



Lust Bites
WINTER'S THAW
Devon Rhodes

A Total-E-Bound Publication



www.total-e-bound.com

Winter's Thaw

ISBN # 978-0-85715-364-7

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Edited by Jess Bimberg

Total-E-Bound Publishing

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Published in 2010 by Total-E-Bound Publishing, Think Tank, Ruston Way, Lincoln, LN6 7FL, United Kingdom.

Warning: This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-burning*.

Seasoned Women

WINTER'S THAW

Devon Rhodes

Dedication

For Jess, editor extraordinaire.
Love ya, girl.

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Muzak: Muzak, LLC

Chapter One

God, I hate Muzak. Maggie switched her cell phone to the other ear and pushed her fingers through her dark, irritatingly frizzed-out hair, automatically loosening yet another snag. She normally straightened and smoothed the mop, preferring it sleek, but hadn't had time this morning, so it fell in kinky twists, framing her drawn face.

She had just spent yesterday flying halfway across the country with her nine-year-old daughter, Cassie, to her mom's farm for an extended summer visit. Then after dinner, just as they were settling in, the call had come from the hospital about her husband, Wade—well, technically, ex-husband, but one month of 'ex' versus almost fifteen years of marriage made it hard to automatically add the prefix. He was in critical condition in the ICU after a car accident, so she'd had to book a solo next-morning flight, deciding to settle Cassie in with Mom instead of dragging her right back home. Then Maggie had spent a mostly-sleepless night getting frequent updates from the nurses before driving in the bleak pre-dawn to the closest airport. The first short flight had gone fine, but the voicemail message to call the ICU had been waiting when she turned her cell phone back on after disembarking.

She glanced up automatically as an extremely tall man stepped over her stretched out legs before dropping into the seat next to her. Mouth going dry, she could only just keep from gawking. *Wow, talk about the total package.* She made a mental note to tell her best friend, Sam, that she had sat right next to a Total Stud. Maybe even a Fallen Angel, their highest ranking for hot uber-alpha male.

She gave him a quick, furtive once-over out of the corner of her eye, her clearest view of his body his lap, where jeans that looked older than him lovingly clung. *Holy smokes. And 'package' was certainly right on the money.* More than just an Angel. They might have to invent a whole new category just for him, she mused. Maybe God on Earth? She searched her imagination for a title worthy of him as she continued to wait on hold. The two friends had played this game for years, 'collecting' and describing in detail the yummy, unattainable eye candy they ran across to one another. They were married, they always joked, not blind. And

at least she had something to keep her mind occupied while she was stuck in phone purgatory.

* * * *

"I'm sorry," the older woman's impersonal voice rang through the brutally clear cell connection. This was breaking it to her gently? "Someone from the discharge planning office will be calling about making arrangements and getting your husband's effects back to you." The delivery was rote, as if she was reading from a mental script. "Mrs. Winter?" she prodded.

"Yes, fine," Maggie managed to croak out. "Thank you." *What am I thanking her for?* she wondered. *For telling me that my husband just died? Talk about a social oddity.* The call disconnected, apparently from the other end, and Maggie was left leaning back in the hard airport seat, cupping her cell phone loosely in a slightly trembling hand.

The white noise from the endless mass of humanity around her was a surreal backdrop to the chaos in her mind. Maggie sat there unmoving for an untold measure of time, until a sudden, energetic surge of movement around her brought her back to the current situation. Apparently, they were boarding. Stay or go? The call had been an abrupt ending to a flurry of planning and rushing about which had started about fifteen hours earlier when she had gotten the first unexpected call, informing Maggie that Wade had been in a serious car accident back at home in Oregon.

Now, she was sitting here in the Minneapolis airport, standby the best she could do for this upcoming flight, and suddenly, she wasn't even sure if she should continue to Oregon or return to her daughter. *Cass.* A fresh burst of pain hit and Maggie sighed wearily at the prospect of breaking the news to her daughter. She rubbed her forehead, feeling the tension headache that had been growing all day tighten, digging its claws in. Poor baby was going to be devastated. Regardless of the difficulties Wade and Maggie had gone through lately as a couple, Cassie was very attached to her dad.

She flashed on a mental picture of Wade, energetic and in the prime of life, lying on a hospital bed, still, unmoving, not breathing... She firmly pushed the impossible image away, swallowing hard as she debated her next move. The prospect of flying home alone and

walking into the house they'd once shared was just flat disturbing. She should probably just catch the short commuter flight back to her mom and daughter.

Her name being forcefully announced penetrated her mental anguish. "Passengers Winter, and Ingram, party of two, for Portland, please come to the podium," the gate attendant called over the intercom, and Maggie stood to automatically obey. Taking a step to the right, she wobbled as her foot collided with something immovable. Before gravity took over, a firm grip caught her elbow and steadied her. She looked gratefully down into a pair of intense blue eyes. *Ah yes, the God on Earth.*

"Thanks." Maggie shook her head, feeling disconnected to reality. "Sorry about that."

"No problem," Blue-Eyes returned sympathetically. "Least I could do. My bag, my bad." He continued to hold her arm in a gentle grip. Maggie raised an eyebrow, and he released her with a faint, apologetic smile that had her unconsciously smiling in return.

She sobered abruptly with a mental slap that felt almost like a physical blow. *Your husband is dead, Mags, nothing to smile about right now.* She wondered numbly how many hundreds of times the reality would brutally hit her like that before she remembered.

Maggie shouldered the mom-sized leather purse which was her only bag for the trip, a deliberate attempt to avoid having to battle for overhead storage. She worked her way through the maze of legs and bags to the counter, waiting behind an older couple with matching wheeled luggage who had gotten there ahead of her.

"Hi," the male gate attendant greeted the couple. "Ingram?" The pair nodded in synch, the frowning wife bellying up to the counter. "There's one seat in First Class that I can put you in, and the other in Coach."

"Aren't there two seats together?"

Maggie mentally rolled her eyes at the woman's pointless question. The harried attendant looked irritated. "Well, there are two seats in Coach; however, they aren't right next to each other. Middle seats," he glanced down at the screen, "only two rows away from each other. I assumed one of you would prefer the First Class seat."

"But, we're travelling *together*. There must be something you can do." She leaned aggressively across the counter. Mr. Ingram stood back, apparently accustomed to letting his wife duke it out. "I'm not going to sit between two strangers for four hours. Aren't there two First Class seats?"

This time, Maggie did roll her eyes, and let out an audible sigh that felt really good. *Yes, just for you, lady, we'll put an extra row in the plane.* Her head was really starting to pound.

"Honey," Mr. Ingram timidly chimed in. "Why don't you take the First Class seat? I don't mind."

"Well, I do!" she rounded on him. "This is ridiculous. Just because you didn't make sure we had seat assignments when you reserved this thing..." She turned her ire on her husband, and at this point, the airline employee looked past them to Maggie.

"Winter?" he queried, and she nodded. He typed for a few seconds without further comment, then the sound of printing came from under the counter. He reached down and extracted a boarding pass, which he stretched over the counter to pass to Maggie. So simple. She glanced down. Seat two-F.

"Thank you." She offered the gate attendant her first genuine smile of the day. *Flies, honey, vinegar.* Point proven.

He smiled back and gave her a conspiratorial wink. Maggie quickly walked to the dwindling line to board. She wanted to make sure to get into her seat before the arguing couple realised that the First Class seat was history.

That distraction gone, she began thinking again about Wade. They'd had a solid marriage up until the past year when things had crumbled apart. But even during the bizarrely amicable divorce which had become final last month, they'd been able to keep things mostly happy and friendly for Cassie's sake. After nearly two decades together, he was still a huge part of Maggie's life. Yet she felt completely numb. *Shouldn't I be crying or something?* She remembered bursting into tears immediately when she'd learnt Dad had died. She'd literally cried for days. Still did sometimes, five years later. But in the unexpected face of her loss today, her eyes remained dry.

She clenched her jaw, miserable and furious with herself. *What the hell's wrong with me? And why am I even going to Portland now?* She stopped abruptly on her way down the gangway as that thought penetrated. She had forgotten all about deciding she should just go back to Mom's. The sole reason she had been going home was to be with Wade while he was in the hospital. Now...

Maggie groaned. The overwhelming scope of all she suddenly had to do in the next few days began to whirl through her aching head. She pushed it aside and tried to focus on this

trip. Might as well go at this point, she decided wearily. Surely some of the details would be easier to handle there in town rather than over the phone. She finished her descent down the gangway, stepping onto the plane without acknowledging the cheerful greeting of the flight attendant. Two-F, she recalled, looking to the left at the numbers along the overhead bins then looking down—to meet now-familiar blue eyes in the aisle seat next to hers.

Blue-Eyes had evidently been watching her approach—she caught him in the process of rising from his seat and stepping into the aisle. Her eyes followed him up, her head tilting slightly upward as he continued to rise well past six feet. This time she got a perfect view of his wide, developed chest, well-displayed by his tight white tee tucked into those impossibly faded jeans. She forced herself to look away, mentally chiding herself. *Geez, quit panting like a idiot over this hard, young kid, Maggie Jean. Drooling is very unbecoming at your age.*

He made a gentlemanly gesture towards the window seat, and she slid past him, only a breath away from that wall of chest, before twisting to sit heavily. As he settled in next to her, she automatically tucked her purse under the seat. After sitting back up, Maggie realised she needed to, at the very least, tell her Mom the news. She bent again with a sigh, extracting her cell phone.

“Hey, Mom,” she responded when she got an answer, “How’s everything going with Cass?”

“We’re just fine, honey, just finished breakfast. Have you heard anything new?”

Maggie took a deep breath, nostrils flaring. “He died, Mom.” She closed her eyes as her mom’s shocked exclamation was mostly lost under the announcement from the flight attendant. “I’ve got to go, I’m on the plane to Portland and they’re closing up. And Mom?” she added quickly. “Don’t tell Cass yet, okay? I’ll talk to her when I get back.”

“Oh my God, honey, I’m so sorry. Call me as soon as you get home.”

Maggie closed the phone, then popped it back open again. Home, she thought. She dialled her friend. And got voicemail. “Hey Sam, it’s me. Uh, I’m on my way back home. Long story, but was looking for a ride from the airport this afternoon. I’ll just grab a taxi or something. I’ll call you later, okay?” She turned her phone off and tucked it back into her bag. Four hours of quiet before diving into this mess. Maggie heaved a deep sigh, sagging bonelessly back against the seatback.

Now on rotation for her viewing pleasure were Blue-Eyes' long legs, stretched out under the seat in front of him and crossed at the ankles. His large, strong hand rested on the armrest between them, long fingers drumming occasionally. It was tanned and for some reason, sent a spike of feeling shooting through her gut as she watched it tap.

"Would you like something to drink?" This question was from the flight attendant, as she set a napkin on the area between the armrests, her manicured hand lingering close to Blue-Eyes' forearm. Irritation made Maggie's mouth tighten as she looked up and found the flight attendant practically in Blue-Eyes' lap as she bent over him. It had to be against airline regulations to have her shirt unbuttoned that far down.

To Maggie's shock, Blue-Eyes picked up her own hand, his fingers toying with her wedding band. He leaned closer to her, "Sweetheart, do you want something?"

Her gaze snapped to his, uncomprehending, as her jaw dropped in shock. *What is he doing?* The strokes of his fingers on hers was doing something wicked to her insides.

"Let's start with some water. She has a bad headache." This was directed to the flight attendant. "Do you have anything she can take for the pain?"

Maggie watched as the attendant withdrew to the galley, then turned back to Blue-Eyes. "She's gone now. You can let go," she whispered hoarsely, trying in vain to reclaim her hand.

"But she'll be back," he murmured just as quietly. He bent his head towards hers again. His dark hair looked like it had been recently cut in a short, businesslike style with a slight wave, and his chiselled jaw line sported a hint of shadow. His fingers stopped moving, but continued to hold her hand. Maggie could feel the warmth spreading upwards from her chest to her face as the blush consumed her. How long had it been since she'd sat holding hands like a kid on a date? Wade wasn't much for PDA. That thought did the sudden smack of reality thing again, which only added to her anxiety.

She turned away to try to get herself under control and could hear Blue-Eyes thanking the flight attendant. She gave a surreptitious tug to her left hand, practically a yank. He refused to relinquish it immediately but gently turned her hand over and placed two pills in her palm.

"Are these okay?" he asked, indicating the medicine in her hand. She glanced down and nodded. He held a glass of water, which he gestured with. "Go ahead."

She tipped the pills onto her tongue and reached for the glass. Her fingers brushed his as she took it, and she mentally castigated herself as she swallowed the water. *C'mon, Mags. Hardly a good time to get caught up flirting with some aeroplane Romeo.*

This sobered her again, and she knew she had to nip this in the bud as she finished the glass of water and set it down. "Thanks," she offered blandly, without looking at him. She pointedly closed her eyes and leant back.

She could feel his regard, but stubbornly refused to acknowledge him and tried to relax. It felt so good to close her eyes. This was her fourth flight in two days.

Her eyes flew open in shock as she felt a glancing touch across her breasts. Her nipples instantly hardened to taut peaks, and she saw Blue-Eyes' arm leaning across her chest.

"Seatbelt," he explained as he buckled her in. "You forgot to fasten it. I thought you were almost asleep." His eyelashes swept downwards and she could feel the tension between them ratchet up about ten notches as she sensed him noticing her reaction to his touch.

She squirmed a little under his gaze. Had she ever been on the receiving end of a look like that from a guy like him? Never in her very ordinary life. Maggie closed her eyes again, a little desperately, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to cross her arms across her chest. Apparently, Blue-Eyes finally got the message, since he also settled back into his seat.

Gradually, she relaxed, and the plane taxied towards takeoff. She was hyperaware of her body and could feel her breasts jouncing slightly as the plane moved over the runway. Was he watching? Just the thought made her peak again. A slight intake of breath next to her made her wish for a blanket. She hardly ever wore a bra, since she barely fit into an A cup, and never when she travelled. Now she wished she had some armour to reign in her wayward breasts, even if it would have been uncomfortable. Her nipples seemed to be eagerly awaiting the next touch. *Party's over, ladies.*

Chapter Two

Nick rested back against the seat, shifting slightly to ease his semi-erection. What was it about this petite woman that made him feel aroused and protective all at once? He had noticed her in the waiting area for the flight and purposely took the seat next to her. For all the good that did. He had immediately spied the disappointing presence of her wedding band. *Figures*. She had barely even noticed him when he caught her as she tripped on his bag.

He had still been thrilled when he realised that she was his seatmate for the flight and had shamelessly eavesdropped on her phone calls, watching in empathy as she passed along the bad news. He wasn't sure who had died, but suspected it was her husband. He felt like the biggest asshole in the world for his resentment of her married state. *Jesus, you're a creep*. He should just leave her alone.

Nick wasn't sure what possessed him to seize the flimsy excuse provided by the hovering flight attendant to take her hand, except for maybe wishful thinking. But once he touched her, he just couldn't stop. Her hand was so soft and warm, so small in his. He had tugged at her simple gold wedding band, wanting to remove it from her hand. The wave of possessiveness that went through him stunned him. Her eyes were a beautiful burnished copper, but he could see the pain and stress lurking in their depths. A headache, he'd guessed, and no wonder.

He had honestly been just trying to help her get settled when he reached across her to buckle her seatbelt. But the back of his arm glanced across her breasts, and he had felt the peaks pressing back against him. He hadn't been able to resist a glance down.

He groaned inwardly now at the recollection. No bra. He raked a hand through his hair and leant back in his seat, careful not to touch her again. Her eyes were closed, but he somehow knew she was as aware of him as he was of her.

Nick took the opportunity to study her profile as the plane began to take off. Her skin was fine with light freckles scattered across her tilted nose and cheekbones, and at this close range, just a few permanent smile lines were visible. No makeup. He guessed she was probably a bit older than him, likely in her thirties. Her almost-curly, dark hair was past

shoulder-length with some dark-reddish glints to it. Darker than auburn, and with those pretty copper eyes instead of the usual blue or ordinary brown, she made an impression. Her hands were clasped across her slim waist, and like him, she wore jeans, which hugged her generous hips and fell to straight legs. She had comfortable-looking running shoes on, legs loosely crossed at the ankles.

Nick let his gaze drift back up her still form to her simple red tee. As if she felt his regard, her nipples hardened again, poking at the soft fabric. He sucked in a breath in reaction as he shifted once more. She was blushing again, but her eyes were screwed closed and he reluctantly looked away, trying to respect her obvious desire for privacy.

As the plane began to level off, sensing she was still awake, he finally lost patience, wanting to see her eyes again.

"I'm Nick."

She continued to rest her head on the seatback, but tilted his way as those heart-stopping eyes opened to zero in on his. The effect was somehow very private and personal, as if he was her sole focus. "Maggie." She blinked, averted her gaze to somewhere in the vicinity of his shoulder. "I'm sorry if I'm being rude, but I've had a really bad day, and I just need to get some rest."

"So I gathered. I couldn't help but overhear your phone conversations." He boldly took her hand again. "You lost someone today?" he softly queried.

Maggie felt the first prick of tears in response to his unsolicited sympathy. "My husband, Wade," she managed. *Oh no.* She could feel the tears building as she spoke his name out loud for the first time. Finally beginning to grasp her loss, feeling the dam breaking, she tried to turn away towards the window. Nick took her by the shoulders and pulled her back firmly against his chest, awkwardly across the centre console, silently holding her as she at last began to weep.

The position wasn't in the least comfortable, the hard plastic pressing into her lower back, and as if sensing this, Nick leant forward, easing her more upright as she struggled to get a handle on her emotions.

As if breaking down and sobbing in the arms of a complete stranger wasn't bad enough, the flight attendant chose then to come back around and refill drink orders. She reached their row and waited, somewhat impatiently, for their attention.

"Nothing right now." Nick's voice came from right by Maggie's ear as the corresponding rumble in his chest gave her the awareness she needed to pull away. He, reluctantly it seemed, let her straighten and she immediately dove for her purse, needing a tissue in the worst way.

Throat aching and a million thoughts racing through her head, she settled back once again in her seat and wondered at the surreal scene she'd somehow fallen into. Back and forth across the country. Falling into the sympathetic arms of a disarmingly gorgeous man.

Oh, and losing Wade.

Forever.

Maggie shook her head as if that could clear her mind. She and Wade had been high school sweethearts, well, junior high to tell the truth. She couldn't remember a time when he wasn't in her life. They'd been in school and college together, been each other's best friend, married soon after graduation, and eventually had Cassie. Everything should have been rosy.

The only portion of their lives that hadn't really clicked was what had eventually driven them apart. Sex. Or lack thereof. Wade had a high sex drive, while Maggie's was nearly non-existent, even more so since she'd had Cass. He had begun to resent always being the 'initiator' and she, in turn, had felt pressured and harassed. Finally, perhaps inevitably, Wade had strayed outside their marriage. His affair was brief, and many men would likely have hidden the secret relationship away, but in this, their long friendship stood them in good stead. So they'd talked about it, as rationally as they could, and the separation had come with pangs of nostalgia, but no real pain.

The divorce had been, according to her friends, 'ridiculously amicable', and they were even technically still sharing the house. Wade had an apartment a couple of miles away. But instead of having Cassie uproot herself for his portion of the visitation, Wade just kept a bedroom in their house and stayed over most weekends, as if the family unit was still whole. They'd agreed that when—or as she'd always silently amended in her case to *if*—they ever

started seeing other people, that would be time enough to begin to completely disentangle their lives. But for now, it worked for them.

Had worked.

The bludgeoning correction to past tense yet again shook Maggie to the core, and her thoughts opened her eyes to the realisation that she'd be home in a few hours, walking into the house they'd shared—alone. She could probably go stay at Sam's, but that was ridiculous. It was her home.

Pushing the thought aside for now, Maggie accepted first the warm towel to wash up before the meal arrived then the food as it came. Nick had been a quiet presence next to her while she'd composed herself, and she was grateful for his understanding.

They shared their meal in a not uncomfortable silence, and after things had been cleared away and they'd stowed their tables back in the armrests, Maggie found herself turning to the man next to her.

Opening her mouth to speak, she found she didn't know quite what to say and closed it again, but his attention had already been garnered. *Oh well.* She was struggling for a grip on some sort of conversational ball, when he thankfully jumped in instead.

Obviously asking her how she was would be the dumbest question ever, so when she finally looked in his direction, he amended it to, "How is your head feeling?"

She blinked and thought about her answer for a moment. "It's okay. Better, but still just...full."

He could only imagine. "You want to talk about it, or do idle chit-chat?"

She sent a grateful look his way. "Chit-chat is good."

So they spent the next half hour talking about random things, and if periodically she would steer away from certain topics, likely linked in her mind to the elephant in the room, he let her direct the flow.

The video compilation finally settled into the movie, and they donned their headphones. Nick really had no interest in watching the rom-com, but went ahead for appearance's sake, to take some of the pressure off Maggie—that strange compulsion to talk to the person next to you on a flight.

When the movie finished, they'd been sitting next to one another for hours, and Nick reflected that the sheer proximity gave him a sort of comfortable knowledge of Maggie. Oh, she still pushed his buttons, but he was in his twenties, not some out-of-control hormonal kid. So the low-level glow of attraction simply warmed, an undertone to the ease with which he was becoming familiar with his seatmate.

The delicate way she picked at her food first before visibly forcing herself to eat. The constant shifting in her seat, which spoke of being unused to sitting for such a long stretch. Her clothing choices, which put comfort ahead of trends. All these observations combined to paint a picture of her in Nick's mind—one of a woman who concentrated less on herself and more on the people and activities around her. She was well-spoken and polite, even with the trauma she was currently undergoing, and she most definitely loved her dead husband.

Nick shook his head in sad wonder. To have found the person you have such a deep connection to then lose them so suddenly... It was amazing she was doing as well as she was. She was probably still in shock, he decided, and he hoped she had someone in town to support her when she got back. That brought his mind back around to the message he'd heard her leave earlier.

Touching her soft hand briefly to get her attention startled her into focus, then she offered him a half-smile. He smiled in return. "Sorry, you were kind of lost in thought. I wanted to make sure you had a ride home from the airport."

A slight grimace crossed her face. "I won't know until I land, I guess. I wasn't able to get hold of Sam—my friend," she clarified and he nodded. "I'll probably just take a taxi. It's the weekend, so the train doesn't run out to my neck of the woods."

"You live down in the southwest 'burbs? That's a long taxi ride."

She shrugged. "Works both ways. By the time I get hold of Sam then wait for her to get to the airport, I could be home already, even by taxi."

"My car's in the airport parking garage, and I live down that way. I don't mind giving you a ride."

Her gaze turned wary, and he figured she was thinking about getting into a car with a virtual stranger, having him know where she lived. He held up a hand. "Only if you're comfortable with that. But honestly, I live in Lake Grove, so I have to go down there anyway,

and I can guarantee my car's more comfortable than a taxi." He smiled reassuringly then had a thought. He pulled out his wallet and extracted his license.

"Here." He handed it to her. "You can text my info to whoever you like when we land so someone knows who you're with, if that makes you feel safer." He watched as she studied his ID for a minute, then looked up, startled.

"You're younger than you look."

Nick burst out laughing. "Should I feel insulted that I look 'old'?" he teased, and watched as a blush crept up her neck and face.

"I didn't say that—exactly. Just old-*er*. Than you actually are. Oh man." She dropped her face into her hands and groaned theatrically, and Nick felt a burst of affection for her. At least he'd gotten her mind off things for a moment.

"It's okay. See? I'm legal and everything."

"Barely," she mumbled under her breath, but he managed to catch it even under the white noise of the plane.

"Oh, come on. You're not that much older than I am."

She finally peeked back over at him, this time with her brow arched sceptically. "Well, you just keep on thinking that. That's fine with me. As for me, I *know* exactly how much older I am, so I'm entitled to comment."

She maintained her serious look for a few moments then they were both laughing lightly. She handed his ID back and caught his hand for a moment. The grip surprised him and sent a shiver of awareness through him.

"In all seriousness, thank you." She gestured around them. "For everything. I was really dreading this flight. I don't do well with a lot of time to think, and— Well, you've made it pass by much more easily than I ever would have guessed possible." She glanced at their joined hands and let go quickly. "And thanks, also, for the offer of a ride, but I don't want to put you out."

"It's no trouble at all," Nick interjected quickly, sensing that she was wavering. He put all his sincerity into the gaze locked with hers. "I'm happy to do it, if it will make this day any less stressful for you."

Maggie's cheeks puffed out as she blew out a quick breath. "I never do this, have anything to do with strangers..."

"We're not really strangers anymore, are we?" Nick heard the overly serious tone of his own voice and purposely lightened it up. "I mean, you cried all over me, we've held hands, heck, even the flight attendant thinks we're together."

He got his desired response as her lips turned up in a slight smile once again. "Okay, that would be really nice. I'm not a huge fan of taxis." Her nose wrinkled up. *How adorable was that?*

A shadow crossed her face as her expression smoothed out once again.

"What is it?" he gently queried.

She shrugged then hugged herself. "I was just thinking about walking into the house. Alone. It's never empty. I mean," She looked out the window pensively. "Between me and Wade and Cass and Champ—the cat, who's with Sam," she explained and he nodded. "It's just going to seem really quiet."

He didn't have a response for that, so kept silent. After a moment, she shook herself out of her ponderings and shot him a curious glance. "You're awfully comfortable with this. Are you some kind of counsellor or something?"

"Or something," he agreed. "I'm a police officer."

Her eyebrows rose. "Really?" she blurted, then grimaced apologetically. "I don't know why that surprises me, but it does." She looked puzzled. "You might have mentioned that when you were trying to get me to trust you enough to take a ride from you."

Nick frowned, hoping she wasn't that naive. "You wouldn't trust someone just because they *said* they were law enforcement, would you?" She shook her head, and he relaxed a bit. "Good." He reached in the other back pocket and pulled out his flat badge and departmental ID in their slim case and opened it for her to see. "Always ask to see their ID. Most departments require we carry our credentials at all times while armed, which is most of the time. Oh, not now," he clarified as her eyebrows shot upwards and her eyes dropped to scan his waistline. He tucked his ID back away. "But I'm just in the habit of having it on me."

"Okay," she acknowledged, and he wondered what was going on behind those wary eyes. "I guess I am a bit naive," she somehow plucked the word right out of his head. "I don't know much about cops...uh, is 'cops' okay?"

He nodded, slightly amused at her reticence. "I've been called worse," he commented wryly.

Her lips twitched and he had to forcibly look away from her as some very inappropriate thoughts went through his head. He looked at his wristwatch. One more hour.

Shifting uncomfortably as her scent and nearness combined to make his cock start to thicken, Nick finally gave up and headed to the forward lav for a little breathing room before he shocked her with an inappropriate display.

It was just his luck, he finally runs into a woman he feels true chemistry with, and she's a widow of less than a day. And right there, practically in his lap for hours.

Longest fricken flight ever.

Chapter Three

"How do I ask this without sounding rude?" Maggie wondered aloud, not surprised when Nick tipped her a grin from the driver's seat of his SUV. He was a really likeable guy and she enjoyed their conversations. He was the kind of man she imagined people would gravitate to, take their troubles to, and share things with they wouldn't tell other people. *Just look at me, I'm talking his ear off and making him play chauffeur for the 'damsel in distress'.*

"Lay it on me. If it's really rude, I'll just drop you off here." He waved his hand vaguely at the interstate highway rolling by under the vehicle.

She was unused to all this teasing and banter with a member of the opposite sex, but found herself responding in kind.

"Police brutality!"

Nick's eyebrows shot up and for a moment, she thought she'd gone too far. Then a deep rumbling laugh built up and she spent the next couple of minutes trying not to smile as he regained his composure.

"You finished?" she mocked, checking her bare wrist for the time.

"Mmm hmm." He was pressing his lips together. "Question?"

"What were you doing flying First Class?"

"Oh, that is rude. What, you think because I'm a cop I should be stuck back in cattle class?"

Maggie sputtered for a minute before she noticed the teasing light in his eyes. "Of course not," she answered, then conceded, "You got me. I thought you were seriously offended."

"Oh, I'm offended all right. Offended that you don't think you can ask a reasonable question without me overreacting."

That's because I was married to the king of touchiness, she thought, then mentally chastised herself for thinking ill of the dead. "Touché."

"I'm a pretty big guy, I need the room. And I don't fly that often, but when I do, it's worth it to me to upgrade to first."

Her eyes had begun to roam over his form without conscious thought as he spoke, as if they needed to confirm he was indeed a big guy. Tall, yes, and muscular in a fit, athletic way. Maggie tried to imagine him in his uniform for the first time, and suddenly had an appreciation for how 'badge bunnies' must feel.

Okay, enough of that. Eyes forward.

Before long, Maggie was directing Nick to turn into her driveway. The house looked deserted in a way it never had before, even with the unforgiving daylight. He turned off the engine and Maggie still couldn't make herself move from the passenger's seat.

Then her door opened, and Nick stood there, a concerned expression on his face, holding his hand to her. Striving for courage, she swallowed and accepted his help, feeling the need for a connection, wanting to not feel alone right now.

"I'll walk you inside. Okay?"

Sheer relief made her a little dizzy. "Thank you."

She pulled out her keys and cell phone as they walked to the door. Maggie closed her eyes briefly as the thought of how many calls she was going to have to make, how many messages had piled up.

Despite her earlier thought of it feeling deserted, in actuality, the house looked no different than when she'd left it. Why would it? Maggie doubted Wade had been here in the brief time between their departure for the airport and his accident. In fact, ironically enough, that was exactly why Sam was watching Champ instead of Wade checking on him here. Wade had thought it would feel too quiet, too odd being here alone without Cass and Maggie.

Now here she was.

But not alone.

Nick stood in quiet support at her side in the foyer, looking around, his gaze sharp. *Ah, no wonder he wanted to walk me inside.* Probably hard to turn off the cop, even off duty.

She took another step farther inside and looked down as her foot contacted something. Cassie's hat. The one Wade had given her. She'd been wearing it when they were getting ready to leave for the airport, but changed her mind and winged it in the door at the last minute. Maggie stooped to pick it up, memories of Cass and Wade smiling together in her head, and all at once, she broke down.

Nick tried to catch her arm as she pushed past towards the couch, but she shook him off. Even in her sorrow, she knew she didn't want to make a fool of herself in front of him once again. Willing him to leave as she dropped to the cushion, burying her face in her hands, she wasn't terribly surprised when instead of going, Nick sat beside her and put a strong arm around her shoulders.

She must have wept for ages, and by the time the storm abated, she'd emptied the box of tissues on the end table and her shirt hem was soaked. Nick had retreated once and come back with a damp facecloth, which he used to cool her face. Averting her eyes as she took it from him, she hid behind the blessedly soothing material for as long as she could. It became evident he wasn't going anywhere anytime soon, and she finally surfaced.

"Don't you have anything better to do?" she challenged, her voice falling well short of the heat she'd intended.

"Not a thing," he replied with sincerity, and she raised her eyes to lock on him, so close to hers. She was fully aware of what a disaster she must look, and very thankful she hadn't taken the time to put on any makeup. At least she was spared the streaks down her face. But puffy and red likely wasn't much better.

And yet she couldn't look away, trapped by the concern and warmth in his gaze.

"I'm a mess," she murmured.

"You're beautiful," he countered. Her eyes dropped to his lips as he spoke and the sudden urge to kiss him both spooked and enticed her.

What are you thinking?

But her inner voice was more curious than chiding. She knew this was a bad idea. A really, really bad idea. But God help her, she wanted his touch right now, his strength, and she knew instinctively he wanted her too.

His lips were dry and warm against hers, gentle pressure as they glanced tentatively against one another. The contact shocked her into sanity and she pulled back with reluctance.

"Sorry about that," she apologised. For what, she wasn't certain.

"I'm not."

The husky answer sent a tendril of want coiling back through her, which she ruthlessly suppressed. Standing, she distanced herself from him, then fought back a yawn.

He stood as well. "You're tired. I should go."

"No." The automatic response surprised both of them. "I mean, of course you can go." She shook her head as if to clear it. "I probably should have had you stop for a coffee."

"Would you like me to run and get you something?"

Just then, her forgotten cell phone rang, bringing her back to the reality of all she needed to do. She answered the call from one of Wade's relatives and was quickly pulled into an emotional conversation. Nick stepped up to give her a brief hug and kiss on the forehead before mouthing, "Hang in there. Okay?" He turned and walked to the front door.

Her eyes followed him helplessly, and she wished she could say goodbye and thank you. The indefinable feeling she was losing something had to do with Wade. Right?

A hand lifted in a wave, then he was gone.

* * * *

The next couple of hours passed in a sapping blur of phone calls. Sam had come by to lend support, but knowing that today typically was a busy day for her friend's family, Maggie had sent her home with a promise to take her up on her offer of company tomorrow when she would have to go to the hospital and auto shop and Wade's apartment.

Every conversation took a little bit more out of her until the last one, which sent her careening over the edge of vulnerable exhaustion—her goodnight phone call to Cass. She kept it as short as she could, Maggie's mom helping by successfully distracting Cass with the chance to choose dessert. The subterfuge of trying to act normal for her daughter's sake sent Maggie crashing to the couch when the conversation ended, her mom's, "Try to get some rest, honey," echoing in her head as she finally succumbed to the welcome respite of sleep.

It was dark when she next stirred, something intruding into her uneasy rest. Then she was being lifted in strong arms and carried. The movement finally had her opening her eyes in dazed curiosity, even as she looped her arms around a masculine neck. Nick's scowl greeted her from a few inches away as he began to ascend the stairs as easily as if he were not hauling a grown woman.

Maggie knew she should protest. She wondered at his presence. But the past twenty-four hours had taken their toll and she pushed all that aside and simply accepted the cossetting as Nick lowered her to her bed and covered her with an afghan.

"We're going to talk about you leaving the blinds open and the door unlocked," he warned close to her ear, then sighed. "But not now. Get some sleep." He straightened to go and the implications of his action finally cut through her lethargy.

She grabbed his wrist. "Will you stay?" His shocked eyes met hers as he turned. "I mean, I didn't get a chance to say... I want to..." She let go of his wrist. "Oh, who am I kidding? I just—want you to stay." She inwardly pleaded for his understanding, because right then, she had no idea what she expected, whatever the outcome might be. Coherency was beyond her.

All she knew was, when his arms were around her, it was the first time she'd felt at peace all day. There was more to it than that, but that was all she'd allow herself at the moment.

His eyes searched hers in the dim light from the hallway then he stood back once more. She bit back a protest—if he'd made up his mind to leave, there was no use in begging.

When he kicked off his shoes and placed them neatly under her dressing chair, she finally relaxed.

"I'm going to make sure everything's locked up and turn off the lights." He brushed some hair back from her temple. "Be right back."

Maggie exhaled in relief then sat up as he strode from the room. Making a trip to the bathroom, she did an abbreviated night-time routine then slipped into one of her favourite old T-shirts. She briefly considered adding pyjama pants, but knew she wouldn't be able to sleep as well, and the tee covered her almost to the knees anyway.

She was back in bed under the covers when Nick came back in. "Do you want me in here?" he asked, and didn't appear surprised when she self-consciously nodded.

He walked to the opposite side of the bed and undid his jeans. That's when she noticed the gun. He must have noticed her eyes widening. "Does it bother you to have the gun in here? I usually keep it right by me, but I can lock it in my —"

"No, that's fine. It just surprised me."

He appeared to gauge her response then resumed taking the holstered gun from his belt and placing it on the nightstand. Then he dropped his pants.

Oh my God.

Maggie was instantly frustrated by the lack of light in the room. The tight white boxer briefs were like a beacon in the dark, but she couldn't see details.

Just as well, you perv. Go to sleep. Think of him as an asexual teddy bear.

Nick slipped his socks off and climbed into bed in briefs and T-shirt. Maggie had a strange moment when the realisation hit her that, yes, there was a man in her bed, and not one she'd know since they were kids. Wade had been her one and only since puberty, and friends for even longer. So to even be this close to another man was foreign, as were the sensations coursing through her. It took her a while to decipher what she felt and when she did, the shock of it almost killed the feeling itself.

Desire.

So this is what it feels like.

Stunned, she instantly felt disloyal to her memory of Wade. If this was what had been missing from their relationship, if this was what she had owed him and never felt, then she had done him a great disservice in marrying him to begin with.

All those years, wasted.

Maggie curled onto her side, away from Nick, feeling sorrow at what should have been. Silent tears of grief tracked along her face into her pillow well into the night.

Chapter Four

Nick spent much of the night dozing rather than sleeping. The strange bed, his earlier anger and worry at finding her door unlocked with her vulnerable on the couch when he'd come back, Maggie's stifled tears she was obviously trying to hide—all conspired to keep him on edge and made it difficult to let go and fall asleep.

He'd debated with himself earlier, finally caving after a trip home to unpack. He wanted to make sure Maggie was going to be alright. She'd looked so alone, so lost when he'd left. Then when he had returned, he'd been able to look right in and see her sleeping on the couch from the window in the front of the house. Some instinct had made him check the door before ringing the bell, and sure enough, it had been wide open. Fear and fury, coupled with the images from work in his head of what he'd seen happen to less careless women, had driven him inside, clearing the house. She'd even slept through his moving around, her only reaction to curl more tightly in on herself as he'd stood over her and watched. The thought of someone committing a crime of opportunity doing the same almost made him physically ill.

He thought he'd done an admirable job of fighting back his ire when he'd taken her up to bed, and indeed, now that she was safe and tucked away, he could focus on how to impress upon her the real need to be extra safe now that she would be living alone.

Nick frowned as he thought about that. From what he'd observed, there was little evidence a man even lived here now. Oh, there was a jacket and a couple of pairs of shoes he'd seen, and there were family pictures featuring a slight, blond man with glasses, along with a cute little girl with her mother's eyes and curls, only blonde like her dad. But that was it.

Maggie moved in her sleep, and he remembered her grip on his wrist, her eyes steady on his as she'd asked him to stay. Pleased to have the chance to talk to her, to maybe even become friends, he'd been more than happy to stay. She didn't imply anything untoward, although there had been a moment when he'd shucked his jeans off...

Even in the dark, he'd felt the crackle of desire as something changed in the way she'd looked at him, held herself, maybe her breathing. But then, like a faucet turning off, it was

gone, and she'd hunched away from him on the bed. Moments later, a hitch in her breath had given away her tears, as much as she tried to be silent. It was one of the hardest things he'd ever done, to leave her alone in that moment, only lending the tacit support of his presence, when all he'd wanted was to pull her into his arms and tell her everything was going to be fine.

She'd lost her husband. Things were a long way from being fine for her.

And she was a long way from wanting anything more than a warm body, someone at her side to keep it from being too quiet. Nick figured he was being used—oh, not in a bad way necessarily—as a substitute for the companion she was accustomed to. And that was fine. If it gave her some comfort, he could be whatever she needed. In a ridiculously short amount of time, she'd somehow twined her way into his heart. He didn't believe in love at first sight, but he knew chemistry when he felt it. Allowed to grow, love could come.

But that kind of growth was not in the foreseeable future.

Nick grimaced. *Figures.*

Ah well, he'd take what he could get. He had nothing but time. And speaking of which...

He rose up and glanced at the clock. Nearly two a.m. He flopped back down and tried to blank his mind, then gave up and rose. Quietly pulling his cell from his jeans pocket, he made his way downstairs to the living room. He dialled the desk and, as he suspected, got Rollie.

"Hey Rollie, it's Nick."

"Nick! You back? How was your grandma?"

"Yeah, just got in this afternoon. It was a good visit. She's getting up there, but still really active. Hey, can you look something up for me?"

"Sure, whatcha need?"

Nick gave Rollie Wade's name and the fact he'd been in an auto accident. "Might not be down as a fatality, he died at St. Vincent's."

There was the sound of typing and a period of silence. "Okay, yeah. Other driver crossed into oncoming traffic. Three car accident, four people transported. The driver at fault was dead on scene. Um, what else? No one under the influence. He—Wade Winters—had a

clean driving record. Highway patrol notified ex-wife Margaret Winters yesterday by phone. Do you need the number?"

Ex-wife? "Sure, go ahead."

Rollie gave him the number and he entered it into his phone. "That all you need, Nick? When are you back on shift?"

"Days, tomorrow. Uh, today."

"Well, damn, get some sleep then."

"Will do. Thanks, Rollie."

Nick hung up and finished entering Maggie's name on her contact page. *They hadn't been married anymore.* But he could swear she'd referred to him as her husband, not ex-husband. And she was still wearing her wedding band.

Huh. Well, maybe she just hadn't moved on yet, even though she was free. A sense of relief spread through him at the knowledge that instead of being attracted to a raw widow of a day's time, he was more acceptably interested in a divorced woman who had just lost her ex—which was bad enough. The other had just been disturbing. He blew out a breath, feeling much better about himself.

Back upstairs, he carefully got back into the far side of her bed. Settling in, actually feeling like he could rest this time, he realised part of his restlessness before was his subconscious unease at being in the bed of another man, in place of him. Letting go of that worry, he confirmed that his cell phone alarm was set and let himself relax into sleep.

* * * *

Maggie woke up slowly from a good dream that was getting better by the minute. She was tucked securely against a large male frame, her head pillowed on a muscular shoulder. There was no confusion, no mistaken identity. She knew instantly it was Nick—Wade had never been a cuddler, and moreover, Nick likely had at least fifty pounds on her ex.

The grief tried to intrude at the thought of Wade, and she pushed it away, purposely concentrating on the now. Her leg was thrown possessively across Nick, and she couldn't help a little movement, rubbing against his hair-roughened thigh. He squeezed her in response, and she smiled against his skin.

He'd stayed.

And had been a gentleman.

Not sure if she was happy with that or not, she wiggled a bit closer. His chest started to shake under her and, startled, she lifted her head to look at him, to find the movement was apparently stifled laughter. His eyes danced with amusement, and she frowned.

"What's so funny?"

He used his large hand to tuck her head back down against his shoulder. "You are. You sleep like the dead, but you're very wiggly when you wake up."

Her head popped back up as soon as he let go — she wanted to see him — but she had no desire to move anything else. In fact... She shifted her leg over his again, and he groaned, his head going back onto the pillow.

"Quit moving!"

A rush of pure feminine power overtook Maggie. It was as if she were another woman — a confident, sexy woman, certain of her own appeal. Trying not to think too much about what she was doing, she went on instinct instead. From the position she was in, it took about two seconds for Maggie to be straddling Nick.

From her new vantage point astride her sexy bed mate, she could see the surprise in his gaze being overtaken by heat.

"This isn't the best time for this," he cautioned, even as his hands came up to bracket her hips, holding her in place. "You need time."

"I need this. And there is no better time. We're here — now. The rest of the world can wait a while."

Nick's lips parted as if to argue, but then he gave her a wry grin instead. "You sound very certain."

"I am," Maggie agreed, needing to make it clear to him. "I'm not stupid. I know this is probably some knee-jerk, cycle of grief thing. But oh, I want this." She circled her hips against the growing firmness beneath her, and he helped by holding her even more firmly and moving her exactly how he wanted.

He gave a jerk forward, and she lost her balance, falling to catch herself on her elbows just above his shoulders. The new angle had his cock rubbing against her clit on every pass, the two thin layers of their underwear no barrier to the heat and moisture being produced.

Each thrust sent shockwaves of sensation through her, travelling from her sex to her now-aching breasts and back to concentrate at her core.

Her lips parted. There wasn't enough oxygen in the world just then. Brushing the taut tips of her breasts against his solid chest, she lingered just above his lips. Their eyes locked and the kiss she craved was just an inch away. Maggie knew Nick wouldn't take it, that he would let her set the pace, and that made her even more determined to tempt him into making a move.

Maggie licked her lips as her gaze dropped to his mouth. His tongue was just visible inside his parted lips and she could feel the warmth of his breath on her face. She alternately surged with and fought against his hold on her hips, seeking the most contact she could, using her sex to shamelessly stroke against his rigid erection.

This is the best sex I've had in my life, and we're still dressed.

Time to make it better.

Maggie sat up abruptly and pulled the T-shirt over her head in one swift movement. Nick's gasp ended in a growl as his patience finally broke. He tossed her off of him onto the other side of the bed, and before she'd stopped bouncing, he had hold of her panties and pulled them down her legs.

He tossed the garment aside and deliberately slowed his movements as he worked the T-shirt over his head. At the first sight of his broad, muscled chest, Maggie forgot all about lying there naked and exposed. Eagerly trailing her eyes over his form, she propped herself up on an elbow and followed the path of her gaze with her hand, all the way down to the waistband of the boxer briefs that had drawn her attention earlier that night. Her fingers slid just inside the elastic, and she began to pull downwards. Nick gave a heart-stopping little shimmy of assistance and she worked the last barrier downwards to his thighs.

His erection hung long and thick—and Nick was uncircumcised. Distracted by the difference, she reached out before she thought and took him in hand. He hissed in a breath and pulsed against her palm.

"Wow," Maggie voiced her admiration and was gratified when Nick flushed red. "Can I, um..." She wasn't sure how to voice her request to see how the foreskin worked. So instead, she stroked him and watched as the glistening red head emerged.

"Girl, you're killing me."

Maggie snorted. "Girl? I'm no girl." She kept up her slow stroking, mesmerised, until a bead of pre-cum welled in his slit. She inhaled and looked up.

Nick's heavy-lidded expression did crazy things to her insides and her pussy was literally clenching in anticipation. *I want him to fuck me*, she thought, stunned.

Her sense that another person had taken over her body increased at the alien thought. But sure enough, all the signs were there. She mentally pictured herself as she was at that moment—sprawled before him, naked, breasts peaked and the fold of her sex moist, hand on his erect cock. Not a position she ever thought she'd be in.

But not one I'm going to squander either.

Chapter Five

Fighting through the feeling of her hand on him, still caressing him with a maddeningly light touch, Nick retained enough sense to see the acceptance in her eyes. But he still needed the words.

"Maggie?" He waited until he had her attention. "I won't do anything you don't want. We can stop anytime. We can stop right now. As little or as much as you want. Your call."

She didn't hesitate. "I don't want to stop."

He leant down until he was braced over her. "What *do* you want?"

At the direct question, she opened her mouth then closed it. Her hands came up and ran along his lats then down to cup his ass in a firm grip. Her pressure pulled him forward enough so his cock rode against the softness of her belly.

"Would it be easier to answer what you don't want?" he tried one last time.

Her eyes shone up at him even in low light cast by the streetlamp, still on outside. She arched beneath him, seemingly seeking greater contact.

"I don't want to stop feeling like this."

At the heartfelt admission, he relented and lowered his body on top of hers, relishing the feel of her cradling him against her smooth skin. "How do you feel?" he murmured.

Maggie mouthed his jaw line, and he felt the tip of her tongue come out to taste him. He in turn let his own lips glide down the curve of her neck. Her legs came up to wrap around the back of his, twining together until they were completely aligned. One small movement would put him right where he was dying to be. He gritted his teeth, the effort to keep this two-way seduction slow straining every bit of patience he had.

"I feel—sexy. Hungry. Alive..." This last trailed off and he saw a hint of reality enter her expression. Waiting to see if it would be the tipping point, he nearly held his breath until she continued.

"I love feeling this way. It makes me think I've missed a lot in my life. I want you to show me."

There was no reply he could give that seemed adequate to answer the trust and responsibility she was asking him for. So instead, he tried to show her without words how vibrant and gorgeous he found her. Dipping his head, he took those small, tight nipples one at a time into his mouth, teething and tugging at them until they were standing taut at attention. Satisfied, he tasted his way down her stomach, his frequent glances up at her rapt face spurring him onwards to the dark triangle protecting her core.

Shouldering her legs even farther apart, Nick found her nether lips were partially spread and glistening. He ran his tongue through her folds, opening her completely, tasting the mouth-watering essence of her as she fought to ride his mouth. He stilled her hips with his hands, and suckled and lapped at her clit and dipped into her entrance.

Her moans and cries intensified until at once, she arched up against him and he tongued her through her climax, pulling back only when her hands scrabbled at his shoulders. Loving the feel of her dampness on his lips and chin, he moved upwards to share her taste in a long, lush kiss that left them both panting.

Absolutely at the breaking point, he pulled back reluctantly and slid to the side of the bed in order to reach for his pants.

"What? Where are you going?" Maggie's voice sounded almost panicked as she sat up quickly. Not wanting to cause her a moment of worry, he turned to soothe her with a kiss.

"Just getting some protection, sweetheart."

"Oh." Her chagrined tone made him ache for her.

"It's no reflection on you or on me. It's just smart, a precaution."

"Of course, I know that. I just didn't think." She rolled her eyes, self-deprecatingly, and Nick relaxed and grinned. Pulling a condom from his wallet, he opened it, then held her eyes with his own as he gave his shaft a few hard pumps before placing the disc at the tip.

Her expression abruptly changed as she watched him hold and roll the condom down his length, and her admiring gaze made him even harder. When was the last time he'd ever been regarded with such blatant yet innocent interest? Nick shook his head. Nothing about Maggie was like anything he'd ever experienced before, from her wide-eyed reactions to her sultry siren song. His protectiveness towards her was yet another new sensation.

He laid her back and stroked her warmth with his fingers, testing her readiness, then sank into her welcoming folds. Her gasp echoed his as they came together and he paused to

allow her to adjust. Damn, she was tight. She was a petite little thing, and he also wagered it had been a while. Rocking side to side instead of the further penetration he was aching for, he tried to give her time to become accustomed to his presence.

Then she took matters into her own hands, so to speak, by trailing her fingertips down his pecs to his nipples and giving them a caress. Always a hot spot for him, he couldn't keep from thrusting in reflex, finally sinking all the way into her warmth.

That thrust felt so good, and Maggie had nothing but desire and want in her eyes, so he began to move. The slow, rhythmic pace he set effectively edged his impending climax—all the time spent in such close proximity to her, sleeping with her, the foreplay—it all had kept him at the breaking point for longer than he'd thought possible.

Nick finally let his body take over, his penetration going deeper and harder until sweat trickled down his back and temples. Maggie was a quiet, wordless lover, but the gasps and moans deep in her throat gave him all the feedback he needed.

He got a hand between them and thrummed her peaked clit along with his thrusts and she went wild beneath him, finally arching against him as he rode her to his own finish. The squeeze of her passage on his shaft at the peak of its sensitivity prolonged his pleasure. "Ah, babe. Maggie—" he called then, his strength fading, he rolled to his side, taking her with him.

Holding her close, their damp skin pressed together and breaths comingling, he rested his forehead against hers. Her dark lashes rested against her pale skin, and he closed his own eyes as well. After a few minutes, he was forced to disentangle himself and grasp the condom as he slipped from her body.

After a trip to the bathroom to take care of necessities, he returned to find Maggie curled on her side away from him. A twinge of foreboding hit him at the tell-tale body language.

She stiffened as he slipped back in behind her. Ignoring her silent protest, he pulled her back against his chest and decided to take the bull by the horns.

"What's going through your mind, Maggie?"

After a moment, a shrug was her only response and his sense of dread grew.

"Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"What's wrong?" she asked incredulously, and the strain in her voice made him wince. She turned over to face him, tears streaking down her face. "What could possibly be wrong? My daughter's father is dead, and I have a funeral to plan, and here I am, rolling around in my bed with some...kid." She sat up and grabbed the sheet and tucked it firmly in place under her arms.

Defensiveness boiled up in Nick, even as he recognised Maggie was just striking out in her guilt and grief. "Can I remind you that I told you this wasn't the best time for this? That I asked you, repeatedly, if you were sure this was what you wanted? I gave you every opportunity to stop."

"Of course you did, but you knew I wouldn't. You had me so turned on—" She cut off abruptly.

"You asked me to continue. I gave you control of the situation at every possible stopping point. I did not take advantage of you," he gritted, even as he owned up to himself that it was possible he *had*. What had he been thinking? He should have known this would be the outcome, should have been the clear-headed one.

Remorse filled him and his anger deflated. "Ah, Maggie, I'm sorry. I honestly thought this was what you wanted. I thought you enjoyed it."

Her face crumbled. "I did." Then she was sobbing, and he understood. She was upset because she had enjoyed it, had wanted it, and was beating herself up for being human.

He took her in his arms, and while she was still stiff, she didn't pull away. "Shhh," he tried to soothe, wishing he knew what to do or say to take away her pain.

"I feel horrible. Just horrible. What kind of person am I?"

"A human one," he tried to make her see. "There's nothing wrong about needing comfort, or something to take your mind off things. It's been a very stressful, painful time, and you have so much more ahead of you. Don't blame yourself"—or *me*—"for trying to alleviate that pressure for a little while. C'mon, it's okay. Shhh..."

Nick rocked her in his arms a while and she gave herself over to his care, crying herself limp. Finally easing her back down to the pillow, he was about to lie down and join her when his cell phone's alarm intruded into the quiet.

Maggie gasped and Nick cursed as he fumbled for the phone on the bedside table and turned it off.

He turned back towards her. "Sorry about that. I'm on days today."

The tone of her voice was distant, and she didn't meet his gaze. "It's okay. Go ahead. You can use my shower if you want."

His heart ached at the divide she was erecting between them. It was as if he was losing something precious just as he discovered it. "Hey." She kept her eyes averted. They were puffy but dry now, and in a way, it was worse than the tears had been. "Please look at me for a sec."

Maggie finally looked up, and he could see the resolve in her expression. Changing what he was going to say, he asked, "Do you need me to do anything before I go? Or after my shift?"

She shook her head. "No. I have my friend coming over. I'll be fine."

There didn't seem to be much more to say. He gathered his clothing and gun and dressed, then tucked away his wallet and phone. On second thought, he pulled out his wallet and extracted a business card. Spotting a pen on the writing desk across the room, he jotted down his personal numbers and email. "Here's how you can get hold of me. Call me if you need anything, or if you even just want to chat. Okay?"

She sat there on the bed, tucked up in her sheet, looking very small and vulnerable with her shoulders bare and hair tousled. But there was steel in her expression, not necessarily directed at him but at trying to keep herself together. Only his shoes remained, and he knew in a minute he'd have no excuse left to keep him here.

"Nick?"

He paused in sliding his last shoe on.

"Thank you. For tonight. Well, for everything."

"My pleasure." There was only sincerity in that response right now. He knew, though, that he'd be thinking about the real pleasure they'd shared for days and nights to come. "Take care, Maggie."

"You too."

He straightened. "I'll meet you downstairs if you want to grab a robe or something. I don't want to leave until you're there to lock up behind me." Nick dropped his eyes away from her, the surprise parting her lips. Lips he wanted to kiss and be damned with the consequences.

He strode from the room and waited impatiently downstairs for the few minutes it took her to descend. The sight of her slight frame bundled up in her plush robe, bare feet peeking out from beneath the hem, made him wish foolishly that she could send him off to work every morning just like this.

To that end, he ignored the common-sense part of his brain and her less-than-welcoming body posture, and dropped a brief kiss on her lips. He didn't trust himself to speak, so he walked out the door, waiting to hear the tell-tale snick of the deadbolt engaging before he walked to his car and out of her life.

And if she watched him drive away, he didn't know. He didn't look back.

Chapter Six

Five months later

Maggie checked her inbox with more eagerness than she should have felt, hoping for a message, however impersonal, from Nick. Disappointment rang through her — nothing.

She'd spent a couple of months incommunicado after that crazy night, in which she'd had Cassie's heartbroken reaction to losing her father to deal with, as well as all the myriad tasks and frustrations which came with dealing with the death of a family member. She relegated Nick to a memory of a kind of mental break-down, a doomed one-nighter with a kid in his twenties that couldn't have possibly gone anywhere. She needed to grow up and focus on Cassie, not sleep around.

But Nick wasn't easily forgotten, and finally, a couple of weeks after school started back up, Maggie had one day given in to the part of her that still missed Nick's presence.

She was too spooked to call and possibly hear dismissal in his voice, or worse, that he didn't even remember her. After all, they'd only spent less than twenty-four hours together, a long time ago. So instead, she decided to send him an email. She'd kept it brief, only a few sentences asking how he'd been and telling him she'd been fine, but it had taken her the better part of an hour to compose.

He replied almost immediately, and his warmth and personality rang through his missive, making her miss him even more.

The self-loathing she'd felt after their night together had been hard to deal with, but she'd finally seen it for what it was — an affirmation of life. What had been hardest about it was how disloyal she'd felt to Wade, scant hours after his death, to have experienced elsewhere the passion she'd never felt with him — that he'd finally gone to look for elsewhere. She'd finally accepted how upset his infidelity had made her, how much it had hurt her. Maggie had tried so hard to keep things peaceful for Cassie's sake, she hadn't given in to her honest right to her anger. And Wade had only benefitted from her tacit acceptance of his

straying, getting off scot-free, which made her angry at his memory – creating a whole new level of guilt.

So many 'what ifs' had gone through her head, and the grief and guilt and exhaustion had all combined to make her do what she'd feared to be the stupidest thing she'd ever done – ruthlessly pushing a man like Nick out of her life. A man who was everything she'd never known she wanted, and who had treated her like some precious gift without thought for himself.

Since those first couple of stilted emails, they'd gotten into the habit of sharing their days and thoughts with one another via that medium and the occasional IM. Every couple of emails, he'd close with, "Call me sometime," but she hadn't yet had the nerve to pick up the phone.

"Hey, Mom. Can I check my inbox too?"

Cassie was still very excited about having her very own email address. She corresponded mainly with Maggie's mom and a couple of cousins, as well as a few school friends she saw every day anyway. "Sure, sweetie, let me switch over."

"I can do it!"

"Okay, okay, go ahead." Maggie slid out the chair and ceded it to her daughter. She headed to the kitchen and heard a ping from the computer.

"Who's Nick?" Cassie called.

Maggie's heart almost stopped in her chest, and she hurried back to the computer. An IM box had popped up in the lower corner.

"R U there?"

Maggie nudged her daughter, who reluctantly stood up. "He's a friend of mine, sweetie."

"I'm here. Day off?"

"On nights."

"Like a boyfriend type of friend?" her daughter asked guilelessly. Maggie froze and turned her full attention to Cassie. She heard another ping, but ignored it for now.

"No," she answered slowly. "But what would you think about that if he was?" She held her breath as she waited for Cassie's answer, searching for any sign of upset.

Cassie shrugged. "That would be kind of cool. Caylyn's mom has a boyfriend, and he takes her shopping and to the movies and stuff. And they went camping."

Maggie's eyebrows rose. "You want to go camping?" She shook her head, laughing a bit inwardly at being so easily distracted by minutiae. She also recognised her inner amusement was partially relief at Cassie's seeming acceptance. "So it would be okay with you if I went out with Nick?" she sought to clarify.

"Sure, Mom." Cassie gave her a look that made her seem years older. "I know Dad's not coming back, and I don't want you to be alone forever." Tears welled up in Cassie's eyes and Maggie's vision blurred as well. They hugged for a long time, and Maggie finally processed the persistent ping of another couple of IM's piling up.

Wiping her daughter's face, she instructed, "Go find a tissue. You're leaking all over me." Cassie made a face, and Maggie watched lovingly as she ran from the room, leaving her alone to wipe her own tears.

Turning back to the computer, she read the IM's that had piled up.

"Have a couple of days off starting tomorrow."

"Maybe we could do something?"

Then, a couple of minutes later, *"Sorry, my mistake. I understand. Bye, Maggie."*

His status now showed offline.

Oh crap. Now he thought she didn't answer him on purpose. Anxiety seized her, and she opened a new email message, then stopped.

Maggie ran upstairs to her bedroom and pulled open the drawer of her bedside table, taking out the card with Nick's numbers on it. Figuring if he'd been on the computer he was at home, she started with his home number, becoming more and more frustrated and agitated as she got no answer. When the messaging picked up, she wasn't prepared, and she hung up.

Determined to fix his perception that she was ignoring him or upset, she quickly dialled his cell. It rang and rang, and just as she despaired of getting through to him, he answered, his voice sounding thick and gruff.

"Hello?"

"Nick?"

"Maggie?" He cleared his throat. "Hi. Sorry, I had just gone to bed."

Immediately, her mind flashed to the vision of his naked form in her bed. She just barely restrained herself from asking what he was wearing...or not.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Mmm—" Then he groaned. Logically, she knew he was probably just stretching, but the sounds shot straight to her overwrought libido. "Okay, so, how are you?"

"Doing good. Better. I had a great conversation with Cassie this morning. That's why I went AWOL on our IM like that, not because I didn't want to answer or anything. She just caught me off guard by starting a discussion that was probably past due just then."

"What about?" His sleepy, gravelly tone was sinful.

"About whether you were my boyfriend and if that would be okay if you were."

Silence from the other end. Silence she had to fill. "So, I mean, maybe you're dating someone else by now, and I wouldn't blame you if you were, but— If you were free and wanted to... I mean—"

"Maggie," he interrupted, all traces of tiredness gone from his voice. "What are you doing right now?"

"Now?" It came out almost a squeak. "Um, nothing. Not really."

"You're at home?"

"Yes, why—" she started to ask and he cut her off again.

"I'm coming over. This is a conversation I really want to have in person. Okay?" He didn't wait for an answer. "I'll be there in fifteen." He hung up.

She blinked at her phone for a full minute before it hit her. Nick. Was coming here. *Now.*

"Oh my God." Maggie rushed to the bathroom and grimaced at the sight of herself in the mirror. She ran a brush through her hair viciously and stepped out of her mules, kicking them towards the closet. "Clothes, clothes," she muttered to herself, frantically perusing her closet as she undressed, mentally discarding choice after choice.

"Oh hell." She finally just pulled on a newish pair of jeans and a long-sleeved knit top. No bra. That made her smile, remembering the plane ride.

Back in the bathroom, she washed her face and flossed and brushed her teeth, then looked around. Deciding not to worry about the state of the bedroom—after all, Cassie was home—she flew downstairs to start picking up the living room.

"Cassie!" she yelled, and her daughter skidded around the corner.

"What? What'd I do?"

Maggie laughed. "Nothing, hon. Here, help me pick up in here. Hurry!"

"But Mom, I was —"

Maggie continued to grab stuff. "No buts. You want me to have a boyfriend or not? 'Cause he's on his way over right now."

"Oh. Oh!" Comprehension hit, and Cassie grabbed all the stuff in Maggie's arms and sped across the room to throw it in a closet. "Go put some makeup on."

"What?" Maggie stared at Cassie. "You think I need makeup?"

The doorbell rang and they looked at the door then back at each other. "I'll get it," Cassie decided.

Maggie hovered in the living room as Cassie confidently crossed to the door. "Who is it?" she called in a sing-songy voice then grinned at her mom.

"It's Nick, a friend of your mom's." The sound of his voice in person for the first time in months, even muffled by the door, sent shivers through Maggie, which only multiplied as Cassie opened the door to reveal Nick himself.

Her memory hadn't done him justice. He looked bigger and more muscular than she remembered, which she could easily see since he didn't have a coat on...

"Oh, you must be freezing, come in," Maggie invited hastily. He stepped in and threw a smouldering look at her before looking down at Cassie who was unabashedly observing their guest.

"Hi, you must be Cassie." He offered his hand.

"And you must be Nick, the *boyfriend*."

That little imp.

Nick only smiled at the precocious taunt. "It's nice to finally meet you. I'm looking forward to getting to know you." He looked down at the cat twining between his legs.

"That's Champ. He must like you."

"Cass, can you please excuse us for a little while?"

Cass groaned theatrically, but picked up Champ and headed for the stairs. "Come on, Champy, we can't hear the grown-up talk."

The two adults watched her disappear upstairs then turned to each other. As their gazes locked, Maggie couldn't restrain herself any longer, and she quickly crossed to walk straight into his welcoming arms.

Nick hugged her so tightly against his chest she was reduced to shallow breaths. "I thought you'd never call," he confessed gruffly.

"Oh Nick. I wanted to, for the longest time. I just didn't know how to—put myself out there, I guess. Especially after how I treated you that morning."

He frowned down at her. "Haven't we taken care of all that since we've been 'talking' these last couple of months? Haven't we become friends?"

Yes, but I want more.

"Yes. We're friends. But it's different in person."

"Better," he countered confidently.

"Better," she agreed and took a deep breath. "Nick—" Maggie paused to gather her thoughts. "I'm so glad to see you. I don't ever want to be apart like that again."

She waited for his reaction to her statement, tantamount to her asking to be together—really together, like a couple.

"I don't ever want to be apart—period."

His answer was all she had hoped for and more. She could see the desire for her in his eyes and felt it in the way he held her, and thanked God she had finally broken the ice.

Or maybe she should thank Cassie. Speaking of which, "Go to your room!"

A giggle from the stairs and thumping feet confirmed her suspicions.

"I guess you're officially my boyfriend now. Cassie will be thrilled."

Nick grinned. "As long as you're thrilled too, that makes it unanimous."

"I am," she agreed, snuggling closer to him as they rocked together. "Oh, and Nick?"

"Hmm?"

"How do you feel about camping?"

About the Author

Devon started reading and writing at an early age and never looked back. After a creatively-sapping career in the business world, she gratefully took some time off to be at home. At thirty-nine and holding, Devon finally figured out the best way to channel her midlife crisis was to morph from mild-mannered stay-at-home mom to erotic romance writer. She lives in Oregon with her husband and two girls, who are (mostly) understanding of all the time she spends on her laptop, aka the black hole.

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