words, as much as his body, accomplished it then.

"Because you don't let just anyone this close. You don't like having your breasts touched, and yet you strain to get more firmly into my hands. I like making you needy. I like you trusting me with your body."

"What do you get?" Her head fell back against his chest. Her knees weakened as she caressed the hands cupping her breasts.

A wet, warm tongue traced the side of her neck before he nibbled her earlobe. "Me? I get hard."

She grinned.

"And I get to feel your firm, perfect breasts. If I behave, I might get kissed. And believe me, I like the kisses. I love getting in your mouth, and then you hold me and rub your tongue against mine."

"That feels good?"

"Mmm, incredible. What else do I get? If I do it right, touch and arouse you enough, you might need my hands lower on your body."

She groaned and twisted in his arms. The thought of his hands going *lower* forced a spasm deep inside. Moisture trickled and the wet spot grew between her legs. "I know what that would do for me, but what would you get?"

"To see you spread your legs for me. That's an incredible turn on. Then I'd get to touch your soft lips and open them. I love the way you smell and feel. You get so wet and excited."

With trembling hands, she placed them on the waist of her jeans and slowly let the button slip through the hole. The sound of the zipper descending

made his breath quicken against her ear.

“Don’t stop. Finish it. It’s all right to show me what you want. I want it too.”

Hesitantly, she slid denim and her panties down to her mid thighs before losing confidence. The moment of discomfort didn’t last.

Keith turned her sideways, caressed her throat and gently pushed her chin up. “And now I get something else I want.”

She swallowed, gazing into his eyes feeling dazed and weak.

“I want to feel you come with my fingers deep between your legs and my tongue in your mouth. I love the sounds you make and how tight you squeeze me. Will you give that to me?”

She nodded and he bent to nibble her smile. Moist lips parted hers before he slid beyond to seamlessly stroke inside. Her belly quivered, anticipating more. His palm slid down her back, between her cheeks and further, to find her swollen and wet sex. The other hand caressed her belly, abdomen and finally parted her sensitive lips to go beyond to touch her clitoris.

The aroma of the warming roast filled her head as heat from the stove washed over recently exposed skin. A constant spattering of freezing rain pelted the windowpanes to create a steady, soft, lulling sound. Tiny circles of pressure from a fingertip rubbed around and around the sensitive spot high on her sex, as a long, solid finger breached and entered her.

The sound of his rapid breaths, the thudding of her heart and the whoosh of rushing blood, filled her ears. The crazy dipping of her stomach and the stream of spasms, escalated until an explosive orgasm throbbed between her legs. Her hips lunged forward and back in a rapid pumping motion as she clung to his arm.

The darkness behind her closed eyelids turned into a haze of brilliant light. He spread her further with two fingers as his tongue filled her mouth. Violent tremors expanded into an unbelievable fire in her breasts, belly, thighs, and between her legs. He gave her unimaginable pleasure and she greedily took it. All he got in return was his tongue sucked and his fingers squeezed and wetted.

When she could hardly stand up, his kisses changed. They became soft and not as urgent, soothing and tender. Long after she should've quieted, his fingers slowed and only stroked when she'd tighten around him. The trip down was as exquisite as the one going up and over. Eventually, she became safe and replete, cuddled in his arms as he stroked her back, his thumb trailing her spine.

There'd been no prearrangement, no talk of what he'd expect as payment. With her cheek buried against his shirt, she realized he hadn't contemplated it.

"Would you mind—be terribly put off," she said, "if I wanted something from you?"

"I'm an easy sort of guy, Whisper. Ask. We'll see if I can't help."

She'd never requested what she wanted then. She'd never really desired it before meeting him. The question formed six different ways before she blurted out a portion. "Would you come upstairs with me?"

"Sure." He didn't sound hesitant and never questioned why.

He could always change his mind once they got there. If he did, she'd feel like the world's most accomplished fool. She pulled her pants into place and lowered her shirt.

He'd mastered the stairs over the last several days by holding the railing and hopping on one leg. She carried his crutches. When they reached the

upper landing, he followed her into the bedroom. Her stomach turned at the scenario running through her mind. Before she lost courage, she closed and locked the door after he'd entered. He stood silent and still in the middle of the room.

The only light came from the partially lifted shades. The darkened room fostered bravery. She grasped the front of his tee-shirt in a fist, and he hobbled to the bed as she pulled. Once there, she took the crutches and leaned them against the wall. When her hands gripped the bottom of his shirt, she asked, "Are you still okay with this?"

Who was she kidding! Okay with it? His guts turned over and over and he began sweating from anticipating her tiny, warm hands on any part of his screaming flesh. He'd almost come rubbing against her ass in the kitchen, fully dressed.

Raising the shirt, it didn't even get over his head before he felt her tongue on a nipple, her hands holding his sides. He groaned and threw the shirt across the room before taking her head gently between his hands and threading his fingers in the soft strands.

In between flicks of her tongue, she said, "I don't want..." She kissed the center of his chest and then straightened.

His thumbs supported her chin so she'd have to look at him. "What? Tell me so I know."

"I'd like to touch you, the way you touched me. I want to make you feel what I felt. But, would that be enough? Would it be all right if that's all that happened?"

"Can you feel my hands shaking?"

She nodded. She looked so damned unsure.

"I'd love having your hands on me, anywhere—hell, baby, everywhere. Take as much or as little as you want."

Her eyes lit and she smiled before saying, "Kiss

me, please. Right now, hard, like you did before.”

He bent and opened her mouth, held her in place and gave her what she’d requested. He couldn’t decide whose hands shook worse. Consumed with the kiss, some moments later, he found his belt undone and the front of his jeans open. Before she skimmed everything away, he grabbed his wallet. God only knew why he replaced the packet. The last one practically rotted in there. Maybe he felt lucky when it came to Whisper and some incredible possibilities.

When he’d been bared, he sucked in a breath through clenched teeth. Her looking at him had the strangest effect. Could a guy come from nothing more than a woman’s gaze?

She held his shoulders and applied pressure until he sat on the bed. She didn’t waste time when she crouched in front of him to tug off his jeans, boxers and socks.

“Lay down for me? I’ll make you comfortable,” she said.

He did and she propped his leg with pillows. His erection throbbed and ached, screaming to be touched. When she sat next to him and stretched an arm across him to lean on, she began touching and fondling him. Like the last time, his hands shook too much to get the damned rubber out of the wrapper. She took care of it, slowly rolling it down his aching, straining flesh.

“God, Whisper!”

Her hand lifted. “Am I hurting you? I didn’t mean to.”

“It hurts when you stop.”

Fingers curled around his shaft and she gently pumped him once.

“Shit! Again!”

“You’re so sensitive.” Her soft, little voice had a seductive quality. She knew what she’d done.

He'd forgive her if she'd do it some more. "Oh, shit, I won't last. You get me so damned hot. That's it, God, stroke me." He closed his eyes and gave in. He'd lose it in seconds and didn't care. If he was too fast off the mark, she'd done it to him.

"You're so hard, baby." Her using the pet name with her drawl made him shudder. It sounded so sexy coming from her soft voice. "It's all right; you're too wound up to let me feel you for very long. Let it happen and next time you'll enjoy it more."

Next time! He obeyed and doubled up as he burst and creamed the hand fisting him, pumping him to climax. Falling back against the bed, he grunted and made inhuman noises. He'd never been brought off so quickly. She made it good though, working him through every delicious pulse until he lay limp and panting.

Sleet beat against the windows, and the room grew darker as she handled some of the aftermath of his pleasure. Yawning, he decided the incredible release took care of the pent up desire from night after night of burning, sex filled dreams. Damn, he'd make sure next time he lasted longer.

"Are you comfortable?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, extremely."

"Can I ask another favor?"

"Anything."

"Your arms up like that, with your hands under your head—does it hurt?"

"Not a bit," he replied before another yawn got away.

"Your back, you're not pulling the stitches in that position?"

"Nope. Everything feels good."

"Would you leave your hands under your head if I asked you to?"

"Sure, Whisper."

"Do you have more?"

“Huh?”

“Protection.”

“Sure, dresser drawer.” He yawned and his eyes watered.

The bed moved and he couldn’t care. At least he didn’t until she came around to the other side and nudged his hip.

“Lift up for me, Keith.”

“Okay,” he said, bracing himself with his good leg and lifting his hips. A cold, stiff pillow went under his ass and his eyes opened. “Baby?”

He turned to find Whisper getting another pillow. With her shirt and bra missing, his mouth watered when she came close. She touched his hip and he rose up again, mesmerized by the sway of her breasts. Damn, they were perfect with thick, dark nipples. She curved in all the right places with a long slender torso flaring into some attractive hips. Indiscriminate clothes generally concealed her fantastic body. Why the hell did she hide herself?

At the foot of the bed, she shifted his right leg and pushed until he bent it. She crawled between his leg and cast, moving him as necessary to make room. Spread kind of wide and propped up, he had a clear view of where she headed. She licked a trail up the inside of his thigh. By the time she got to the good stuff, blood automatically diverted where she’d probably want it. He wasn’t tired anymore.

“We have a bargain, right?” She placed a fresh condom over him and smoothed it with her tongue.

“Huh?” he asked, unable to focus on much but where she’d lick next.

“Your hands. They’ll stay where they are?” she asked, before tasting a very tender area below the base of his erection.

“Jesus,” he said, unable to arch, stretch or move. With a bent leg, his hips raised, and his hands *trapped*, he couldn’t do much of anything. “You keep

doing that and I won't promise a thing. Shit! Do you have any idea—damn! How incredible—God!”

He didn't get an answer as her wet tongue gave long, languid strokes. He couldn't help howling because her mouth felt that damn outstanding. She'd never hold out long enough, because he'd never get enough. When her tactics changed, he settled down to see what she'd do next.

Working her way up his hard shaft, she teased and gave small licks and nibbles until he raised his eyes. God, she looked right at him as her lips opened and tongue shot out for a taste. He'd never seen anything so sexy. Especially from a seemingly shy woman who didn't want to have sex with him.

She took him slowly and when she got him in deep, her eyes closed like she'd discovered some delicacy. His eyes closed too. They didn't need to stay open. The vision of her taking him in, was burned into memory. The sensations to go with it wouldn't be forgotten either.

Like the first night she'd used her mouth, she took her time. When he'd get close and ready, she'd back off and slow everything down. The fourth time she took him to the edge, he started begging. “Please, baby, make it happen this time.”

“Mmm.”

“Ugh!” He loved when she sucked him. “I'm begging. Is that what you want?”

She became more enthused.

“I'm slow but not stupid. What'll it take?”

Nothing changed. He lay trapped, ready to erupt but couldn't.

“Harder, Whisper.”

She complied.

He figured out what she wanted. “Your tongue. That's it, flatten it out and wiggle it just—like—that!” His heart hammered in his chest, his stomach muscles bunched and he burned. He reached high,

grabbed the headboard and hung on. He couldn't take much more.

"Faster baby, deeper."

A hand cupped him and fingers curled around the very base of his shaft.

"Please don't stop. Almost there." He swelled and strained and oh, God, did he gush. Promises forgotten, his hands smoothed through her hair, rubbing her scalp, demonstrating how mind-blowing the experience was. She murmured, like she'd gotten pleasure herself. He couldn't fathom it. She kept things going until nothing remained but weakness and satisfaction. Out of breath, he coaxed her to lie close. He could sleep for days but sensed her tension. Her denim covered thighs squeezed together tightly. When he accidentally brushed a hard nipple, she made a small, needy sound. He couldn't believe she'd gotten excited from sucking him. He cupped a breast and she moaned and arched. God, she'd burn him alive!

"Take your pants down so I can get between your legs."

"No." She was panting and her skin practically burned. "It's okay. No."

It wasn't all right, but he'd make it that way. "You need me."

"No."

"Like before." He sensed the problem. He'd broken a promise when he couldn't keep his hands where she wanted. "I can't do anything more. You took care of that. If I get out of line, you could get away because Mr. Stumpy's resting on the pillows. I'm stuck."

She started laughing and he turned toward her as much as his leg allowed. "You're aching. Let me take care of you."

When he tried to kiss her, she turned away. "You don't have to."

“You didn’t either. I want you.”

Touching her cheek, he brought her back. He needed her mouth and she acted like she needed his. The sleet finally tapered and a few rays of sun lit the room. As they kissed and touched each other, her hands strayed to the front of her jeans.

Chapter Ten

"They're taking him into surgery," Whisper said into the cell phone.

She'd gone with Keith to the orthopedic surgeon at the hospital for a routine follow up exam and x-rays. The news wasn't good. One of the plates in his leg had shifted.

"I'll be there in thirty minutes," Mark replied.

"Don't. Please. He told me not to call until after."

"Why?"

"He didn't want anyone worried."

"How big a deal is it?"

"The surgeon didn't seem concerned. He said it happens sometimes, but didn't want to wait even a few days. If the wrong nerves get compressed...he just said it wouldn't be good."

She stood in the chilly surgical waiting room. Others sat comfortably on the couches and chairs with a television spewing the latest news. She preferred to stand in the corner by the window overlooking the parking lot.

"I'm coming down. We just won't tell him I'm there. I'll wait with you."

"The kids. School."

"If he's still there when school lets out, I'll leave and pick them up." What he said made sense.

"Whisper, are you all right?"

"Sure."

"You sound shaky."

"No. It surprised me. He seemed to be doing so well."

“Thirty minutes,” he said before hanging up.

Keith would remain semi-conscious while they fixed his leg. How could they expect to cut off the cast, cut into his leg and reposition a metal plate with him awake! He didn’t bat an eye when they told him. He’d said, “Let’s get it taken care of. Ready when you are.”

She knew the color left her face, and right in front of the doctor, he pulled her close. While he sat on the exam table, getting ready to go for surgery, he wrapped her in his arms to offer comfort. He should’ve needed the reassurance. She’d been a burden when she should’ve been strong.

Nothing good ever came from visiting a hospital. Her grandparents both died in a hospital. Even though her mother had basically died at home, they’d rushed her fifty-six miles to the nearest emergency room to pronounce her dead after a sixty second examination. Her father had been rushed to an emergency room multiple times followed by days of recovery. The last time she’d gone with him, she’d been forced to sit in a holding area until a sad looking doctor hesitantly talked to her. Her father died that day.

Staring out into the overcast, gloomy day, the fat, puffy flakes of snow reminded her of the stark white sheets they put on hospital beds. They always smelled of bleach. Why couldn’t they use a little fabric softener, or better scented antiseptic? She hated hospitals! Unconsciously, she raised the sleeve of her sweater and began scratching the crease of her arm. Soon, she did the same to her other arm. The backs of her hands started itching along with her palms. She stood there staring, scratching and remembering.

When someone tapped her shoulder, she saw Mark’s reflection in the glass. She glanced down at her watch when he said, “Sorry it took so long. The

roads are getting dicey.”

She turned to greet him. He didn’t look very happy. “What’s going on, Whisper? You told me he’d be fine.”

“He will.”

“You look scared to death!”

“Sorry. No. Just hospitals in general.”

“I would’ve taken off to bring him down. You should’ve said something.”

“He wouldn’t let you miss work. He was going to drive himself.” He tried to place his hand over hers, and she backed into the window. She’d startled him with the quick retreat. *Get a grip.* “Sorry, like I said. Hospitals.”

“Jesus, your arms!”

She looked and found lines of blood surfacing under the bumps on her skin. “Disgusting, huh? I get hives when I get nervous. A childhood thing I never outgrew. People back home thought I had leprosy or something.”

“What can I do?”

She still carried the antihistamine and started digging through her purse. “Water?”

“I’ll get it. Sit down, would you? I’ll be right back.”

A few hours passed in the cold waiting room before the surgeon approached. She and Mark stood. She introduced Mark and they shook hands.

“How did it go?” Mark asked.

“Fine. Everything’s where it should be now. We put him in a walking cast. There’re different approaches to a leg broken as badly as Keith’s, but I’ve seen some remarkable recoveries. I’m confident that weight bearing with crutches at this point, could only help. He’ll probably have to cope with some additional pain though.”

“How long until he’s ready to leave?”

“We’ll keep him overnight. We started off with a

local anesthesia. When we got going, we found more damage than I initially anticipated. I figured he'd been through enough, so we put him out. He'll be in recovery for a while and then we'll get him into a room. While we had him comfortable, I removed the sutures in his back. They should've come out a week ago."

Whisper sat there numb and worried, scratching the inside of her arm while Mark asked questions. "How long until the cast comes off?"

"Probably ten weeks. More or less depending on his progress. Then we can start physical therapy and see how he does."

"So he'll be fine in a few months," Mark said, obviously relieved.

"He's a big, strong guy. We got his records from the hospital in Texas. They did great work down there. Makes my job a whole lot easier when the first surgeon knows what he's doing. Once he's healed enough, we'll go in and straighten out the rest."

"What do you mean?"

"He'll probably need additional surgery. He didn't tell you?"

Mark looked stricken so she took her turn and filled the silence. "No. Could you please explain?"

"Like I've said, the first surgeon was excellent and really did a lot of repair. With how bad it was though, it may take another surgery, if not a few, to give him real use of the leg. He's too young to settle for half measures. With enough time, patience and physical therapy, we're hoping one day he'll be able to walk normally."

"How long are you talking?" Mark asked. "How long from now will it take until he can get around without the crutches?"

"We'll assess him and move him from the crutches to something more comfortable as soon as he's ready. He'll probably use a cane for a while. I'd

say, given his age and physical condition, probably no more than a year before he's in really good shape. That's a great prognosis. He's lucky to have the leg at all considering the amount of damage."

"Thank you very much for everything. We really appreciate it."

The doctor stood and Whisper did as well. Mark sat on the light green sofa with his forearms resting on his thighs, his head hung. The doctor shook her hand and smiled sympathetically at Mark. "Get something to eat and relax. It'll be a few hours before he gets a room. We'll come find you. All right?"

"Yes, and thank you again."

When the doctor left, Whisper sat next to Mark. He'd been devastated by the news. She wanted to console him, but he wasn't a child. Touching his back, stroking him gently, she frowned when his face fell into his hands.

"He didn't say a word. None of us knew how bad it was," he said.

"You know now, and you'll be there for him."

"He needs more surgeries. He won't walk right. God, Whisper, this will kill him."

"He's strong. He'll be fine. It'll just take some time." She didn't know what else to say. She had no business saying anything.

"Why?"

"What, Mark?"

"Why didn't he tell me? Did he figure he could just hide all this shit? Didn't he trust me enough to help?"

"No," she said, stroking his hair. She didn't know Keith well, so she talked about herself instead. She knew why she would've kept hurtful things from Heather, and in fact, why she'd done so previously. "He didn't tell you he almost lost his leg because it didn't happen. You didn't need to go through that."

That's why he simply came home as quickly as possible. He wanted you to know he'd be fine."

"But he's—crippled."

"For now. The doctor said he's young and strong and they're hopeful he'll recover. A terrible thing happened. He's not dwelling on it, and you shouldn't, either." A thought occurred and she voiced it. "Are you worried about money?"

"Hell, no. We're fine. He made sure of it."

"He'll recover. You have enough money. Let it end there. Don't worry."

He rubbed his eyes with fists. "He's my brother. He was doing three times the work of any of us. He stepped in when Mom left and never bitched. Billy wasn't even a year old. He traded his motorcycle and Corvette for that stupid Ford so a baby seat would work and we'd all fit."

"I bet he didn't mind."

"He worked crazy shifts and weekends so we'd have enough to keep us going. And this is how he gets paid back."

She rubbed his back again before placing her arm around him. She held him and leaned over, resting the side of her face against his shoulder. "When you love someone, Mark, you don't think about motorcycles or cars or working too much. You focus on the people you love and if you can provide, you do, however you need to."

He sat straight, took her hand in his and leaned back. Flattening his palm against hers, he traced the back of her hand with his fingertips. "Is that why you work at Ruby Red?"

"Why else would I be there?"

He chuckled. "You're an exhibitionist?"

"I think you know me well enough to know that club isn't a goal or aspiration for me. We need the money, and I'm glad I can make it."

"What if Heather finds out? She's not a dumb

kid.”

“I know. I pray every single night she never finds out. I don’t think I could live with the shame.”

“Then quit.” He turned toward her. “It’s not safe there, so just stop going in.”

She pulled away and her heart started pounding. “You won’t tell her, will you?”

His hands captured hers and squeezed. He didn’t utter a sound until she looked up. “I’d never do that, Whisper. I swear. Me and Nomad are the only ones who know. But your working there bothers me. You don’t belong in that type of place. The guys that go in there...”

“Throw their money away on fantasy. They don’t touch me in any way. Not physically, not emotionally.”

“It has to affect you, hurt you. The comments alone from the drunks would have to be terrible.”

“Stop.” she said. She could be strong when she needed to be. “It’d take a lot more than a few drunks shooting off their mouths to hurt me. I’ve had one hell of an education on mouthy, drunk men.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to be. Quit worrying so much. Let’s get back to that brother of yours. He didn’t die, he kept his leg, and he’ll be home for a while. Maybe he’s just happy things aren’t worse. He’s a pretty tough man, you know.”

“Whisper?” Mark asked. She waited as he brought words together. “I’m really glad you’re here.”

“Me too, Mark.”

After nurses situated Keith in a room, Mark left to pick the kids up from school. Keith didn’t wake and Mark eventually took the children to the cafeteria to eat before they came back to sit quietly. The hospital personnel didn’t mind all of them

sitting quietly. Keith stirred once, opened his eyes, saw the kids and said, "Hey, guys."

"You okay, Keith?" Billy asked.

"You bet. They fixed me up." He mumbled most of the words before drifting off.

Whisper already called off work, figuring she and Heather would stay at the house. Mark seemed keyed up and paced a lot during the hours of waiting. Nine at night, Mark grabbed his coat and gestured for Heather, Billy and Corey to do the same. He asked, "Are you all right being here?"

"Sure." The initial hospital jitters left and she'd gotten comfortable in a chair.

"How about if I take the kids home, get them situated, and come back so you can leave."

Mark didn't want Keith left alone. The longer Keith slept, the more anxious Mark got. The nervous habit of cracking his knuckles became unbearable.

"I'll stay."

"You scratched yourself raw earlier."

"I don't itch now; you'll break your fingers if you stay any longer. You promise me you'll look after Heather, and I'll plant myself right here. I have my cell if you need me. Go home and get some sleep."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. Make the kids do homework and get them to bed soon. I'll give a call in the morning and let you know how he's doing."

"You'll spend the night?"

"I won't leave him. If he wakes up and starts jabbering before midnight, you'll see me at the house."

Mark stared, wanting or needing to say something. She spoke for him. "Really, I swear I'll be right here the whole time."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." In truth, the thought of leaving him alone with strangers, made her stomach

hurt and head throb.

She gave Heather and Billy hugs before they quietly left. The automatic blood pressure cuff swelled on Keith's arm as she sat back down on the chair. She pushed the sleeve of her sweater up and rubbed the bumpy, damaged skin. The nurse came in and noticed her arm. Quietly she asked, "What happened!"

"Hives," Whisper replied.

"Allergy?"

"Yes, to hospitals."

The nurse smiled. "That sweater's probably irritating it. I can get you a scrub top and some calamine lotion. Looks like you're staying a while. Want to get comfortable?"

It didn't require much thought at all. "Yes, thank you."

The nurse left and came back in record time. Whisper used the private bathroom to change shirts. When she came out, the nice young woman slathered the insides of her forearms and backs of her hands with the lotion. The burning ceased and she once again expressed her gratitude.

"Anything else I can get you?" the nurse asked.

"No, thank you though."

After sitting for a while in the chair, she reclined and curled her legs on the seat. Used to sleeping lightly, she dozed off listening for any unusual sound.

Sometime later, she jerked. She found the same nurse covering her with a blanket. Keith continued to sleep. It was after one in the morning.

"He woke a little while ago and had some juice," the nurse whispered. "He saw you over here and nodded right back off. The poor guy's wiped out."

"He's all right then?"

"Sure. He's sleeping, not unconscious. His vitals are good. He'll be fine."

"Thank you."

"Can I get you anything else? Thirsty? Hungry?"

She shook her head. The nurse turned down the lights on her way out. Whisper dozed, waking every half hour or so to glimpse the clock and Keith. A constant stream of broken dreams assaulted her, most of which bordered on nightmare.

The talk she and Mark had earlier, made issues surface in her mind that she'd struggled to bury. *Please don't let Heather find out.*

She heard her ex-husband's voice, saw his red eyes as he walked toward her. *God damn it, you'll do it, Wendy, or I'll blacken both your eyes.*

Already half undressed; she shook when he grabbed her wrists and pulled her from the floor. He demanded she finish taking her clothes off for his *friends*. She'd stopped crying and whining a long time before that night. Sometimes, if she did what he wanted and amused his friends, he'd let her dress and leave the room. Heather wasn't allowed to go near his "party den," but with thumping music and yelling men, Whisper always feared Heather might walk in.

Doug received some perverse pleasure in watching her dance for his friends. He loved the lewd comments and reinforcement he'd married a *fine piece of ass*. He'd never let them touch her though. Eventually, she learned he also thrived on making her afraid. The less scared she acted, and the more she pretended to enjoy stripping for their amusement, the less it happened.

A fine performance however, never fully guaranteed a safe retreat when he'd had enough. If she managed to arouse him, he'd make her take care of it. Never in front of others, but at some point, that humiliation probably wouldn't have mattered much either. More often than not, he'd get angry, and depending on the drug of choice for the evening,

she'd get some attention.

He mostly only hit her where she'd be able to hide the marks. He was a drug addict, but not a stupid one. When she'd gone to the studio with a black eye once, her father casually took Doug in the back room, and beat him senseless. It'd taken a while for him to work up the courage to hurt her again. After her father died, it happened frequently.

Please don't let Heather walk in. God, let her sleep through this.

Whisper. She heard the name and didn't connect it to herself. In her nightmares, she was Wendy.

"Whisper."

Her eyes opened and she tried remembering where she fell asleep. A man in a hospital bed came into view and she threw the blanket aside before jumping to her feet. Within seconds, she woke completely and staggered forward.

"Are you all right? Do you need something?" she asked.

When his hand lifted, she held him. He looked so tired. "What are you doing here? Why aren't you home in bed?"

"You wouldn't wake up." She felt strange and emotional and held him tighter. "I don't like hospitals. We didn't want you here alone."

"You're kidding me, right?" he asked, before a disbelieving smile formed on his lips. "You stayed the whole night?"

She nodded.

"With that shirt you have on, it looks like they admitted you, too."

"It's the very latest fashion. All the girls around here are wearing them. You like?"

"Stunning."

"You've got quite the outfit too, I see."

"Baby," he said and she leaned closer. "Shut the door and check out what's underneath."

She smirked. "I guess you're not feeling too bad."

"Actually, can you see what they have me hooked up to?"

"Sure." She read the IV bag. "Saline."

"Nothing else?"

"Nope. You're on the salt water plan it seems."

"No little plunger thing, hooked to a pump thing, that has the best drippy stuff on demand?"

She depressed the nurse call button. She knew what he needed. The thought of him on a pain pump made her queasy. They'd hooked her father to one after one of his surgeries. They figured out about his drinking problem with the dosage needed to control his pain.

"What's wrong?"

"It bothers me. You hurting and needing drugs."

"It's not that bad. I'm a baby."

She squeezed his hand. He was a very handsome *baby*.

"What were you dreaming about?" he asked.

She kissed his hand, laid it on his stomach, and grasped the rail of the bed. Glancing toward the door didn't make the nurse suddenly appear. "I don't remember."

"You worried about Heather?"

"Always. She's very pretty, sixteen, and at home with your sixteen-year old brother. Why do you ask?" She'd been dreaming about Heather walking in on one of Doug's party's. If there was a God, she hadn't talked in her sleep.

"It's still early. You can go get them ready for school. I'll be fine."

At only five in the morning, she did still have time. But she trusted Mark to take care of Heather. Her fingers trembled as she found the courage to make a confession.

"I lied," she said.

He didn't say a word and she couldn't quite look

at him. Nightmares and Heather were really none of his business, but he'd asked and she'd lied.

"I know," he eventually replied.

She only confessed because she suspected he already knew. She'd been cornered. She'd been wrong. Some things could be talked about. The care came in giving the right amount of information without relaying too much.

"I'm sorry."

"I know that too. You're not a very good liar."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome."

"Keith?" As she pondered words, he patiently waited. She didn't deserve his tolerance, even though she'd been untruthful about something insignificant. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure."

Brushing hair away from her face, placing it behind her ears, she wet her lips and thought about how much to say. She couldn't bring the words together.

"Whisper?"

Caring what he thought mattered a great deal. It shouldn't. Heather should be her first priority. She wanted to ask forgiveness for being evasive, hiding facts, and any lies she might tell in the future. She also wanted to warn him she'd been broken, used up, tainted. If she told him the truth, if he ever found out, she'd lose him, and that's why she couldn't speak. He wasn't truly hers to begin with, but for the moment, she liked pretending she belonged with a good man and a family. Heather liked pretending too. For now, they fit in.

"Baby," he said.

Her eyes closed. She was very tired.

He stroked her hand with his fingertips. "I know you can't talk about certain things. I understand—to a point—for now. I'll take whatever you can give and

we'll see what happens. Deal?"

That's it? The suffocating feeling lifted and she took in a deep breath. "Deal."

The nurse came in and walked to the side of the bed. Whisper backed away and sat in the chair. Dizzy with relief one moment, all the happiness faded the next. Solutions to problems didn't come about so easily, at least not for her.

Chapter Eleven

Keith sat in the Explorer as Mark, Corey, Billy, Nomad and Jade unloaded items into the storage area of the local homeless shelter and food bank. Heather sat in the passenger seat. She'd wanted to help, but he wouldn't allow it. The temperatures ran below zero, and the wind chill took them down into the negative double digits. The boys could handle the supplies.

"You do this every year?" Heather asked.

"We're generally a lot earlier. The week before Christmas is cutting it close," he replied.

"I wondered why you stored all that stuff in the basement."

"A few of the local places give us a great price on items that don't sell. We get four times the product for the price. Whenever they have a clearance, we scoop it up."

His childhood friend, Miles, came to the driver's door and knocked on the window. Keith rolled it down.

"Manchester!" Miles poked his head in, glanced down at his leg and laughed. "Corey said you took a beating. Hard to believe you're actually broke."

He accepted Miles hand for a handshake. "It could've been worse, I got lucky."

"Can you come in for coffee? It's between meals and I have some time."

Keith turned off the truck and looked at Heather. "We won't be here long, honey. Come in and meet the crew."

Walking with crutches over ice could be tricky business. Miles and Heather didn't let him go it alone, with one on each side the whole way until they made it in the door. As fast as the boys unloaded the Explorer and Nomad's pick up, workers inside scooped up the items to be placed in storage.

In the main dining hall, they took off coats and got comfortable as Miles poured them coffee. Tracey, an older woman working at the shelter, started getting mugs of hot chocolate ready for the kids. Amidst the confusion, he and Miles had a few minutes alone.

"Will you have enough this year to make it happen?" Keith asked.

"You'd think with the lousy economy, we'd be struggling. The outpouring's been phenomenal," his friend, turned preacher, replied.

"I'm glad to hear it. You have enough toys for the kids? Clothes? Anything in particular you're short on?"

"You've done plenty and we should have presents for all of them." Miles never changed hairstyles. The shoulder length black hair, then striped with gray, smacked of a man stuck in a generation long past. He wasn't particularly tall, but appeared lofty because he lacked about twenty pounds to be considered an average weight. "I wish we could stretch the generosity out over the whole year."

"Damn it," Keith said, "I told you to call if you needed anything."

"If we ever get critical and can't squeeze something out of one of the philanthropic donors, I'll call. Your quarterly donations are more than enough. You're not rich. Actually, with the accident, I'm surprised you're here this year."

"Give it a rest, Miles. You know I'd never fail

you at Christmas.” He sipped on the steaming black coffee. “How many kids this year?”

“Probably a few hundred with the outreach program. A lot of folks are hard pressed.”

“I’ll ask again. Do you have every single kid covered? Any holes you need filled?”

“I’ll manage.”

Keith sighed, reached into his breast pocket to pull out a small pad of paper and pen. “You dumbass, it’s the week before Christmas. I called a few weeks back. You should’ve told me what you needed then so I could get stuff without the crowds.”

Miles smiled and rested his elbows on the table. “Get the kids to shop. Charitable work is good for the soul.”

“Yeah, yeah, spill it. How old, and what size? Boys or girls?”

“There’s one family in particular.” The pause created a dramatic effect. Miles’ tactics never changed. He wished the preacher would figure out he could just say what he needed. Tugging on heartstrings couldn’t make Keith more sympathetic. He already felt plenty for kids who didn’t have warm clothes or enough to eat. Remembering Whisper, he also discovered a soft spot for parents who’d been caught unaware and put in tough situations.

Miles interrupted his thoughts by saying, “They’re the cutest little girls.”

Keith sighed. “I don’t suppose you’d bypass the history and just cough up the details. You know, take it easy on me because of this broken leg and all.”

Miles laughed. “Shit, Keith, it’s part of who I am. But yeah, I’ll take it easy on you this year.”

With the grin on the preacher’s face, Keith braced himself.

“A young woman came in late one night.”

“Here we go,” Keith said, rolling his eyes.

"She had three little girls in tow. They're about two and weren't dressed to be out on a nasty Cleveland night."

Keith swallowed. *Damn it!* He hated the visuals he conjured sometimes.

"The mom's being admitted in a few days. She's got a tumor that needs removed. She'll be in the hospital two days. She asked if the triplets could stay here. Her husband moved her to Cleveland and split. She didn't leave Oregon on good terms, so there's no family she can go to."

"What day?"

"Come again?"

"When do I get them? You sure as hell can't handle them here."

"You've taken others and never refused. I appreciate the offer, but you're not up to snuff yourself. I'd take them, but I already have nine at the house. Jessica wouldn't understand. They'll need a lot of care."

"We'll manage. I'll call in some favors."

"It'd be temporary, maybe a day or two, just until she gets out of the hospital. We've got social workers fixing things permanent."

"As long as it takes. Shit," Keith really thought about it, "three? Are they out of diapers?"

"No, but you remember how to do that stuff. You had those two boys last year and they weren't even walking."

He stopped acting put off and smiled. Holding a little kid, feeding them and caring for little needs had never been a burden. Kids getting arrested, or beaten up, or getting a girl pregnant, made him a little crazy.

"Is that it?" Keith asked.

"That's what I have so far. You know, the closer it gets to Christmas, the more people come through the door. Are you sure you'll manage? I could look

elsewhere, but I knew you'd be coming in today."

"So you planned on me taking them."

Miles' gaze dropped to his coffee mug. "Yep, I set you up. Actually, when I saw them, you were the first person that came to mind, even with that broken leg."

"Why?" Maybe he needed to rethink his friendship and commitment to the shelter. He didn't like being used.

"The girls aren't very warm with new people."

"And you thought of me. Thanks a bunch."

"Keith, there isn't a kid alive that doesn't get all mushy when you're around. God gave you a gift and you damn well know it. The best present you could give these girls is some time." Miles smiled and gestured toward Heather. "Where did she come from?"

"Corey's girlfriend." It wasn't the whole truth, but he didn't really want to admit he'd picked her up after some trouble, fed her, and she and Whisper now hung out.

"Can I drop the girls off Monday? That's when the mom's having surgery."

"Sure. Anytime. I'll be home."

"I'll get supplies from the back and bring it with them."

"Save the stuff for kids here. Are they average size?"

"Maybe a little small for two year olds. Really, let me bring what they'll need. You've spent enough money and with you taking them, I feel..."

"Relieved?"

"Yep," Miles gazed at the activity as the storeroom filled. "Thank you."

"You know, you really ought to offer a better cup of coffee when you drag someone into your lair. It'd make swallowing your sob stories a whole lot easier."

"I really don't need to. The coffee hasn't

improved over the years, and you keep coming back. Maybe you're just a sucker."

The triplets came, stayed for two nights and left. The house was more chaotic than normal, but Keith hadn't minded. The girls were as cute as little buttons. Mid-afternoon on a Saturday, Keith managed to get Heather out alone. They both wanted to do some shopping. He still used crutches to get around, but the new improved cast made doing it a whole lot easier. With his knee then bendable, he figured he could manage a few months with the extra weight.

When they walked into the house, the smell of baking and dinner hit him square in the face. He loved coming home to the scents of food, especially on a cold December day. He and Heather ate lunch at the mall, but nothing compared to a home cooked meal. From the spicy scents drifting from the kitchen, they'd be treated to chili.

Muffled bellows and thumping resonated throughout the house and he smiled. The kids were at it again. Corey and Heather spent the hours after homework writing new lyrics. More often than not, the band practiced in the evenings. Whether he became desensitized to the noise, or they'd actually improved, Keith didn't have a clue. The beat didn't sound nearly as annoying lately. He might actually call it enjoyable.

"Whisper?" he called, wondering what she'd gotten into. The woman barely managed five hours of sleep a night, and controlled his home the rest of her waking moments when she wasn't at work. With the headaches less severe, and him able to manage better, he figured he should start pulling his weight. She'd been more than helpful and he felt guilty.

"With dinner on the stove," Heather said, "I bet she didn't go far. I'll check upstairs." Heather darted

off and came back a few minutes later. "Not upstairs. Maybe she's in the crypt. She promised to help with timing on some of the songs."

"She has some sort of musical background," Keith said, stating a fact. Maybe he'd get lucky and Heather would offer up some information.

"She does. Bob was," she said before falling silent, her eyes growing big. "I mean, her dad..." She looked scared.

Generally, he didn't push, but he wanted to know a few simple things. Two sisters could have different fathers; his own little brother was a product of his mother's marriages. Why the secrecy? "So you and Whisper have different fathers?"

"Yes."

"And Whisper's father is a musician?"

"Yes."

"And that's where her knowledge comes from?"

Heather nodded and blushed. "I have to take this stuff home now to hide it. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Heather vanished out the front door. What could it be about their past that made it impossible to relay basic facts? Being a patient man, he wouldn't push—for now. He didn't need to crowd either of them. Little odds and ends slowly came out. He'd pay attention and piece things together until one of them felt comfortable enough to talk openly.

The kitchen was spotless and a frosted cake stood under a glass pedestal. A layer of transparency separated him from some sort of amazing chocolate confection. He'd lost ten pounds after the accident. He'd put on twelve the last few weeks. He'd need to be careful because he could easily pack on a bunch more weight without the daily grind of work and a lot of mouth watering food available. Come to think of it, Corey put on some mass and no longer looked like a scrawny kid.

He pulled open the basement door and carefully trekked down the stairs. The musical rumbling grew in intensity. When he made it to the last step, he saw Billy and Mark seated on the couch, both of them hovering over a book. They spoke loudly, Mark asking questions and Billy answering. They toiled over information for a history test on Monday.

Half the basement was a rec room and laundry area, with the other half enclosed for the soundproof room. *Soundproof* didn't necessarily equate to *devoid of sound*. But it sure as hell muffled it for the neighbors, and he could listen to the television at a normal level while they played. The speakers outside of the room could be adjusted to increase or decrease the volume from inside. Mark and Billy had it turned on, listening to rehearsal while Billy studied.

In the middle of a song, everything groaned to a halt. Through the large window into the *studio*, he saw Connor throw drumsticks at Corey.

"What the hell's wrong now?" Corey asked.

"I can't stutter the tempo like you want. It won't work."

Whisper stood from the chair she'd been sitting in and collected the sticks. She said, "Sure you can, but it won't happen overnight. You have to practice."

"I don't have a set at my house. How the hell am I supposed to practice?" Connor replied.

"Without the drums. You walk around banging on everything around here. You don't need drums to practice."

"Sure, Whisper, that makes total sense."

If the little man didn't check his attitude real quick, Keith would do it for him. He had no right speaking to Whisper in that tone. In fact, Keith wouldn't tolerate it.

She handed the sticks to him and grabbed another set from the shelf. She touched his shoulder and he stood. "Get the other stool," she said.

She sat behind the drums while Connor got the stool.

“Right there.” She pointed so he’d bring the seat closer. “Now, drum with me.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Connor asked.

Corey, Jade, Dusty and Connor all had disbelieving looks on their faces. Mark and Billy put the book aside, stood, and gazed in the window. Whisper took her hair, twirled it from the base before stuffing it down the back of her shirt. She didn’t make eye contact with any of them as she adjusted the stool and looked over the set up. She tested foot pedals, each of the drums and cymbals before running through it with more and more speed.

All of their mouths dropped open. Once she seemed comfortable, she said, “Let’s run through *Disclosure* once. Three—two—one...”

Slender arms and legs started moving, and the sound staggered him. The kids stood there dumbly until Jade’s guitar came to life. Dusty started picking out notes on the bass. Connor sat in a stupor until Whisper stopped.

“The purpose of this is so you’ll learn,” she said. “You with me this time? And Corey, I’ll set the tempo this once. Try it my way, and then it’s up to you. All right?”

She began again, the kids following her lead. When Corey started blasting out lyrics, they sounded like a real, honest to God band. He’d heard the song before as a muffled misconception of beats. It flowed with Whisper guiding. Rolling sounds of staggered rumbling lead to extended basic rhythms. He didn’t know a damn thing about drums or drumming, but clearly understood Whisper did. *The expression on her face!* Absolutely confident of every strike and roll, for the first time since he’d met her, she looked secure, connected, and *aggressive*. She’d

done a hell of lot more than *listen* to the radio or CDs.

Corey's voice overtook the instruments to belt out lyrics flawlessly, emotionally and with absolute precision. When Jade went wild with his guitar, the drums blended to create an undercurrent to accentuate the screaming, whining chords and notes. About four minutes later, the fiercely charged, heart pounding rush escalated with the roar of thunder created by Whisper's lightning fast hands and feet. The hair stood up on his arms as she struck the drum set one last time. A hush fell over the lower level of the house as the symbol gradually sizzled to stillness.

She placed the sticks down on a snare drum and stood before gathering her hair to drop it between her shoulder blades. She said quietly, "I'd tune the set if I were you. If you need help, ask. You need more practice with rolls. The fills are fine."

"Whisper," Connor said, "you ever drum pro—"

"Dinner's got to be almost done. I'm going up now."

"Thanks, Whisper," Corey said, staring like he'd never seen her before.

"Welcome." She walked from the room and after closing the door, she bumped into Keith. She offered an uncertain smile. "Dinner." She hurried by and raced up the stairs.

Corey walked out a few seconds later. "Did you see?"

"Yeah. She's good, huh?"

"No. She's phenomenal. Scary phenomenal."

"Don't bug her about it, get me?"

"Why?" Corey asked.

Keith spelled it out. "You drug her down here, didn't you?"

"Sort of." The answer came with the slump of Corey's shoulders and shuffling of his feet.

"She wanted to help and ran out of ways to tell you, so she showed you."

"Damn, she showed all of us. I wonder how she got so good."

"Keep wondering. Don't push. She already regrets what she did. Let her see it was no big deal, and she might get comfortable."

Corey's gaze became fixed. "Her and Heather both. They've been around for months, practically live here, and neither one of them trust us any more than they did. Why, Keith? We haven't done a thing wrong."

It'd been forever since Corey needed an opinion or answer from him. Did the kid mature a bunch over the last few months, or did the change come from Keith being home and available? A portion of the intelligent, trusting boy, who cared about an older brother's view on a subject, couldn't be more welcomed.

A squeeze to his shoulder replaced the hug Keith wanted to give. "Like her drumming, they'll share when they're ready. She opened up a little and when nothing bad happens, she'll learn she can safely let more out. That's how some people trust. You know, slowly."

"So we really shouldn't mention it?"

"Keep practicing. If it helped, thank her again and drop it."

"I won't ask her, I'll listen to what you just said, but damn, I'd sure like to know where she learned."

Keith squeezed his shoulder again and made his way to the stairs. He'd like to know too, but he'd follow his own advice. Whisper and Heather would be around for a while, and at the moment, his time was unlimited. He'd keep listening to all the stuff she didn't say, and see if answers would start coming out. As long as he didn't need the pain medication, he'd be more aware.

Chapter Twelve

The ache inside Whisper's bones wouldn't go away with the freezing cold roughening her skin. She huddled under three blankets and two quilts on her bed, shivering. She couldn't get enough to drink and wished Heather would return with a gallon of water. The incomprehensible thought of getting out of bed, fizzled away.

Uncomfortable and a little scared, she felt like she did when she'd lived with Doug. Hands touched her, but she didn't receive anything to quench her thirst. *Hands, hands everywhere, with not a drop to drink*, strolled through her muddled mind. The room tilted as someone lifted her. Broken complaints spilled from her parched lips. "Please leave me alone."

"It's okay, Whisper, I've got you," he replied.

Why? Where are you taking me? A blast of frigid air made her gasp before she coughed into the blanket over her face. When she could finally breathe again, her muscles gave up and dissolved. All sorts of activity swirled around until she came to rest against something soft. Maybe she could get warm there.

Jerked into a sitting position, she wanted to cry with how bad everything hurt. Pills were put in her mouth and she spat them out. "No, I won't take anything. Go to hell! Leave me alone!"

She tried moving away from Doug, but didn't get far. Maybe he'd already given her something. Not having a clear mind terrified her. Maybe that's why

she felt so terrible.

“Hold her,” he said.

Her arms hurt because someone forced her to sit upright. She’d have more bruises. Pills pressed against her lips and she opened her mouth, didn’t have a choice.

“Please, Whisper, take the pills.” Doug sounded strange, like he actually gave a damn.

At long last, a glass touched her lips and she grabbed hold. Her shaking hands made water splash as she gulped it down. Maybe she’d sleep through the ensuing high. He’d only drugged her once, but she learned some things quickly. The spacey confused feelings weren’t enjoyable. “Bastard,” she said, unable to swallow any more. “Why would you do it? You promised, you son of a bitch.”

Keith tried stroking her cheek so she wouldn’t be so afraid. She flinched away and fought harder.

“Whisper!” he said loudly, “it’s okay, settle down.”

With the high fever, she didn’t recognize him. Seriously contemplating an ambulance, he tried once again to get the thermometer in her mouth. The device would give a quick reading, but she wouldn’t stay still even with Nomad holding her.

As she calmed, he managed to place the thermometer. When it flashed, he read it. One hundred and three, and that was after she drank cold water. If the pills didn’t work in half an hour, Nomad could load her in the SUV and they’d drive to the emergency room.

All at once, the fighting ended, and Nomad eased her down. Her teeth chattered and they layered blankets over her.

“Shouldn’t we be opening the windows instead of making her warmer?” Nomad asked.

“We’ll give it a little while. If the pills don’t work, we’ll take her. She doesn’t like hospitals, so

let's see what happens."

He'd made Heather and Billy leave when she started babbling and trying to scream. They didn't need to see her so out of control. Hell, she scared the shit out of both him and Nomad. She calmed after a few minutes and only jerked every once in a while, like she couldn't help the movements while stuck in a nightmare.

The night before, she hadn't looked good, but went to work anyway. Nomad took her straight home after her shift. Billy had been home two days with the flu. With Whisper's high fever and chills, Billy obviously shared the bug.

"Can you get the pitcher and fill it with ice water for me?" he asked.

"You sure she doesn't belong in a hospital?" Nomad replied. "I'd take her and you could stay here with Heather and Billy."

"Not yet."

Nomad left and Keith limped to the bathroom. He ran the cold water before stuffing a washcloth into the stream. Despite the chills, her face was damp with sweat. When he sat next to her, she tried scooting away. She didn't get far with the blankets trapping her. He started talking before touching her.

"I'm going to wipe your face, Whisper. It'll feel good, so just relax. See? Nothing to get all hyped about. A nice cool cloth is all that's touching you."

Thankfully, Nomad took the day off from work. He ran right over to get Whisper when Heather called.

"My head hurts," Whisper said, slurring the words but seeming a little more lucid.

"Yeah, I bet it does. You know where you are?"

"No."

"You're in my bed again. You said you liked it here, so get comfortable and take a nap."

"Keith?" At last she realized who sat next to her.

Thinking about the *bastard* she'd been yelling at wasn't a wise idea. In fact, he wouldn't dwell on how crazy she got trying to get away. Someone taught her those survival skills. A *son of a bitch* educated her. One who shoved pills down her throat. *Yeah, best I concern myself with her fever. Don't think about the other stuff.*

"What's wrong? Why am I here?"

"Billy gave you the flu. You're running one hell of a fever."

"I've never been sick. Can't be."

"Never?"

"Maybe a cold. Not like this." Her teeth chattered.

"Welcome to an Ohio winter. You'll be as good as new for Christmas, I promise." When he stroked her hair, she relaxed. His own tension drained. "Why did you settle in Cleveland, baby?"

She yawned. "Closer to Bob. Seemed like a good spot."

It wouldn't be fair to get answers while she couldn't think straight. He wouldn't take advantage of her too much. "Who's Bob?"

"Dad."

"Is he in Cleveland?"

"Yeah. Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Inducted last year." Her mouth seemed dry so he helped her sit and she finished the water. "Thanks."

Tucked back in, she yawned again. Her voice was so hoarse, he should leave her alone. He couldn't, being so close to at least one answer.

"So your dad lives in Cleveland?"

"Mostly. His body's in San Diego." Swollen eyes blinked, remaining closed longer each time.

"Whisper, your dad's dead?"

"As a doornail."

He swallowed. "Did he hurt you, baby? Did he scare you?"

"Dad?"

"Yeah."

"No. Never wanted me, but never hurt me. Poor guy."

So, who frightened you? And how the hell could she say her father didn't want her, and then pity him for it? She'd fallen asleep or he would've asked. She relocated to be close to a father who'd been someone famous and didn't give a shit about her. A dead man's memory caused her to settle in Cleveland. Where was her mother?

"Thanks," he said when Nomad set the water on the night stand.

"She sleeping now?" Nomad asked.

She coughed into the blankets and tried clearing her throat. Moaning, she turned onto her other side. Mumbled words held a pleading quality as she settled beneath the covers. Nomad moved a chair close to Keith. "I suppose you'll stay with her."

Keith stood and swung onto the chair. "Yep. Not going anywhere."

Nomad took a spot on the bed. Watching her grouse, shiver and at times, fight, the kid rubbed his hands nervously up and down his jeans. "You like her?"

Since when did Nomad want to chat? The last real conversation they'd had, happened a while back when Keith bailed him out of jail. That's when Nomad became a semi-permanent fixture around the house. Nomad and Mark hung out for years before the incident, otherwise Nomad, his birth certificate name, would've been history. Theft or a fight landing him in jail might've been overlooked. The arrest for drugs almost had him black and blue and on the street permanently.

Keith finally answered. "Yeah, kid, what's on your mind?"

"She's not as jumpy as she was a few months

ago. Figured you and her alone during the days might have something to do with it.”

“Is that any of your business?” The question came out aggressively. The kid knew better than to make statements like the one that just rolled out of his mouth.

“Yeah, I’ll make it my business.” Nomad stared at her, watching her toss and turn.

Keith’s temper jumped up a notch. Before he acted on it and took Nomad apart, he wanted to make sure what the kid tried to say. “Spit it out.”

“She’s been around drugs.” Nomad sat rigidly.

“I figured as much.”

“That’s not a problem?”

“As long as it doesn’t resurface, a person’s entitled to mistakes.”

Nomad slumped and let out a long breath.

“Did you think I’d figure it out, and ban her and Heather from the house?” Keith asked.

“I didn’t know what you’d do.”

“That’s it? You’ve been walking around worried about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that the only thing eating at you?”

“No.” The answer was definite and Keith waited for the rest. “What you see isn’t really what you get with her. She’s damaged.”

The word choice made him think for a moment. *Damaged*. Nomad once referred to himself as damaged. It’d been his one word summation of a childhood filled with trauma, abuse and neglect.

“You know something about her you want to share?”

“Nothing concrete.” Nomad probably took in a lot through quiet observation. “She’s grateful to be here though.”

“Why would you say that?”

“I can see it, sense it. She’s been drifting a long

time. She feels a connection here but doesn't think it'll last. She's waiting for the next shoe to drop. I'd bet my last nickel, she's had more than two come crashing down."

Could the kid be mistaken? God, he hoped so.

Nomad balled his hands into fists before flattening his palms against his thighs. "That's my interest in her. I want to make sure nothing happens to her. And if it does, I don't want her to be alone."

Keith's stomach dropped and guts twisted. Nomad thought he knew Whisper. He believed they were alike. The emotional hole in the kid was the size of a crater.

When they'd talked over dinner after the drug bust, Keith asked direct questions about Nomad's home life. He learned an eighteen-year-old boy could look and act normal after severe abuse. Nomad hadn't stuttered, got up tight or cried. God, he had a right to cry. His stride in eating the burger and fries never broke as he talked casually about torture, molestation and exploitation.

"Hey," Keith said. He couldn't stand the glimmer of deep-seated sadness in Nomad's eyes. "You know she won't get hurt here. You know firsthand."

"If it comes down to a choice..." He sighed before saying, "I want to protect her, but I owe you my life."

"For Christ's sake, Nomad."

"Don't write off what you did for me. I'd be whoring to get more drugs and on the street."

"You weren't that dumb or desperate."

Aging four years should've put some distance between Nomad and his drug habit. Maybe it took eight or twelve years.

"And there's the problem," Nomad said, ignoring Keith's last statement. "She's the first person outside our family I worry about. With the two of you *liking* each other, I keep wondering what I'd do

if that changed."

Our family. Two words said more than he relayed through most of the conversation. It mattered—Nomad feeling like he belonged.

"Why does it have to change?"

"It always does."

"What about Heather? You don't feel anything for her?" Keith asked.

"I do, like a kid sister. But she's strong and can protect herself. Whisper's also got Heather's back. Heather's safe."

Again, he listened for everything Nomad didn't say and tried to bring it out. "But Whisper's not?"

"No."

"She's stronger than you think."

"Not about some things." After his last cryptic certainty, Nomad stood and left.

Keith mulled the conversation over. Someone lightly knocked on the door. "Come in."

Heather slipped inside, carrying a plate with a few sandwiches and a cup of coffee. "Roast beef and Swiss."

"Thanks, honey." He accepted the plate and she placed the coffee on the night stand.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For making me something to eat?"

She smiled and he couldn't help smiling too. She was a cross between an awkward teen and a woman. One moment she could be shy and uncertain, and the next, knowing and confident.

"For calling," she replied.

"You did the right thing. You should've called sooner."

"I wasn't sure what was wrong. She's never been sick."

"She said the same thing. Hard to believe." He saw a tear fall as she turned to leave. "Heather?"

"Yes?" She continued facing the door.

"You worried, honey?"

"Yes."

"She'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"If we can't work it out here, we'll take her to the hospital."

She spun around, the color having left her cheeks. "But you'll do what you can here first, right?"

"Sure," he replied, wondering what problem the sisters had with hospitals. "By the way, how's my little guy doing?"

"He ate and zoned out on the couch with some cartoons. He's just sleepy today."

"Good. Could you do me a favor?"

"Yes."

"Make sure he gets plenty to drink. Anything he wants except milk. Got it?"

"No problem."

"You feeling okay? No headache, sniffles—nothing weird going on?"

"I'm fine, why?"

"The flu is the gift that keeps on giving. It's contagious. The first sign of sneezing, sore throat, even being more tired than usual, let me know. We'll dose you up on some vitamins, stick a gallon of orange juice down your throat and pray."

"Is that all it takes to avoid it?"

"Not always, but sometimes you get lucky. If Nomad goes out, have him pick up a few gallons of orange juice."

"I will. And Keith?"

He looked in her direction after taking a bite of a sandwich.

"Thanks for everything. Despite the cold, snow and flu, I'm glad we came to Cleveland."

In truth, he'd never been more pleased with the area. Mentally postponing the move, he wanted time

Whisper

to let the home front settle down to see where life took them.

For the time being, with Whisper and Heather in the picture, they could stay right where they were.

Chapter Thirteen

The phone woke Whisper on Christmas morning. At five sharp, Keith explained Billy couldn't wait much longer to open presents. When she and Heather arrived with their gifts, the house exploded in a flurry of activity.

The kids exchanged presents. Christy gave packages of homemade cookies. Nomad supplied gift cards for everyone. Corey and the boys in the band made homemade autographed CD's, with a printed copy of all the lyrics to the songs. Mark and Keith purchased clothing items and some expensive leather jackets to keep the kids warm. Billy had a huge mound of video games, a new gaming system and toys.

She rethought the gifts she and Heather made, wondering then how adult males might feel about getting Christmas stockings. When Heather passed them out, a lot of laughter and sounds of surprise traveled through the room. Each stocking held different items, depending on the receiving individual. All of them held homemade chocolates. She and Heather worked days to make the pounds of sweetness.

The room quieted as stockings were emptied to see what lay inside. Christy exclaimed, "My favorite perfume. Thank you."

They'd chosen small personal gifts for each of them. Keith opened the undersized box from his stocking and she filled with dread. At the time she purchased it, nothing seemed more appropriate.

Purposely watching the others, she didn't want to see his initial reaction. She'd chosen poorly. What could she have been thinking?

"Whisper?"

He held the silver key fob and his eyes glistened. He motioned for her to come near, which she did somewhat hesitantly. She knelt beside him and he stroked her hair. "St. Joseph?" He at least recognized the image on the medal or maybe he'd read the tiny inscription. *St. Joseph—may he protect you*. Sometimes she forgot not everyone had her upbringing. "Isn't he the patron saint of carpentry?"

"Yes," she said, looking down, "a lot of things actually. I thought more about him being the patron saint of fathers."

"But I'm not a father."

"Neither was he. He was a surrogate father. I figured you two have a lot in common, and he might look out for a guy who can build a porch, work construction and has this thing for making sure kids are safe and well cared for. It seemed like a good idea at the time."

The rest of the noise and confusion in the room dwindled as he drew her closer. Holding her chin with his fingers, he kissed her very softly before saying, "Thank you. It's one of the most thoughtful gifts I've ever gotten."

At some point, it occurred to her he'd just kissed her in front of the kids. Not passionate in any manner, the public display still made her uncomfortable. Before she could retreat, he gave her a small, slim box, wrapped in gold paper. She opened it slowly, savoring the thrill of anticipation. She'd never received a true gift from a man, not father, husband or any other. She'd been given gifts, but there'd always been a stipulation or ulterior motive behind the offering. She doubted the small, golden, foil wrapped box came with strings attached.

Her fingers shook when she found the black velvet box inside. Opening it carefully, she stared at the diamond solitaire pendant surrounded by white gold on a chain. Stunned, she didn't know what to say.

"Whisper?"

It must've cost a healthy sum. And she'd done nothing to deserve it. No commitment lay between them. She couldn't fathom why he'd thought to get her something expensive and beautiful.

"You don't like it."

"I'm at a loss for words."

"Whisper?"

She finally tore her eyes away and gazed into his. He appeared uncertain and her heart broke, realizing he actually cared whether or not she liked the gift.

"Baby?"

"It's amazing. I'd never—can barely comprehend..." Regardless of how the words came together, she'd never be able to express the emotions rolling through her. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

She pulled up her hair as Keith took the necklace from the box and secured it at the back of her neck. When she tucked it into the front of the grey sweatshirt, he looked curious.

"I'd like it close right now, next to me, touching me," she said.

Eventually, they focused on the activity in the room. Each of the kids checked out their gifts and examined what the others received. Nomad remained the only person still slowly opening presents. Keith settled back in the chair as she slid the ottoman next to him and sat. They enjoyed the others joking and fawning over Billy's loot.

Nomad pulled the small wrapped gift from the stocking and thoroughly examined it before shaking

the box. He took his time unwrapping, peeling the tape away, removing the stuck on bow, and disassembling the shiny emerald paper. Through glances in his direction, he'd opened each present as meticulously.

Keith leaned close. "He's been here for Christmas for years, and still doesn't get it. Believe it or not, he's surprised each time he gets a thing."

"I believe it," she replied. One day, Nomad absently blurted out a single statement, which he'd obviously been told over a period of time.

She and Keith watched as he opened the box and pulled out the soft black leather wallet. She hadn't counted on him going over it so thoroughly. She'd banked on him looking inside much later. He pulled out the small piece of card stock paper and began reading. He turned it over and read the rest. When he didn't move, or look up, or react in any way, she excused herself and escaped to the kitchen to begin making breakfast. She'd made a mistake and upset him on Christmas.

Keith wondered why Nomad wore a strange expression. He kept reading and re-reading a small note that'd been tucked inside the wallet. Five full minutes passed. Nomad remained bent at the waist, the wallet on his knee, studying what he'd found. No one else seemed to notice.

Keith stood and hobbled over to sit down on the couch next to the kid. Nomad silently drew in an exaggerated breath, his chest swelling with it. He cleared his throat and a sound of emotion came out with it, all while he read and turned, read and turned the card. Keith never saw him so beside himself.

"Nice wallet," Keith said. "You okay?"

He nodded. "You showed me. All these years you never gave up on me. None of you did."

When he fell silent, Keith squeezed his shoulder.

“You’re family. You’re home.”

“Mom never said nice—not that Whisper’s like my mom or anything. She’s too young, too damn pretty too. And women I’ve gone out with talk about themselves and shit that doesn’t matter.”

He couldn’t fathom what Nomad tried to say and quietly waited for more. The kid didn’t look in his direction and slowly handed over the small card. What in the hell could fit on a tiny two inch by two inch piece of paper that’d make someone like Nomad choke up? Keith read.

*Distant, quiet, anxious,
observing with your eyes.
Feeding on the fringes,
of other people’s lives.*

*You’re not meant to stay there,
on the edge and all alone.
She lied to you, that woman,
there’s nothing to atone.*

On the back:

*I know that place you dwell in,
confusion, pain and hate.
Let all it lay behind you,
and lift that harmful weight.*

*Refuse to be a shadow.
The chains that bind you—break!
Your needs and dreams; they matter.
You were never a mistake!*

He found himself flipping the card to read it again.

“You told her about your mom?” Keith asked. The carefully printed words didn’t come from a book. Whisper wrote them. No one could’ve pegged Nomad

with such clarity.

"Not exactly. I was fixing the washer one day. Like a jerk, I forgot to turn off the water. I loosened the fitting and she got soaked. Figured she'd rip my ass. And then the crescent wrench slipped. Dropped on her bare foot. I didn't apologize. Probably should've. Told her instead I was a mistake. You know, I say it when I screw up. Didn't think about it. It was a goddamned joke."

Nomad had done exactly that for years. It'd become his manner of an apology. Keith heard it so often, the expression eventually held no real meaning, other than to say he was sorry.

Nomad leaned against the back of the couch. "She didn't laugh. Wanted to know who told me that. I told her *some bitch*."

"I guess she didn't like *some bitch* saying you were a mistake."

"Guess not. The rest of it though—all that other stuff."

"Go on." Whisper made some profound statements, nailing the manner in which Nomad lived.

"I never said shit to her about anything else. How the hell would she know that stuff?"

"Simple. She cares."

"Why?"

"You're worth caring about."

Nomad let out a heavy sigh. The kid didn't believe him. Or maybe he couldn't believe *a woman* cared. God knew his own mother hadn't. He asked about another facet of Nomad's existence which remained somewhat of an enigma. "You've had ladies in your life. Tell me none of them cared."

Nomad stared at him, telling him plainly, no one really gave a shit about him personally. Reviewing his own feminine interests, Keith could boast the same percentage, although the numbers were

greatly less than Nomad's. From what Keith could remember, his own mother wasn't rotten or abusive, but she'd been distant.

"You think she's weird?" Nomad asked.

"No." He'd known women who cared, albeit, about someone other than him or the kids. He knew that type of woman existed. "Why the hell do you date around so much, if not one of those women give a shit about you?"

Nomad's eyebrows rose.

"No." Keith scoffed at the prospect of Nomad getting intimate with all those females. "There's no way you're dating that many women and," his voice dropped, "sleeping with all of them."

Nomad cocked his head to the side and smiled.

"Bullshit, you're not that good looking."

"That's what I can't figure out. I'm not sleeping with Whisper and she reads me like a book. Women I've slept with, some more than five or six months, don't know what color my eyes are."

His reference about having sex with Whisper wasn't easily overlooked, but Keith took the meaning and tried to let the rest slide. Mulling it over, maybe Whisper *was* strange. Keith shook his head and handed the card back. After he stood, he rubbed Nomad's head affectionately. "Take the woman's advice. Get off the sidelines and into the game. Stick your neck out and take a chance. Maybe make the first move and start a conversation with someone, and if you trust them, open up a little."

He'd gotten two hobbles away when Nomad asked, "Keith?"

"Yeah?"

"The jacket. It's bad ass. Thanks." Nomad's glance scanned the people in the room. "Being here means even more. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, kid." And it was. The merriest.

If he took it slow, he did fine without a single crutch. In the kitchen, Christy, Heather, Billy and Whisper made breakfast. He grew weak with the smells coming from the room.

"What's on the menu?" he asked.

"Quiche, ham, fruit salad, strong coffee, and homemade croissants with jam," Heather said.

"Quiche." He'd meant it to come out with enthusiasm. It sounded more like, *what the hell is quiche?*

Whisper laughed. "If no one likes it, I'll get some regular scrambled eggs together with six pounds of bacon. Deal?"

He thumped across the kitchen and opened the oven door. Four pie plates filled with half-baked ooze smelled heavenly. "Quiche," he said, believing it might be something he'd like.

"Eggs," Whisper began, "heavy cream, sausage, different cheeses, thyme, pepper, hint of onion, pinch of garlic, cloves, mushrooms and other stuff."

They worked slicing and dicing fruit. Billy took blueberries and threw a few into the large bowl every now and then. Keith leaned against the counter and watched. Whisper's adeptness with the paring knife amazed him. He asked, "Where'd you learn to cook?"

Her fingers flew as she sliced strawberries then bananas. "Mom."

Heather glanced up before concentrating real hard on the cantaloupe.

"Your mother taught you?"

"Worked a small restaurant with her. Spent most days after school there." Whisper's accent grew more pronounced. "Extensive menu. Saturday night in a small town left few dining options. When they were backed out the door, it was every hand on deck."

"How old were you?"

"Little. I was about Billy's age when I could help out. Been there for years by then."

"Did you like hanging out at the restaurant?"

"Sure." Both Heather and Whisper worked faster. "Your mom never taught you to cook?"

"No," he replied, slowly, casually. "She probably didn't know much herself beyond the directions for macaroni and cheese. I never complained though because she baked it with love."

Whisper glanced up. "You don't bake it."

"I read the box when I was about eight and knew. I never had the heart to tell her though. Those crunchy little noodles got rid of some baby teeth for me."

She started laughing and the rest joined in. Her expression relaxed and she worked more carefully. "I guess I was lucky then. Gorman the cook, Maude the baker, and the waitresses were like family."

"Any fun pastimes other than working at a restaurant?"

"School, church, work and chores." She spit the items out like a soldier would repeat his purpose in the military. The response came out automatically and with a tinge of resentment.

"No friends and hanging out?"

"No, sir, idle hands are the devil's tools. You chop enough onions though, and the devil won't want anything to do with them."

The kids laughed. Whisper smiled but again, the response had been so automatic, it'd been something she'd either said frequently, or thought about often.

He couldn't believe she'd been so sick a few days before. She recovered quickly, he hoped in part, to the kids sharing the burden of household duties. If everyone pitched in, it took much less time.

"Are you going to spend all day cooking?" Keith asked.

"No. Simple Christmas dinner."

"What would that be—sandwiches?"

"Prime rib, twice baked potatoes, salad, homemade rolls, au juice, horseradish sauce for those with an adventurous spirit, asparagus in lemon garlic sauce, and corn. Our Billy loves corn," Whisper said.

"Simple, huh?"

"The prime rib cooks itself. Nothing to salad or veggies. I made up the rolls and froze them. The potatoes are ready to stick in the oven. They only need heating."

"Dessert?"

"Cheesecakes. Whisper's specialty," Heather said. "Turtle cheesecake with caramel and chocolate, cherry cheesecake, lemon cheesecake and sour cream New York style. And for those not fond of cheesecake, we made two peanut butter pies."

"Peanut butter in a pie?" He couldn't put it together.

"Graham cracker crust," Whisper explained, "peanut butter, butter, confectionary sugar, vanilla, milk and tons of whipped cream." She was a walking recipe book. "Blend it together, spoon it in the crust, top with shaved chocolate and more whipped cream and freeze. Easy breezy."

"How long will it take to make?"

"Done. It's waiting across the street."

"When did you have time?"

"A little here, a little there. With all the laundry being done, I had plenty of time. Besides, after lying around over here, when I went home I couldn't sleep."

Tomorrow. He'd definitely start watching what he ate then. "You had the kids pick up the stuff you needed, didn't you?"

"Pardon me?"

"The food. You didn't buy it, did you?"

"I contributed."

"I told you..."

"And I told you, I don't feel right about not paying rent."

"Why should you? You're over here most of the time cooking, cleaning and doing laundry."

"I enjoy it." Her voice sounded small.

In truth, he felt as though he'd been taking advantage of her. With the fruit salad put together and everything else laid out, he looked at the kids and motioned with a jerk of his head for them to go into the other room. They left, probably glad to get back to some gifts.

When Whisper strayed close to throw the knife in the sink, he eased his arms around her and pulled her between his slightly spread legs. Reluctant at first, she glanced around before leaning into him. Making her rest her head against his chest, he rubbed her back and shoulders.

"Jesus, you feel good," he said. "Hold me, just for a minute."

"I have sticky fingers."

"I'll lick them for you."

"Tease," she said.

He grinned. If only she knew how badly he wanted to lick her, she'd run. "Quick, look at me."

When she did, he kissed her and got the taste he'd be thinking about. Damn, it didn't happen with some innocent gliding of lips either. It relayed how badly he'd missed her the last week. She indulged, letting him know she was every bit as hungry. It hurt to have the kiss end.

"Do you want me?" he asked. "You're trembling."

"Mmm." Her cheek nestled against his chest.

"We're adults. We could go upstairs, lock a door, and let the kids watch cartoons."

She chuckled and he loved the way it vibrated against his chest.

"I'll never forget this. The holidays here," she

said.

"I bet. You worked your ass off, spent days in bed with your first case of the flu, and ran yourself ragged chasing down some active two year olds for a few days. It'd be something I'd remember."

"I'm being serious. This has all been like you scratching my back."

He hugged her a little tighter. He really liked what followed the scratching on that stormy afternoon.

She sighed. "It's a sweet spot in life I never expected to be in."

"You're in a good place here with me and the kids?"

"The very best. Sharing your home with us..."

"Stop it. You sound sad now, baby, and it's Christmas." He rocked her before he admitted something. "It's like that for me too."

"You asshole!" Mark yelled.

"Mark!" Keith bellowed, holding Whisper so she couldn't leave. He didn't want the kids ruining their moment.

"Corey took my chocolate covered peanuts."

"Tell him there are more," Whisper said.

"Whisper has more!" Keith called.

"He's still an ass—" Mark began.

"Language, Mark!"

"Sorry!"

Whisper quietly laughed and he joined her. That sweet spot they found themselves in had a few kinks. All things considered, it wasn't a bad place to be at all.

Chapter Fourteen

The Monday after New Year's, Whisper pulled into her drive in the worn out Chevy Malibu after dropping the kids off at school. She promised Keith she'd be over after a long, hot shower. She'd pulled a muscle in her lower back at work and reeked of liniment. That'd teach her for neglecting exercise. She never guessed missing a few days would have such an effect.

After the shower, she combed her hair and entered her bedroom. Slipping into panties and a long tee-shirt, she started stretching. It alleviated much of the strain. Most days, she spent at least half an hour stretching and doing crunches. When she'd lived with Doug, the routine lasted two hours in their home gym. It became a form of avoidance and a way to work off tension. Between housework, cooking, cleaning, laundry and dancing, she didn't seem to have an anxiety problem anymore.

With her legs spread wide while sitting on the floor, she brought her forehead to her left knee and grasped her ankle, holding the position until her leg and back loosened. After repeating the process on the right, she came forward and concentrated on making the muscles in her thighs relax. Her forehead touched the floor as she stretched her arms out.

"Do you know who Gumby is?"

The deep male voice startled her. Close to the floor, she replied, "Everyone knows who Gumby is."

"Are you related?" Keith asked.

"No," she replied, laughing. She straightened and looked up. "Why?"

He shook his head, a disbelieving smile on his face. "That position isn't natural. The human body isn't meant to stretch like that."

Speaking of things people shouldn't be doing brought a question to mind. "You're not supposed to be walking around without crutches, are you?"

"Sure. They said I could lose them whenever I felt comfortable."

"In a few weeks."

"Yeah, well, I'm ahead of schedule."

She brought her legs together, stood and shifted her hips. Heat from the shower and stretching let her feel as good as new. When she walked by the dresser, she hit the power button on the small CD player. Her mood couldn't be better and she wanted to share some of her past with Keith. She might not tell him specifically where the music came from, but him listening would be a start.

A long, intricately styled guitar riff filled the room. The thud of the bass batter drumhead created a dark and delicious sound. The accentuated thumps delivered emphasis. Despite how bad things had gotten with Doug, she found music missing in her everyday life. The older studio recordings filled a void. When she'd been drumming, it gave her an outlet for stifled emotions.

She imagined Keith took the slippery walk across the street for a reason and asked, "Do you always break into your tenant's homes?"

"Not before today. I'm pretty sure I've been missing something."

Her craving for closeness and intimacy outweighed everything else. The look on his face guaranteed he wanted the same thing.

"A few minutes earlier," she said, lifting the tee shirt over her head and tossing it on the floor, "and

you might've caught me with less on."

She no longer hated having her breasts touched. Keith taught her pain was involved only with a careless man. Keith wasn't careless. His chilled hands touched everywhere, stroking, holding, and bringing her close before sliding her panties down and away. Skillful lips fit against hers before his tongue filled her mouth. They hadn't been close in two weeks, and she was wild to end the abstinence.

She pushed the leather coat from his shoulders, and it dropped to the floor. She pulled at the black tee-shirt. Once she'd gotten it to his mid chest, he stripped it from his body. His fingers flew to his belt. When he had it unbuckled, she took care of the snap and zipper. They both shoved the barrier away and he grabbed her.

Issues stood between them, important ones. They could come together in one special way and she desired the union more than air. She needed him to see and feel and taste who she really was under all the secrets and half-truths.

"I need you. Want you so bad. All of you," she said.

"You sure?"

She nodded.

His mouth slanted across hers, first one way and then another, kissing, consuming, devouring. He tasted of peppermint, smelled of spicy cologne, leather and winter. She pulled away long enough to take his jeans and boxers off. Before she tossed them on the floor, he grabbed a condom from his wallet. When she straightened, her insides turned to fire as he crushed her against his hot body.

"Tell me again, Whisper."

"Everything. All of you!"

The drums grew louder. Vibrations rolled up her arms and legs, forcing her to anchor herself to the one man, who after getting close, never brought

pain. She couldn't wait to experience the ultimate nearness with him. The notion plagued her for weeks and she'd wholly succumbed to the driving hunger.

A pounding sensation filled her chest, stomach, and between her legs. Desire once stolen, resurfaced with a maelstrom of quivering, shaking need. Her mind spun. Her body strained against him. Full, hard muscles covered in warm skin slid against her. Vicious, lustful feelings sank deep and took control.

"Now! Fill me, satisfy me."

He laid her on the bed, smoothed the condom into place, hovered and pressed her down. She opened her mouth, her legs, hoping and praying he'd ease the torment. He grunted and apologized for stretching her too quickly. He tried slowing the searing penetration but she'd have none of it.

"I need you right now."

He plunged and she reared beneath him, bucking and grinding, loving the fullness. Delicious, hot, and aching, she arched and exploded from the instant blazing climax. She cried out with a harsh, hoarse voice. "Keith!"

"Slow down, baby. Easy," he said, before grunting, thrusting, and rewarding her with his own uninhibited lust.

"Oh, God!"

Her heels dug into the mattress, making their bodies thrash together. A hand flattened against the base of her spine so he could ravage her. Breathlessly, he kept time with the pounding, throbbing pulses of her drums, nailing each beat, forcing her into rapture again and then again. The rush of his passion burst, filling her with the knowledge he'd found great pleasure in their union. He stayed with her after, placing his lips over hers. They gasped and tongued each other while the last tremors of ecstasy bled from their bodies.

As with the studio session, the perfect place in time came to an end. Their panting filled the silent room. As she lay sprawled beneath him, the dream-like quality of the encounter slid away to expose the cold, stark reality of what she'd done.

A large, gentle hand rested against the side of her face. Tender kisses repeatedly touched her lips and she savored the additional moment, forcing down the word dancing through her mind. *Deceiver!*

"I love you, Whisper."

Oh, God, what have I done!

The urge to cling and weep raced through her before she forced it away. He didn't even know her name. She would be damned for certain for what she'd say next. It wouldn't matter, because she'd felt damned her entire life. She wanted him to know what lay in her heart, so when it ended and came crashing down, he might someday remember.

"And I love you." *How can I love him when I'd never loved the man I'd been married to?*

"Don't cry." He wiped the tears as he rolled aside and gathered her close. "Jesus, baby, don't cry."

"I'm so sorry."

Bitter, burning tears branded her face to let him see her guilt and shame. She'd taken his trust and love, and tarnished it by never giving him the truth. She'd pretended to be someone else and managed to gain his affection. God, he'd hate her when he learned everything else.

"Whisper, stop. You're shaking."

He could be so gentle. She'd never known gentle, or love. Not like his. "Please don't hate me, please!"

"You're scaring me. Tell me what's wrong."

She forced the tears to stop before drawing in some ragged breaths. She should be thankful. She'd been truly well loved by a decent and caring man for the first time in her life. Her bottom lip turned down and she blinked away more tears. In the next

instant, everything would change.

"I'm not who you think I am."

The tension came, his body stiffening. The step he took away happened in his mind, but she felt it. The pain following his withdrawal threatened to choke her.

"What are you talking about?"

"I've lied to you."

"About what?"

"Most things. Important things."

"Damn it!" he said.

She'd expected much worse. "I'm sorry."

He scanned her, looking for what he'd missed earlier. She felt the blood drain from her face as he tried to see beyond her average exterior to the vile, deceitful woman beneath. Doug could see the real woman. It hadn't taken him long at all.

"Are you married?"

"I don't think so."

"You don't know!"

She swallowed. "I signed the papers. I think the divorce went through."

"Did he leave the marks on you when I first met you?" He sounded distant, like he did all those months ago.

"No."

"Who did?" The staccato, monotone questions relayed anger and mistrust.

"A man. Stranger. At work."

"Did your husband ever hit you?"

Feeling very tired, she closed her eyes so she wouldn't have to see his.

"Did he?"

"Sometimes." *Did it matter? He might still be her husband.*

"So you ran."

She nodded. *For better or worse, in sickness and in health...*

"How long ago?"

"Seventeen months." *An eternity.*

"How long were you with him?"

"Eight years."

"God, you were what...eighteen?"

"Nineteen. Barely. I'd known him since I was thirteen."

He sat up, turned and leaned over her, supported by an outstretched arm and a hand resting on the bed next to her. "Whisper?"

His cell phone rang. When he didn't move to answer it, she said, "It's one of the kids."

She rolled off the bed, retrieved his jeans and handed him the phone. He flipped it open. "Yeah?"

He listened and said, "I'm on my way."

Closing the phone, he started dressing. "I need you to stay put, I might be a while. Mark had an accident at work and he's at the emergency room. Nomad's with him."

"How bad?"

"Nomad said a tire got loose in the tire cage and caught Mark. They think he might have some broken ribs."

"I could go with you."

"No. Get the kids from school if we're gone that long. If you're working tonight, and we're not home by then, Corey can stay with Billy and Heather. We'll talk after Mark's seen to. Get me?"

"Yes."

He pulled the shirt over his head and stood. As he tucked it into his jeans, he stared at her. "We'll finish this later."

Keith could only image what the three of them looked like shuffling up the walk. With his casted leg, and Mark moving slowly, Nomad followed up the rear with a splinted wrist. Mark and Nomad both worked in the same auto repair shop. Nomad raced

to reach Mark after the tire flung him against the cage. In too big of a hurry to get the gate open, Nomad caught his hand in the wire and had a sprained wrist to show for his rash actions.

Not in the very best of moods, Keith had at least gotten them home at a reasonable hour. A hoard of kids, along with Whisper, greeted them at the door. He released Mark's arm and Christy helped him toward the couch. After everyone got inside, Whisper asked, "How bad is he?"

"Bruised ribs, slight concussion. He'll live."

"Nomad?"

"Sprained wrist. Looks like they'll be home for a while."

"Are you all right?"

He wasn't, not really. After the day he'd had, he found himself in a rotten mood. One he'd try to keep in check when he and Whisper talked. Mark's accident couldn't have been timed any worse. Wanting answers about her, and then stressing all day, hadn't left him with an abundance of patience.

He took her arm and led her away from the activity. "Kitchen."

Billy walked in behind them and Keith pointed. "Living room."

Billy left promptly and he turned his attention to her. "Answers, Whisper. I want a bunch of them."

"I'm sorry," she said backing away.

"For what?" She kept apologizing for things he'd been too stupid to question.

Keith believed their current situation to be mostly his fault. That would end. Five minutes would give him a better idea what he'd been glossing over. Just five minutes of some direct conversation would settle things. "Please, sit down," he said.

She sat and lowered her gaze. He opened the refrigerator, grabbed two cans of pop, set one down in front of her, before he sat in the chair across the

table. Popping the tab, he chugged half the contents, wanting a beer more than ever.

"You're married?" He'd start at the very beginning so he wouldn't miss one fact.

"Probably not. I think the papers got filed. I didn't stick around to find out for sure though."

"His name?"

"Doug."

"Why are you running from him?"

She sat there.

"Because he hit you?"

She nodded. It'd be a long night with him asking and her nodding. He waited and slowly turned the can clockwise. His issue with the situation wasn't really the fact she might be married. He knew she'd been evasive about her past, suspecting at some point she'd been mistreated by a man. The largest problem between them lay with her inability to trust him enough to say something sooner. The second problem—he couldn't deal with her break down after they'd had sex. All rolled together, his mood turned to shit, and he wanted to find out exactly what the hell caused it. He wanted details.

"Where is he?"

"San Diego." She ran the tip of a finger up and down the can.

"Is that where you lived?"

"Yes."

"What about Texas?"

"I grew up there."

He sat quietly, waiting her out like he might one of the kids. Maybe with enough silence, she'd start talking. She eventually did. "I tried to do everything the right way. The divorce was mostly over but he had the best lawyers. He tried forcing Heather to go back."

"How could he legally take her from you?"

She glanced up and placed her hands around the

cold can, staring at it. "Heather's his sister, not mine."

The headache he hadn't experienced for a week suddenly returned. The tightness in his shoulders increased. "You have *his* sister."

"He had no real interest. She was terrified of him. I love Heather. He didn't."

"I'm guessing he didn't just get over it."

"No. That's why I haven't been straightforward with you. The last time we got careless, the private investigators found us. The police were involved."

"The police!" *Calm down. Listen. Don't accuse.*

"Technically, I have Heather..." Her fingertips ran over her forehead. "He told them she was kidnapped."

He tried comprehending what she'd done.

"Anyone can see she wants to be with me. Another year and a half and she'll be eighteen." A very soft-spoken fugitive sat across from him trembling.

"He has the type of money to keep chasing you over a year later, with private investigators?"

"More than enough."

"You deserve part of that money if you were married to him. You got nothing?"

Her face paled and her eyes became glassy. She spoke quietly and occasionally glanced at the doorway. "No. I got nothing in the settlement. I had no money to fight about Heather's guardianship. I would've lost if we stayed and fought."

"She had nowhere else—no other relative?"

"Not close. None that cared. Not that'd fight Doug."

"How did you avoided him this long? What about credit cards, social security numbers, Heather going to school? You leave a trace wherever you go."

"We're careful, learned along the way."

"Your car..."

"Is registered to Gertrude McMillon. Her widow sold it to us in Georgia. Said he'd keep it in his name. When the plates expire, the car needs to go away."

"School for Heather?"

"She's enrolled under a false name without a social security number. If I pay enough, they record her grades and *fix* the social security number when she turns eighteen."

"How the hell did you get away with that!"

"A sympathetic principal. I told her who I was and what happened. She did the research and accepted my terms."

"Who are you?" The headache throbbed behind his eyes as he waited for the answer. He wanted to hear *Whisper Neuman*.

"Wendy Black."

"Not Neuman." He didn't ask a question. He wanted confirmation.

"My married name is Neuman. I've never used it. I've always been Wendy Black. Doug insisted I keep it for the media. He wanted no confusion about who my father was."

She used her husband's name to hide from him! Black? He started piecing things together. "Robert Black's daughter?" *Rock and Roll Hall of Fame induction last year.*

She nodded and his temples threatened to explode. *Wendy Black, the drummer for the Robert Black Band. Bob Black, the man, the legend... Wendy Black, the felon, the fugitive.* He groaned and put his elbow on the table, his forehead in his hand. "Jesus Christ! If you're Bob Black's daughter, why the hell don't you have the money to fight a bastard husband?"

His voice gained volume and he didn't care at the moment. She might as well have neon strobe lights taped to her ass and a banner saying, *here I*

am, hanging out with the Manchester's. Oh, and when you find me, make sure you question Keith's guardianship of Corey and Billy. He drained the can of pop and really wanted that beer. Hell, he wanted two!

"Doug took care of finances. I never got near the money. When Dad died, Doug took over. The guys in the band were paid and he handled all the expenses. I didn't question him."

"In a bad marriage, to a jackass who slaps you around, and you didn't question anything?" She'd married him when she turned nineteen. He could see it then, a girl having been raised with *school, homework, church and work*. Even at twenty-seven, her innocence was evident. That particular quality drew him when he'd met her. He needed to keep his voice calm and non-threatening. He'd do better in a minute, after thinking things through.

"I drummed where he booked us and spent time with Heather at home. I'd just never been exposed to the money end of things. I didn't realize its importance."

He could almost understand her ignorance of financial matters. Other, more important questions surfaced immediately though. "You're familiar with drugs. How?"

"Doug."

That explained a lot. "Could you use that against him?"

"Not unless I said very specific things about it. He'd kill me."

"But he'll merely chase you down when you have Heather."

Her eyelids drooped. "If he gets Heather, he knows I'll go back. I make him money. He's angry because I left. Divorcing him was like a slap in the face. His ego suffered. Money and how people view him are very important. If however, he goes down for

a drug bust, a lot of people would go with him. If it happened because of me, I wouldn't be safe hiding in an alley in Peru."

She either had an answer for everything, or she'd done a lot of thinking over time. His neck hurt, eyes burned and head throbbed, trying to grasp the enormity of the situation. He worried about her, Heather, and his own kids. They all had a lot to lose.

He glanced at the clock and saw the time. "You're not working tonight."

She shook her head and placed her hands in her lap.

"The computer place pays you under the table?" He asked as an afterthought.

Again, she shook her head slowly. "Can I help here in any way before we leave? Is there anything you need?"

Oh, hell no! The change in subject glared like a red light and siren going off. "You don't get paid under the table?"

"Sure. No taxes."

"You don't work for a computer company," he said, really thinking about it before realizing he'd taken way too many pain pills over a prolonged period. He hadn't questioned too much of anything. "Where do you work?"

She afforded Heather's tuition, rent, utilities—God only knew whose name *they* were in—as well as groceries, clothes... What the hell could she do in Cleveland to clear that type of cash, especially when she'd rolled into town a few months before? His stomach tightened, knowing she'd been educated in drugs. She couldn't—wouldn't! Not after a drug-using, abusive husband. But in reality, until ten minutes ago, he knew her as Whisper.

"Where?" He slammed his fist on the table to emphasize his need to know. The pop can jumped and she caught it. If she brought drugs around his

kids...

"Ruby Red," she said so quietly, he'd barely heard.

"Waitress." It came to mind with her being shy, especially when they'd first gotten close.

"Dancer," she whispered.

Absolutely nothing about her was real! Not one blessed scrap of anything he knew was about a real woman! "A stripper!" he yelled. Shock and anger made his voice practically bounce off the walls.

She stood and called for Heather. He hadn't nearly finished. "Mark and Nomad know! Hell, of course they do! I made sure you got a ride to and from work!"

He glared as she made her way around the table before running into Nomad. He grasped her upper arms, looked into her face, and immediately let her go. She darted to the front door and she said to Heather, "Coat, shoes. Move!"

Keith threw her full can of pop across the kitchen. It hit the wall and exploded on the way to the floor. He couldn't believe what a damn mess everything turned into, and not just in the kitchen. Nomad stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, glaring at him. He didn't acknowledge the kid, having a hard time trying to digest and come to terms with the previous ten-minute conversation. The screen door opened, the front door shut, and he felt like breaking something.

"You're letting her leave like that?" Nomad asked.

Keith's mind began processing information, bit by bit, rationalizing all the facts. He didn't speak, didn't move as he focused on all the things she didn't say. He'd reacted to the words, the truth, her life. Regardless of what she'd told him, he knew she'd finally been honest. It scared and hurt her, but she'd answered every question. How the hell could a

woman like her dance at a strip bar? Almost thirty-five minutes later, he knew. Taking surprise and hurt from the equation, he saw the truth. She'd do whatever it took to take care of Heather. Anything.

"Goddamn it!" he yelled, toppling the chair as he stood. This time the anger was self-directed. He should've waited until he'd been less tired and stressed. She deserved someone to listen, maybe even sympathize or support her. Instead, she'd gotten judgments and rage. If his leg weren't broken, he'd kick his own ass every step of the way to her house.

Chapter Fifteen

Once Whisper got Heather inside, she said, "Hurry. Get what you need."

Heather crossed her arms and stood arrow straight. "You lied to me."

Whisper couldn't fathom what she'd lied about. She only told untruths when avoidance didn't get the job done. Whatever she'd done, she was sorry. "Please hurry, Heather. We need to leave."

"I'm not going anywhere with a stripper."

Whisper froze in the kitchen, her hand touching the wad of cash in the coffee can.

"As a matter of fact, I'm not leaving, period."

Whisper turned toward Heather and found a red-faced, young woman who looked to be on the brink of an explosion.

"I'll explain when we're on the road."

"No." Heather said, "I'm not leaving. I won't. You're not my sister, my mother or anyone important. *You* leave. Take whatever you want. I'm staying with Corey."

"Honey, you're sixteen. There will be other boys."

"Don't call me honey! It makes you sound like a slut *and* a stripper."

Heather ran to her room and slammed the door. The words stung but Heather didn't mean them. Young, scared, and feeling lost, Heather lashed out. Whisper could take it. She'd taken worse. When she opened the door, a lap top computer hit her in the chest before toppling to the floor.

"You stupid bitch, get out!"

"Please," Whisper sobbed, deflecting a history book.

"No! You screwed everything up! You came between me and Doug. You're the reason he didn't pay attention to me!" It wasn't true. Heather knew it too, but she'd gotten so angry. "Leave! I'm not going with you!"

"Heather, I love you."

"You're worthless! You let your father drink himself to death and then you worked on Doug. You didn't do a damn thing to stop him from using drugs!"

Heather spoke the truth. Whisper couldn't fix a thing. She'd always wanted to help, to make things better and like now, she unerringly found the appropriate course of action to make situations worse.

Heather stood beside her bed, breathing heavily before she exploded and swiped everything from the top of her dresser to land in a broken mess on the floor. Whisper tried to apologize, but the words wouldn't come out. She swallowed and tried again. Her voice finally dried up, nothing more to say, no way to verbally explain.

"You're pathetic! I saw you with Doug's friends! I shouldn't be surprised you were making money that way! You love it, the filthy attention you get!"

Whisper thought she'd pass out from the sick, sinking feeling making her hands and feet numb. Heather couldn't have seen her dance; the door remained closed. She didn't see!

"You can't take care of me!" Heather screamed. "Keith can. He'll take me in and do what you couldn't. He's a decent man. One that won't put up with a *stripper* taking care of me! Oh, God, they all know! All of them know you take off your clothes and..."

Heather crumpled beside her bed. Sobs of grief filled the room. Whisper backed out and quietly closed the door. *Stripper!* She felt strange, peaceful, and empty. Only one thing would make up for all her mistakes.

In the kitchen, she took the roll of cash from the can. Peeling off five one-hundred dollar bills, she laid the rest on the coffee table in the living room. With a pen and small piece of paper, she scribbled a note.

She laid the pre-paid cell phone down on top of the bills. Heather wouldn't call the woman she blamed for her brother's addiction, the woman who humiliated her. At sixteen, Heather knew what would be best. Keith would take care of her, no matter what. He wouldn't blame an innocent child for a sister-in-law's shameful behavior. He'd do better than she could. Better than Doug.

She stuffed the bills in her back pocket and grabbed the key ring out of her purse. She took the car key off and laid the rest on the table. She walked back to the bedroom door and placed her palm on it, listening to Heather's sobs. Her heart would've broken but it'd already died. Little pieces of it littered the highways from one state to another. One last time she wanted to tell Heather she loved her. Her mouth opened and the words stuck. Heather wouldn't care. Whisper shamed herself and everyone surrounding her.

She walked through the living room, listening to the quiet. She'd never see Billy, Corey, Christy, Mark or Nomad again. She hoped her note at Christmas hadn't hurt Nomad in some way. She'd had the best of intentions...

Keith. A better than lousy track record with males, should've made her stay away from him. She really didn't learn from past mistakes. He gave her hope, made her feel normal and trusted her. And she

repaid his kindness with deceit and filth.

Through the kitchen door, she stepped into the bitterly cold night. It occurred to her she hadn't taken her coat. It didn't matter. Her clothes were soaked with perspiration from fright and humiliation. For the moment, the cold agreed with her. Her skin felt like her heart. Frozen. She climbed into the old car and tried starting it. *One more time. Just one and you never have to start again.* The engine fired and she dropped the gear shift into reverse.

As the car chugged past the Manchester household, Whisper didn't even glance over as she'd done so often in the past. No one within the cozy, safe house wanted to know her anymore. Her only regret was Billy hearing Keith's loud words. *A stripper!* She hoped Keith didn't have to explain to Billy what the word meant. She hoped Billy didn't already know.

Whisper's car wasn't in the drive, but it didn't mean she hadn't parked in the one car detached garage. Keith knocked, waited, and then used his key to gain entrance. Uneasiness descended. The house was utterly silent.

"Whisper! Heather!"

He shut the door and listened. Past the living room and down the hall, he heard muffled sobs coming from Heather's room. He knocked. More sobs. Stuff scraped along the carpet when he opened the door. The remnants of a tornado lay inside. "Heather?"

He found her huddled in a corner. Careful to avoid the clutter on the floor, he hobbled to the bed and sat. She'd seen him come in. He'd wait. Her hands remained balled into fists resting on her knees. Maybe he should've let Corey come over too. A kid her own age might understand. Why in the

hell would Whisper let her cry like this?

When she settled down, he knew better than to say a word. She'd talk when she felt ready and he had plenty of time. A few pain pills before he came over mellowed him. He probably should've taken them before talking to Whisper. The headache still throbbed, but lessened after the medication.

"I th-thought you were m-mad at us," Heather said.

"The discussion I had with Whisper had nothing to do with you. I'm not angry with you. I'm not angry with her."

"You y-yelled."

"And I'm sorry."

Ten questions came to mind, and he kept every one of them to himself. He learned something that night. When you ask questions, you generally receive answers. And not particularly the ones you want.

"The rest of them. They know."

After running his hand over his face, he let out a deep breath. "Yeah, I spelled it out loud and clear. Look, honey," he said, waiting until she wiped her cheeks and looked at him. "I was caught off guard and shot off my mouth."

The thought of Whisper dancing still made his blood run cold and hot. The visuals stuck in his head would leave when he saw her again. The nervousness when he'd first been around her, and the way she didn't like having her breasts touched, made everything else seem impossible. But she'd *danced* to get money. The look of horror on Whisper's face after he yelled it out, stuck in his head. He'd slapped her, hard, verbally.

"God, what you must think of me!"

"What Whisper did to make money has nothing to do with you."

She peered at the floor. "You don't think I'm a slut too?"

Another deep breath made the urge to loudly explain a thing or two dissipate. Unable to imagine what she felt, he made concessions because she was probably in a state of shock.

"Whisper isn't a slut." Words came out through teeth mashed together. At least he managed to stifle what he wanted to say. "She worked there to keep a roof over your heads and food on the table."

"She didn't have to do *that*."

"Don't judge your sister."

"She's not my sister! I hate her!"

He stood when she did. He'd never dealt with an emotionally charged teenage female, and decided she should've already calmed down. Instead, she got more wound up. When she rushed to get past him, he grabbed her. Balanced mostly on one leg, he had a hard time holding on, but managed. One hell of a fight ensued before the burst of energy drained. Sagging against him, he sat and pulled her onto his lap. Instinctively, he wrapped her in his arms. Rocking her back and forth, her small hands clung and held tight.

"I feel terrible," she said. She looked and sounded bad.

"The way you've lived hasn't been easy on either of you. You had to be careful, watch what you said, not let anyone know. You're tired. That's all, you're just tired."

Nomad appeared in the doorway. "Everything all right?"

Heather asked, "Nomad?"

"Yeah, it's me."

She exhaled loudly. "I don't want Corey to see me like this. I don't know what's wrong, what got into me." When she squirmed, he let her leave because she sounded almost rational. "I have to apologize. Right now."

Heather slipped past Nomad and rushed down

the hall. They heard her knock and then open a door. A few seconds later, she ran by Nomad into the living room. When Nomad left the doorway, Keith followed. Heather stared down at the coffee table. Nomad moved closer to stand beside her. After a moment he said, "For the love of God!"

The blood left Heather's face. She blinked once and said breathlessly, "She left me."

Nomad caught her as she collapsed. He held her and turned to Keith, looking like he didn't know what to do.

"On the couch," Keith said.

Keith limped over and read the note. *A down payment. Please take care of her.* With his head spinning, he said, "Check the garage."

Nomad hurried out the kitchen door. Whisper's purse and coat lay on the table next to the stack of bills. She couldn't have left. Not without her purse. The keys to both houses lay there too.

She wouldn't leave Heather. The kid was sixteen years old. Whisper would give her last pint of blood to make sure Heather was safe and cared for. Before he panicked, he went to Whisper's room and flipped on the light. Nothing looked out of place. When he heard the back door close, he limped to the kitchen and found Nomad.

"She's gone." Nomad hadn't looked that bad since he'd been in jail.

Keith carefully walked to the couch and sat down on the coffee table. Turning Heather's face, he tapped her cheek. "A glass of water."

Nomad brought it and Keith eased her up before placing the glass to her lips. A little trickled in and she choked. Giving her a minute to get her bearings, he asked, "Where would she go, Heather? She can't be far. We'll find her." Pale, shaking, she grew limp again and he couldn't wait. "Heather, get with it, honey. We need your help."

"Okay."

"Where would she go?"

"Your house."

"Where else, Heather? Think."

"Nowhere."

"She went somewhere. Where were you before Cleveland?" He concentrated on keeping his voice calm and even.

"Nothing there for her. Police found us in Georgia. We got away."

"Before that. Where were you before that?"

"Phoenix, I think."

"Did she make a friend there? Someone—anyone she might go to?"

"No, not Phoenix."

"Her mother in Texas?"

"Dead."

"Your brother. Would she go back?"

Heather shook her head and tears fell.

"Damn it, honey, she went somewhere. Think. Somewhere she'd go to feel—safe." The word almost didn't come out. *What the hell did I do!*

Heather gazed at him. "Here."

Keith wanted to shake her so she'd choke up an answer. He knew it'd make matters worse. "San Diego, then. You lived there for a while. She had a friend, someone she talked to."

Heather shook her head.

"All right, someone she knew maybe. What about the band? Any of the guys in the band?"

"She wasn't allowed to talk to them. Doug didn't let her. She'd go to the studio, a concert or home. He went with her all the time. He let her come home alone once with the band. We ran away late that night. They had a fight."

"He wasn't always with her. Shopping, taking you to school, getting the goddamned mail?"

"Jared took me to and from school. Jared took

me shopping. Whisper wasn't allowed to go. Doug picked out her clothes." Her eyes lit up suddenly. "The computer. Maybe she had a friend online. Doug didn't take it away until a few months before we left. Is there a way to get into her e-mail account? We could see if she was writing to someone. I know the address but not the password."

Keith stared, trying to understand the kind of life they'd run from. Heather lived with her for years. The kid described a prison, not the home of a celebrity daughter who played concerts and cooked and looked after kids. She didn't have a single friend and wasn't allowed to occasionally reach out, and on the tail end of their time with *Doug*, not even through a computer.

"I'll call Maynard." He stopped talking as a dawning came. Who would he send them after? A woman who lived under the radar because she'd *kidnapped* her sister-in-law? She'd managed to avoid private investigators and police while dancing in a strip joint. Probably a lot of strip bars in various states! Besides, if the police found her, they'd keep her. Kidnapping was a felony.

"What happened, Heather?" Keith asked, his forearms on his thighs, his head hung.

"Wh-what do you mean?"

"Why did she leave tonight?"

"Embarrassed, pissed off—I don't know." He'd heard enough bullshit from kids in his life, and she was feeding him a pile of it. If Whisper left because of him she might come back to collect Heather. If she left *because* of Heather...

Nomad started to say something and Keith put up his hand.

If they left Heather alone long enough, he'd find out whether or not he'd ever get the chance to apologize and make up for one of the biggest mistakes of his life. How did it happen? He lived

clean, worked hard and raised the kids to the best of his ability. How could he savage the only woman he'd really given a shit about in a matter of minutes?

"We won't be able to find her, will we?" Heather asked, confirming the severity of the situation. "If she doesn't come back on her own, there's no way to find her." Her voice cracked and she started breathing faster.

Keith and Nomad remained silent.

Heather's fingertips pushed bills aside, fanning them out. "Three thousand, four hundred dollars. She took five or six hundred. That would give her gas to get a few states away and some food." She sobbed and put her hands over her eyes. "If she'll eat. She doesn't always. She'll sleep in the car—hotels waste money. It's so cold though. She could freeze to death. The car doesn't always start. She stops at night in remote spots so no one would bother us. There won't be someone to help her!"

"Slow down, honey. Nice deep breaths," Keith said.

"Where would she go? I mean, if she thought no one loved her?"

Keith swung onto the couch and put his arm around her.

At the rate she was going, in thirty seconds, she'd be hysterical again.

"I said horrible things to her." Heather sobbed loudly.

"Shh, it's all right."

"No! No it's not. You don't understand. I was really mad and I told her..." she gulped air and wept bitterly, unable to finish.

"She knows you love her."

She shook her head.

"She does."

"Told her I hated her. Told her what I saw. She tried to hide it, keep herself between me and Doug.

But Doug made her strip—more than once. He hit her if she didn't." Her hands balled into fists before she pressed them to her temples. "But if she hated it so much, why would she make money doing it? God, I was so angry with her. I hated thinking about her doing it to feed me. I felt so—guilty! So I hurt her back. Jared told me to never tell her what I saw. He said it'd kill her. Did I kill her? Keith, did I kill her?"

He couldn't feel his arms but saw them surrounding Heather. She needed it, the comfort, and safety.

He closed his eyes and held her tighter. "No, honey. She's hurt and driving and thinking. She's not even mad at you, no one is." He cleared his throat, felt like a kid himself with some raw emotions. "We'll go home and you'll sleep in Corey's room. He'll double up with Billy. You'll stay with me until Whisper comes back."

"I should stay here and wait. She'd be worried if she came home and I wasn't here."

His chest hurt from the inside out. He felt the cold seeping into the house through every tiny crack. The urge to shudder eventually passed. "She'd be so pissed if I left you here. And I can't sleep if I'm not near the kids. Stay with me and keep me company. She'll be back." If false hope would let her cope, he'd give it.

"She left money for you. She said it was a down payment. She'll get you more money. She'll be back to pay you, and then I can apologize. I won't be there for long." Her voice had a pleading quality. "I can cook like Whisper. I won't cause trouble. I'll be better than before, I promise."

God, stop! "You're fine the way you are, Heather. You've never been a problem. You were never a problem for Whisper either. She loves you."

"She's all I have."

"She'll be back."

Kathleen Lash

“I love her.”

“She knows.”

“I was just mad.”

“She knows, honey.”

Chapter Sixteen

"Can I come home?" Whisper asked.

"When?" Doug replied.

"Tomorrow. One in the afternoon."

"Are you flying in?"

"Yes."

"Give me your flight number. I'll be there."

"No," she said, "send someone. You don't have to."

"It's either me or the police."

She'd given the flight number and boarded the plane. Slightly over nine hours later, Doug met her at the departure gate. Two large men dressed in business suits accompanied him. She wondered if they were police.

Dressed impeccably in designer jeans, Gucci shirt with Prada sunglasses folded in his pocket, he stared as she walked up. He stepped forward and she swallowed the sick, helpless feelings as he embraced her. Despite the clothes, he looked worse than ever, his eyes telling how he'd spent time since she'd left.

She lightly returned the embrace and he whispered close to her ear, "You're a fucking mess, Wendy. How much weight did you put on?" He pinched her waist. "We'll fix it." He turned and ran his hand up her spine until his fingers tightened around the back of her neck. He pressed deep and started her walking. "Where's Heather?"

"Safe."

"For now."

The two men followed close behind, a mere few feet, in fact. Did he think she'd change her mind and run? "Where's your wedding ring?"

He still wore his. "Pawned."

"You were supposed to give it back. If you needed cash," he said, maintaining a smile for the people they passed, "you only had to call."

"I need cash. I called. I'm back."

"Without Heather. What happened?"

"I found her a guardian."

Not another word came between them until they left the building. A limo rolled up, and one of the men held the door open. Doug squeezed her neck and shoved her forward. She fell in and scooted to the opposite door. He sat in the middle of the seat. Her hands folded in her lap while she waited. Anything could happen. He turned, bent his knee, brought it up on the seat and leaned against the back.

He pulled strands of her hair through his fingers, tugging on the ends before doing it again. "Why would I sign over guardianship when having her around keeps you in line?"

"It does? Where have I been, Doug?" The slap didn't hurt nearly as bad after doing without them for a while. Unable to feel much of anything, she waited. He'd hit, or yell or ignore. One was as good as the next. "Whatever. Keep it up and I won't be on stage any time soon."

"You'll do what I tell you, or pay."

"Sure. Fine." The indifference seemed to bother him. She'd typically cower or rage. The rage seldom happened. She couldn't muster up the fear.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"It's simple. You get your lawyers to draw up the papers and turn over guardianship of Heather with a monthly allowance of ten thousand dollars until she's eighteen."

"You've lost your mind."

"I wonder how much another album would make the band—oh, and you, of course. I wonder how many concerts we could do? Heard sales have plummeted. Would my face and name smeared all over everything make life good for you again?"

Ching-ching. She practically heard the sound coming from between his ears. *The mental cash register wins!* She knew he'd trade Heather for more money any day. He'd also probably be happy to get her out from underfoot. He didn't love Heather. He was incapable of loving anything except the drugs.

"What do you get out of this?"

"Left alone."

"Not a chance in hell, Wendy."

"Touch me and I'll kill you."

"Yeah?" His hand clutched her throat and tightened until she couldn't breathe. More damage to her vocal chords wouldn't matter. They'd been crushed before. She'd simply talk quieter, or maybe not at all. After the marks receded the last time, he'd actually taken her to a doctor. *Perplexing symptoms, Ms. Black. Your inability to speak normally seems unwarranted, especially without a history of trauma to your throat.* Shoved away from him, she rested her head against the back of the seat.

"Heather gets a new mommy and daddy, and you start behaving again. Hell of a bargain. You'll behave, won't you, Wendy?"

To a point. She opened her mouth and nothing came out. Unconcerned because it'd happened before, she turned away and stared out the window.

"I guess you're back to being Whisper for a while. I really didn't mean to hurt you." The backs of his fingers stroked her neck. "I was angry. You pushed me. Let's start over and make it work this time. Okay?"

She nodded. If she had a dollar for every time he'd spoken those words, she and Heather could've

lived comfortably in the Bahamas until Heather turned twenty-one. Behind closed eyelids, the sun warmed her face through the tinted glass. Exhausted and empty, she allowed Doug to place his arm around her before he slid close.

She belonged with Doug. He was a weak and helpless human, clinging to the only life he knew. She no longer really feared him. She pitied him. At least she'd had a perfect time with family, caring and warmth. What a blessing to have it happen around the holidays too. She'd make the memories last.

Keith sat at the dining room table, staring at the papers he'd signed for. He immediately placed a call to Maynard, who arranged for a phone consultation with an attorney in California. He finally knew, without a doubt, where Whisper went after she disappeared. If she loved Heather, she didn't show it. He and Heather were due in a San Diego court in less than a week to have decisions made about her guardianship.

Mark walked in the front door and shrugged out of his coat. Taking a seat across the table, Mark rubbed his hands over his face. "Nomad called."

Before Keith could feel relief, he asked, "Is he all right?"

"Yeah." Nomad took off the night Whisper left. He'd called Mark a few times, letting him know he wasn't dead or anything, but wouldn't say where he'd gone. "He's in San Diego. He found Whisper."

"He ready to come home?"

"He said he's fine, not to worry."

"That it?"

"Pretty much."

Every last one of them ran on adrenaline and not much sleep.

"What's with the papers?" Mark asked.

Keith debated what to tell him. Having enough of avoiding touchy subjects, he said, "Heather and I are taking a trip to San Diego. There's a court hearing about her guardianship in less than a week."

Mark's fist hit the table. "That's bullshit! How did he find her?" His eyes rounded a few seconds later. "No way. Whisper wouldn't say a word!"

"You think Nomad did?"

They both knew who instigated the legal proceedings. Mark asked, "What can we do?"

"I'm working on it. I'll have it ironed out."

"God, she'd have to hate us all to do something like this."

Keith didn't disagree and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't really blame Whisper. Maybe since she couldn't protect Heather anymore, she'd begun protecting herself. They'd go to California, but he wouldn't leave Heather behind. He'd try it legally, their way, but if things headed in the wrong direction, he'd make sure that kid never wound up back with her asshole brother. Keith would spend every dime in the savings account to do it. Whisper said to take care of her. He would, even if she'd changed her mind.

Chapter Seventeen

Keith and Heather sat in the hallway of the courthouse on a bench. Allan Woodward, the older, distinguished looking attorney stood before them, briefing them on what to expect. They'd talked several times before arriving. He'd explained to Heather what to say, what not to say, and how to answer questions. She literally shook, terrified of her future, despite his constant reassurances.

Heather excused herself to go to the bathroom. She'd puked twice on the flight over and only seemed to get more wound up the longer they waited. With nerves raw himself, Keith wished a round of throwing up would alleviate some of the tension inside.

People passed by as he waited. Two men in suits came to stand outside the courtroom doors. They scanned the hall, checked out everyone in the vicinity before one of them spoke. "Clear."

They appeared to be security of some nature. A man and woman followed another security guy toward the doors.

"Only half an hour late," Woodward said. "At least they showed."

Keith stood, unconsciously buttoning the suit coat while trying to get a better look at the couple. The man was about six feet tall with long blond hair pulled back into a ponytail. He dressed somewhat casually in black dress pants and a black, button down shirt. The woman wore a dark gray pants suit with black heels. The closer they got, the more he

relaxed. The woman had shoulder length pitch-black hair. Long bangs concealed almost half of her face. She wore crimson lipstick with dark shadow, liner and lashes.

When the security men opened the courtroom doors, the couple walked by and the woman lifted her face to glance at him. His pulse raced, stomach knotted and he instinctively took a few steps to grab her. Woodward caught his arm and stopped him. Whisper dropped her gaze, hung her head, and let her ex drag her along.

The doors closed and a security man stayed outside, legs slightly apart, hands folded in front of him. *Let me or Heather be the reason she looks so bad. God, make that bastard treat her right this time.* She planned on staying with him. The court proceedings clearly outlined her intent.

"What's wrong?" Woodward asked.

Everything! She appeared drawn, thin, half-dead with the black hair against her light complexion. Even make-up couldn't conceal her hollowed cheeks or how tired she looked. Not a spark of recognition, hurt or life shone in her eyes.

"She's a goddamned walking corpse. Call this off, postpone it, stop it! She can't take it, not now."

"Keith, we need to start the defense. Heather's young. She'll bounce back once things were settled."

"Not Heather. Her sister. You have to stop this somehow!"

Heather walked up and grasped his hand. He squeezed before lacing their fingers.

"You're here," Woodward said. "We can't postpone. It'll work out. Take it easy."

Heather's brother walked by him without a glance to see who'd be fighting him over custody. Either he figured he'd win hands down, or didn't give a shit. Both scenarios made anger surge. Before things got settled, he'd get a piece of Doug Neuman,

one big enough to make up for some pain he'd inflicted on Whisper and Heather.

After ten minutes of standing in silence, Heather backed toward the bench. When she sat, she held tight and made him sit too. "I'm sorry, Keith."

"Not your fault, honey. It's fine."

Heather wore jeans, a white cotton blouse with her hair pulled back. A pale, washed out face, made her look twelve, not sixteen. Twenty-five minutes later with his nerves in a full fit, the door opened and a man in a white shirt, black tie and pants said, "Manchester, Neuman."

Woodward led them inside, past the rows of chairs, up to a table at the front. Keith walked behind and Heather followed. Woodward motioned for them to have a seat. Grinding his teeth wouldn't help, but it seemed beyond his control. The only thing keeping him seated and quiet was Heather. She looked small and helpless sitting next to him, her shoulders quaking as she blinked tears down her cheeks. The attorney grabbed two tissues out of the box on the table and handed them to her.

"Attorney Woodward, please approach," the judge said.

Without Woodward standing to their right, he had a clear view of Whisper. Heather blotted tears and looked where he did. She choked and put her hand over mouth. Keith patted her back.

He said quietly, "Easy, honey. The judge will think you're crying because you're terrified of me."

She shook her head and sniffed quietly. She kept turning to glance at Whisper. Whisper's gaze remained straight ahead or in her lap, never once turning in their direction. Keith stared, unable to believe three weeks changed her so drastically.

"Mr. Neuman, do you have anything to add?" the judge asked.

The other attorney motioned for him to stand, which her ex did. "No, your Honor. Nothing."

Doug sat and the judge asked, "Mrs. Neuman."

The minute that bastard hit her, she was no longer a *Mrs. Neuman*. *Her name's Whisper!*

Whisper stood, swayed. Keith fought the urge to go to her. Woodward glared, silently warning him to remain seated. Whisper shook her head and sat, almost falling back into the chair.

"Mrs. Neuman?" When Whisper tried standing that time, Doug grabbed her arm and jerked her to her feet. "I need a verbal confirmation."

Their attorney spoke. "She's unable, your Honor."

The judge raised his eyebrows.

"Mute. Vocal cord damage, we can produce a physician's statement if it's required," the attorney said.

"No need, it's pretty straight forward. For the record, Mrs. Neuman, since Heather's also resided with you, do you agree to the proceedings? A nod will suffice."

Her head drooped forward. She looked ashamed, beaten. She nodded.

"Do we have an agreement then, gentlemen?" the judge asked.

Both attorneys said yes before a gavel rapped. Keith and Heather stood as the judge left through a side door. Her ex kept hold of her arm and pushed her forward. Whisper walked while looking at the floor. As they passed by, Doug glared at Heather, and Heather stared back. He didn't display a hint of affection or remorse.

Both attorneys walked to the table, and with the room cleared, Keith couldn't contain the anger riding him. "What the hell happened? Not one question—nothing?"

"No need," Woodward said. "The judge looked

over the papers and agreed.”

“How is that possible?”

“You won. No fight, everything drawn up into a neat contract. The only thing the judge questioned was a reference. I provided it with the background check we did and the statement from the Cleveland shelter about your fostering children for them. You’re now Heather’s legal guardian.”

Stunned, he and Heather sat there gazing at him in disbelief.

“We’ll need your signature on a few forms. I’ll file the papers and forward you copies.” He laid out the papers and handed him a pen.

Keith started reading while the attorneys hovered. After reviewing and signing four forms, he read the last. “What the hell is this?”

“A stipend. An allowance until Heather turns eighteen,” Woodward answered. “With support offered, I didn’t think there was anything to discuss. If the amount isn’t sufficient...”

“Ten thousand dollars? A month? Am I reading this right?”

“That’s correct. Additionally, my fees have been taken care of. Your retainer will be refunded in its entirety. It’ll go out in the morning mail. It turned out rather well, wouldn’t you say?”

“What happens if I don’t sign this?” Keith asked.

Woodward looked shocked. “We’d have to renegotiate. You don’t want the money?”

Heather put her head on the table and cried. Keith rubbed her back as she sobbed.

“I don’t want her money,” Heather said.

“It’s Mr. Neuman’s money, little girl,” the other attorney said.

Heather looked up and her expression changed from wounded to furious. “Look, idiot, you don’t have a clue! My sister pays for everything.”

The attorney gazed at Woodward, horror on his

face that the *little girl* spoke to him in such a manner. Overwrought for too long, Keith couldn't help laughing. Woodward laughed and finally Heather did too. The other attorney's arms crossed as he glared at Keith. "Would you like another go at this? I can guarantee the outcome wouldn't suit you."

"Sign it and bank the money or burn it. Take the win, Keith, and figure the rest out later. Heather can get on with her life." Woodward pushed the paper closer.

Keith signed and helped Heather to her feet. The three of them watched as the other attorney gathered papers and left without a word.

"How can I get her number?" Keith asked.

"Whose number?" Woodward placed papers in his briefcase.

"*Mrs. Neuman's.*"

"You *did* read the stipulation in the papers about not contacting them."

"Yeah, well, I work construction and tunneling. I'm not too bright at times. Is there a way?"

"I know how," Heather said, her face lighting up.

"I wouldn't suggest it. As a matter of fact, don't you have a flight to catch?"

They did, in a few hours. Woodward extended his hand and Keith shook it. With the first huge burden lifted from his shoulders, he straightened his posture and prepared for the next. It didn't take long to start weighing him down. She'd made sure Heather would be safe. They needed to figure out how to make Whisper safe too.

Whisper stared at the computer monitor, reading the message for the third time. She'd received two or three messages a day. She couldn't comprehend how they'd found her. How did Heather find her e-mail address? Had Whisper forgotten to

log off after using it at some point?

Whisper hadn't replied to a single message, but they kept coming. Billy e-mailed her most recently. Someone else typed it, the spelling impeccable, but the words belonging to him, probably exactly as he said them.

Miss you bad, Whisper. Keith told me not to say it, but you should know. Are you taking naps? Do you have kids there too? Hope you're not cold. Mark got better but Heather got the flu. Got a B in spelling. Spring is coming soon. You would like it. It's late here and I have to get a shower. Don't see why. Not like I can play outside yet. Do you miss us? Do you miss me?

Before she could think about it, she hit *reply* and typed, *always* before pushing send.

She logged off and closed the laptop just as Doug walked in. "Hey, Wendy, you ready?"

She nodded and he placed his hands on her shoulders. He rubbed and she tried to relax, not wanting him to know how repulsive his touch could be. He'd been at it all day, pills, pot and more. With the amount of drugs he'd ingested, she couldn't comprehend how he managed to walk around.

"You think the new guys will work out?"

She nodded. Doug made some great choices in the guitarists, bass and keyboard players. The only man left from her father's time was Ben, who'd stepped up as lead singer after her father died. From the time they spent together in rehearsals, Ben cleaned himself up. He seemed to notice an awful lot lately. He'd once again become a serious musician and brought everyone together. They rehearsed old stuff, most of the younger guys improvising and adding their own flair. Tonight they'd be playing three new songs.

Ben kept prompting her in rehearsal to take the beats further, stretch and then let go. Away from

daily drumming for too long, she needed more time to build confidence. After the first rehearsal, he'd caught her alone. "You okay with Doug—things better now?"

He'd tried to touch her and she flinched away.

"I'll help you, Wendy." Ben and her dad had been the same age. They somewhat resembled each other too. "Stick with it and things will change. I'm working on it. A few months and we'll get you away from him. Okay?"

She hadn't moved, afraid to acknowledge what he'd said in any way. His eyes had been clear and seemed very attentive. He'd also been around Doug the entire time she'd been gone. If Doug used Ben to test her, a nod of her head could cost big time.

"You with me, Wendy?" Doug asked, pulling her from thought.

She nodded.

"You want something to eat? You have about half an hour."

Did she finally get thin enough, or did he worry she'd pass out on stage? After the first week, she never really felt hungry anymore. He kept her on the *diet* for her own good. He claimed she needed to be thin to drum effectively. She knew he liked the thin, starved model look. He made sure she attained it. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a candy bar and held it out. "Just this once, to help with your nerves. You haven't been out there in a while." He smiled and she accepted the offering. "Well, go ahead. Eat it."

She opened it carefully and hesitantly took a small bite, eyeing him the entire time. She chewed and enjoyed the sweetness.

"I'll get you some coffee. You look tired."

She hated coffee but would drink it, every drop. Tired didn't begin to describe the scared, hollow, achy, spinning feeling inside. Maybe the caffeine and

sugar would do some good. The sold out concert didn't help matters, the noise from the crowd was already ear shattering when Doug opened the door to leave.

The computer sat there. The urge to go online once more almost overrode her common sense. She'd check later, see if another message waited. She couldn't afford to care, but did. After a third bite, she felt sick and laid the candy down. Doug came in with the coffee. She sipped before drinking from the water bottle, getting the coffee down that way.

As time crawled, she paced. Doug sat on the couch and lit a joint. "You want a hit before you go out?"

A knock came. Ben opened the door. He looked good for a fifty-one year old man. He didn't bother touching up the gray at his temples and he sported a body showing daily workouts. His gravel-bed voice pounded out lyrics like few others, and he moved like a man twenty years younger. In all, he'd become one of the best front men in the business. Not as good as her father, but a very close second.

"Need Wendy up front. We've got stuff to go over. She needs to carry Aaron and Blue over a rough spot."

"Thought you got it worked out in rehearsal," Doug replied.

"Thought so too, but with the new shit, I don't trust them."

Doug waved his hand, dismissing her as he took another long drag. Outside the private dressing room, Ben pulled her close. She didn't like being physically near to anyone but tolerated it. With the rowdy, noisy crowd out front, she wouldn't hear him otherwise.

"Blue came up with a fantastic new riff. We should use it. I need you backing him up. If he screws up, or Aaron loses him, drown him out, got

it?”

She knew what he wanted, but didn't like the idea. They should play what they'd rehearsed.

“Nod your head or something, Wendy.”

She did, even though she didn't agree.

“Big, bad crowd out front. You up for it?”

Would it matter if I'm not?

“One last thing. Been a while for you, so I'll go over the rules. Backstage is rammed tonight. If you need help, look for one of our security guys, not house security. They have special orders about you. If you get nabbed by media, they'll take care of it. Black tee-shirts and jeans with white baseball caps. They have the letters *BBB* on the front of the hat. You got that?”

She did.

He placed his arm around her and escorted her up front. The opening band started playing. She studied the drummer, his technique, tricks and energy. Someone handed her sticks and she became lost in the music as she drummed along on the iron railing. All of the anxiety faded. For the first time in weeks, she felt warm and alive. Connected to the energy on stage, Whisper's problems drifted away.

Chapter Eighteen

"I just got another e-mail!" Mark yelled.

Keith and everyone else crowded around the computer to see what Whisper sent this time. The e-mails started off as one or two words, but they'd grown. Nomad hadn't called in a few days and Mark begged Whisper to say if she knew anything.

He's here. Working security for the band. Don't know how he got in. Can't make him leave. You try. Dangerous work. Tell him you need him, he'll go. ~W

Mark replied, *Keep trying. Won't answer my calls. You ok? Mark.*

He sent it and Keith figured the very direct plea would probably go without a response. She hadn't written one word about herself.

Almost immediately, the inbox held another item and Mark opened it. "It's from Nomad," Mark said.

He opened the e-mail. Nothing appeared in text. Mark clicked the attachment, which took a long time to load. The sound wasn't the greatest, but it held video footage of a recent concert. They stood around the nineteen-inch monitor, watching the amateur video. Keith almost wished Heather hadn't walked in. Whisper looked bad. She'd dropped a lot of weight.

"Who is that?" Billy asked.

Heather started to answer and lost her voice. She tried again and said, "Whisper."

"No it's not."

Keith watched the three-minute clip in

amazement. With hair in her face, pounding those drums, he couldn't believe a woman her size carried so much inside. The number of drums and cymbals dwarfed her, but she made herself heard. The sweat and strain on her face as she stretched and moved, hitting drums with lightning speed and accuracy, stole his breath. Even with black hair plastered against her face, arms barely covered with flesh, she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. Passion drove her. He ventured love once did too.

He left the kids to watch. They needed to visit with an important part of their family. After her being in the house only a few months, they couldn't seem to mend the hole she left. He'd thought about e-mailing her but didn't. What he needed to say wouldn't work through technology. It probably wouldn't work face-to-face either.

At three in the afternoon, he grabbed his keys and coat and yelled, "I'm going out. I'll be back."

He heard Mark acknowledge him and left. Another doctor's appointment would either have him heading to surgery or getting the cast removed. No matter what the x-rays revealed, if surgery was the answer, it'd be scheduled so the kids could be prepared. No more surprises. They'd dealt with enough.

Half way down the road, his cell rang. "Yeah?"

"Keith?"

He drew a heavy breath and let it out. "You drop off the face of the earth for a few days and Mark goes nuts. It drives the rest of us crazy too, Nomad. Why didn't you call?"

"Been busy. I'm getting a promotion."

"What are you talking about?"

"Took a while, but they're moving me up. I'll be closer to her now."

"Look you half wit, catch a plane or drive that truck home."

"Can't."

His heart pumped a little faster. "Why the hell not?"

"I just wanted to tell you so you won't worry."

"Yeah, well you're making me worry. Come home."

"I'll call when I can."

"Nomad!"

The kid hung up before Keith could yell again. The cell phone wound up tossed on the passenger seat. He pulled into a gas station, parked and gripped the steering wheel. The urge to fly to San Diego and grab Nomad by the scruff seemed too strong to ignore. He wanted to grab Whisper too, *kidnap* her and hold on until she didn't try to get away. He'd do it gently though. He'd feed her and make her sleep. She'd eventually feel safe again. She'd stop hurting too. The kids being close could do that for her.

A cold sweat broke out on his forehead and he wiped it with annoyance. *His leg*. He'd give his leg to see her again, alone. Ten minutes of her undivided attention for a leg wouldn't turn into regret down the road. He'd have the time with her.

Even if he flew to California, he'd never get close. Maynard stopped by one evening and they'd talked. Maynard checked things out, called in some favors and ventured Keith wouldn't get into her gated community, much less to her front door.

"Jesus Christ!" Keith's fist hit the dash before he covered his face with a hand. The kids were coming apart; he was coming apart. He hadn't lied. He loved her.

A knock on the window made him look up. It took a minute to focus.

"You called?" Miles stood outside, smiling. He headed around the front of the SUV, opened the passenger door, placed the cell phone on the dash

and got in.

"Where the hell did you come from?" Keith asked.

"Nice day, no wind. I walked down here to grab a different flavor of coffee. Want some?" He held out the paper cup with a lid.

"No. Thanks."

Miles sipped and looked ahead. Keith couldn't think, much less formulate sentences. Miles didn't seem to mind. He sat quietly enjoying his coffee. Eventually, Miles asked, "You come here often?"

The words penetrated but he couldn't grasp the meaning. When Miles raised his eyebrows and winked, Keith burst into laughter. Keith eventually sighed. "I'm not having the very best day."

"Oh, no, not a sob story!"

"I owe you one, but don't worry. You won't have to hear it."

"Good. It'd make me feel bad. Now where were you heading?"

"Shit, doctor's appointment. I'll drop you at the shelter."

"No need. My schedule's free the rest of the day. I'll go for a drive with you."

"It could take a while."

"I have time. You might even decide to share that story. I bet it has something to do with that *dish* Whisper."

Heading out of the parking lot, he glanced at the preacher.

"What's that look for?" Miles asked.

Keith grinned. "*Dish*?"

"You know—cutie?"

"You don't get out enough, Miles."

"Yeah, so I've been told. How is she, by the way? Whisper."

Keith could only imagine the look on his face. He felt like his friend punched him in the gut. He was

back to wanting to beat the dash.

“Bushhh,” Miles said, making the sound he used to when they played kids game a few decades ago. It was supposed to sound like a torpedo sinking a ship. “Direct hit! Score one for Miles!”

“For a man of God, you’ve got a sick sense of humor.”

“I must have to keep you as a friend. Spill it. Even Jesus had moments where he had a hard time coping. Not that I’m comparing the two of you, because you’re not remotely similar. In fact, with your language...”

The diversion Miles provided might not be so bad after all. It’d been more than a week since Keith found something funny. An hour or so with the preacher might be good for his temper. Depending on what the doctor said, it just might be wise to have someone with him. Limited emotionally at the moment, if he took another direct hit, he’d fly over the edge.

Whisper stood on the opposite side of the pool from Doug. With his current mood, she wouldn’t get any closer than she had to. He decided to throw a party for the band and everyone involved. With a tenth successful concert behind them, he wanted to celebrate. The amount of alcohol and drugs being consumed by the crowd scared her.

Nomad casually came close. “You holding up, Whisper?”

She nodded and he kept walking. He blended and never drew attention, but managed to stay very close to her the last few weeks. His ability to walk on the fringes suited his purpose. He refused to leave. With Doug becoming more and more irrational, she found herself thankful Nomad had been so stubborn.

Gradually backing her way into a dark corner of the privacy fence, she relaxed. Not too many people

approached her because no one thought she could speak. Doug told everyone during her prolonged absence, she'd undergone treatment to fix her poor, broken little voice. A failed surgery gave him an alibi for her silence.

Ben worked his way through people and eventually stood in front of her, blocking her from anyone else's view. The only way to avoid him would be a hasty retreat to her left. She didn't take it. Instead, she crossed her arms and looked down. She'd rather face Ben than Doug any day.

"I never get a chance to talk to you. Doug keeps the lease tight these days, doesn't he?"

She didn't trust him. Until a few years ago, he'd been using and drinking and ignoring his wife and their three children. He'd been lucky, gaining sobriety while retaining his family and career. She wondered what her father might've been like without the booze.

"I wanted you to know—wanted to tell you that you can come to me if you need anything. I never realized what Doug put you through. If your dad had any idea what an ass the boy is, he would've killed him."

No he wouldn't. Even if her father spent his days sober, he didn't care enough to do a thing. Her father protected her once. Ben reached out and she backed into the fence. He didn't need to touch her, and she especially didn't need Doug seeing him so close.

"Come stay with me, Barb, and the kids. That son of a bitch won't get within a hundred feet of you. I'd make sure of it."

She wondered if he'd gone crazy. Doug controlled the money. His management of the band was a joke, but he still held the purse strings. Ben wouldn't put all that money aside for her.

"I have an attorney working on things. Me and

the guys are seeing what we can do to put Doug into retirement. We're close; the attorney found something to work with."

If they crossed Doug, they'd all pay. If the rest of the band united and tried to oust him, Doug would kill her, whether she'd been a part of the defiance or not. If she ran again, he'd get Heather back. He made sure legally, he could change his mind. She'd been warned to behave. He laughed when he said he *owned* her. He owned her, all right, but only until Heather turned eighteen. Not a second beyond. *If I live that long.*

"Wendy!" Doug bellowed.

She darted past Ben and rushed to her ex. As she neared, he fell getting up from his seat. When people laughed, he did too, in a furious sort of way. Without warning, he shoved her backward and she fell into the pool. Stunned by the impact, she gasped and took in water. The sound of the party died and everything grew peaceful.

The next thing she knew, someone held her and kept hitting her back as she coughed and choked pool water from her lungs. Nomad held her until she could breathe. Through blurry eyes, she spotted Doug stumbling toward them. Her arms wrapped around Nomad as she buried her face against his neck. She couldn't take more of Doug's rage or torment.

Nomad should've left her at the bottom of the pool. After so long without a kind word, or gentle touch, she didn't see the point of living. She'd gone from Wendy to Whisper, to—nothing. Tremors formed deep inside and vibrated outward. His arms held her but it wasn't enough. His palms flattened against her spine to pull her closer.

"No more," she begged, sobbing afterward.

"Done," he replied.

Keith finally managed to work his way around

the house and into the gated back yard. Nomad had called two days prior and told him about the party and the possibility of Keith getting close enough to see Whisper. A plan formed after forty-eight hours of contemplating what to do. He would beat Doug Neuman to within an inch of his life before grabbing Whisper and leaving. He'd worry about the ramifications down the road. Nomad's calls had become more frequent. Sometimes he'd call twice a day. The kid was in over his head and didn't know what to do. He couldn't find an opportunity to grab Whisper and run. With Keith there, the time had come.

As he eased his way through the crush of bodies, he saw Nomad sitting on a chair holding Whisper, both of them soaking wet. More forcefully, he shoved people aside and limped quickly until he reached them. Nomad glanced up. Relief washed over his face. Whisper didn't move.

"What happened?" Keith stroked her hair with a trembling hand before pulling her into his arms.

Gasps and worried noises made Keith turn. A crowd gathered around a man lying on the ground. "Does anyone know CPR?" someone asked.

A number of people pulled cell phones out. Multiple voices described the man's condition. A woman who'd been attempting to revive him eventually said, "Still no heartbeat. I think he's dead."

Nomad stood. "You need to leave."

Whisper lay limp in his arms. "Like hell. I have her and I'm not letting her go."

"You can't be here when the cops start asking questions."

"We won't be."

"Looks like her dumbass ex just died." His voice dropped. "If Whisper disappears, they'll find her. When they do, they'll want to know why she ran. I

bet if they did a little research, they'd look damned hard at her relationship with you."

"We'll handle whatever happens."

"If people start talking about how Doug's been treating her, the police might wonder about her getting some payback. With you here..."

The last thing he wanted to do was walk away.

Nomad reached for her. "Don't cause her more trouble. Give it a few days and you'll see her. Please, Keith, trust me."

"Call me. I'll stay in town. If she needs anything, you call," he said before reluctantly handing her over.

"Go now. Hurry."

Chapter Nineteen

Keith spent days pacing the confines of the hotel room, receiving frequent updates from Nomad regarding the investigation into Doug Neuman's death. He kept stamping down the urge to go to Whisper, hold her and help her through the ordeal. Nomad said she walked around in a stupor and slept a lot while the police badgered her to answer questions by writing them down. As preparations for a burial were made, he flew Heather, Mark, Corey and Billy out to California. Heather wanted to go to her brother's funeral. She wanted Corey there with her. With the possibility of seeing Whisper again, Mark and Corey insisted on coming too. If nothing else, they provided a great diversion the day before the service.

He kept Heather and Corey in the background at the cemetery. Mark and Billy took in some sights. Billy had never been to a memorial service. Keith would be damned if *Doug Neuman's* would be his first. Heather cried while standing between him and Corey, but not the type of tears he'd expected. She cried over the lost opportunity to ever know her brother without the drugs.

One of the last to arrive at the gravesite, Whisper stepped out of the limo. She walked between Ben and Nomad. Her pale face, haunted eyes and sunken cheeks, appeared more pronounced against the black dress. *God, what she must've gone through.*

It'd be asking a lot for Whisper to forgive them.

He'd have the opportunity that very evening. With the police investigation concluded, Nomad would step out of the picture and Keith would get to spend some time with her. If things didn't go too badly, he'd beg her to let the kids visit. Heather needed to see her and apologize. The guilt the kid carried around would eventually have her on some anti-depressants. God, he hoped things went better than they did in his dreams.

The reverend started speaking and heads bowed. Keith leaned heavily on the cane. His leg throbbed from the unfamiliar freedom of movement. The new brace offered minimal support. Without the bulk or stability of the cast, he found himself tiring quickly and having to concentrate on walking. It looked like there wouldn't be more surgeries in his future. Miraculously, his leg continued healing better than anyone thought possible. In time, he'd get rid of the brace, cane and hopefully the limp.

After some brief words over the casket, Nomad and Ben stepped back, allowing Whisper a moment alone with her ex. She hadn't shed a tear and something dawned on him. He'd only seen her cry once. It happened after they made love. The painful memory twisted his insides.

Corey and Heather walked toward the rented car as the crowd dispersed. Keith remained, waiting for Whisper to leave. How could a woman as gentle and breakable as her, ever move beyond so much pain?

Something sparkled on Whisper's chest. A small diamond glittered in the sunlight. He bowed his head and fought to control the wave of emotion ripping through his chest. She wore the necklace he'd given her. She wore it to her ex-husband's funeral.

At four o'clock that afternoon, Keith found

himself limping up the walk to the massive house, questioning himself every hobble of the way about what he'd say. If she threw him out, he'd make sure she would at least agree to a meeting with Heather. She couldn't hate Heather the way she probably loathed him. She'd forgive the kid for words spoken in anger.

Nomad stepped out of the house. He looked good, older, more self confident and less cynical. God, if it hadn't been for him following Whisper...

"Where are you going?" Keith asked as Nomad strolled by.

He turned to face Keith. "Promised Mark and the kids I'd take them to a movie. We'll get back to the hotel around midnight. Figured I hang out with them tonight. You okay with that?"

"Yeah." Keith looked at the enormous house he was about to enter. She'd spent years there. How the hell did she happily transition to his shit hole?

"After the door closes, the house is armed. You want to leave, call me. I can be back in twenty minutes. If you run into problems, two security guys patrol outside. No matter what, don't leave her alone."

"Security?"

"She's a hot commodity. Wendy Black gets round-the-clock babysitters. She's your responsibility now. Don't screw up. Get me?"

Keith ignored the kid because of the smile on his face. "I forgot. She's not just Whisper."

"It's kind of hard to understand at first, but when I saw the whole picture I couldn't believe that, back home, she washed my underwear."

"Yeah," Keith said, struck again by where she came from.

Nomad turned. "You know she'd rather be Whisper than Wendy Black. And I sure as hell know how she felt about being Wendy Neuman. Use your

charm on her. She needs it.”

“What the hell do you mean by that?”

Nomad jammed his hands in the front pockets of his khakis, and strode down the walk. With his black hair, build, and long legged stride, the kid looked like security for a star. Keith sure as hell didn’t look like he belonged in the neighborhood. He limped into the house anyway, closing the door behind himself.

Black marble floors and expansive rooms filled with elegant furniture greeted him. He kept moving through a huge living room and then dining room, before coming to a massive—parlor? Library? Carefully descending three steps into the area, he scanned for Whisper. Three white leather couches, enormous built-in bookcases, a big screen television with chairs scattered here and there, filled the room. He almost missed her sitting on the oversized couch.

“Whisper?”

She stood immediately. She didn’t turn to face him as he gained a few steps. He waited. Maybe Nomad would get a call sooner than expected. As she stood there, she trembled. His palms began sweating. He’d come to apologize, not terrify her.

“Why are you here?” Obviously, by her tone, Nomad didn’t warn her about the visit.

Stunned because she’d spoken, he took a moment to reply. Nomad never said she’d regained her voice. “To see you.”

She wore a powder blue shirt with the neck hanging off one shoulder, resting slightly down her arm. Her jeans hugged every tiny inch and sat low on her hips. The heels of her bare feet poked out below the bottoms.

A pin dropping would’ve sounded like a plate. It hurt like hell, her standing there, unmoving. Nomad wasn’t far. It wouldn’t take him long to come back. She’d been savaged too badly to forgive what he’d done. He’d hoped things would be different.

He couldn't stand the uneasy silence. *Face-to-face* was too much, too soon for her. He'd call tomorrow. "I'll go. I'm sorry."

She turned to face him with her head bowed, something in her arms. "I got him," she said quietly before her voice faded.

Drawn toward her, he closed the distance. If she took a step back, he'd die. A small bundle of fur gained his attention. She held and stroked a red-haired puppy that slept against her stomach, cuddled in her hands. "Nomad picked him up."

"Whisper?" Within a few feet, he viewed the full effect of everything he'd seen at a distance. Tears fell onto the scrap of fur. Her bottom lip trembled. The emotion radiating from her wounded him to the core. He'd never seen anyone so hurt and vulnerable. *I'm sorry, baby, for everything.* "Pomeranian?"

She nodded and sniffed, swiping at tears with the back of her hand. She resumed stroking the puppy with shaking fingers. Huge, watery eyes glanced again, like she didn't want to look, but couldn't help it. She needed to feel secure—couldn't help gauging how close he stood. She hadn't used that self-defense tactic in months.

No one ever needed him more, and he'd never hurt anyone worse. It'd been done quickly with a few angry words. He wanted to explain his reaction would've been different with someone else. He'd never cared so much for a woman, hadn't the experience with the strong emotions attached to love.

"Allergy," she said, glancing up a little longer.

"What?" He'd been staring, taking an accounting of every small facet, pondering how he could've ever reacted badly to such a sincere and loving woman. He'd probably never be this close again.

"My eyes. I'm allergic. That's why they're watering." She drew in a shaky breath before

clearing her throat.

He took another step and she held the puppy out, placing something between them. He deserved the barrier. He'd hurt her. The urge to hold her and take away the fear overrode a lot of common sense. Their hands grazed when he accepted the warm bundle of squirming, half asleep fur. He couldn't have been more surprised when she didn't pull away, kept her fingers close as she stroked the little thing.

She chose a pet as fragile as herself. A little dog would need protection. She'd been strongest when someone required her care. He knew firsthand.

"I lied," she whispered. "No allergy."

I know, Whisper. A long breath escaped before his back teeth set together. The pain inside swelled. Rather than growing angry at the situation, he felt sorrow at how close they stood physically with a canyon separating them. He finally opened his damp eyes to find her gaze. "Allergies." His voice sounded harsh, even to his own ears.

His fingers opened to touch her soft skin. Stroking her settled some of the building emotion because she accepted the caresses. The little ball of hair squirmed and he arranged it to lie comfortably in one hand. The fingers of his left hand were then free to touch her. She stilled for a moment before accepting that too. She continued gently fondling the puppy.

Drawn closer, he tried to remember not to crowd her. His hands itched to touch, his arms longed to hold, and chest burned to feel the warmth of her breath. When he brushed tresses from her face to tuck behind an ear, the short black hair felt just as silky against his fingers as the strawberry blond. Calloused fingertips soaked up the pulse at her temple before gliding to her jaw, neck and then shoulder. When his hand shook, he pulled it away.

His voice trembled when he spoke. "I figured you more the kitten type. Why a puppy?"

"If I love him enough—if I do it right," she said before taking in a ragged breath, "he won't leave."

Unsteady fingers slid into her hair and he hesitantly opened his palm to pull her close. The cane he'd hooked over his forearm, hit the floor. He absorbed the warmth of her scalp before caressing the back of her neck. He wanted to ease the strain in her, and then take it completely away. Eventually, she slumped against him and his eyes closed in thanks. Soft kisses fell on the top of her head.

"I'm sorry, Whisper. I never meant to hurt you."

"I did awful things. Didn't tell you because I knew how you'd feel about a stripper around the kids."

"Please don't." His ears would bleed if she said anything more.

"I wasn't sure the divorce went through and I forced you to have sex with me."

"You never—"

"I tried not to, tried really hard, but it happened anyway. I shamed you."

"You never shamed me or yourself." She felt so good, her and the puppy against the front of his shirt.

"I should've handled things differently. I'm not strong though. I'm weak, ineffective, irrelevant." Is that why she'd gotten so thin? She wanted to be small and insignificant, to go through life unnoticed?

"You're very brave, Whisper. What you did to make money, must've been terrible. I know why you did it though, where you learned to dance. I heard what the bastard made you do."

She sobbed and he put his arm around her. After a few months with Heather speaking openly and honestly, he knew some of their history. He ventured even though Heather lived under the same

roof, she probably didn't know half of how Whisper suffered. Whisper would've hidden the worst from her, just like she tried to hide the dancing.

"Heather told you," she said. She knew where the information came from.

"Heather never blamed you, only your ex. She felt guilty you danced to support her. She's a kid, honey, and she lashed out at the only person close enough to take it and forgive her. You."

"She hates me. She should."

Heather needs you, baby. Forgive her. Forgive me. "She loves you." She needed to believe what he said and he'd repeat it until she accepted the truth. "The kids do too." His cheek rested on her silky black hair.

"They can't. Not after..."

"They all know what happened. They don't still love you despite the dancing; they love you because of your sacrifice."

"I didn't sacrifice. I made money as a stripper."

"Did you like what you did?"

"No. I hated it."

"Doing something you hate, to provide for someone you love, is a sacrifice." She'd kept them all oblivious to what she faced nightly while offering love and caring to each and every one of them. She'd never asked for a thing or expected repayment. She just wanted and needed to be accepted and loved without judgment. *Forgive me.*

"Does Billy know?"

"I explained it, in ten year old terms." He kept her head against his chest when she would've pulled away. "He said he hated me for hurting you. I told him I hated me too. What you did made no difference to him, because he only ever viewed you with his heart. I made a mistake when I met you, looked at a situation rather than the woman standing right in front of me. I did it again the last time we talked.

Please, Whisper," he said, unable to say more.

A hand remained on his chest when she straightened and pulled back. Big, blue-gray eyes gazed into his. Fingertips scraped against fabric as her hand drew into a fist. He'd accept a punch. He deserved it. Her hand flattened back out. She'd caressed him. She kept rubbing until his pulse slowed.

His voice came out raw. "One more chance? I swear I won't screw up this time."

She didn't have a clue what he'd asked. She really couldn't understand what he wanted. He'd tell her. "I love you, can't stand what it's like without you." Her lips turned down and before she could look away, he gently cupped her chin. "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

He placed the puppy in her hands before kissing her cheeks to take the tears. She gave her answer by sagging against him. She no longer belonged to a dead, bastard ex-husband. She belonged with him.

Carefully, he kissed her temple before licking the rim of her ear. Just below, a strong pulse beat in her neck. It seeped into him through his lips and tongue. With every breath he took, he got closer physically and emotionally.

Composure spread through him with the taste of her skin. The strangest, most comforting things filled his senses. His mind conjured sunshine, a green lawn and the smell of freshly cut lumber. The laughter of children echoed as he envisioned them playing and sleeping, singing and talking, crying and smiling.

He drifted further and reminisced on memories he'd take to the grave. He revisited Billy taking his first steps. He remembered how Corey used to run from the house every evening to fly into his arms. He sighed, vividly recalling Mark gazing at him in disbelief, his eyes bright with tears when a forgiving

judge pardoned a stupid moment in Mark's youth.

Whisper. He thought about more recent happenings in his life. He traveled to a peaceful house where the smell of dinner permeated every room. He thought about how the half dressed woman with fragrant, soft skin, felt nestled against him while she apologized for becoming wet with desire. Quiet moans and soft whines echoed in his ears as he relived Whisper coming apart from his touch. All her apologies and regret finally made sense. She'd been sorry for enjoying his hands, his mouth, and his body. She'd regretted wanting and needing him. At the time, she believed she'd been disgracing him.

She pulled away and the happy moments ended. The room grew darker, colder, against the stark white furniture and pastel walls. An overzealous air conditioner didn't cause it.

She stooped, picked up his cane and handed it to him. He accepted it and expected to be ushered to the door. He'd been way out of line. He once mentally offered a leg for what he'd just gotten. With the leg still attached and him getting more than some words with her, he'd forever be grateful.

She gained a few steps, cuddled the puppy, and glanced back. She expected him to follow, which he did, cursing himself every step of the way. When she opened a door and stepped inside, he went too. So entrenched in thought, once he regained his focus, he realized they'd stopped in a bedroom.

She closed the door, placed the sleepy puppy in a large basket, and stood in front of him. The white walls didn't seem stark with splashes of blue and yellow on the curtains and bedspread. Light colored wooden dressers made the room appear huge. A brass and wood ceiling fan turned lazily, reflecting the dim lighting.

Trembling fingers reached for his shirt. A button slipped through a hole. As she worked open the next

one, she said, "My room, not his."

Whisper and her ex had slept apart. When the last button came undone, she took his cane and leaned it against the side of the king bed. The shirt slid over his shoulders before she unfastened the cuffs and slipped his arms free. A dawning came when she worked the tee shirt up his stomach. He wouldn't be leaving after all.

A rush of heat and desire swept through him as he took the shirt and pulled it over his head. Her cheek and hands drifted against his chest. She had to feel the pounding within. Arms circled her as he concentrated on how firmly he hugged. He wouldn't crush, he mustn't. She only needed the heat from his body. She couldn't want the same things he did. His luck wasn't that good. He could give simple warmth and keep all the passion and impatience tucked away.

Serenity and lust came in unpredictable surges as her hand ran up and down his back. Heated lips pressed to his chest as a wet tongue tasted a nipple. When the palms holding his ass bunched up to lightly squeeze, his heart exploded into a frenzied rhythm.

"I wouldn't let him touch me."

The thudding in his ears grew louder. "Oh, God!" he yelled as his body burned from her delicate hands and nibbling lips.

He'd make her forget the last few months. *Doug Neuman was dead and buried. Worm food. Bastard!* "He's not here anymore. It's just us, baby."

Her hands brushed and stroked his sides. "I wanted you to know I couldn't go from his bed to this one—with you."

A foggy brain kicked into gear and he figured out what she'd been trying to say. The unspoken words came through loud and clear. *I wouldn't let him touch me because he wasn't you.*

Overly emotional, he couldn't help the kiss he gave. Instead of getting scared by his eager mouth, she embraced him and uttered urgent little sounds against his lips. They needed to separate so he could pull off her shirt. When it finally happened, he found flesh and breasts and hard nipples sitting above ribs too close to the skin. She'd gotten desperately thin. It didn't matter. He'd be loving and gentle.

He bent to taste her and she squeezed his arms. The disturbing reaction helped him stay focused. She'd been hurt before, could probably never forget certain pain. With the whole night stretching before them, he gathered her slight weight and laid her on the bed. A slow and thorough consummation should've happened the first time they came together. Instead, they'd managed fireworks and explosions. The sparks and heat left her burnt, not replete. He'd erase the memory, do things differently this time.

"Can I touch you?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Like this?" Nothing but his breath swept over her. "Feel good?"

"Yes. More."

Meticulous, small kisses covered her breast. His chest welled with satisfaction when her back arched. She wanted to get closer. He grazed her nipple patiently, hovering over the peak until she pushed against his lips. The underside of her nipple received a wet lick from his tongue.

"Ahh." The vocalization confirmed pleasure and anticipation.

He stroked her then, adding pressure, but only to that small spot. Fingers pushed into his hair as nails scored his scalp. *Jesus, I missed you, baby.* "More?" he asked.

"Yes."

The nipple firmed under his wiggling tongue as

he bore down on the peak.

“Kisses,” she whispered. His lips surrounded the hard tip. “Wet kisses.”

He provided the *wet kisses* she requested, tonguing and taking a breast. Willpower collapsed and he drew her in, sucked deftly on the delicate flesh. She squirmed, pulled free and twisted, placing the other nipple within reach. The rapid rise and fall of her chest confirmed how much she could take. His mouth opened to take more while giving gentle suction.

Her hips stirred. Their time together wouldn't be turned into a teasing contest. If she asked, he'd answer. She'd silently requested attention and he'd willingly give it.

The fastening on her jeans came undone. She raised her hips and he slid the denim and panties away. Long, slim legs and hip bones greeted him. He couldn't imagine how he'd touch her gently enough between her thighs. Wetness welcomed his fingers as he skimmed the soft, neatly trimmed hair. If he pushed into her, he'd come. She felt and smelled that unbelievable.

“Keith!”

“I know, baby. I know,” he said. He brought her legs up, repositioned himself and slowly parted her knees. “Relax. Trust me.”

As her legs spread, the scent of arousal raced through him. On his stomach, close to her sex, he'd never seen anything more beautiful. Moisture from desire glistened along the tender, pink folds of flesh. He'd go slow and take his time. He'd never hurt her.

Kisses placed on her quivering flesh allowed her to grow accustomed to the newness of the touch. For him, it quickly became impossible not to go further and he rushed to take the opened, spread offering. As he acquired her essence, he moaned from excruciating desire and grew unbearably harder.

Self-confidence expanded as he experimented and tasted everything by tonguing over the exposed center of his breathless woman.

"Please," she begged.

I'll get it, baby. Be patient with me.

There, on the crest of her sex, lay her sensitive nub. He'd only felt it with his fingertips, never searched with his tongue. Sliding around, seeking the right combination of pressure and movement, he triumphed when her hips rose off the bed.

The constant whines and moans accompanied by her squirming hips, supplied him with unending stamina. She'd come for him, against his tongue and mouth. He'd make it happen even if it took all night. He'd likely come too, his erection smashed between his straining ass and the firm mattress. God, it didn't matter as long as she came.

She shrank away before bunching up and opening like an erotic blossom. Everything beneath his tongue vibrated, twitched and she cried out. When her climax slowed, he couldn't bear the thought of anything ending between them. He needed her to indulge in the raw pleasure thoroughly, so she'd forget all the pain he'd caused.

He concentrated and went slowly, gently as he eased a single finger into the gripping, wet tightness of her body. He discovered with the lightest touch and the barest pressure inside, he could keep the climax rolling indefinitely.

Dismayed and in awe when she finally reached her limit, he placed a final kiss. Both of them panted from exhaustion. Delighted with the spasms still randomly tightening around his finger, he stroked the damp flesh inside to soothe, rather than incite. Withdrawal became a slow process. He hesitated before slipping completely out, troubled over losing the intimacy.

He'd never experienced anything half as

amazing. Tasting her climax would get a lofty spot in his collection of memorable moments in life. The smile on her face created a dizzy form of relief. The blush radiating from her pale skin, reminded him of draught grass after finding relief from a summer storm.

She squirmed and grasped his arms before gently tugging. She wanted him to lie alongside, which was fine. He wanted it too. Small hands smoothed over his skin before she worked to unfasten his jeans. She didn't need to. In his mind, the evening was all about her. When he stilled her by placing his hands over hers, she withdrew, physically and emotionally. He could see and sense her upset. He couldn't understand what caused it. "Baby?"

"It's okay," she said. She wouldn't look at him.

"Whisper?"

The hurt displayed on the rigid, pale woman next to him, eventually made sense. Rolling to his back, he shoved his jeans and underwear down before tossing them off the bed. Socks got shed in the same manner before he stretched out with nothing on but a leg brace. She needed to touch him, and he'd stupidly told her not to.

"Your hands, I'm burning." If she forgave and touched him, he'd blow. "I didn't think you'd want me, not after the last time."

"It's all right? You don't mind?"

His eyes closed, anticipating her hands. When he felt breasts and her stomach slide over him, he sucked in a breath. He grasped her upper arms and finished bringing her on top. *Damn it—protection.* The thought fizzled away when her long, slim legs spread.

"Jesus!" he said, praying he'd hold it together. "Sorry, baby, I won't be much good. I won't last."

She slid down, opened and began taking him in.

"Oh, God!" He'd never had a woman this way, completely naked. He held back with every ounce of restraint until she took the last hard inch. Buried deep, he raised his hips and she clenched. *Don't let me come!* Involuntarily, he exploded inside her wet, shuddering heat.

When sense returned, he found her sitting upright, her head thrown back, breasts swaying, as her hips rocked back and forth. In the throes of climax, she became a vigorous, hungry woman, claiming her due. He stayed hard, actually felt harder than before, and ground in contrast to the sexy sway of her body.

"Take it, Whisper, all you can stand."

Her hips rotated. In her to the hilt, he swelled. Grasped and released, rolled and tugged, he pushed to stab deep. Air hissed through clenched teeth.

"You're so tight, baby, so good." *Damn, she's still coming!*

He pumped. She burst and went wild, the grinding of her sex against him too much to bear. He couldn't stand it, the savage need clawing for freedom. Attempting to stop what would happen, he seized her hips. Unable to tolerate that either, he let her go and begged, "Harder!"

A burning sensation simmered at the base of his shaft. Repeated thrusts upward into the willing, clenching body of his lover made the fire expand.

"Keith!"

"Yeah! You can do it. Keep coming." He couldn't resist the straining warmth and wetness surrounding him or the broken sounds of her ecstasy ringing in his ears. "Don't stop! Baby, don't stop!" he yelled.

He came so hard, he couldn't take air, saw stars as he finished, grunting in rapture. She stayed with it, worked him through each throbbing surge of deliverance. Laying beneath her in a daze, the

dream ended when he felt drops of moisture hit his stomach. It took a while to focus once he opened his eyes. Tears on her face made a rush of adrenaline flood his veins. He grabbed her arms, pulled her down and laid her out. Trapped beneath his right leg, she wouldn't get away this time.

"I'll rot in hell," she said.

"For what, baby?" He could hardly catch his breath.

"Enjoying this when Doug's been in the ground less than a day."

To hell with Doug! "God knew what He was doing. He struck the asshole down. He figured you'd paid plenty and it was time for a different kind of life. Don't feel bad, not about us coming together."

She didn't try to get away and the last thing he needed to do was make her feel trapped. He rolled to his back and carefully pulled her onto his chest. It felt right, her snuggled on top of him after making love. "You okay?" he asked.

She kissed his chest. "I love you."

He stroked her hair before gently kneading her shoulders. It took a long time before he felt he could speak. "I swear to God, you'll never regret it. I'll make things up to you so can let go of everything that son of a bitch did."

"No. I don't want that. No pity."

"When did I say I'd pity you?"

"You didn't feel sorry for me before. I couldn't stand it now. If you can find it in your heart to overlook certain aspects of my life, I'd do my very best to act differently, you know—normal."

Normal? What the hell constituted *normal* for the drummer of the Robert Black band? He'd start small and try to get a definition. "Do you want to stay with the band?"

"For a while. I'd like to see where we wind up. I owe Ben something. Over the last few months he's

been different, caring. I'd like to give him a good run with the music, so when it falls apart, he could move on with another group, or replace me without consequences."

She didn't realize nothing would be normal, at least not for him. Maybe it was time to redefine his perception of normal and think outside the box. How would they live? Where would they live? What about the kids?

She squirmed. He kissed her long and hard, letting her know they'd work it out. He'd find a way to meet everyone's needs and satisfy a few of his own in the process. His time had come. Finally, something in life for him, even if he did have to share her with a dozen kids, a rock band, the public, the press, a zillion fans, and a red haired puppy. He wasn't all that greedy.

"I love you, baby."

"We'll see how long it lasts," she said.

"I've waited all my life. I'll stick until *you* want unstuck."

"I've been waiting forever too. I guess we'll work things out."

He yawned. "Like what?"

"Who will manage the band, where the kids will go to school, if there's enough money to run this house, how much I owe, the net worth of the band, if Heather still hates me..." Her soft voice kept right on relaying all the potential problems facing them while his mind shut down.

He pulled her close, kissed her and asked, "Do you have any beer?"

"Do you drink?"

He heard the terror in her voice. Jesus, he rarely ever got a single can. Given her recent time spent with a drug abusing asshole, the urge for the beer dwindled. "I don't want one after all. Sex with you gets me buzzed."

“Yeah?” She smiled.

“Oh, yeah.”

Whisper was the only high he’d need for the rest of his life. He’d make sure he became her addiction as well. *Forever, Whisper. We’ll make it, I promise.*

Chapter Twenty

Six months later, Keith clenched his teeth to help calm down. Backstage resembled a riot area. The man in charge of the thirty rented security guys answered questions and gave directions from a central spot while sitting on his ass, sucking on a cigarette. Ben and Nomad stood in front of the band and kids, trying to shield them from the crunch of bodies. Tully, the useless son of a bitch would handle the situation, or Keith would.

As Keith neared, he heard Tully ask the guy standing next to him, "Who's that?"

"Dude," the young guy replied, "that's Wendy's ole man."

When Keith stood two feet away, he said, "Clear this area. Do it now."

"They have backstage passes." Tully crossed his legs, leaned back and teetered the chair on its two hind legs.

Keith pointed. "Get them the hell away from my family and the band."

Nomad sprinted over with a worried look on his face. "We don't have control. Too many people."

Keith stepped onto a riser and placed his index finger and thumb between his lips. The shrill whistle made security men turn. He pointed to the spot directly below him and growled out a single word. "Now!"

Blue jeans, black tee-shirts, and white baseball caps with *BBB* embossed on the front, hurried over. When most of them were near, he explained how the

rest of the night would go.

"What's going on? Corral these people and move them across to the other area. Three of you stay with them and keep them in line. Who the hell is at the stairwells?" Nothing but silence came from the group of men. "You and you," he pointed, "each of you take a man and get those stairwells covered. If you leave your post or let anyone get through, I'll kick your ass before you get fired. Get me?"

"Yes, sir," they said before moving with a purpose.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Tully asked, stepping up next to Keith.

Out of the corner of his eye, Keith saw Billy get shoved and almost knocked down. That did it. *Best in his field, my ass!* Keith drew his arm back and saw Nomad grimace before he let his temper fly. His fist flew too, knocking Tully off the riser. A few of the men caught him before he landed. The entire backstage area fell silent. The crowd out front didn't, but at the moment, it wasn't his concern. Regular cops handled them.

"You're fired," Keith said, looking down. "Anyone else not interested in doing his job tonight?" A lot of white baseball caps turned from side to side. "Good, I bet we'll do just fine then."

Whisper walked over and gazed up at him. Damn, he hadn't meant for her to see that. He'd like it even less if she or any of the kids got trampled.

Keith pointed. "You three, get the tourists where I want them. Do it now."

He didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to. The men moved and started gathering the forty people together. "The rest of you," he said, making sure he received eye contact from the remaining guys, "you see this woman?"

Heads nodded. Keith pointed. "You see those kids over there?" *Yeah, they looked, they saw.* "Your

life depends on them not getting hurt. That's why you're here. You'll listen to me and take care of my family, or you'll have more than a few broken teeth. Get me?"

Finally, people started moving. "I want you and you," he pointed, "on the right side of the stage. You'll stand there the entire concert. If someone gets past the cops, you won't let them anywhere near the band. And you two," he picked another two big men, "same detail, left end. Understand?"

With the backstage area under control, the kids and band finally came out of the alcove they'd been rammed into. He motioned for Nomad to hop up and stand next to him. When the kid got there, Keith pulled the stupid cap from his head and whipped it across the area.

"This is your new boss. You have a question or something looks funny, you get me or Nomad, pronto. You'll earn your paychecks tonight gentlemen, every stinking cent. If you won't work that hard, quit now because if you screw up, you're mine. If you do the job and keep things under control, you get a bonus."

Guys looked at each other and smiled. He figured money would do some persuading. "The best twenty guys will have an invite to work with us steady. No more of this shit, never knowing who's got our backs. I need long-term, dependable men who can keep order, take care of trouble, take it serious and follow directions."

He turned to Nomad. "Tell them what you need. Anyone gives you shit, get me. Keep the kids and my baby safe."

"Done," Nomad replied.

Keith moved off the riser and took a step toward Whisper when he heard an outraged Tully coming from behind. He pushed Whisper back before spinning to grab Tully by the shirt. The guy was

huge but Keith had tussles with other large men. Bigger didn't always mean stronger. An elbow in his stomach, a right to his chops and the big lug staggered. Keith let a lot of aggression build, watching the chaos for two hours before putting an end to it. He vented on Tully with a few more hits before Tully dropped and kissed the floor.

"Get him out of here," Nomad said. "He's fired."

Three guys lifted and carried him away. The remaining security moved in close as Nomad gave orders. The kid was a natural, looking tough, speaking softly and meaning business. For once, his stony face and cool exterior perfectly suited the job at hand.

Keith placed an arm around Whisper and escorted her back to the others. When Billy scrambled away from Corey, he came flying. Keith caught him and scooped him up.

"Holy shit, Keith. That was way cool!"

"Language, little man."

"Sorry, but holy shit!"

Keith rubbed his head and set him down. Whisper asked, "How's your leg?"

"Baby," he said, pulling her close, kissing her temple, "I didn't hit him with my leg."

The announcer started talking and the crowd roared. Whisper nervously twirled drum sticks through her fingers as he massaged her shoulders. He hoped she wasn't more on edge over the security incident. He'd hung back, watched the catastrophe during the last two concerts before he couldn't take it. Enough was enough!

She followed the others up on stage, the screams from the crowd temporarily deafening him. He glanced down at Billy to make sure he had the earplugs in place. They'd get a routine going after a few more concerts.

Keith relaxed and leaned against a wall. The

kids surrounded him, watching Whisper and the band. With the houses in Cleveland donated to Miles and the shelter, he probably wouldn't be travelling back and forth so much after tomorrow. He'd get Whisper and the kids home before hopping a plane to bail Connor out of jail. They'd gotten the call earlier in the day. They probably should've just dragged him back a few months ago, but he hadn't turned eighteen yet. The stupid kid got into a fight and spent his first day as an adult in jail. *Happy birthday, you little rebel.*

Christy stood next to Mark looking prettier than ever. Who would've thought she wanted to be a nurse. For that matter, he never would've guessed Mark had an interest in becoming an attorney. For now, he spent the savings to educate the kids and invest.

When they met with the attorney and found out how much Whisper inherited, she wanted to pay for everything. He refused. By the time his savings dwindled, he'd make damn sure he remained an asset to her, not a liability. He and Ben worked to figure things out with the new manager they'd hired. Between the band, the kids and Whisper, his days and nights were filled in the best way possible.

A bunch of hours later, the kids left with Nomad and some of the better security guys. She'd changed, cleaned up and did some photos with the guys before they settled in the back of the private limo. Playing local concerts had distinct advantages. No autograph seekers to contend with when they hit their front door.

She snuggled against him and he stroked her hair. She'd gone back to the strawberry blond and put on a few pounds. She looked more like the Whisper he knew.

She studied him in the dim light. "You look tired. Did you get worn out beating that poor man?"

"Baby, I didn't beat him. That would've involved blood and teeth and intestines all over."

She stopped smiling. "I couldn't imagine you ever fighting. It never occurred to me you would."

"He had it coming."

"Probably."

A lot of silence followed and he didn't like it. "I'm sorry. It won't happen again."

"You do what you think is right."

"I didn't mean to upset you."

"You know, it's pretty hard to miss how big you are, but you're so casual about it. You never threaten anyone. Even the smallest children run to you."

"Yeah, that's me, a sissy."

"No one would call you that if they saw you tonight. Bam, bam, he's out!" They both laughed. "Why did you get so angry?"

"The man didn't take your safety seriously. He learned."

"You *do* protect us."

"I may not always do the right thing, but you can bet I'll try."

When she leaned close, he pulled her onto his lap and cuddled her. "Keith?"

He closed his eyes and relaxed. He probably wouldn't sleep with having to catch a redeye in the morning. The hours before then wouldn't be spent catching a nap. He and Whisper had things to do.

"Yeah, Whisper?"

"Would you..."

He stroked her back. "What, baby? Ask."

"Marry me?"

He came to full awareness. Temporarily stunned, it took him a minute to comprehend what she'd asked.

"It's okay. Never mind."

"Oh, hell no. You asked and now you won't take it back." He'd contemplated the question a thousand

different ways. With her money, fame and talent, he could never find the right words. Somewhere down deep, he figured she wouldn't permanently stick herself with someone like him.

"But you didn't answer."

He chuckled. "I was stunned into stupidity. I'm better now. Yeah, we'll get married. As soon as you want."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." With the request coming out of the blue, he knew he shouldn't ask, but couldn't help himself. "You been thinking about this for a while?"

"Sort of."

"And you figured you'd pop the question tonight?"

"Well, I, uh, keep thinking about stuff."

"Like..."

"How good it felt, you know, us together, without protection."

He groaned and squeezed her too tight, remembering exactly how incredible it felt the one time they'd been fully naked together. After a long, hot kiss, he licked her throat, restraining himself from licking a hell of a lot more. "You could get pregnant. You okay with that?"

"Mmm," she murmured. He parted the neckline of her shirt and she twisted in his arms.

"God, baby, you'd have my baby?"

"Oh," she said, before, "uhh, oh! Yes."

With the tinted windows, they had about five minutes before they'd roll in the driveway. He needed to stop. She didn't show any mercy. Kissing him, squirming in his lap with her ass stroking his erection, she said against his mouth, "Our baby."

When she opened her lips, he gave into the burning need. "Damn it," he finally managed to say after some in-depth, red-hot lip action. Pulling his hips from the seat to rub against her perfect ass, he

rode the searing, pulsing climax to the end. How embarrassing!

What did it? Her wanting to get married? Her wanting a baby? He cradled her, taking in her scent. He eventually realized he could never hold back with her because she wanted *him*. All of him. He had no choice but to answer and give her anything and everything she wanted. He loved her. He'd always love her. And he sure as hell didn't mind kids. Especially the really little ones.

**If you enjoyed *Whisper*, you'll want to read
another of Kathleen's books,
Forbidden Thunder. Here's an excerpt:**

John Thunder glimpsed at the carnage in utter disbelief. A tangle of tractor-trailer and tractor-tanker blocked one complete lane of the two-lane interstate. Any description of the mess wouldn't do it justice. The cab of Liam's rig dangled off the side of the bridge. Twisted slightly toward the passenger door, the grill and windshield pointed down. The rear axles straddled the guardrail, which barely supported the cab. The trailer had jack-knifed and lay partially on its side with the tanker tangled against it. The massive Detroit diesel sputtered, sending up tiny bursts of smoke now and again. John had cleaned up some bad accidents but nothing compared to the destruction a few yards away.

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

"What's the situation?" John asked.

"The tanker's intact, the driver's safe. But the McKenna driver is trapped in the cab."

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

"Thunder, is that you?" John heard Liam say before he caught the faint odor of gasoline fumes.

"Yeah, I came for the barbeque. You on the menu?"

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

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

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

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

"Can't reach the key."

"You hurt?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I'm catching fumes from the vapor recovery on the gas tanker. If the diesel starts getting a steady dose of them, the motor could over-

rev and a lot of bad things could happen if it starts running wild.”

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

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

The shouts of one patrolman brought them all whirling around. “Hey, where’s she going?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I came to help."

"Your boot is on my crotch!"

More shifting.

Sorry, I'm wedged in."

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

"Can't. I'm stuck."

"Stuck!" Liam and John cried in unison.

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

"Are you hurt?" John called.

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

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

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

All at once, with a great screech of metal, the truck pitched to the right. John grabbed the handrail and held tight as the cab twisted away from the bridge. Men shouted to get the hell out of the way. Then nothing but stunned silence as the tractor dropped. Seemed like a mile, but was probably no

more than a foot. The motion stopped with a tremendous jolt as the entire weight of the truck was held by the chains his brothers used as anchors, and a not-so-secure looking fifth wheel. The cab was twisted almost completely over onto the passenger side, but safe for the time being.

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

"Sorry, that's it."

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

He listened as they struggled and she yelped.

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

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

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

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

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Don't talk, work the chains."

"Sorry about this," Caila said.

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

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

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

A word about the author...

Kathleen Lash is a multi-published, award-winning author who enjoys writing in various romance genres. She loves strong heroes and stronger heroines who can stand up to adversity and find their own happily-ever-after.

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